



Win the Struggle for Database Talent

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It is every company's goal to build profitable and long-lasting relationships with its best customers. Yet when it comes to building long-lasting relationships with the hired talent needed to make it happen, many employers are discovering that building company loyalty among their database marketers is much more elusive. It is not that database marketers are less loyal by nature but rather that employers often do not spend as much time as they should thinking about how to retain their star performers.

In helping hundreds of companies hire database marketers over many years, I have found that employers with less than average turnover in their database marketing departments do not just talk about the struggle for talent -- they give it their highest priority. The following four retention getters stand out as being among the most effective:

Offer your database marketers the opportunity to move within other areas of the company. If your database marketer has a strong background in marketing, technology or both, look for ways to leverage that experience. One financial services client of mine began an external search for a director of direct marketing while overlooking that its own manager of customer information management had all the experience it needed from spending eight years at a prior job managing major financial services clients at a leading direct marketing agency.

At many organizations, database marketing has been folded into a larger enterprise wide customer relationship management initiative. To underscore the strategic importance of CRM in the organization, many companies are restructuring their marketing function around CRM. Newly created positions such as director of CRM or vice president of CRM are becoming increasingly common. Senior management may need look no further than its own database marketing team to find the best talent for these new CRM leadership roles.

Experienced database marketers are in their "zone" when it comes to integrating marketing, technology and analysis, all core competencies required for a successful CRM strategy. These senior-level CRM opportunities can give database marketers the

excitement and freshness that come with a startup, combined with the relative stability and cultural fit that comes with staying with their current employers.

Employee training and education is the single most effective tool for retaining top people. Ongoing learning is especially important for a technology-driven discipline such as database marketing. Locking people into a degree or certificate program is almost a guarantee that they will remain with your company until they complete the program. Not only will they come out better educated and more productive, but also many will remain loyal and thankful long after their schooling is completed.

Education and development are also among the least costly ways to keep your top talent. One of my clients encourages his database marketing team to spend 20 working days per year attending classes, seminars and training. They decide what sessions to attend. He claims his turnover rate is less than 5 percent. Companies offering aggressive learning programs have discovered that the cost of these programs is more than offset by saved recruitment fees and sign-on bonuses, in addition to the increased productivity that comes with a more educated work force.

Be flexible. Software giant SAS Institute boasts one of the lowest turnovers in the business. Year after year it appears near the top of the country's 100 best companies for which to work. Its remarkable retention rate has less to do with compensation than it does with its environment and culture. In working with SAS, one of the first things I discovered is that its organizational structure is remarkably flat for a company of its size. An account executive at SAS is no more than three or four levels away from the CEO.

The company hires hard but manages less, putting a great deal of trust in its employees. It does not hurt that SAS also offers employees an onsite swimming pool and free health clinic, but its policies show that by being open and flexible, the intangibles can have a far more lasting effect on retention than compensation and other tangible benefits.

Internal social networks are powerful binders. One database marketing candidate said that while he thought he was ready for new challenges and greater responsibilities, he was reluctant to leave his current company because of the bonds he had developed with his fellow database marketing team members. Companies that promote a team environment tend to have less discontent than those that keep their employees apart.

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