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“Two words: very cool. I was skeptical of a ‘virtual trade show,’ but the experience was very smooth and intuitive! And, I got lots of great content to review.”

— Kimberly Wright, PMP, Creative Services Supervisor, Heidelberg USA, Inc.

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Behind the Direct Marketing Hiring Survey: A Few Final Thoughts From Guest Columnist Jerry Bernhart

Jul 3, 2007



By Jim Gilbert View More Posts

While I'm working on my report on who owns the Abacus data (see last week's column) I got this response from Jerry Bernhart, the author of the hiring survey that started the thread regarding hiring practices in the catalog business. So without further ado I turn my column over to Jerry, who's the president of Bernhart Associates Executive Search.

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For the past seven years, Bernhart Associates Executive Search has conducted a survey measuring employment trends in the direct marketing industry. In our most recent survey this past April, we added this new question: How would you characterize the overall ease or difficulty you are experiencing finding qualified candidates for your open positions across all levels and direct marketing job functions in your organization?

Not surprisingly, about one-quarter said they were having a “very difficult” time and about half described it as “somewhat difficult.” That means about 75 percent of the respondents said they were experiencing varying degrees of difficulty finding qualified candidates. No surprise there. And the degree of difficulty was reported not just among a few selected job functions or levels, but rather across the board.

Wendy Weber is right: It's now a candidate-driven market. In fact, it's not unusual to hear about positions that have been open for as long as six to nine months. Just last week I spoke with one client who's been trying, unsuccessfully, to fill a position for more than a year!

Why the shortage? Direct marketing is a cyclical business. When the economy is doing well and consumers are spending, direct marketers are making money and they hire staff, soaking up the available pool of talent. That's what's happening now, but during this most recent economic recovery, the “pool” of talent has become more like a big puddle.

Think back 20 years ago. The DM talent pool was huge in those days, dominated by the presence of mega-mailers such as Fingerhut, Time-Life, Columbia House and Publishers Clearinghouse. You also had the major financials like First USA, American Express and Provident. These companies were redefining the direct marketing landscape and became the “graduate schools” for training and mentoring, churning out very large numbers of well-trained, experienced direct marketers year after year.

Today, these kinds of environments just don't exist much anymore. Plus, the online channel didn't even exist back then. So when you add in the strong demand for experienced e-commerce candidates, the supply simply can't keep pace with steadily growing needs.

Our surveys indicate demand for talent is strongest in several areas:

- \* candidates who can manipulate and segment data, and convert that data into customer and prospect marketing campaigns;
\* candidates who can sell “solutions”;
\* candidates who can educate brand marketers on the benefits of direct marketing and help them become more customer-centric, and
\* candidates who can build customer relationships via the online channel.

A very happy 4th to all, and I'll see you next week – Jim.

Jerry Bernhart is president of Bernhart Associates Executive Search, an Owatonna, Minn.-based search firm. You can reach him at (507) 451-4270 or www.bernhart.com.

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