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Q&A WITH JERRY BERNHART

AN E-COMMERCE RECRUITER TELLS INTERNET RETAILER
WHAT QUALITIES ONLINE RETAILERS SEEK.

TOP E-COMMERCE EXECUTIVES ARE IN DEMAND.

2017 has started off stronger than almost any year in terms of demand for top e-commerce executives, says Jerry Bernhart, principal at Bernhart Associates Executive Search LLC.

Bernhart has recruited marketing and e-commerce professionals for 28 years. Last year he placed 43 employees at companies ranging from startups to Fortune 100 businesses, he says.

Each year, as the industry matures, the quality of the candidates improves, he says. Here is what he looks for when recruiting a candidate.



What separates a good candidate from a great candidate?



The best e-commerce candidates couple wisdom with technical knowhow. They can drive strategy and, at the same time, work closely with the technical team, work with developers and oversee the selection of platforms. They also have a strategic mindset. They're the ones that hold the company's e-commerce vision. They have their feet in both buckets.



What skill sets are important?



Collaboration and relationship-making. There are a lot of soft skills, not just technology. E-commerce is a team sport that requires leaders to interact with major departments within the business, as well as work with outside vendors. Executives have to work with teams ranging from product marketing, sales, customer service, finance and external partners.

They need operational and project management expertise. They need to be able to use data to target and measure. They

need a deep understanding of e-commerce metrics—everything from conversion, average order value, traffic, shipping, web analytics, budgeting, the P and L. Retailers expect those at the VP and director level to be able to drive the business. While technical skills are essential, at the end of the day it's about driving the business. And that's what retailers are going to ask about in an interview. If a candidate is talking to an owner or a president or a CEO, the executive is going to want to know what the candidate has done to grow the business. "Give me examples of how you've grown the business for your last three employers. And how did you do it?" Those are questions everyone should expect.



Is there a particular answer employers want to hear?



I'm not talking about just slashing costs, I'm talking about top-line revenues. There are a lot of different ways you can do that, such as introducing new products or entering new markets.

I'm also looking at the bottom-line results of growing the business.

Maybe a candidate assembled a great team that works like a finely tuned machine. That's important. A candidate needs to have a strong ability to attract, hire and retain talent.

There are a lot of aspects as to how a candidate can grow a business. Those are the things a candidate should be aware of when he sits down with a chief executive who wants to know how he can grow his business.



What types of accomplishments should someone eager to move up have in his or her background?



Candidates should show they've helped their previous employers penetrate new markets the businesses weren't penetrating or weren't aware of. »

That's the hallmark of a good visualizer—someone who sees markets their employer didn't see before he came into the role. It could also be affiliations or partnerships or working with new entities to help further the business. There are a lot of ways this could manifest itself. For example, quite often I'll talk to a candidate and he'll say, "They were marketing to this segment, then I came along and I identified a new segment that they hadn't marketed to. We successfully penetrated that market, grew it, and that had a strategic impact on the business." When a candidate talks about vision, it's all about strategic impact.

Q *What skills should a candidate have that many are lacking?*

A The leadership piece is sometimes lacking in candidates I see coming up from manager to director. Often, it's not their fault. Maybe they haven't had mentors or haven't had a chance to really refine their leadership abilities. If there is any area where I think candidates need the most help it would not be technical and operational skills but leadership skills.

Q *How should a candidate showcase his or her leadership skills to a potential employer?*

A Candidates should have evidence that they have shown steady advancement in their career. I love it when I see steady advancement. Sometimes when I see someone take a big jump from one role to another and they skip something in between—like going from 10th grade to 12th grade—sometimes he was thrown into a really deep pool and still hasn't learned to perfect the strokes he needs. I like to look for a candidate who has had a steady progression, which tends to produce pretty good leaders because he's taken it in stages. He moved from one stage to the next to the next to the next, and along the way he's had mentors and coaches developing him and helping him along. That's one way to develop leadership skills.

Q *Does it matter if that steady growth was at one company?*

A Oh, no. In fact, it's almost better if it's been over a variety of organizations because that exposes them to different cultures, different environments, different styles, different philosophies and different leaders. On the flip side, I don't want to see someone who's jumped around every 12 months—that can throw up a big

red flag. I'm talking more about staying in one place for a few years, then moving on to another one for a few years.

Q *What is the job market like right now for e-commerce executives?*

A The activity level is very strong. That's good for those who are in the space who are looking for opportunities. 2017 has started off stronger than almost any year I've experienced. And the quality of the candidates just keeps getting better.

Q *What academic backgrounds are most common among e-commerce executives?*

A They are all over the map. I've just placed someone with a history degree. If you are in college now and you know you want to be an e-commerce professional you might want to focus on something a bit more quantitative, like marketing, or something that has more of a technical orientation. But they come from everywhere—English, history, math, IT, computer science.

Q *What's turnover like?*

A VPs stay maybe three to four years. Directors maybe two to three years.

Q *Why so short?*

A These candidates feel like they've accomplished what they've accomplished and they don't feel as challenged as they did when they started, and they are looking for the next challenge. They like to be challenged, and if they feel like they've done what they were hired to do, they are ready for the next one. A lot of candidates have been in scenarios where they've taken these businesses almost from the ground floor. So they are hired in to start these e-commerce operations almost from scratch, they grow them up and turn them into a business. Once that's done, they kind of look around and go, "Alright, I don't see myself retiring here. I'm ready to go somewhere else and start something new with them." Or maybe something bigger, on a bigger stage. ●