



Winning the Battle



The secrets to effective recruitment may be right under your nose.

By Kim Shepherd and Thomas Brennan

Every industry faces unique recruiting challenges, but one thing just about every company has in common in today's market is that talent wars are fierce. Unemployment is low and business is expanding, which means candidates have choices. In the construction industry, you can add to that the cyclical nature of the business and the fact that it is harder to create loyalty among hourly workers than among white-collar employees.

In a situation this frustrating, it's easy to see why the war seems un-winnable. So here's the first secret: you don't have to win the war, you just have to win the battle. Your competitors are facing the same challenges. To win the battle, you have to differentiate yourself from them.

In today's market, you have to dangle a better carrot than the competition. While benefits are important, don't forget: your rivals also offer a 401(k) plan. They also offer great health insurance. Unless your benefits package has something truly distinctive, your competitor's carrots cancel out yours and vice versa. We're back to square one – so stop obsessing about the challenge and start obsessing about a solution.

So what sets your company apart? The most effective value proposition may not be the first thing that comes to your mind, but it may be more obvious than you'd expect. Here's an example. A hiring manager in Hawaii complained that he just couldn't attract enough skilled labor. According to him, his team would rather go surfing than work. They even took an hour and a half for lunch to go surfing.

Wait a minute. I pressed for details. Not only did he go surfing with them, but they were on the clock during those 90 minutes. Without realizing it, the carrot was, well, right in front of him, ready to be dangled: "We pay you to surf. Oh, and we also hammer some nails."

A little tiki torch lit up above his head. It was so obvious that he had missed it. Secret No. 2: the carrots you dangle have to be appealing to your target audience. What's important to a director of IT or a controller probably isn't what's important to carpenters, masons and backhoe operators. Talk to your existing hourly team to find out what's valuable to them.

Using Carrots

You may already have an idea: steady work is a big one, and job location often ranks near the top. If, for example, you have a business model that lands longer contracts and lands them more quickly than the competition, you definitely want to feature those carrots.

Retaining employees is the other side of this coin, and it works hand-in-hand with recruiting. Carrots bring 'em in, but culture keeps 'em on the team. When I bring up culture, a lot of executives get that deer-in-the-headlights look. They think culture is either squishy (can't put it on a spreadsheet) or complex and mysterious (requires training in subtle, arcane arts). Nope. In fact, culture is easy.

Don't overthink it. I worked with the CEO of a successful industrial contracting firm in Southern California. Turns out this CEO also rides a Harley. I don't know the actual percentage of people in the construction trades who ride motorcycles, but at the risk of stereotyping, I'm going to say it's pretty high. We started featuring pictures of this CEO with his hog in recruitment ads, and candidates responded.

Is that huge in the company's big picture? Not at all. But to the target audience, it's significant. It communicates that this is not a stuffy, three-piece suit culture, but one with which members of the target audience can identify.

Put your head into their heads. For example, when a new person joins the construction crew, what happens? Maybe the rest of the team razzes the new one and plays some harmless pranks. That's not your culture, that's theirs. But you can help affirm their culture to promote retention. For example, you could post a picture of the new employee with "New Guy" or "New Gal." Then, when the next new person comes on board, the previous one gets to tear down the picture and put up the new "New Guy/Gal."

It's like an initiation, and it builds loyalty. Want to take it a step further? Set up an account with a local bar that your crew likes. At the end of New Guy/Gal's first week, send your crew there to celebrate, with the first round on you. Pay for the Uber rides home, and for \$100, you've just promoted culture. As a big extra bonus, you've just made New Guy/Gal part of your recruitment team, as he or she tells coworkers from previous jobs about what a great company you have.

If this sounds a little like a page from a sales and marketing handbook, you're right. Secret No. 3: You have to court candidates just as you court customers. Both have choices, so you have to compel both groups to

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choose you. Just as your marketing team develops customer profiles to focus marketing efforts, you have to know your candidates so you can focus your recruiting efforts.

If you've stuck with me this far in the article, you've probably realized that these "secrets" are just common sense with a dose of creativity. When the problem is the center of our focus, sometimes we stare so hard at the center that we forget to look on the edges. Just remember: your competitors are busy staring at the center, too. To differentiate yourself, don't be afraid to be a little edgy.

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