

Recruitment lessons from *Sex and the City*!

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Like seemingly everyone else in Sydney, I took myself to see the long awaited and much anticipated *Sex and the City* movie on its opening weekend. Afterwards, I found myself thinking that, strange as it sounds, there are some important lessons for recruiters to be found in the film! Think about it – these women constantly search for the elusive “relationship”. In a different context, of course, recruiters should be searching for the same sort of exclusivity when it comes to their clients.

Before I explain the importance and benefits of exclusive and retained relationship recruiting, let me first explain what is wrong with the current method. The majority of recruiters today work on a contingent level, where the emphasis is on speed-to-market: “Get those resumes to the client before a competitor does.” So what is the problem with this? The answer is simple: there is no mutual commitment. You are committed to providing your client with the best in service, but your client is all the while working with your competitors. It’s like a relationship where one partner is exclusively committed, but the other continues to “play the field”.

This doesn’t make sense when you stop to think about it. Sure, it’s the way we’ve been working as an industry for years, and many people who attend my training point this out as though it’s some kind of excuse or justification. It isn’t. Rather, the fact that we have been working this way long term, may well explain some of the problems that we face as an industry today.

The industry’s reputation is not as healthy as it should be, and this is no surprise. Stories abound of clients being “burned” by inattentive, money-grabbing recruiters who throw piles of unsuitable resumes at clients, hoping that one will eventually stick. We in the industry shake our heads, and lament that a few sub-par recruitment providers are ruining it for the rest of us. The truth, however, is that this frantic approach is nothing more than the practical reality of contingent recruitment. The desperation to fill the vacancy before the competitors do means that the consultant does not have time to properly assess the suitability of the

candidates they put forward. Essential details are skimmed over, and the client ends up with a pile of resumes that are either obviously useless, or deceptively suitable (in which case the client will waste valuable time interviewing the candidates, only to realise that the resumes do not reflect the reality). As a result, the client can only conclude that they would have been better off filling the vacancy themselves. In short, the competition of contingent recruitment inevitably compromises the quality of service.

To return to the relationship analogy, the partnership can only last in a healthy way if commitment is exclusive and mutual. Competition from outsiders erodes the intimacy and quality of the relationship, to the point where the competition has to either be shut out, or the relationship has to end as it is a waste of time. The same can be said of recruitment. The solution to the quality service issue is to shut out the competition by selling retainers to your clients. This means, in short, that the client pays a percentage portion of the expected fee upfront, for you to source and select a quality shortlist to present to them. Commonly known as the “fee for service” concept, the financial commitment eliminates the competition, and therefore the frantic speed to market component of contingent recruitment. It certainly makes your job easier (you work fewer jobs for the same financial result), but more importantly (and this must be emphasised to the client) it allows you to find the very best in candidates for the particular role, or roles, now that you have time to do the sourcing and selection properly.

Here’s a process I emphasise in my training for the development of a healthy, exclusive client relationship, not dissimilar to the development of the romantic kind:

- 1 you prospect for new business (you are in the pub on Friday night, checking out the talent);
- 2 you successfully secure a client visit (first date);
- 3 the client starts working with you contingently (the second, third, fourth dates etc);
- 4 the client works with you exclusively (falling in love, deciding to date no others);

5 the client becomes an advocate and works with you on a retained basis (you make a commitment towards each other).

Will there be objections? Of course – clients, like lovers, can often be commitment-phobic. Many consultants I train are reluctant to sell retainers because they are afraid of the initial response. All you need to do is point out to your clients that a retainer allows you to give their needs top priority. If you had to compete with other agencies for their business, you would not have the same time available to find the highest quality candidates for them. Tell them that you want and that you intend to make their commitment worthwhile, and that their retainer will easily pay for itself in the form of top quality candidates who may not have been found in the rush of contingent recruitment. If they remain sceptical, emphasise the candidate-short market and the fact that finding the quality job-seekers has become more difficult and therefore more costly.

Retained and exclusive recruitment is a win-win for all involved, from the placing consultant to the client to the recruitment industry, whose standing in the business world can only improve as the quality of its service does so. Old habits die hard, and I understand this, but if you commit to moving your clients from contingent to retained and exclusive, then I guarantee that the results will speak for themselves! ■



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