

Acquiring Young Talent: Marketing a Must

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

Government recruitment, for far too long, and far too commonly, has been a passive affair. A jargon-filled boiler-plated vacancy announcement gets posted somewhere on the Internet, and the staffing specialist waits around for applications to come in. The perception from the outside is that the government thinks applicants ought to be honored to be considered for government jobs, and that the applicant needs to prove herself or himself to be worthy of the agency. That is not a perception that is going to allow your agency to compete successfully for the young talent that you are trying to attract.



Old SOPs Collide with Young Expectations

Agency HR offices don't consciously try to be difficult to deal with—or at least not usually. They are using established standard operating procedures (SOPs) designed to ensure that the agency adheres to civil service merit system principles. These principles generally emphasize fairness and establishing a level playing field with no favoritism in employment processes and decisions. This philosophy is often operationally manifested as treating all applicants the same. In their zeal to treat all applicants the same, HR functions hesitate to tailor their interactions to the individual. Yet people, including job applicants, are individuals, and individuals thrive on personal attention and like to believe they are receiving personal attention. This characteristic is particularly true of today's twenty-somethings—the so-called Millennial, or Gen Y generation. Millennials were raised by doting baby-boomer parents. They typically have fewer siblings than their parents or

grandparents, so they are accustomed to a lot of personal attention. They are used to being told how special they are. This is the generation where every pre-teen player on the soccer or field hockey team got a trophy, win or lose, at the end of the season. They have a personalized Facebook presence, customized iTunes music collections, and their own personally-selected apps on their iPhones. (The older ones have personalized LinkedIn sites.)

Millennials are also the instant gratification generation; Google and Wikipedia give them answers in seconds to every imaginable information need. In contrast, their parents would have happily accepted the need to spend days ferreting out this same information at a library.

Millennials prefer Chrome over Internet Explorer because they like saving a second or two on every Internet search. They do a lot of their shopping over the Internet so they don't need to spend time walking through malls past a lot of storefronts that don't interest them. They record their favorite television shows so they can watch them at their convenience, rather than at the convenience of the TV networks. They don't like having to sit through the 90-second commercials that interrupt the story lines of those recorded shows. In contrast, their parents unquestioningly accept those same commercials as a necessary evil.

Millennials expect agencies to come to them on their terms. They expect to be courted electronically. They expect lots of electronic interaction on demand. They expect real-time information on the status of their job applications. And they definitely expect prompt and ideally useful, substantive feedback on any unsuccessful job applications.

Most of all, despite their apparent self-absorption, they are idealists at heart. They want to know how working for your agency will help them improve the world—or at least a corner of it.

Sell the Mission

I once worked for a United States senator who had had a very successful private sector career before entering politics. In the marketplace of ideas that is the U.S. Congress, he always urged me to “sell the sizzle, not the steak.” What I believe he meant was that people initially respond emotionally to the perceived benefits—the value—of taking a course of action, and are less concerned at that stage with the detailed intricacies of the action itself.

The corresponding lesson for government agencies is that their vacancy announcements or advertisements have to sell the mission first. Lead with the societal value that your agency contributes; that's how you get a Millennial's attention. Once their imagination is captured by the mission they will be helping to achieve, then they'll read the fine print in the vacancy announcement.

The happy reality is that this recruitment strategy doesn't work only on Millennials. I experienced the value of selling the mission firsthand when I was chief human capital officer at the U.S. Department of the Interior. At one point I was trying to hire a senior HR executive. The first time we advertised the position we lead with the job title, salary, duty station, and essential elements of the position description. We got few, and uninspiring applicants. Then we took a different approach; we led with DOI's mission. The revised vacancy announcement read something like this: “Come set HR policy for the nation's largest landowner, the agency that educates some of the poorest children in the country, makes the desert bloom, protects America's natural and cultural treasures, manages huge reserves of energy resources...” This time we got lots of high-quality applicants, and ultimately we were able to hire a wonderful individual who did a lot of good for the agency.

Expedite the Hiring Process

We have already established that patience is a rare virtue among Millennials. Indeed, they don't view it as a virtue at all, but rather as a now-unnecessary artifact of the pre-technological era. There are three primary actions that one can take to expedite the hiring process. Technology can enable all three of them, but a human working smart is really the key to the success of each.

First, the staffing specialist needs to profoundly appreciate what sorts of knowledge, skills, abilities, and competencies the hiring manager is looking for in the Millennial. The staffing specialist also needs to understand why the hiring manager thinks the job should be considered fun, rewarding, or otherwise attractive to applicants. Again, this should ideally be expressed in terms of the mission of the agency. With this information, the vacancy announcement can be written to sell "the sizzle, not the steak."

Second, the hiring process itself needs to be streamlined. The number of steps needs to be reduced as much as possible, and each step expedited as much as possible. Over a period of years any governmental process tends to accrue steps, often motivated by the desire to minimize risk and ensure quality control. However, the often unintended consequence is that the process becomes overly burdensome and mired down in bureaucracy.

A risk-free hiring process that takes so long that all qualified applicants have accepted non-governmental jobs before your agency can make an applicant an offer is a bad process. Agencies often need outside help to reengineer their hiring processes. This is because the sincere people who run the current process consider it normal and appropriate. They often have a hard time initially accepting the possibility of significant business process reengineering.

Thirdly, the hiring manager and the staffing specialist need to have a mutual commitment that qualified applicants will be interviewed quickly once identified by HR. Often this can be facilitated by the staffing specialist working closely with the hiring manager's administrative assistant. Working together, time for reading resumes and interviewing candi-

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dates can be written in stone in the hiring manager's schedule even before the vacancy is advertised—long before scheduling conflicts can erupt. Very quickly on the heels of the last interview, the staffing specialist should meet with the hiring manager and broker a hiring decision before the memory of the interviews becomes stale.

Maintain Regular Contact with Millennial Applicants

If Apple can routinely tell their customers the exact status of their iPad in real time, then agency HR offices can similarly inform job applicants of the status of their job applications. Indeed, there are several technologies already on the market that easily perform this task. They also offer the valuable secondary benefit of tracking the status of the processing of job applications inside the agency. This means those responsible for process delays can be readily identified and held accountable.

By allowing Millennial job applicants to easily learn about the status of their applications and any status changes, several goals are accomplished. First, the applicant feels connected to the agency and gets useful information for

their job hunt. This keeps them interested in the agency and the job. The job application tracking tool can even be used as a secondary marketing tool, offering the employee an opportunity to subscribe to press releases or newsfeeds about the latest developments in the agency. It can also alert the applicant to new job opportunities in the agency for which they might want to apply, given what the agency already knows about the applicant's education and experience.

Second, the technology relieves the staffing specialist of a significant administrative burden. They no longer need to read or respond to applicant emails or field telephone calls from the applicant, and that time saved can be spent more productively inside the agency.

Thirdly, the unsuccessful applicant can be painlessly informed as soon as they are deemed to no longer be under consideration for an appointment. This spares the applicant the demoralizing endless wait for bad news that is never actually communicated, but ultimately inferred. Even a computer-generated rejection letter transmitted by email makes a better impression on a candidate than endless silence. It shows the agency has at least a modicum of respect for the applicant, just when the applicant is feeling most vulnerable.

Attend to Proper On-boarding Processes

Don't forget the goal is not just to hire the desired Millennial, but to retain them in the agency for the desired period of time. Effective on-boarding is crucial to saving the agency time, money, and aggravation, but that's the subject of another column.

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