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Is search firm's approach legit or more junk mail?

I received an e-mail from someone I claiming to be a 'retained' search firm looking for executives in my industry. I don't know where it came from. I never opted into any electronic mailing list or anything like that. I deleted the message but it left me wondering, would any legitimate retained search firm really use that method to contact people that they have no relationship with?

"I actually know an executive who might have fit this firm's request but I never would have sent his name to this organization when I knew nothing about them. If these retained search firms don't use these e-mail techniques, then how are they expanding their networks these days? "

Would a legitimate search firm look for candidates this way? It's difficult to say. Elaine McKenna, vice president and partner with the Weterrings & Agnew division of Providium Human Resource Group LLC in Rochester, says the e-mail probably was-n't from a legitimate firm. "Executive search is a very hands-on, labor-intensive business," she says. "E-mail is useful but it's not the primary method of contact."

But Gary Baker, partner at Cochran, Cochran & Yale LLC, another local search firm, says your e-mail could have been from a legitimate retained search firm. "Our business is a people business and we have to reach out to as many as possible," he says.

He says his company uses selected e-mail lists to send electronic alerts to people who might know of candidates in certain fields. "It can be very effective," he says. .

One factor influencing this trend, he says, is that there are more jobs than there are qualified candidates to fill them. The firm has more than 125 openings and the majority of them are outside Rochester, in other parts of the United States, Canada, Mexico and the U.K. "Our biggest problem is not finding openings. It's finding the people for the openings," he says.

In a recent edition of the Wall Street Journal's CareerJournal.com, author Sinara Stull O'Donnell noted that the urgent demand for high-level talent combined with online recruiting efforts has changed the world of executive search—not necessarily for the better.

Search firms that specialize in retained searches were always known for "exclusivity," she writes, and a "slower, consultative, methodical approach" to identifying high-level talent while contingency recruiters were always known for finding candidates quickly.

Retained recruiters are typically paid 25 to 35 percent of the position's first-year salary and usually work on positions paying \$100,000 or more, receiving regular incremental payments from employers. Contingency firms, on the other hand, are paid if and when they make the match and successfully place the candidate with the employer.

Is value missing from your mission? Most companies have a meaningless mission statement that was created by a marketing department. It's all about being No. 1, exceeding customer expectations and building shareholder value. Barf.

What's your real mission? Is it different from your mission statement?

Where's the value to the customer? Isn't that the real mission?

What you need is a value proposition that fully explains how you help others, how they win, how you serve in terms of the customer, how that leads to loyal customers and referrals, AND a mission statement that matches it.

A value proposition states what you do in terms of how a customer benefits. For example: You might say, "We provide a 4-hour service response." A "value proposition" way of stating the same thing is, "When equipment is broken or needs repair, production stops. That's why we instituted a 4-hour-or-less service response. That way there is minimal loss of productivity and job profitability."

Same words, stated in terms of how the customer wins.

Value is important to a prospective customer for three reasons:

1. It differentiates you from the competition.
2. It gives the customer understandable reasons to purchase.
3. It gives the customer the peace of mind they need to move forward. To buy.

Value is important to an existing customer for three reasons:

1. It builds a real relationship. A relationship based on value.
2. It makes reorders more automatic and less bid-driven.
3. It eliminates competition. Most competitors thrive on "saving a customer money." Note: Customers don't want to save money as much as they want to produce right thing by following your instincts in deleting the message.

"Someone is just shooting it out there blindly hoping someone might bite on it," she says. "It's not against the rules to use e-mail in the search process but it should be done in a credible fashion."