

When the Best Candidates Call YOU: Using Media Expertise and an Indirect Approach

By Dave Perry

You may be finding that -- despite the much-ballyhooed “softening” of the economy today -- it’s no easier finding the right candidates for an opening. There is, however, a novel way to get potential candidates to call *you*. It’s called the “indirect approach”, where media is used to create such an external buzz about a company that candidates eagerly line up to be interviewed!

We’re concerned here about getting candidates with the Right Stuff -- the best candidates, not the ones who are searching the Job Opening ads or those who would respond to that tired phone call opener: “Do you know of anyone who is interested in this position?” That’s just for hiring the inexperienced.

Finding and hiring the Right Stuff in today’s softer economy is even harder than it was in yesterday’s red-hot job market -- though your clients and employers may find not understand why. But professional recruiters and in-house Human Resources officers know that having a slow-down in the high-tech economy is not making your job easier. The top candidates you are looking for are being better hidden by their employers, away from your search. They are cloaked by call screening, e-mail filters and ever-more-watchful HR departments. The best candidates are also being protected by better incentives to stay, making it even more difficult to pry them free, assuming you can find them.

The million-dollar question is: how can you make the Right Stuff knock on your door, and *ask* to be interviewed for a job?

The battlefield strategist Liddell Hart summed it up years ago, when he coined the term “the indirect approach”. It means you don’t keep banging head-first into the problem -- that just makes it worse. Attacking the trenches head-on in the First World War is a tragic example. Instead, you do something surprising -- something that maneuvers around the blockage. In the Second World War, the Germans attack through the supposedly impassible Ardennes forest, sweeping around behind the French army, is an indirect approach.

How do you apply the indirect approach to Recruiting?

I have had great success in generating attention-getting recruiting campaigns through the media, such that the “Right Stuff” candidates call my office and ask about the job. Having your phone ring is much better and easier than trying to make someone else’s phone ring.

I use an expert to run these campaigns for me. Barry Gander, an Ottawa-based media consultant who specializes in Media Launches, is my hidden weapon. Here are a few of his inspired campaigns:

- DY4 Systems Inc. suffered from its success. It had been quietly servicing clients in Ottawa for a dozen years, and found that getting new staff was a problem. The company had an image as an unexciting place to work, especially in the environment of pre-IPO enterprises. The solution? Find a media-worthy event that tied the company’s name to the “entrepreneur” concept, so candidates would associate DY4 with “energy”. Barry’s answer was to invent the “Technov8 Awards Program”, where DY4 sponsored a contest for the creation of the best innovative technology. It got sweeping media coverage, and the DY4 phones began to ring, as the Right Stuff linked DY4 with a place where innovation is rewarded!
- Espial had the opposite problem: it is a small, relatively unknown entrepreneurial company, with no track record of media coverage. The answer was to take an inventive contest for software developers to new heights -- literally! The reward for the best software application was a ride to the edge of space, in a Russian Foxbat fighter plane! The idea caught the media’s imagination in

Barry's press drive, and gained North American-wide coverage in prestigious new-economy publications like Wired magazine.

- NetActive had to compete in a tight job market against big players who had big bank-rolls. Barry ran a program to sponsor the local "Ultimate" tournament, where teams of thousands of young high-tech professionals spent several weekends tossing Frisbee-type disks to each other. Great fun -- and great coverage, showing disks that were clearly stamped with the word "NetActive". Money raised by the tournament went to the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

The lessons from this media-driven indirect approach are simple to state (if somewhat difficult to think up in the first place!):

- Understand your market, so you are emphasizing the strengths of your client company. An indirect approach that is badly focused will backfire.
- Know what would appeal in that market to the Right Stuff -- what will drive them to admire your client?
- Make it a superlative campaign. These indirect approaches only work if they stand above everything else that's competing for news attention.
- Be inventive! If something has already been done, don't copy it. Find a new idea.
- Know the media, and what attracts them.
- Above all: *sincerity wins*. These days, people are dying for a hint of *meaning* in their lives. Connect your indirect campaign with a Cause that touches the community.

If you want to make your phone ring, find the indirect way to position the company where the Right Stuff will see it shining! Ultimately, it's much easier to get the top people to call you, than for you to make a dozen calls yourself!