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7 Smart ideas to help grow your recruitment agency

Some help for when you need inspiration rather than perspiration!

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Introduction

Some economic observers forecast it would take 10 years to recover from the effects of the credit crunch and the Great Recession. However, new waves of uncertainty have washed over the global economy. The Brexit vote, the Trump presidency and the threat to global security from terrorists, rogue states and cyber-crime are just a few of the factors inhibiting significant improvements in economic performance.

Consequently, for many firms the stimulus for better financial performance is likely to originate from within our businesses rather than the operating environment outside. If we look deeper, there are a number of ways that we can drive greater efficiency within our businesses. Technology solutions enable better efficiency by helping us to work smarter. However, working smarter is not just about applying technology.

During the lean times, working smarter helps to maintain growth or provides some stability. However, the concept called 'sandbagging' doesn't power 'real' growth; it is in fact a 'passive' growth driver. It works to help prevent the bottom line going into reverse; or in a more serious scenario, to help arrest free-fall.

When more prosperous times return though, working smarter boosts competitive advantage, helping to actively drive growth. In this guide we look at a number of ideas that use a smarter approach to help power real growth for recruitment businesses.

1. Develop and deliver digital marketing content

Identify yourself as a thought leader

Every industry, sector or niche has market leaders. One of the most powerful drivers enabling a business to dominate in its marketplace is the perception that it is a thought leader. Often these perceptions are driven by the ownership of ideas, theories or principles that represent unique or exceptional positions on business issues, industry topics or areas of practice. Ownership is generally driven by the expertise of an individual or a team whose credentials are established through qualifications and experience.

The use of digital technology channels significantly reduces the costs of marketing when compared with traditional media activities such as press, radio or even TV ads. Examples of content types here include white papers or 'how to' guides and blogs, or case studies which show how thought leadership derived solutions help a customer to achieve success.

For recruitment agencies, big thought leadership ideas could be a specialist method of evaluating candidates; the pros and cons of Myers-Briggs vs psychometrics; or a model for identifying candidates with transferable skills for a specific career move.

The recruitment business is largely about brokerage, with clients on one side and candidates on the other. It is important to try to regularly engage both segments of the audience with thought leadership content, even when they are not actively seeking staff or a new role or contract.

Digital marketing content designed to get ideas like these out into the marketplace is a fundamental element that helps an agency to dominate in its area of the market.

2. Integrate social media

Social media as part of a structured approach to communication

Social media is a powerful element within the wider marketing mix. As such, social media activity needs to be planned, structured and integrated with other marketing activity.

Social media channels are also well suited to distributing the content that you develop in order to position your agency as a thought leader.

- Tweets let you drip feed your expertise into the marketplace

- Blogs let you express more edgy opinions, with less formality and editorial control

- LinkedIn and Facebook draw clients and candidates towards the agency

- Email campaigns let you directly engage clients and prospects with the guides and white papers that set out the big ideas in full

Email activity enables you to deliver focused and targeted communication to different audience segments.

- For candidates you have placed, when it is appropriate, you could send emails on subjects like "Ready for your next move?", whether they are actively looking not

- For clients, it could be cross-selling a new area of expertise with a message like "We're not just technology specialists - we now supply finance staff"

- Thought leadership content is ideal for maintaining contact and staying in touch regularly; rather than being 'salesy', it offers an alternative basis for engagement

Technology tools (including cloud-based SaaS applications of course!) easily enable the integration of social media and email activity with your website and CRM data collection.

When using social media for business purposes it is essential to get some policies in place that govern who and how staff use the networks you are on. Content guidelines are also useful for controlling blog content.

3. Use an integrated approach
Drive greater financial efficiency

Integrating online timesheets with accounting, payroll and invoicing systems provides the opportunity to accelerate back office processes. Speeding up the tempo in the back office helps to release hidden financial benefits.

A paper-based approach to timesheets and invoicing is labour intensive. This slows the tempo, feeding the familiar monthly mentality to processing timesheets and billing clients. An integrated approach to back office software is a platform that allows agencies to increase the tempo with weekly invoicing.

On the client side, it is necessary to negotiate payment on 30 days from date of invoice. This may not be possible with every client, but for the ones for whom it is feasible, it is well worth exploring this as it speeds up cash flow through the business. Hand in hand with accelerated cash flow, better management and reduction of aged debt, together this reduces the need for working capital.

For some, the entrepreneurial nature of recruitment is an important consideration. Accelerated cash flow leads to a much healthier balance sheet. This is advantageous, especially for the purposes of valuation and due diligence at M&A time.

4. Conduct or commission research

Obtain market intelligence

Those that are familiar with technology or recruiters that service technology clients may be aware of the focus on 'Big Data' that has evolved over the last few years. As a concept, 'Big Data' is essentially about extracting intelligence from the mass of information typical of that generated and held by large enterprise organisations.

Recruitment businesses can borrow a little from this idea to conduct research of the mass of information sources on the internet to gain market intelligence.

Examples of some of the areas that are useful here include:

- Labour statistics

- Merger and acquisitions (M&A) information

- Recruitment industry research

It is about cross referencing a number of sources to uncover the nuggets that help us obtain insights that we may be able to apply. Rather than searching 'blindly' it is useful to initiate research activities with the objective of proving or disproving a theory or assumption.

For example, when expressed as the average number of days that jobs go unfilled, there is a view that vacancies for sales people are the most difficult to recruit.

You could set out to find out if this is true and use research information to understand how to refine your process to get your agency's time to recruit sales people below the average. This could be the lynchpin of a strong market offer and might make for a compelling marketing message.

Another example might start with the premise that contact centre roles are difficult to fill because there is a significant shortage of workers with the right experience.

Research could show whether this is true and whether it is worth developing a market offer aimed at recruiting workers without experience because it is relatively easy to cross-train candidates.

5. Don't overlook the win-win of SaaS, cloud-based technology

The last decade has seen widespread migration away from on-premise software. Any firm still self-hosting business management applications on in-house servers should develop a clear roadmap for phasing out such legacy systems.

Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) applications delivered from the cloud offer significantly better value as well as power and flexibility. These online applications delivered over the internet are one of the great success stories in the technology world in recent times.

Specialist Line-of-Business (LoB) applications deliver the functionality needed to address specific areas for different sectors, verticals and niches. You don't have to put up with software applications that have been adapted to your needs. A good back office solution will deliver the dedicated functionality the recruitment and staffing sector requires.

There's little or no software 'flab'– menu after menu of features you don't need. LoB SaaS software just provides all the functions you need to get things done quickly.

It's fast, efficient and represents the best value because it is built on the SaaS model which eliminates traditional direct costs associated with software, such as infrastructure, licensing maintenance and support.

6. Take an integrated approach to back office software

The best of today's smart back office software solutions frequently combine the benefits of SaaS with the industry specific focus found in Line-of-Business applications.

Essentially, specialist LoB back office software designed for the recruitment sector addresses two basic inefficiencies:

Eliminating time consuming manual tasks and joining up disconnected processes.

The best back office solutions enable the integration of key functions including:

- Timesheets

- Accounting

- Payroll

- Invoicing

Utilising an integrated mix of cloud-based products and services from a range of market leaders in Line-of-Business recruitment software enables an agency to join up the dots in the back office.

Integrating a 'best of breed' solution for each area enables significant improvements in efficiency. Even if you need to protect investment in existing on-premise legacy software packages installed on your servers until they can be phased out at the end of their natural lifecycle, a good cloud application should integrate with them.

7. Get back to basics

Combat negative candidate and client perceptions about the recruitment sector

Many recruiters will be aware of the poor image that recruitment has in the eyes of some. To prevent this propagating further and reverse negative perceptions, leaders of recruitment businesses need to be proactive in overcoming client and candidate antipathy towards the sector.

To combat these trends recruitment needs to refocus on where it adds value - the process of enabling employers to obtain the best talent and the best talent to get the right roles.

Stripping it back to basics, it's essentially about engaging with people to sell and effectively execute a set of 'soft' skills including influencing, persuading and negotiating.

Consider how front office technology, such as online job boards and systems for applicant tracking and candidate management, have dragged recruiters away from these fundamentals.

- These systems have helped find potential candidates but they have enabled hundreds or even thousands to apply for a role in a single click

- If we filter these through a system how can we be sure that those remaining are the best candidates and not those that have 'gamed' the system by using professional CV writing services and keyword stuffing?

For some there is an emphasis on tests such as psychometric evaluation and Myers-Briggs personality testing.

- Such testing is useful, but the results are not definitive; they are just one more element in the recruiters toolkit

Polished soft skills, intelligently applied, in combination with front office technology and psych and personality tests, enable recruiters to deliver true value. The best talent is recruited, employers get the right temps, contractors and employees, while workers get the right roles. Meanwhile, the recruitment sector combats negative perceptions.

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