

**“We're getting ready for 2010 and think we'll soon be able to afford to hire one additional person. We're debating what kind of person we should hire - someone to help us produce and deliver, someone to help us sell or a finance person to help analyze where our profits are coming from. Suggestions?”**

By now we've all heard that getting out of this recession depends on getting the unemployed back to work. The Fortune 500 typically have a negative net hiring number, in good economies as well as lean times. This means that as a group they let go more people than they hire in a typical year.

On the other end of the spectrum are small, privately held businesses (companies with fewer than 300 employees). Our companies are a major player in how and when we exit this recession. We already employ more than 50 percent of the private sector (non-government) work force. And historically our companies have been the primary source of net hiring additions in our economy.

We put people to work. Our work force growth will reduce unemployment, which is vital to getting our economy back on track. This means it's up to us, as small business owners, to get the economy moving.

It's great to hear from owners like the one who wrote in this week. Companies are getting back on track! We're hearing that more and more. Now to the question of which positions to fill first.

### **Change your strategy**

Most business owners focus first on hiring for operations because that's what they are most familiar with. I often hear owners say that they are the most uncomfortable overseeing staff in marketing and sales, finding it difficult to manage and predict results. And who needs more headaches to manage, or black holes of which to keep track? As a result, many owners hire in marketing and sales last.

Well, it's time for an attitude adjustment. Marketing and sales are the growth engine of any well-run business. Get the company in gear, firmly sitting on a solid, replicable growth track. That's the owner's No. 1 job. If growth is a given, then fixing operations and profitability can flow naturally out of that growth. Without growth through sales and marketing, the company faces continued cuts in payroll because revenue and profit will decline over time.

What to focus on, when it comes to marketing and sales? Look for someone who has experience expanding awareness of a company's products or services. Keep your ears open for someone who can create interest and turn that interest into inquiries and leads.

Look inside the company as well as outside for your marketing person. Someone who already understands your customers, products and services can play a significant role in marketing. The job description will include a variety of tasks.

### **Get your share**

Identify lists of companies to approach whose attributes match those of your current good customers. Make up compelling offers to those suspect companies that get them to contact your company or take your company's call. Cull through existing good customers to find out what other services or products they would like from your company.

Get the company visible by any means available. Take advantage of the many no-cost, low-cost marketing options available on the Internet today. Build complimentary programs to get the word out that your company is looking for more opportunity to do business. Implement or expand the company's contact database, ensuring that drip marketing is in place for all suspects, prospects and customers. Identify and manage vendors who can help with the company's marketing programs: from strategy to design, copy, and distribution in audio, print and Internet environments. Build a trade show strategy and a cold-contact program. Set goals and report regularly on results, adjusting as necessary along the way.

Some business owners have told me they don't think that marketing will get them anywhere. Unless they are already at 50 percent market share for the products or services they provide, I would disagree. If there is not enough business to float all boats, then you're going to have to steal share from some other company and fight to get your fair share of work.

The next few years will be highly competitive. Some businesses will grow, and some will shrink. That's where marketing and sales come in to play. They are the keys to holding your own and to growth.

Looking for a good book? Try "The Fundamentals of Business-to-Business Sales & Marketing" by Joe Coe.

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