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Are Mass Mailings to Executive Search Firms Still Effective?

By Larry Runge

Are Mass Mailings still effective as they once were? In the past, generally when an executive was terminated, it was customary for the company to provide the executive with outplacement services. Companies like Drake Beam Morin and Scherer Schneider Paulick provided the executive with office space, telephone and computer, an answering service, counseling, resume advice, and mass mailings, while the executive's ex-company picked up the fee.

One of the most important aspects of outplacement firms, was that they trained an executive – someone who may have spent their entire career with a single company – how to look for a job. And effectively searching for a position is a specialized skill set, the same as accounting or automotive repair are specialized skills. These skills aren't taught by universities, and they're not taught by most companies. Either an outplacement firm trains you in them, or else you have to pick them up at the school of hard knocks.

In addition to training managers how to search for and obtain a new position, one of the most important functions outplacement firms performed—at least in the pre-2000 days—were the mass mailings. In these they sent your cover letter and resume to a selected list of executive search firms.

However, they did not blast your resume to the Human Resource departments at the target companies themselves, for that is one of the least likely ways to get hired. With all due respect to those in the H/R profession, H/R does not really “hire” anyone at a management level. What they do, is to “filter out” those who do not exactly fit the specifications.

Typically, these specifications do not adequately describe the person the company really wants – and more importantly, really needs – for one of two reasons. Either the specifications were written by a harried executive who didn't have the time to give them the attention they deserved, or the specs were put together by a committee. And remember, a camel is a horse that was designed by a committee. So in days of yore, the executive recruiter was the way to go if you were looking for a position that was near or above the \$100,000 mark.

As an aside, there's an excellent book by John Lucht, titled, “Rites of Passage at \$100,000+”. It's a must read for anyone working with search firms, and provides considerable insight into what otherwise might appear an unfathomable process. The book is currently available and is an update of the older classic. But current or previous editions should be available in the public libraries.

But back to mass mailings. Pre-2000, doing a targeted mailing to executive recruiters who covered your area of expertise would typically result in an immediate 1% to 3% response. So for 300 letters mailed

out, you might get 3 to 9 responses back from headhunters regarding open searches. Of these, perhaps half might lead to preliminary interviews.

Even with those, which did not generate leads, you were now inserted into the search firm's catalog of available candidates for six months to a year, and might continue to get calls for months afterwards. In fact, the upwardly mobile – once landing a position – would send out another mailing to the selected search firms letting them know where s/he landed, in case a better offer popped up later down the road.

Alas, the world has changed. I know of a mailing in April 2001, which had a tenth percent return rate. Similar mailings in September of that year and in April of 2002 had zero percent return rates. As did an electronic mailing using the Internet to target several hundred search firms in 2002.

Obviously much of the reason for the poor returns on these mailings were there simply aren't enough jobs out there for all who desire to be gainfully employed at this time. Furthermore, the ranks of the executive recruiters themselves have been thinned considerably, both because of the lack of open positions, and because that companies who would normally use an executive search firm, are now trying to "roll their own" using internet job posting services. And this contributes to the poor response rate on mass mailings.

And now, for more than a year, the executive search firms have been trying to take a different tack. The major firms, and most of the minors, now want you to put your resume online, in their own proprietary system. For the search firms, this is a boon, for it lowers their cost. Instead of having to beat the bushes of the marketplace for qualified candidates, the candidates come to them. What could be easier or cheaper? Thus people who continue to send either paper or electronic resumes usually receive a rubberstamped reply asking them to enter their resumes online in order to be considered.

The question is, can this be practical in the long run? First, these systems are often quite different from each other. Putting a resume in one is not a problem, but putting it in as few as the top 20 search firm databases is extremely time consuming. And now the boutique firms are following suit and asking that you enter your resume in their systems also.

A person who has been out of work for two years or more, and who may find things extremely tight financially, has the time and the motivation to enter their resume into numerous, disparate and cumbersome systems. But once that person lands – and they eventually will – it's unlikely they will bother to keep all but one of two of the largest firm's databases up to date. Furthermore, should the person relocate when they land – which happens frequently enough – then the information in most of these databases will be all but worthless. A recruiter cannot consider someone they cannot locate.

Whether the online resume databases of the executive search firms will prove as valid in times of a booming economy, as they seem to in times of extreme recession, is yet to be seen. The fact that search firms frequently post open positions on internet sites themselves gives cause to wonder whether their internal databases are proving to be as useful as expected.

However, regardless of how you sling the fertilizer, currently mass mailings to retainer search firms are not bearing the fruit they once did. When you combine the terrible condition of the job market, with search firms who now want you to enter your resume into their proprietary system (rather than just

sending it to them), and add to that companies who are forgoing the retainer firms altogether in favor of performing their own executive searches via the internet, the results of mass mailings are likely to be depressing for a while to come.

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We are very fortunate to have members like Larry who are able to articulate and also willing to share their job search experiences with us. While the opinions of subject matter experts are to be valued, I think you will agree that we are more empathic with the experiences and insights of our peers. As always, I welcome TENG member contributions to our newsletter.

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