

How to Market Yourself to Employers in a Recession

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The title of this article wasn't chosen by accident.

What most job-seekers (during recessions and economic booms alike) don't realize is that applying for jobs is a marketing problem. The best jobs aren't won by filling your resume with cliches and business buzzwords, using a pretty Microsoft Word template, and jumping through the same tired human resources hoops as every other job seeker. Perry Marshall touches on some of the problems with this approach in his excellent report on using direct marketing techniques to land a new job. They include:

- **The best jobs aren't publicly advertised.** Rather, the jobs you see posted in newspapers and on Monster.com are the jobs insiders don't want.
- **Applying for such jobs puts you at the back of a long line of job-seeking clones who look mostly or completely the same on paper.** Furthermore, the line is set up in such a way that it's very difficult to reach a real person at the company.
- **Any real person you do eventually reach is likely to be a human resources bureaucrat rather than someone with serious authority to hire you.**

This process can be effective in a prosperous economy, when jobs are plentiful and the competition for them isn't very intense. But it does not work during recessions. By definition, jobs are extremely scarce during recessions, meaning the competition for what few jobs exist is fierce. And if you try to get those jobs the same way you would during times of prosperity, you're basically walking into a war zone unarmed.

It doesn't have to be this way.

But if you want to get different results - that is, a well-paying job in a time of economic despair - you have to do something different. Rather than merely applying for jobs in the same cookie-cutter fashion as the rest of the herd, you need to market yourself (there's the key word again) as a difference-maker. You need to create the impression that despite the current economic crisis, you need to be hired - like, yesterday. To do this effectively, however, you need to understand something about how corporate decision-makers think during recessions. Don't skip past this part, because it's critical to the tips that follow. A true grasp of this will separate you from the rest of the job-seeking herd almost instantly.

Employers still want and need to hire difference-makers.

Believe it or not, companies don't all freeze up and stand still during recessions. While they are more reluctant and selective about whom and how many people they hire (because cash is low) companies still need top-notch employees to help them remain profitable and stay afloat. This is as true during recessions as it is during good times. In fact, it's more important. Economic crises reveal a company's employees for who they truly are. Those who produce demonstrable, bottom-line results for the company are distinguished from those who merely act the part and collect their weekly pay. And make no mistake - if you really, truly are a results-oriented difference maker, then companies want to hire you. They need you now more than ever. The challenge then becomes how to show them that you are such a person.

How to reach decision-makers

First and foremost, this is a matter of reaching out to the right people. The aforementioned human resources bureaucrats are not going to be of much help, especially during a recession when they are even more risk-averse than bureaucrats usually are. No, instead, you need to reach the senior-level decision makers. The people within a company who A) realize the need for results-oriented difference makers and B) have the power to hire them immediately. But how do you reach them? Surely you can't just waltz into a company and ask to be taken to a vice-president's office. Probably not. But what you can do is get their mailing addresses.

Just visit ZapData.com, the list service of business credit behemoth Dunn & Bradstreet. Once there, you can set up a free account and search within certain industries and locations - say, software development in Seattle.

Then you just pay the fee and download a mailing list with the addresses of presidents, owners, or senior-level managers within that industry. Again, these are the people you want to reach, not HR guys. But once you have the names, what do you actually say to them?

Making your pitch

This is critical. Having the names of decision makers won't do you much good if all you do is send them the same watered-down, dime-a-dozen, MS Word-generated resumes as the classified ad crowd. Remember - these companies are experiencing the pains of a recession. They are cutting costs to the bone. The only way to get hired in such a climate is to market yourself as a results-oriented producer. This is in stark contrast to the types of people who do not get hired in recessions, whom Harvard MBA John T. Reed calls "external validation addicts." According to Reed, "You can spot external validation addicts by the way they describe themselves in their resume or bio. If it is a list of appointments they have received from various committees, like military rank or plum positions like battalion commander in an airborne division, they are external validation addicts."

This is absolutely relevant to our purposes here. If your resume reads like this, you're in trouble. You might have served on every committee your former employer ever created, but guess what? The company you're applying to now is losing money hand over fist, and committees are just another drain on the budget. They want people who can cut costs, increase sales, or both. In short, they want people who are results-oriented. Reed goes on to describe what the resumes of those people look like:

Those of us who think you can shove your external validation have different self-descriptions.

Ours involve straight-commission jobs and marks like top producer; successful entrepreneurial activities; successful coaching in sports; books and articles written ("Getting published" is external validation. I published almost all my books and articles myself.); marks set in athletic competition; net worth; income; discoveries made; inventions patented; and so forth."

The more of these things your resume contains, the better your chances of being hired in a recession.

Another key to accentuating your results-oriented workplace credentials is to use specificity. Too many job applicants rely on laudatory adjectives and buzzwords to communicate their strengths. Don't do that. Whenever possible, quantify what you have done or could do if hired. For example:

Don't say "achieved phenomenal growth in the produce department." Instead, say, "Grew sales in the produce department 15% during the slowest quarter of the year, during a hiring freeze, with no additional support or resources from management." Even if some of your achievements appear to be committee/popularity oriented, don't name them as such. Instead, try to unearth the objective reasons why you achieved those things. For example, don't say "won Manager of the Year award in 2007." Instead, say "cut operating costs by 20% while at the same time increasing after-tax profits more than any other store in the tri-state area."

It's all about results

These statements identify you as a difference maker, someone who could step in, take the reigns of a department, and deliver immediate, bottom-line results if hired. And do you know what the best part of this approach is? You don't need to have a mile-long list of college degrees, awards, or sparkling credentials. The dirty little secret about hiring (and ultimately, life) is that credentials are not the most important thing in the world. As Paul Graham [points out](#), "What [credentials] are, functionally, is a way of predicting performance. If you could measure actual performance, you wouldn't need them."

"Actual performance" are the key words.

Think of what we've been saying throughout this article: results-oriented. Difference-maker. Bottom line. Actual performance. In a recession economy, these things are all employers care about. Everything else is secondary - in fact, lower than that. They really don't matter at all. If you can market yourself to corporate decision makers as someone who can bring these critical ingredients to the table, you will always be employed - during good times and bad.