

A Different Approach to Job Ads

Focusing on FIT for Your Business

Recruitment is a big expense for most small businesses. The time it takes to write an advertisement, post it, review resumes, create interview questions, and interview candidates is a significant commitment and at the end of the day you don't always find the perfect candidate the first time through. I recently posted an entry level receptionist job for a Vancouver based company and received 107 resumes in less than 24 hours! Anticipating a large response to this posting, I put some things in place that pretty much sorted the list for me. With very little effort I reduced the list to 25 in the first step. The second step took me to thirteen. The work I put in to those 13 brought us to 7 interviews, and by the time we got to the interview stage we knew these candidates, on paper at least, quite well.

The process was so effective, I used it twice more in the next few weeks with the same results. In addition, I received many comments from job seekers about how it made our company stand out from the rest, and even some of those who were not selected for an interview, took the time to write me and let me know how much they enjoyed the process. Setting up the process took a bit of time, but it was nothing compared to how much time it saved me in having to sort through all those resumes. Here's what I did.

Step 1 - Create a job posting that's unique, exciting, and talks not only about qualifications, but fit. This is invaluable in helping job seekers to determine if they are the right fit for your company. I began the posting by talking about our company, our philosophy and our values. I also provided a brief statement that summarized our corporate culture. Then, I dedicated one sentence to the skills required: "We assume if you're applying for this position you have the following skills ..." I went on to talk about the kind of person we were looking for and focused on personal traits, work style, personality etc. This took up the bulk of the posting. By the time a candidate got to the end, they were very clear about the kind of person we were looking for.

Step 2 - Put specific instructions in your posting, then be ruthless with your review of applications. In the posting, I made several very specific requests. I told applicants to submit cover letters and resumes in MS Word or PDF formats only. I asked them to send everything as an attachment and not in the body of the email. I provided my name and email address and asked them to address their package to me. I also asked them to answer 3 specific questions in their cover letter. When reviewing those first 107 applications, if there was no cover letter, I tossed it. If the cover letter or resume were contained in the email body, out it went. If it was not addressed to me, it was gone. And if they didn't answer the questions I posed in their cover letter, well, you get the picture. I didn't even have to read the responses. It took very little to weed out the people who couldn't follow instructions, and this step quickly took me from 107 applicants to 25.

Step 3 - Send out job-relevant "assignments" with a due date. This part was the most fun. I put together three assignments for the remaining 25 candidates. The first was to submit, in a one-page essay, the answers to several "get to know you" type questions. These were designed to help me quickly see whether the person would be a fit for the position. The second assignment was a priority-setting exercise where the candidate was given 12 tasks and told to prioritize them over two days. The third assignment was designed to help us assess their level of expertise in using MSWord. They were given an unformatted document and asked to create a

professional-looking business document, including several different elements. Out of those 25, only 13 responded with completed assignments.

Step 4 - Review the packages with "best fit" in mind and use a scoring grid. For each application package I created a grid where I scored the assignments. Resume and cover letter were each worth 5 points, and assignments were worth 10. In their cover letter, applicants needed to have indicated an ability to write well and given me an impression of why they'd be a good fit for our company. Resumes must have addressed the basics of skill and experience. Each assignment was rated on their ability to follow the instructions, and how well they completed them. I determined that only applicants who scored above 30 (out of the total 40 points) would move to the interviews. This took my short-list down to seven applicants.

Step 5 - Use the packages to create personalized interview questions. Rather than use a list of generic questions, we were able to use their experiences and responses to the assignments to create a dialogue about their fit with the company. By the time we got to the interview stage, both the candidates and our interview team felt we already knew each other. This made the interview process easy and natural.

In the end, fit is the most important part of hiring for small businesses, so you may want to try this approach the next time you need to fill a position. Think about the process holistically - you don't have to follow my steps exactly, but the idea is to reduce the amount of time you have to spend reviewing applications, and create a tangible process for candidates that will allow them to show you their fit for your company. I guarantee, if you use these ideas to more creatively approach your next hire, it will be well worth the effort.

5 Ways to Deal with Difficult or Negative Customers

Every business owner has faced it. Those customers who always seem get your dander up. There are things you can do to minimize the impact these customers have on you, and your capacity to turn them around and make them fans of your business.

1. Resist the urge to get mad and make judgments

When you are dealing with a difficult customer, or worse a persistently negative one, it's easy to start feeling angry or upset when you see them coming. It's also easy to make judgments and assumptions about them, and label them - malcontent, disruptive, or complainer. These negative emotions, however, will hamper your ability to deal with the customer effectively. You might, for instance, immediately dismiss their concern or complaint in your mind and set out to simply pacify and get rid of them rather than to truly resolve the issue. When you allow your own negative thoughts to take over, it comes out in your body language. People prone to negativity may unconsciously try to mirror that, or will respond to it with defensiveness making it even more difficult to solve the problem. Instead, give your customer the benefit of the doubt. Assume they are coming to you with a valid concern and really listen to what they have to say. If you truly listen, and hear what they have to say and don't judge, you might be surprised at the response you get, and how much better you'll feel.

2. Dig deeper to get at the root of the issue

Negative behaviour is almost always rooted in fear. Unfortunately, it takes some digging to figure out what that fear is, in order to get to why they're behaving the way they are.

For example, perhaps two years ago, your customer was treated rudely and dismissively by one of your staff. They didn't have the courage to come to you with it directly, but it tainted their perspective on the kind of treatment they can expect from your business. Perhaps they really like your product or service and that's why they continue to come back but their fear (and perhaps even expectation) of being mistreated by your staff puts them on the offensive. So, the belligerent behaviour they display is actually the way they protect themselves from being hurt. It's always easier to offer someone compassion if you understand where they're coming from. That doesn't excuse their bad behavior but if you take the time to try to get to the core of why they are behaving that way, you might be able to resolve a deeply rooted issue, and turn that customer around for good.

3. Defuse their negativity by giving them something they want

This takes some skill, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to bring that customer around. I say skill, because it's about more than just acquiescing and giving in to their demands; demands that give them all the control and that make you powerless. It's also more than trying to manipulate someone's emotions by bribing them with stuff, just to pacify them. The skill lies in creating a win/win, where you're in control but the customer gets some kind of satisfactory resolution. Most customers don't actually expect you to give them everything they ask for, but they do expect something. So, find that something! "I realize you want a full refund on that product, but you've been using it for six months and we can no longer take it back. Here's what we CAN do. We'll give you a pro-rated refund for the remaining six months, which you can use toward purchasing a new product." Or, in the example I gave above, "The employee who treated you rudely is no longer working for us, but on behalf of our company I'd like to offer you my sincerest apology. We value your business, so here's what I'm going to do. I'll give you my private business phone number. If you ever feel one of my employees has been anything less than professional and customer-focused, please give me a call, and I will do my best to resolve the situation immediately." Every business will be different in terms of what they are able to offer. Almost always, giving the customer something something will reduce their negativity and turn their attitude around.

4. Don't take it personally - but accept responsibility when it is personal

It's tough not to take it personally when someone is continually throwing stones, but many times it's not personal. It's about what that customer is going through in his or her life that puts them in that negative frame of mind. When you're under extreme stress at work, or at home, it takes very little to set you off - someone cutting you off in traffic, being kept waiting for an appointment, or a customer service representative who tells you they can't do what you're asking. When you know you haven't done anything wrong, step back from the emotions you're feeling and assume the negative behaviour is coming from something that has nothing to do with you. When you are disconnected from that defensive emotion, you can more clearly see your way to resolving the issue. However, be big enough to listen to the customer's concerns and determine whether you shoulder some of the responsibility, and if so then humbly accept it. Apologize, express your desire to change, and then do whatever it takes to make restitution. That will keep customers coming back.

5. Be proactive by building relationships

When you've got lots of currency in the relationship bank with your customers, they are way more likely to forgive an error or misdeed than if they barely know you. Build relationships with your customers all year long. Listen to their stories, be invested in their lives, treat them with kindness and respect, respond to their concerns. Doing this builds

your credibility and creates a cushion for when things do go wrong. That way you'll have earned your customers' respect and will likely be able to resolve things quickly when an issue arises.

Every business sometimes faces negative and difficult customers. Following these tips will help you to minimize the impact, get to solutions faster, and turn negatives into positives for your business.

Top 6 Predictors of Creative Performance in the Workplace

Dr. Amantha Imber is the founder of Inventium, an international creativity and innovation company. She is author of "**The Creativity Formula: 50 scientifically proven creativity boosters for work and for life**". She has a doctorate in organizational psychology and brings a scientific yet highly practical approach to creative thinking and innovation. About 12-months ago, she set out to see if it was possible to accurately predict whether a person would be an effective creative thinker at work. Her company tested over 1,300 people, from industries as diverse as advertising, engineering and insurance. Although it had never been done previously, their research led them to the conclusion that they could indeed predict a person's ability to think creatively at work, and could do so extremely accurately. It was a matter of identifying the right variables to measure.

Their test incorporated over 25 "predictors" - things they knew were predictive of creative performance as shown by leading researchers in the field. I thought it would be interesting to look at some of the variables that came out as the top predictors of creative performance in the workplace, in the context of your own experience as a small business owner. This information is not only valuable in helping you find and recruit creative people to come and work for you, but to assess your own level of creative performance, and see whether there are any areas you could grow. Here is an abbreviated version of the top 6 predictor's from Imber's study. [Click here to read the entire article.](#)

1. **Openness to experience**

People who score high on this trait seek out and appreciate new experiences. They tend to enjoy having a lot of variety in their life, have a high level of curiosity and use their imagination a lot. As a result, they perform significantly more creatively at work. **To foster this trait in yourself**, become deliberate about experiencing new activities, or doing things differently. This will help improve your openness to experience and thus significantly boost your creative performance.

2. **Creative self-efficacy**

People who are high on this dimension have a strong belief in their ability to generate creative ideas. They will immerse themselves in tasks that require creativity, and will seek to get the best ideas out of themselves. Simply having this self belief has been shown to significantly increase a person's actual ability to think creatively. **To foster this trait in yourself**, reinforce your creative triumphs, no matter how small, and you will increase your awareness of, and confidence in, your creative potential.

3. **Resilience**

People who are high in resilience are able to deal with stressful situations, bounce back easily from disappointments and failures, and can remain optimistic when things are not

going their way. Creativity often involves experiencing failure and being able to bounce back from rejections. This attribute is critical to maintaining creativity and enthusiasm. **To foster this trait in yourself**, start to see failure as going hand in hand with creativity. This can help with setting more realistic expectations, which in turn will help boost resilience.

4. **Confidence in intuition**

People who have a lot of confidence in their intuitive side tend to prefer gut-level thinking over more analytical thinking and their confidence in the accuracy of these intuitive decisions. Having this confidence in one's intuition can help immensely with creativity, as creative thought often involves tapping into intuitive, "gut" thinking. **To foster this trait in yourself**, try to gradually use and test your intuitive judgments in low risk circumstances, then use any successful intuition-based decisions as encouragement for more important tasks. This gradual approach will ease you into a pattern of trusting your intuition and will help to develop your creative aptitude.

5. **Tolerance of ambiguity**

People who are very tolerant of ambiguities are not bothered by problems that are perceived as open-ended or ambiguous, as they tend to be highly flexible and dynamic. They enjoy the autonomy and creativity ill-defined tasks require. Being open to ambiguity is a key to creative performance, as a large part of creative thinking involves being able to sit comfortably with problems that have no obvious solution. **To foster this trait in yourself**, challenge your automatic tendency to view vague instructions negatively. Realize that the more ambiguous your directives, the more scope you have to impose your personal touch and talent on the project. If you consistently approach ambiguous directives in this way, your habit of perceiving ambiguity negatively will be replaced by a tendency to view ambiguity as an opportunity for you to shine.

6. **Cross application of experiences**

People who demonstrate this behaviour frequently apply knowledge and concepts from outside of the work environment to solve work-related problems. **To foster this trait in yourself**, start deliberately applying knowledge and experiences from outside of work to tasks requiring creative problem-solving at work. The more similarities you can identify between projects at work and your knowledge and experiences, the better you will understand the problem you are facing and the more likely you will be able to solve it.

Creative performance is a powerful factor for business growth. As you foster these traits in yourself, and begin looking for people who demonstrate these characteristics when you hire, you'll grow your capacity to problem-solve and creatively adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of small business ownership.

To read the full article on the 6 predictors, [click here](#). The Inventium website contains all kinds of useful tools and strategies to help you build creative performance in your business. [Click here to visit Inventium](#).

7 Sales Fundamentals

Get Back to Basics to Grow Your Sales

When a professional sports team begins to struggle with its game a coach will often take the players back to the fundamentals; those basic skills required for playing the game. The fundamentals are important, they are the foundation upon which greatness is built. The same is true for an accomplished musician. You can't jump from picking up an instrument for the first time to playing Carnegie Hall without learning a whole lot of fundamentals in between. It's the same with selling. If you don't have the fundamentals, you won't be able to build and grow sales, and as a result your business. Many a successful sales person has felt they're on top of their game, but all of a sudden they are closing less deals and it's becoming harder to bring in the same level of revenue each month. Things feel off track and slowly their confidence begins to wane. When this happens, it's time to go back to the fundamentals. In fact, the fundamentals should be the primary focus of your sales strategy all the time, if you want your business to succeed.

International sales trainer, Tom Hopkins, says that without these seven fundamentals, it's actually impossible to sustain sales for any length of time. You might well have a sales boom for a short period of time, but you won't be able to keep that going without coming back to the foundational principles of selling. Here they are.

1. **Prospecting** - this is finding the right people who have the potential to buy what you're selling. Prospecting involves not only figuring out where to find leads, but also how to reach them. Understanding how and where to prospect is a key to successful sales. A successful fly fisherman goes to a lake - even a specific part of a lake - because he knows that's where the fish hang out. He also knows what kind of bait they like, which in turn determines the kind of fly he uses. This can vary depending on the time of day, the time of year, or even the weather. He doesn't just go out everyday with the same fly and cast his line out into the water hoping something will bite. It's his business to know. Sometimes there's a bit of trial and error as he tries two or three flies to see which one the fish are taking on that particular day, but he goes in prepared. It's the same for you. Launching an advertising campaign into the universe and hoping someone, somewhere will bite, is a waste of time. Knowing who your customers are, where you'll find them, and how to best reach them, is the first step in successful selling.
2. **Original Contact** - Hopkins says people form impressions almost instantly when they meet you. Their first impression comes from your verbal connection (how you greet them, your tone of voice, your words) and the second follows closely - your visual connection. This is how they perceive who you are through the impression you make physically (what you're wearing, your body language, your grooming, etc.). Paying attention to the level of professionalism you convey could make or break your connection with that potential customer within minutes of meeting them.
3. **Qualification** - according to Hopkins, this is where most sales people lose the deal. They don't know who the decision makers are so they waste their time trying to convince the wrong people to buy. The president of Blue Beetle Books and founder of this newsletter once said, "Never get a no from someone who can't give you a yes." Qualifying your buyer means finding the decision maker in a company (or even in a family), and determining whether they have the capacity to purchase. They may love you and your product, but if they can't afford it, they're not customers. Time and effort spent on this fundamental will increase the quality of your sales process and boost the number of sales you actually make.

4. **Presentation/Demonstration** - generally, presentations are for intangible products, demonstrations are for tangible products people can touch and feel. This is part of almost every sale. It's the point where you talk about your product or service and create the connection between what you're selling and what the customer needs. The key to success in this fundamental is increasing your knowledge and practicing the pitch. You need to know everything there is to know about your product or service. There should be almost no question you can't answer. You also need to be able to present, or demonstrate, what you're selling in a succinct, concise manner, one in which the customer is clear about why this product is right for them. The only way to get better at this is to practice.
5. **Handling Objections/Addressing Concerns** - "Most people will not say yes until they've first given you some kind of no." says Hopkins. This fundamental means you can handle or address any concern or objection your customer may bring up. A concern or objection doesn't mean "no", it just means "I haven't really decided yet." Mastering this skill requires thinking ahead of time and knowing what those potential objections and concerns might be, and preparing a response that will remove those obstacles from the prospect's mind. If you can do this effectively, your sales will increase.
6. **Closing the Sale** - finding a way to help your prospect agree to buy what you are selling. It is not begging, or tricking the customer into saying yes, it's an exchange of their resources for your product or service - one that will enhance or improve their lives or business in some way. Everyone has their own way of doing this, and you need to find what yours is. It needs to be comfortable, natural, genuine (not pushy), and confident. You should never feel like you're pleading with someone to purchase from you. If it becomes clear it's not the right fit, walk away. There will be someone else who's a better, more qualified prospect. Closing is where many salespeople fail. They get right to the end of the process, and then don't know how to take that last step that will help people commit. Learn how to improve your close and your sales will see a direct and positive result.
7. **Getting Referrals** - Hopkins says too many sales people think they're finished after step six but in fact they're walking away from significant potential sales, if they don't capitalize on referrals at that point in the process. It's when people have just said yes, that they are the most likely to lead you to others who may also benefit from what you have to offer. Don't waste this opportunity to grow your prospect list, which takes us right back to fundamental number one!

If you're struggling with your sales game, consider whether you're paying attention to the fundamentals. Get back to basics, work on those skills, and you'll find yourself getting more goals, touchdowns, baskets, home runs (you pick your favourite sports analogy) and winning the sales game for your business.

8 Fees Your Small Business Can Avoid

Fees - they're everywhere and if you count up all the fees your small business pays in a year, it can add up to a hefty sum. While fees may be a fact of life it doesn't mean you can't avoid at least some of them with a little planning and creativity. Chris Carter, senior editor at thestar.com,

has a few ideas on ways to avoid fees. While these could apply to anyone, read them with your small business in mind.

1. **Cellphone roaming fees** - if you're travelling to the U.S. or elsewhere, talk to your mobile carrier beforehand about a pre-paid long-distance/roaming package. Paying a little upfront could save you hundreds of dollars, and these packages usually last for 30-days so if you don't use them on your first trip you'll have them for the remainder of the month. Make sure, however, that you ask your carrier exactly what kind of coverage you are getting and what, if anything, you would be charged extra for; you don't want any surprises at the end of the month. Some companies will prorate these fees so you can cancel when you return from your trip and only pay for what you used while you were away.
2. **Annual credit card fees** - platinum and gold reward cards can charge annual fees of \$75 to \$120 for features that you never use for your business. Make sure you are clear about what you're getting for those fees, and if they're things you don't use, look at another card that has no annual fees. Sometimes these cards offer faster accumulation of reward points, or air miles, but if it takes you more than two years to earn enough to fly, you've already paid a hefty amount of your reward in fees. Perhaps even more than buying the ticket outright: remember you usually still have to pay the taxes on the flights. Don't blindly pay the fees on your card - check out no-fee credit cards that offer rewards or something that meets your business needs without huge fees.
3. **Cancellation fees** - cancelling a cellphone contract or a TV package before the end of the contract (or service agreement) can result in fees of several hundred dollars. Be aware of the fine print in your service agreement and time your contract changes wisely, or don't sign a long-term contracts in the first place.
4. **Airline fees** - economy travelers on Canadian airlines will now find fees for audio headsets, pillows and blankets, in-flight food, reserving a seat or to get a seat with more legroom. Avoiding some of these fees is simple - take your own ear buds and in-flight snacks. But, rules over checked baggage are changing too. Pack your bags carefully and go online and check your airline's weight restrictions. Going over by even a few pounds can cost you an additional \$50 or more. Also, whenever possible, book your tickets online to avoid a telephone booking charge.
5. **Directory Assistance** - gone are the days when you could call Directory Assistance for free and get numbers for anyone, anywhere. While Google has just shut down its toll-free 1-800-GOOG-411 service, you can still get free business listings from your cellphone by sending a text to 466453 ('Google') with the business name and city. Also, [Canada 411](#) has both personal and business listings as well as maps to help you find what you're looking for.
6. **ATM fees** - they may be handy, but those non-bank cash machines in convenience stores, bars and shopping centres usually have you over a barrel when it comes to fees. You are charged \$1.50 to \$2.50 at the machine and often another levy by your own bank for a total of up to \$4.50 a transaction. So plan ahead, use a smartphone app to locate your own bank's closest machine, or be aware of other locations. CIBC customers, for example, can use President's Choice machines and ATMs in most Mac's Milk outlets without fees. Credit unions have their own extensive shared ATM network. Think through

your day's activities and make sure you're never caught in a situation where you have to pay \$4.50 to use an ATM.

7. **Banking fees** - Canada's big banks and credit unions usually offer accounts that waive monthly fees, if you maintain a minimum monthly balance. Call your bank to ensure you're getting the best deal for your business use. It takes a little digging sometimes, but you can usually lower your bank fees without too much difficulty. If you are paying large monthly bank fees, and your banker won't work with you to see how you can reduce those fees, it may be time to move your business to a different bank.
8. **Pay your business bills on time** - late fees on missed bill payments are completely unnecessary and are usually the result of poor planning or time management. These fees can really add up if you don't stay on top of them. Setting up automated withdrawals for your regular bills will ensure you don't miss a payment and pay unnecessary fees. If you're paying online, set the payment date a few days ahead of the due date. If you do like to pay bills personally, make sure you set reminders in your computer calendar or smartphone to alert you when they are due.

You've heard it said 'there's nothing certain in life except death and taxes'. We could probably add 'fees' to that maxim, but if you pay attention to where, and when, you're being charged those fees, you can likely reduce the amount of money your business is putting out every year, and put that money to better use.