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### MANAGEMENT

#### GETTING THE MOST FROM A TEMP AGENCY ... and getting your money's worth.

by Maria Piscopo

February/March 2007

##### When you are looking to hire through an agency

Companies enlisting the aid of creative placement agencies expect to find better-qualified creatives and screening of staff and freelance talent. As an employer, your goal is to save time, energy and attention. When you call in search of creative staff or freelancers, placement agencies are there to select the candidate with the right skills for the project, with less stress and more productivity for you. Here are four tips for working with a temp agency:

1. Once you have discussed your creative staffing or freelance needs, you will work with an account rep or staffing manager. Look for a firm who will assign you a company representative that works to gain an in-depth understanding of your needs. Emily Brewer, Aquent Creative recruiter, says, "Clients need to understand that 90 percent of what we do for them is behind the scenes, and we are only submitting the cream of the crop. We are working hard to understand their business, culture and goals and doing all we can to find them the right people. The candidates we submit are prescreened and prequalified candidates, not just random resumes."
2. The agency should get to know you, your needs and your budget, but you have to do your homework as well. The better information you can give the agency, the better the match it can make. Dave Willmer, executive director of The Creative Group, offers, "More information is better than less when it comes to letting the staffing manager know your needs. In addition to describing the hard skills required for freelance positions, think about the traits that make someone successful in your organization and describe these qualities to the staffing manager. Don't stop with the big picture; you also want to address the details. Is the dress code conservative? What kind of hours do people work? Is there a challenging personality type the freelancer will have to work with?"
3. Once you have developed a relationship with a temp agency, look for follow up. Find firms that proactively keep in touch, making sure the placement is working out and staying ahead of recurring needs. Willmer says, "Once we've placed a freelancer, we'll follow up with both the client and the professional to ensure the engagement is working. If for any reason it is not and the client notifies us within 16 hours, we'll replace the freelance professional promptly at no charge to the client. It's important for firms to let their staffing manager know how the freelancer is working out as soon as possible. Regular feedback is essential for forming a successful working relationship." Brewer adds, "I work closely with other team members in the office to maintain contact with my client base as regularly as possible. We call, e-mail and showcase talent we think would be a great fit, regardless of whether the company has called us with a need. This shows businesses that we think about them and not just when they call us."
4. Rushing to put a body in a chair in front of a project rarely is successful. I recommend you be better prepared to hire through a placement agency instead of trying to find someone in a last-minute panic. This means looking for a staffing firm before you actually need one, because by the time you need one—yes, panic has set in. Marcia Murray of Murray+Tatro says, "Usually the panic seems to come from a firm's clients, so the firm has inherited a last-minute need. When that happens, it can't be easily avoided. Also many companies don't have the luxury of keeping extra people on staff to take up the slack and jump in if needed. Many of my clients 'run thin' in the creative departments for economic reasons. I suppose in a perfect world they could have an open-door policy about looking at portfolios for future needs, but frankly most of our clients are too busy."

##### Lion's share

To get the most out of a relationship with an agency: Do some research, check references and find someone comfortable for you and your needs. The best relationships are built on trust and experience, and these will not magically appear when you need to find creative staff or a freelancer. Jojo Varona of The Job Shop confirms this, "Our clients know that when we send them candidates, the candidates have been properly screened. We meet with every single one of our candidates, and the candidates know where their resumé is being presented. If we don't have a candidate to present, we tell our clients up front of the difficulty of the search. There are a lot of candidates out there and a lot of open positions. The key is finding the appropriate candidate for the right position. Our clients know that we will not send them a candidate just to send them someone."

Yes, it will cost you to take the time to research placement firms for your creative staff and freelance needs, but it most likely will cost you more not to do the research in advance.

##### When you want to get work via a temp agency

Since clients look for a large variety of staff and freelance help based on product experience, style, salary level and proficiency in certain software, placement firms look for top quality creatives—and that could be you! Placement firms are highly motivated to match their clients' needs with talent from their creative pool, meaning your first step is finding a temp agency to represent you. Follow these four tips for getting hired through an agency:

1. Placement firms generally look for creative professionals who are highly skilled, have great portfolios and demonstrate strong communication skills. Most prefer personal interviews, so be prepared. You are not only showing a portfolio, you are selling the agency on working with you. Brewer says, "When I am searching for and screening talent for our active pool, I look for a background that is solid in whatever their industry is. I look for people who have worked for well-known companies, who can articulate the results they have achieved in past positions, who are professional and personable and who have great portfolios. Basically, I look for people who I'm able to passionately represent to my clients and who I feel confident would represent us in the most

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positive light possible when they're on site with a client."

2. Many agencies have staff who are working or former creatives, so the agencies are able to more accurately evaluate the knowledge and skills that are necessary for different creative jobs and projects. Be certain you can speak to how and why you did the work in your portfolio. Says Willmer, "Our evaluation process includes an interview, and where applicable, a portfolio review as well as skills testing. We also perform selected reference checks. Our goal throughout this process is to understand the freelancer's skills and experience, as well as the type of environment the individual is most likely to thrive in. When making an assessment, it's important to take the whole picture into account."

3. Talent, skills, enthusiasm, experience can all be there and still a placement can go wrong. Because the creative process is not a product sold off a shelf, some agencies take temperament and personality into the mix to better assure a match. Karl Heine, principal, Creative Placement Agency, says, "Once we have established that a candidate is talented, we'll explore for personality. Personality is connected to emotions, and it's what inspires creative thought. We try to match someone's personality to where they will work and for whom. Some creatives like a fast-paced, deadline-intensive environment. Others prefer a more relaxed environment. We explore what drives them, their passions and inspiration. We like to ask a lot of questions about what works best for them, what they want to do in the style of work, agency or corporation, travel or location. We're in this business to make the right fit for our client and candidate."

4. Know the difference between strong design communication versus simply cool or pretty pictures. It's about getting hired because you can deliver the message that the client needs, so only show your best work and be able to communicate why your solution worked for the client. Heine says, "When we review portfolios, we look for: Did the work communicate a clear message from a visual perspective? Did it read correctly from a copy and typography perspective? If available, was the piece or campaign successful for the client?"

#### **SIDEBAR: Karl Heine, Principal, Creative Placement Agency:**

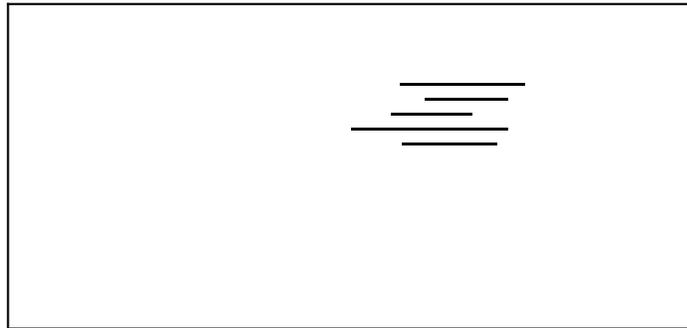
The best way for an employer to prepare for a new hire and engage in a relationship with a recruitment agency is to plan ahead and evaluate the open position. Writing a detailed job description that clarifies the responsibilities is extremely helpful.

From the staffing agency's viewpoint, here are some of the questions that would assist in the search process:

- Can we set up a meeting in person so our agency can get a better picture of your company's personality?
- Will this search be handled through human resources or will our agency be dealing directly with the hiring manager?
- What type of personality type would fit best with your present department or team?
- Are there any other skills you would like this candidate to have that are not listed in the job description?
- Are there schools or similar companies that you respect that would help as a reference point?
- What is the time frame to fill this position?
- Is this a new hire or a replacement?
- Do you have additional company information that would offer attractive benefits to entice prospective candidates?
- Is this our exclusive search or have you engaged other recruitment agencies as well?
- Are you posting this everywhere on the web or a few choice sites?
- What are those websites?
- When reviewing work, do you want digital samples or a website with the candidate's resume? In regard to a traditional portfolio, will our candidates need to drop it off or will the portfolio be reviewed during an in-person interview?
- Is viewing a portfolio on computer acceptable for an in-person interview or are printed samples necessary?

#### **About the author**

*Maria Piscopo started her business as a creative services consultant and art/photo rep in 1978. She teaches classes for creative professionals, speaks at industry conferences, and writes for several industry publications. Her fifth book, *The Graphic Designers and Illustrators Guide to Marketing and Promotion*, is available at Allworth Press.*



Solutions