

How to Respond to A Recruiter's Call

By **LAURENCE J. STYBEL AND MARYANNE PEABODY**

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Your first encounter with an executive recruiter may be a job interview over the phone. If he's a contingency recruiter, who is paid only when the position is filled, he may have received 200 responses to an ad. You may be one of 25 potential candidates in a search firm's database. If you hear from a retained executive search firm, which is paid regardless of a successful outcome, you may have landed on a preliminary list of 20 prospects based on the recruiter's research or networking.

Either recruiter's job is to pare down the list to between three and five reasonable candidates, says Elizabeth Olsen of Olsen/Clark, an executive search firm based in Bainbridge Island, Wash. These candidates, sometimes called a panel, will be submitted to the employer for discussion and evaluation. The recruiter's objective is one of elimination. Your task is to avoid being eliminated.

The Phone Screen

Recruiters may call you at home. Is your phone always busy? If you don't answer promptly, phone screeners will go to the next resume on their list.

Consider getting a personal pager and recommending calls to that number. You'll receive your calls promptly, regardless of where you physically are. It also reduces conflicts with children over the phone. Using a voice-mail service routes calls automatically to voice mail if your line is busy. Another solution is installing a business line. Additionally, many job candidates have cellular phones. Still, consider a voice-mail service for your personal line as some recruiters may be referred by personal references, some of whom may not have the new number. The easiest solution is to restrict your personal line to incoming calls. Use the business line for outgoing calls, faxing and e-mail.

Make sure your home phone is answered in a professional manner. The first impression a recruiter receives is how a family member answers the phone. Prepare a script and tape it to the wall near each phone. "Hello, this is the Smith family. How may I help you? Mr. Smith isn't here at the moment, but I'll be glad to take a message." Keep yellow sticky pads and pencils next to each phone for posting messages.

Some candidates have to get creative to make sure their calls are handled properly. One candidate's adolescent son was going through a rebellious period. When recruiters called,

the son would take messages and then "forget" to tell the father. Threats didn't help. The father eventually arranged to pay \$5 for every valid message.

Landing an Interview

When a recruiter calls, your goal shouldn't be to persuade him immediately that you're the best qualified candidate. His goal is to prepare a short list of candidates for the hiring manager. You need only convince him that his client will want you on the list. A recruiter seeking to fill a position at a consumer products company contacted a vice president of sales and marketing for an industrial products dealer. Soon the recruiter realized the candidate lacked the background being sought and began to explain that the job wasn't a good fit. But the candidate discussed why he should be on the panel as a "dark horse" and that he'd developed an innovative marketing strategy that might interest the employer. He won an interview.

Maintain Recruiter Relationships

Most companies would prefer to locate candidates themselves. Since that's not possible, they work with recruiters. Once you're out of the job market, though, try to maintain relationships with recruiters. Top executive-search firms always have positions to fill at senior levels. Even if they have none appropriate for you, stay in touch. Why? If you're offered a new assignment, recruiters can predict its probable impact on your marketability. They often know how your compensation compares to your peers. They also can tell you what jobs and skills are hot now and down the road. This information can help you select assignments, seek continuing education or read certain books. Additionally, good recruiters have enormous networks that you might be able to tap.

If you've completed a search recently, you probably found that few recruiters genuinely were interested in you. Fewer followed up. These are the recruiters with whom to cultivate relationships.

Ed Kiradjieff, a former retained search consultant in Wayland, Mass., who's now retired, who works with senior financial executives. He suggests the following ways to stay in touch with recruiters:

- Send a warm, personal letter to the recruiters in your field when you find a job.
- Invite a specific recruiter for a tour of the facilities, followed by lunch with you and another senior manager.
- Offer to be a source of leads.
- Have lunch once a year to stay abreast of trends in the larger business community and keep the recruiter up-to-date on your career.

"As a search consultant, I prefer candidates who keep in touch over the years to candidates who call only when they become unemployed," Mr. Kiradjieff says. "I like to hear from candidates when they get that new job, that all-important promotion or would like to invite me in to visit their company."

Stay in Touch

If you see an article in a business publication that would interest the recruiter, clip it and send it to him with a handwritten note. It's an inexpensive way of saying, "I think about you even when I don't need your help." Invite a recruiter to your professional association meetings. In some associations, membership is confined to active professionals or those with specific job titles. If you belong to such a group, sponsor the recruiter as your guest to help him enlarge his contact base.

"An executive recruiter's most valued asset is time," says Joan Lucarelli, a recruiter with Onstott & Associates of Wellesley, Mass. She appreciates receiving a quick e-mail or note to update her files on promotions executives receive. "This technique also creates an awareness" that keeps you in mind, she says.

It pays to keep these relationships fresh. One executive recruiter at a top search firm keeps two computers on his desk: One houses the firm's global talent bank, which includes all the resumes submitted to the firm. The second is his personal database. "If I ever leave here and started my own firm, I couldn't take the company database with me," he says, referring to the first. "The people in this database are my people," he says, pointing to the second computer. Which database would you want to be in?

--Mr. Stybel is president and Ms. Peabody is vice president of Stybel, Peabody & Associates Inc., an outplacement firm based in Boston. They are co-founders of a career resource service for members of boards of directors (www.stybelpeabody.com).