

Edgy Recruiting

More companies are using social media in somewhat whacky ways to kick recruiting up a notch.

By Carol Patton

Employee-recruitment campaigns have taken the next evolutionary step ... toward crazy.

Just watch any of the recruiting videos produced by Hopital du Sacre-Coeur de Montreal. In one video, a mock Chinese television journalist is reporting how China is gobbling up businesses all over the world. The country, she says to the camera, heard about this very cool hospital in Montreal and decided to import the entire facility to Beijing. In the background, a man is being shot out of a cannon and someone who looks an awful lot like Spiderman is crawling down a hospital wall.

More than 3 million people worldwide watched the spoof video, says Louise Mailloux, coordinator of HR allocation who is also responsible for the hospital's recruitment strategy.

"The videos were a suggestion from a marketing and advertising agency -- Cartier Communication -- used [by the hospital] to supply us with new ideas, new technologies and measurable results," she says, adding that each video is posted on the company's website, Facebook page and YouTube. "At the beginning, the videos helped us have a special connection with youth [who] go to the Web, YouTube We used the videos to present ourselves in a fun way."

Welcome to the next developmental phase of employee recruitment. Companies across all industries are using social media to showcase the fun, even whacky sides of their organizations and getting great results. Who wouldn't want to work for a hospital that shoots people from a cannon or where superheroes come to life?

The tactic works like a recruitment magnet, attracting qualified job candidates of all ages, especially Gen Yers (born between 1980 and 2000). And anything goes, from mockumentaries to photos posted to a company's Facebook page displaying prom pictures of job candidates. The only common rule appears to be the crazier, the better.

What does this mean for employers and HR leaders?

Experts say the approach is not for everyone and needs to be test-marketed with your target audience. And don't let age fool you. Not every job candidate under the age of 30 may approve. If you go too far out on a limb, you risk alienating applicants of all ages. So proceed with caution.

More Applicants, Better Retention

In the case of the Montreal hospital, Mailloux says, there were several recruitment challenges that had to be overcome. Although it's a university hospital, it's located far from the downtown university, and as the city's oldest hospital, its appearance was dated. So in 2008, it launched a branding campaign and produced a typical corporate recruitment video that was available on its website. The number of resumes jumped from several hundred to 1,000.

The following year, the hospital released its second video titled Lip Dub, in which some of its 4,200 employees are shown

in the hallways or offices, lip-syncing the words to a Canadian song "Un jour, un jour," which was the theme song for the 1967 world's fair held in Montreal. One singing employee, for instance, is sitting on a counter, dressed as a flapper from the 1920s. In another scene, a patient is being shocked by a nurse with defibrillator paddles, then jumps back to life, singing. More than 8,000 new resumes were received after that video was released.

From that point on, Mailloux says, the company began using a talent-management system that enabled candidates to apply online for specific jobs versus emailing or snail-mailing their resumes.

Last year, however, the hospital implemented a new strategy: targeting nurses with a recruitment video. This recruitment video portrays a nurse visiting the hospital's emergency room as a job candidate, meeting the medical staff in its trauma center. Called Augmented Reality, it's only shown at career fairs. Here's why: Job candidates step in front of a camera that captures their face, then superimposes it on the nurse's face in the video.

Wait, it gets better. Montreal hosted the Grand Prix in 2012. The hospital was chosen as the race's designated trauma center. The end of the video shows the nurse meeting a helicopter on the hospital's roof that transported an injured driver. A fan is connected to the computer. Viewers actually feel a puff of air as the helicopter lands.

Mailloux says nurses swarm the hospital's booth at recruitment fairs to see the video. Still, was it worth the effort? According to her, the hospital needs to recruit at least 100 nurses each year, mostly due to retirement and also to cover for staff vacations. In 2010, she says, the hospital recruited 80 nurses; in 2011, 105 nurses; and in 2012, a record 139 nurses.

Another measure of the videos' success is their ability to brand the hospital as "the place to be" for young nursing students because of its modern, fun and dynamic work environment.

"The videos had a huge impact on the perception that nursing students had of the Hopital du Sacre-Coeur," says Mailloux. "We won eight awards for the [Lip-Dub and faux-Chinese-reporter videos] from the marketing and advertising industry in Quebec. We became the standard for the health industry on how to recruit."

Robots and an Elf

Although edgy video recruiting can yield impressive results, only a minority of companies use them, says Raghav Singh, director of global staffing at The A List, a recruiting company in Minneapolis specializing in recruiting strategies, including the production of such videos.

"I keep emphasizing to my clients that the key to social media is social, not media, not networks," he says. "It has to be informal; it has to be conversational There's not too many that get it right."

To be successful, he says, recruiting campaigns using social media need to be creative, not necessarily crazy. He points to Minneapolis-based ADC Telecommunications Inc. (now part of Tyco Electronics), which encouraged its employees to develop amateur videos about how they creatively used the company's products, then posted them on its social-media sites. "People started to see that, 'Hey, this is a company where, as an employee, if I can find a better way to use a product, I can put it out there,'" he says. "It turned into a very effective recruiting tool."

However, imposing too many rules about what employees can and can't do can defeat the campaign's purpose, Singh says. If employees need to solicit approval from corporate recruiting every time they want to post a photo or video online, the campaign will probably fail. Instead, he says, HR needs to educate employees about what's acceptable and what's not within broad boundaries.

And even if this is handled perfectly, edgy social-media recruitment does pose some risks.

"Somebody will put something out there that will be annoying or ... that violates [Federal Communications Commission] rules sooner or later," he says. "But what's your alternative? Don't do it at all? There's no way you can control this. That's why it's a struggle for HR. [Employees] need to have some idea [of what's acceptable] but you've [also] got to trust them."

One alternative is to maintain control by producing your own video, much like Aldebaran Robotics did in 2012. Although the company targets a rather small select group of engineers, roughly 2,000 people watched the Shape the World video on its website, Facebook page and YouTube. It featured a robot coming to life, demonstrating its superhuman abilities, then added a surprise ending.

"We wanted something very original, something dedicated to engineers to show them that engineers can work in an artistic company and can have fun in a scientific company," says Nathalie Jolivet, HR director at Paris-based Aldebaran Robotics, which has 350 global employees, some at its Boston office. "The video is like a teaser to interest people to watch more and show the company's culture."

The number of resumes received by the company from qualified engineers jumped from 260 each year to 760 after the video, representing a nearly 300-percent increase, Jolivet says. The company is currently working on another video featuring employees in more formal settings speaking about their jobs, which she hopes will motivate college students to study robotics. The video also demonstrates the company's spirit and values.

Sodexo's main goal for its recruitment campaigns is authenticity. With 420,000 employees worldwide (120,000 in the United States), the food-and-facilities-management-service provider annually recruits 5,000 exempt U.S. employees, says Arie Ball, vice president of talent acquisition at Sodexo's North American headquarters in Gaithersburg, Md.

One of its 2010 videos, for instance, features the outtakes of a traditional corporate video where employees talk about their jobs. The outtake video is filled with employee bloopers and staff expressing their nervousness about being on camera.

Likewise, in 2011, job seekers were invited to post their prom photos on the company's Facebook page and share their prom experiences.

Two more videos released in 2011 and 2012 feature Nadia, a cartoon character, who explains the company's hiring process in a simplistic, somewhat humorous fashion.

During the 2012 holidays, it also launched a Facebook photo campaign that piggybacked off the popular children's book and toy, "Elf on a Shelf," with captions that focused on career content.

The Sodexo elf appeared in various locations such as driving a pink Barbie doll car with a Sodexo license plate, asking, "What's your goal?" In another photo, the elf appears in a Christmas Village, asking, "Do you love what you do?"

Recently, the company launched a mobile app for job candidates to search, connect and apply for jobs. The social-media promotion is a humorous video, featuring a man dressed as the app.

"It's almost a waste of money to put effort into formal, professionally developed content," says Ball, explaining that most people don't believe it. "Talent and jobs aren't a whole lot different than how consumers view products. When you see an ad, [you don't] believe it. There's a whole lot more value when [content is] generated by your own employees."

According to Ball, 47 percent of hires last year used at least one of the company's social-media channels for job search or preparation.

Revealing Culture

Edgy recruitment campaigns may not be appropriate for every company, such as those with a conservative culture. Before diving in, HR should test-market the campaign with its targeted audience, says Jody Ordioni, president and chief brand officer at Brandemix, a New York firm specializing in employer branding, recruitment marketing and social recruiting.

"So many companies say to me, 'Everybody is going into social media for recruiting and we really need to do it right now,' " she says, explaining that edgy campaigns make sense for companies that take risks or operate out on a limb. "But what they fail to do is figure out the strategy behind what it is they're going to say."

Some questions to consider: What resonates with your target audience? Would the campaign encourage employees in your target range to apply? Does it move the needle in any way?

Ordioni believes no executive would argue with an edgy social-media campaign that brings qualified candidates through their doors. Besides, this type of recruiting builds engagement. She points to Taco Bell as an example. There, HR responded to a tweet by a young woman whose father encouraged her to apply so she could get free food, she says. Using Twitter to its advantage, HR tweeted back, "Your father is right."

Ordioni says companies are seeking more ways to capture attention.

"Many HR people have taken it upon themselves to come out from behind the veil of recruiting and say, 'This is who I am, this is my cat,' " she says. "[They] become real personalities to the audience so people can feel connected to them."

That's exactly what Sparefoot hopes will happen with the video it launched in July. The CEO, Chuck Gordon, wanted to produce a whacky video that demonstrated the company's informal culture and connects job seekers to the fun side of working for an online, self-storage marketplace, says Rachel Morse, a recruiter at Austin, Texas-based Sparefoot, which has 92 employees.

The hilarious video shadows a job candidate who comes to Sparefoot for an interview, but leaves in a wheelchair covered with bruises, after falling off the company's roof, attempting to escape crazy managers trying to capture her.

"The goal was to show people who didn't know us that we're a fun company, and hopefully, get some great personalities through the door," says Morse. "The development market [of software engineers] right now is extremely tight and we're having to poach from other companies. "[The video] is a great talking point with people. Normally, it's pretty awkward trying to convince them to leave their company."

In the last two months, the company hired 30 employees. Its plan is to double its workforce within the next 18 months. Morse says the video has been a great screening tool, helping to weed out candidates who don't match its culture.

In addition to the video, she says, the company created a pinup calendar of its employees in crazy poses, mailed a hard copy to customers, and posted it on its Facebook page with the caption "Make your industry sexy."

"As recruiters, our job is to hire not only for skill level, but for culture fit," says Morse, adding that Sparefoot's turnover is less than 5 percent. "We want people to stay for a very long time."

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