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# The **Power** Of Innovative Thinking

by JOHN GRAHAM

Companies today face the same daunting problem that confounds so many job seekers — it's the high hurdle of transferable experience.

Whether it's an individual at tempting to get a job or a company trying to break into a new market, both are faced with the identical difficulty of having someone recognize the value of their knowledge and experience — even though these qualities may not be directly related to a new field or industry.

Even when applicants offer skills, a proven track record and experience that are an ideal match for a particular position, they're passed over. Why? The individual has worked in a different field.

Or consider how companies

often use the Internet and other techniques for locating consultants and other vendors. Frequently, the qualification guidelines are so narrow and precise, few prospects even come close to meeting the requirements.

What's the problem? Why not take a highly defined approach? Why not be as exact as possible? Isn't it better to screen respondents as precisely as possible? Doesn't such a selection process narrow the risk? Maybe — and maybe not. Using a fine filter has the major downside of missing valuable applicants — those with experience and skills that can benefit the company.

In the same way, automatically ruling out a consultant or vendor because of a lack of direct experience in a particular industry may close the door to valuable insights and solutions.

Here's the point: Companies are better served selecting employees, consultants or vendors on the basis of what needs to be accomplished rather than specific

industry experience. Many of those who are passed over or ruled out may very well be the right fit.

So companies can broaden their perspective and take better advantage of their opportunities for solving problems, here are guidelines for a more beneficial selection process:

- What do we need to accomplish (rather than who do we need to get to do it)? This is a case when what looks like the wrong fit turns out to be the right one. A large agricultural company liked a marketing services firm's thinking about the way manufacturers should relate to and support their dealers. At an initial meeting, the issues discussed focused on helping the more than 400 dealers enhance their businesses and how the marketing firm had helped companies in other industries achieve this objective.

At no point did the prospective client ask: "What other agricultural companies have you worked for?" If that question had been raised, how would the mar-

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keting firm have responded? The answer would have been “no.”

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- Who will be objective and challenge us (rather than trying to figure out who will tell us what we want to hear)? “We know what we want,” stated the company’s coordinator of special projects. “You’re welcome to apply, but I want to make it clear that you must have experience in our field. We’ve had trouble in the past. We have a way of doing things.”

The tone of his comments and just the way he spoke left the three members of the vendor team with the clear feeling that the “new ideas welcome” flag was not flying over that company. While such an approach may get a company what it wants, chances are that it won’t get what it needs.

- Who will give us a fresh perspective (rather than just what’s going on in our industry)? The manufacturer of quality women’s jeanswear selected a consultant to help figure out how to increase the company’s market share among independent women’s clothing stores.

Research revealed that many women don’t wear jeans or are displeased with the ones they own because of poor fit. The consultant developed a program that took advantage of the company’s support of breast cancer research. With the “try the fit, help the cause” program, the company donated \$1 each time a women tried on a pair of its jeans. This reciprocation-type program produced increased sales.

What’s interesting is that the consultant had no previous experience in the apparel field. Often

it’s the outside perspective that can see most clearly what needs to happen inside a business.

- Who won’t be afraid to pull us out of our ruts (rather than just trying to make us feel good)? William Lamb is a CPA with a talent for finding and recovering monies for companies. Companies pay the same bill more than once, fail to collect discounts and rebates, and even pay invoices long after a service stopped. His offer is compelling. He looks for the money free of charge, and then splits recovered funds with the company. In one case, he handed over a check for \$150,000.

“What a great service,” you say. “There’s no down side. It’s a winner!” Sure sounds like it, doesn’t it? Well, not to business executives who seem threatened by the painful thought that someone might hold them accountable for negligence. Even though Lamb’s professional experience suggests that many companies are bleeding tens of thousands of dollars of money every year, they refuse to close the wound.

- Who will base their work on basic principles (rather than offering what’s in vogue at the moment)? As incredible as it may seem, discipline is missing from far too many companies. That’s right — just plain, basic discipline.

The near total lack of discipline is painfully obvious in companies. This week the president suggests this new sales idea and next week there’s another one.

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It’s much like the little lock in Alice in Wonderland that is constantly running from one place to another. When asked what he is doing, he says, “I’m looking for a key to unlock me.”

Every new “how-to-increase-sales” system finds instant takers who hope it will be the key to unlock a stream of new sales.

It’s following the principles that makes the difference. There’s plenty of wreckage left over from the results of creative accounting. It’s the same way in marketing. The common cry is “We need sales.” It’s heard every day in thousands of companies, and it’s dead wrong. What’s needed is customers — those who want to buy. Just because you and I want to sell something doesn’t mean someone wants to buy it.

The principle is to create the customers who want what is sold. Once that happens, the sale is easy. Unfortunately, most companies don’t follow the essential principles.

- Who will ask us the right ques-

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*John R. Graham is president of Graham Communications, a marketing services and sales consulting firm. Graham is the author of Break the Rules Selling (Superior Books), The New Magnet Marketing (Chandler House Press) and 203 Ways to be Supremely Successful in the New World of Selling (Macmillan Spectrum). He writes for a variety of publications and speaks on business, marketing and sales topics for company and association meetings. Graham is the recipient of an APEX Grand Award for writing. He may be contacted at 40 Oval Road, Quincy, MA 02170; phone: (617) 328-0069; fax: (617) 471-1504; e-mail: j\_graham@grahamcomm.com; web site: www.grahamcomm.com.*



tions (rather than handing us cookie cutter answers)? The president of an insurance organization met with an executive of a marketing firm. In short order, he asked "Well, what can you do for us?" The response was interesting: "If you thought I was coming to this meeting ready to lay out the answers, I'm sorry. We start by asking questions."

While wanting answers may be normal, the pursuit of answers is the problem. For example, get inside almost every company, and what you find is an almost endless series of failed initiatives. The place is littered with programs and activities that stopped almost before they started, and others that simply faded away because of a lack of commitment and follow-through. But there are always more to take their place.

This pervasive pattern is the direct result of basing decisions on what is presumed to be true, personal prejudice and unsubstantiated opinion. If someone comes up with the idea of doing radio advertising, inevitably others will come out with the stations they listen to as the ones that should be chosen. What's so amazing is that this is the way far too many decisions are made. Unless we ask the right questions, we are doomed to come up with the wrong answers.

All this suggests that thinking too narrowly can have a negative impact on companies that want to grow. Almost every industry can suffer from the inbreeding of ideas. While we may feel more comfortable with those who speak our language and share our specific interests, the value of opening the doors to new concepts and approaches may be more than worth the risk. □

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One Spectrum Pointe, Suite 150, Lake Forest, CA 92630-2283  
Phone: (949) 859-4040 • Toll-free: (877) 626-2776 • Fax: (949) 855-2973  
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