

Healthcare ad agency recruiting 101: A Q&A with Matthew West

Matthew West spent 14 years at McCann RCW as VP/chief talent officer; now West is the director of Advice Personnel, a boutique recruitment company, where he specializes in finding talent for healthcare advertising agencies. In an industry where every agency president says good talent is difficult to find, West has some insights about where to find it and how to keep it. *Med Ad News* sat down recently with West for a Q&A.

MAN

What do you think is the biggest mistake when an agency is looking for or recruiting talent?

MW

One of the things is hiring out of desperation. I'm defining desperation as hiring based on seeing someone, they may not have everything that they're looking for, they have an immediate need and therefore they have to hire the first person that they see. That usually never works out. When you're hiring out of desperation, the cost of hiring the wrong person is usually greater than hiring two or three weeks later when they find someone with the right skillset.

On the other hand, if they're hiring the perfect person, or waiting for the perfect person, they're never going to find that person either. So either hiring out of desperation, which is on one side of the spectrum, and then waiting to hire a perfect person, is on the other side of the spectrum. So a good rule of thumb is, what can you live without, what can you live with, and what is in the middle ground.

In hiring any employee, if the person shows the ability to learn fast and to pick up a therapeutic category or the ability to learn a skillset in the past, I think that is an indication of what they are going to be able to do in the future. So if there's a learnable skill that they feel that this person has, I think that it's worth it to invest in a person, even if they don't have 100 percent of the skill sets that are on the job description.

Another mistake an agency can make is not consulting an outside recruiter whom they trust. I think the misconception is that outside recruiters are going to be a big cost to the company, when in reality, an outside recruiter can draw a pool of candidates that they may never have access to. A good compromise would be to yes, use internal sources first, for referrals from current employees, but also consult with a recruiter with an agency business, maybe even has come from an agency, so that they can increase the talent pool, from which they are going to get candidates to interview.

Also, another error can be hiring employees based on only linear career paths. And what I mean by that is, agencies tend to want to hire only folks who don't show zigzags in their resumes. For example, if they are hiring a group copy supervisor, a typical linear career path would be an editorial assistant, a junior copywriter, a senior copywriter, a copy supervisor, going up the path. But what happens if the copywriter takes a brief stint in project management, or digital project management? That could make the employee even stronger as a copy supervisor, or a group copy supervisor, because they understand digital project management, they understand what it takes to be a successful writer in a digital medium, such as mobile or web or social media.

MAN

What do you recommend to someone who wants to work at an agency? How should they approach the jobhunt?

MW

A couple of things, just like any new job or any position, you have to do your homework, you have to really understand what the industry is looking for. So understanding what typical agencies offer is important. What therapeutic category does the agency focus on? Who are their clients? What's been written about them in the news? Understanding what values a company has and where they stand on certain issues and

what's being written, what's being said on their blog, is really where to start. Someone who's never been at an agency before should get involved in social media, and see what's being said, what's being talked about. That's a good way to start. Linking in with employees of companies is a good start, increasing one's Rolodex, when you can talk and get almost an insider's perspective of what it's like to work at an agency, before you actually have an interview, I think that's worth more than the job description, because you can get a sense of what's keeping the employees up at night. One of the key issues, making friends and talking with current employees at agencies right now, even on a discussion board, is probably the best way to approach getting into a certain company.

The other thing that candidates really need to ask themselves is are you a service-oriented person, because the hours aren't 9 to 5. If you're looking for a 9 to 5 job, agency life is not for you. Many times manufacturer side people ask me, coming from the client side, 'I really want to get into agency life.' The first question I ask them is if they are a service-oriented person, because this is a nonforgiving kind of place, where the clients really rule when you are coming home or when you can have a little off time.

When I was at McCann RCW and before I even got married, I told my wife, "I just want to let you know that I will never have a 9 to 5 job. And I just want to let you know before you agree to marry me, there are going to be ups and downs sometimes I can leave the agency at 12 midnight if we're working on a launch, or I may get out at 5 or 6 o'clock." It's whatever it takes, and if you have the "whatever it takes" attitude, then you'll be successful at an agency. But if you're looking for a 9-to-5 job, agency life is really not for you. You have to be OK with a sporadic way of working. And if you're working on a launch, you're saying to your family, "I'm taking a little sabbatical." Because in order to do it right, you're basically working around the clock.

If someone wants to work at an agency, you want to look for companies that offer growth opportunities. And what I mean by that is, do companies have training and how are they with reviews? Because if companies are not investing in the employee, then they're not really investing in the employee, they're not really investing in themselves. I always recommend clients to look at companies that are really investing very well in their employees. And those are ways to look at going about it.

MAN

For you as a recruiter, and from you saw on the agency HR side, what has been more difficult to recruit talent for, the account side or the creative side, and what are the challenges of each?

MW

The short answer is that are challenges for each, the account side and the creative side. If I were to be pressed, if the agency is requiring a certain amount of knowledge in a therapeutic category, for example in oncology or infectious diseases, it's usually hard to find an account person or copy person who has that level of experience. However, if agencies can see, transferrable knowledge or transferrable skills in a candidate, that's sometimes more important than having the therapeutics category that's wanted for a particular piece of business. Because if someone can handle high science for another blockbuster drug, then chances are that they can learn fast and do very well on the therapeutic category that



they're looking for. That's been challenging and it's hard to find talent for specific therapeutic categories when agencies don't budge, but if they're willing to be open and see folks that have learned in the past, or worked on pitches in the past, that had the limited amounts of therapeutic categories they're looking for, they'll find the pool is going to be a lot more open.

I was once told, if you're looking for an account person, and the account person thinks creatively, that's more important than an account person who thinks like an account person. And if you're looking for a creative person who also thinks like an account person, that's more important than finding a creative person who thinks creatively. So you're really looking for someone who has a 360-degree view of how an agency operates. A lot of times now, you're looking for employees that have hybrid skills.

MAN

How should an agency assess its culture when it comes to finding and retaining talent?

MW

I think it comes down to agencies having and wanting a culture of learning. And a culture of investing in people. There's a quote I read the other day, when a CFO was talking to her CEO, and the CFO asked, 'What happens if we invest in developing our people and they leave?' And the CEO replies, 'What happens if we don't, and they stay?' Ultimately, it's an agency's best interest to have a learning culture and if agency candidates understand that there's a mentorship program, that there are training programs, there are lunch and learn programs, constantly learning, ultimately it's going to trickle down to the clients. And the clients are going to want to work with agencies who foster a culture of learning.

So I think that agencies need to look hard and deep and see what their turnover rates are, what's the buzz on the street, regarding how they train their current employees, and what agencies are doing to grow their talent. How are they mentoring their staff, how are they educating their staff? And ultimately, that is going to come down to how are they treating people and creating their overall culture. Agencies really should, in order to have the greatest culture that they possibly have, they need to train people well enough so they can leave, but treat them well enough so that they don't want to. And that's all going to come down to training and education and mentorship. Ultimately those are the indicators of the culture of the company.