
Recruiting CRM specialists

Received: 18th April, 2006

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Abstract This paper is based on anonymous research carried out in summer 2005 with eight well-known companies. Here, the authors present the results and then suggest some conclusions based on this research and other work they have done to help companies find and then manage customer relationship management (CRM) specialists.

INTRODUCTION

In summer 2005, the authors carried out a small piece of qualitative research into how big companies recruit and retain customer relationship management (CRM) specialists. This research yielded some interesting case studies from eight very large companies with immediately recognisable national brands.

The research participants must remain anonymous, as this was promised when the information was collected; however, the business sectors in which they operate were as follows:

- Utility (two)
- Bank
- Insurer
- Credit card
- Automotive
- Grocery products
- Charity

METHODOLOGY

The respondents were drawn from Nowell Stone Ltd's contact base of

companies going back over the last few years, and which have large CRM operations of various kinds. The individual contacts were those responsible (at least in part) for recruiting and managing specialist CRM staff.

A simple e-mail questionnaire (a document in the form of a table into which responses could be inserted) was used to ask our respondents about the following areas:

- The main difficulties they faced in recruiting people.
- The usefulness or otherwise of a good quality CV relative to a clear statement of a candidate's objectives, capabilities.
- Whether they suffered disappointment from new appointees, and whether this was common?
- Whether they found candidates/recruits from other client-side companies more or less appropriate than those from agencies/suppliers?
- Whether they used recruitment or

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- search and selection agencies to find potential recruits, and if so, whether they managed the process well?
- Whether they relied on marketing service agencies to supply them with particular skills, and if so which ones, and what their experience was of using agency people?
 - What they considered to be the main strengths and weaknesses of their team and of how they managed them, and the reasons for these strengths and weaknesses?
 - What their main training needs were?
 - How they plan to build on team strengths and reduce weaknesses?
 - Whether they generally recruit to build a long-term team or for specific projects, or some combination of the two, and why?

MAIN DIFFICULTIES FACED IN RECRUITING PEOPLE

In this area, all the responses bar one focused on the shortage of applicants with the right skills experience.

One respondent from a utility stated simply that getting good quality candidates was the key problem. The other utility respondent noted that the shortage was exacerbated by what the company saw as the relatively high rate of turnover of staff in his company, due to the pressures in the business.

The automotive manufacturer's respondent reported that the problem was finding technically competent people with specialist skills who could also communicate well and who fitted culturally, who had knowledge both of database marketing and of marketing and who were able to understand what the company was trying to achieve, rather than just being excellent technicians. This company also noted a problem in recruiting junior and middle-level staff outside what the respondent called 'the

hub of database marketing and research — London'.

The location problem was experienced by the insurer, which found that its location also made it hard to attract staff: the local market, meanwhile, had been exhausted.

The bank was struggling with the general problem of requiring a broader skill set, combining technical, business and management skills. This led to a high cost of recruitment, but there was considered to be no alternative. This problem was compounded by the bank's experience that search and selection agencies tended just to offer candidates from their existing lists, rather than working hard to try and find the right candidate.

The respondent from the credit card company echoed the bank's comments. They wanted candidates with a strong blend of technical knowledge, competence and commercial acumen, adding that many candidates looked good on paper but turned out to be analytically inept.

In the grocery products industry, where database marketing and its associated disciplines is not the 'normal' model of marketing, the main problem is getting management approval to recruit people with the specialist skills that were the subject of the survey. The problem here was that senior management did not perceive there to be a skills shortage, instead assuming that they could be 'bought' from existing suppliers — especially those full-service direct marketing agencies who were related to the advertising agency network (which of course usually has a close, and usually longstanding relationship with senior management). Then, once approval was given, it was more difficult to find people with a rounded appreciation of the total marketing process. Often, in grocery products, marketing was equated

with brand management, so the relationship between 'technical' marketing and brand management was not as obvious.

The second part of this grocery products response was a special version of the general problem — weakness in marketing and management — cited by several of our other respondents.

The charity respondent kindly provided a case study that illustrates all the above points nicely.

The charity had recently tried to recruit a senior marketing analyst to support its large direct marketing operation. It needed a person who could help make sense of the masses of data it had collected over the previous decade, using advanced statistical techniques and developing predictive models, in addition to the standard reporting techniques the charity had been using for some time. Location, as with our insurer and our automotive respondent, was a problem.

The respondent succeeded in grading the post so as to make it attractive for the sector and locality. They attracted a wide range of candidates: senior database technicians, an exceptionally qualified academic and a number of experienced marketers; however, they did not attract anyone with perfect mix of technical excellence and marketing appreciation. He noted that, having been involved in recruiting marketing staff for his organisation at all levels for the last decade, this was the usual situation. Many marketers are only involved with relatively narrow disciplines. So, product managers or campaign managers may have a good understanding of project management, and some appreciation of proposition development, but few have a full spectrum of skills from data selection through to campaign analysis.

The charity decided to appoint the academic. The candidate had performed

very well at interview, including a practical test at second interview stage. He performed better than any of the other candidates. It was felt he could do the job and take the analytical side much further. Both the Marketing Director and the HR Director agreed he was the best technical candidate and all recognised that he would take time to adapt to a much more commercial culture. Once he was appointed, he was involved in the charity's marketing activity.

This is where the charity hit problems. The candidate found it hard to engage with the charity's problems or to adapt to what must have been a more restrictive corporate culture. He did not like written objectives, appraisals or fortnightly progress meetings. These management tools were alien to him. Meanwhile, the marketing teams demanded faster solutions. The candidate was subjected to verbal and written warning procedures because his output was so low. He left.

The charity concluded that they needed to spend more time evaluating candidates' cultural fit and appreciation and interest in the charities sector and the channels used. It would have done better to take on a candidate with attitude (with some aptitude) and add appropriate training, perhaps with consultancy support. Analysts need not only technical data skills (statistics, modelling, manipulation), but also appreciation of its context (marketing meaning and the logic behind it), basic management skills and disciplines (time and project management, commitments) and, of course, the ability to adapt to an organisation's culture.

The conclusions from the above analysis are, we think, straightforward, but rarely followed through. The shortage of people with the right mix of technical and managerial skills, experience and motivation should be

taken as a given. It is not something that can be resolved solely by recruitment or by the more expensive, but much more focused, search and selection.

Training needs

Even the best candidate, once appointed, is likely to need additional managerial and technical training and support, whether provided internally or from consultancies, agencies or other specialist suppliers. Companies that have large teams of analysts and other technical specialists should involve their strategic HR people if they have them — or HR consultancies if they do not — in designing a programme of training, motivation and communication to ensure that good candidates, once recruited, stay — and deliver.

Industry training organisations, whether institutes like the Institute of Direct Marketing (IDM) or Direct Marketing Association (DMA) or commercial training organisations, need to develop programmes and certification which focus not just on technical skills, or even direct or interactive marketing, but also on managerial and cultural issues. The programmes should give candidates the chance to develop and prove themselves in non-technical areas. This applies both to open training and in-house course propositions.

University academics are usually pretty slow to identify the skills and experience requirements of new models of marketing, such as interactive marketing — particularly in its web and mobile variants — but also in the classic areas of direct mail and telemarketing. They should take a long hard look at the subject areas they cover in MA and MBA courses, so that where clients want to recruit people who are strong in marketing but also have some basics when it comes to the technical side, the

supply of such candidates is more plentiful.

SEARCH AND SELECTION

The second question asked whether the traditional CV was still useful as opposed to a clear statement of candidates' objectives and capabilities. The respondents agreed that while the CV was more important to some than others, demonstration of the application of skills and capabilities was crucial to nearly all.

Of the two respondents from utilities companies, one considered that a good-quality CV was absolutely essential, since it reflected the professionalism of the individual. The other's attitude was that the CV got them to the interview, but the candidates' objectives were less important than what they could do for the company. For the bank, a CV again needed to demonstrate the actual application of skills, rather than just listing them. Selection and search companies helped them here by rewriting CVs into a common format to make it easier to identify which skills had been applied where.

The automotive supplier sometimes missed potentially good candidates because they had buried their skills, expertise and experience in a poor CV. At the grocery products supplier, chronological CVs help interviewers to understand career and professional development while personal and career objectives, if listed, usually highlighted a more self-aware candidate.

Like the others, the charity preferred a clear list of demonstrated skills with supporting examples, rather than assertions of competence. It wanted to use the CV — or any document offered — to identify candidates who could offer some reasonable supporting evidence of their abilities and technical skills and the

size, value and complexity of any projects they had been involved in, supported by examples of outcomes. It also liked to see some personality come through; anything that was different or out of the ordinary that demonstrated a lively mind.

A good example of the continuing utility of the CV comes from the charity sector. A CV presented for the post of marketing assistant was exceptionally clearly written and well laid-out, with good supporting examples of achievements and skills. The key selling point was a short paragraph at the end of the CV that tried to engage the reader and read like a good piece of direct marketing copy.

It recognised a need, highlighted skills and achievements and offered sound reasons why the applicant could work towards meeting the charity's needs — it was one of the best bits of selling copy in a CV that our respondent had ever seen. The applicant got the job and has since been promoted twice. Latterly, the applicant stated that she had deliberately attempted to get inside the mind of the 'customer' (the charity), which is a pretty good starting point for an aspiring marketer! The effort invested in the application also said a lot about the applicant's desire for the job.

The questionnaire also asked if companies were commonly disappointed with new appointees and if staff with an agency background performed better than those recruited from the client side. Success varied and there appeared to be little overall correlation between successful appointments and the methods used to select.

The automotive supplier was always prepared to wait for just the right person, so it would be pretty certain they were up to it. Only twice had it found a recruit disappointing.

Problems with new staff at the grocery

products supplier usually arose when the hiring manager was unable to deliver the position (or programme of which they would be a part) quite as it had been sold to the appointee. Describing a worst-case scenario rarely motivated someone to join, yet selling an attractive 'sizzle' that doesn't materialise was equally frustrating for the candidate. They did, however, feel that client-side experience usually produced more realistic expectations. Candidates with supplier or agency backgrounds seemed to think everything could be solved with more money or better ideas — missing the point that the business had other problems to deal with besides marketing communication.

Conversely, the charity respondent thought that staff with agency experience had broader skills and greater problem appreciation, through seeing a wide range of clients and problems. The key differences were an ability to grasp different scenarios, better time management skills and greater breadth of experience.

Specialist recruitment agencies are a strong feature of this market, so the respondents were also asked whether such agencies were commonly used. Both utilities ran most of their recruitment internally but search and selection agencies were used where needed. The insurer uses a preferred supplier approach with several recruitment agencies. Each has an internal relationship manager, helping to build an effective relationship and develop suppliers' knowledge of its business needs and culture. The automotive supplier uses agencies too, but success depends largely on its own accuracy in defining its requirements to the agency. Good recruitment companies provided an additional synopsis containing information not included in the CV.

The credit card supplier also uses recruitment agencies heavily. Some were 'great', filtering candidates through personal interviews before passing on their details, others seemed more intent on winning the 'CV chase', in which they wanted to make sure they had sent the CV to the respondent before anyone else. In doing so, they send through some very poor matches, which was frustrating. Routinely describing candidates as 'fantastic' or 'perfect' was irritating, particularly when they turned out to be poor.

To the question about how much marketing services suppliers were relied upon to fill skills gaps, one of the utility respondents replied that service agencies were particularly relied on for direct marketing and data analytics. The other utility left it up to the individual managers while the other respondents said that their companies all used agencies (as well as software companies and other consultancies) to provide desired specialist skills.

The charity tends to keep costs down by doing work in-house rather than using agencies; however, specialised marketing services suppliers were used in areas like tool provision and less common types of analysis, and were a real asset in transferring their marketing skills to internal staff.

Where the skills of marketing service suppliers were concerned, the automotive supplier commented that most clients expected their agencies to be much better than anything they could do themselves. Competent delivery was a given, but clients also expected agencies to be creative and pro-active in their approach. Left to their own devices, most agencies were competent but nothing more — a successful agency is largely a reflection of how well it is managed.

Using agencies had become a real

problem for the grocery products supplier. Staff turnover was significant so, out of necessity, much strategy and thinking was outsourced to agencies. Often, this has had a negative impact, as learning resides outside the company and processes had become more cumbersome, involving more people and more expense yet with reduced accountability.

Summary

Overall, although there has been quite a lot of learning by clients, the resulting action has been patchy. For example, if it is important to demonstrate the application of capabilities and skills, short-listed candidates should be asked to send a case study to the client company in advance and be prepared to discuss it. Marketers could also develop some scenarios covering the capabilities and skills areas that are important to them and send them to candidates with the instruction that the latter should be prepared to discuss the issues. These techniques are common in assessment centres, but of course this human resources approach is rarely used when a company is recruiting one person to a very specific brief. If in-house training in different areas of customer management were more common, then case studies from this could be used, though these might well prove too easy in the case of very senior recruits.

In the end, candidates are not being asked to demonstrate a magic touch or give a perfect solution, but rather too have the ability to explain what has been or should be done and to discuss this with the senior interviewer as if the latter were a member of the team. Even the best skills and capabilities are not much use in a team environment unless they can be shared.

HOW COMPANIES MANAGE THEIR PEOPLE AND TEAMS

Most companies had some form of individual development plan and assessments in place to help identify individuals' strengths and development needs, and to improve them. At the first utility company, the team was well organised, strategic and had a flair for development. Its weakness was lack of communication between team members due to the heavy workload. This was being tackled head-on by management, who used team away-days and social functions to bring individuals together.

The second utility company was strong on teamwork, which was also explicitly promoted and recognised by management. Lack of experience was a problem, however, because of the newness of the team. As the team gains experience, this will be less of a problem and they will be able to draw on the knowledge of other, more senior, staff. Regular coaching sessions diagnosed what had gone well and what had not in order to improve action planning and a stronger process for managing individual members of staff involved fortnightly one-to-one sessions and quarterly reviews.

The bank majored on strong management skills and experience, while analytical skills were strengthening as its team grew. It aimed to build on this by running an internal academy on developing customer propositions, as well as through individual development plans.

The credit card company believed that its strengths came from its staff's inherent personalities and attitudes. It recruited personnel to fit in with the company's particular team ethos of hard work, accountability and fun, coupled with a good mix of technical expertise, commercial acumen and communications skills. With the recent team expansion, strengthening people management skills was important; however, there was not

enough time to manage the nine-strong team while also thinking and acting strategically and so it was considering recruiting an additional middle manager. All team members here had personal development plans which they had to make real progress with to avoid their appraisal score being reduced.

The insurer's regional teams performed well, probably a result of its in-depth knowledge and experience of recruitment practices. Concentrating on regions, rather than working as a national team, however, meant missed opportunities. Keeping boring tasks to a minimum, in order to keep the job interesting and rewarding, was important at the automotive manufacturer, as was, again, building teamwork, so that everyone has a sense that what they do has a direct impact on the business and that their contribution is part of a team effort to achieve a common goal. If someone does well and works hard, they are recognised openly, while below-par performance is also transparent to the team. There are higher expectations of those that are paid more. There was a continuous struggle to provide a consistent approach to management, balancing control and micromanagement with staff with autonomy and ownership of projects. Finding the time to have regular one-to-ones with all staff was difficult, as was combining an operational role as a manager while providing the whole team with direction.

A small and inexperienced team was a challenge at the grocery products supplier, as it had little internal political capital and was seen as 'semi-detached' from the rest of the business and not essential to achieving the firm's strategic marketing objectives. This was balanced by high motivation — 'raw ability and a passion to succeed' — and a shared sense of purpose. The opportunity to do leading edge work with clever suppliers also

helped in motivating them. It was trying to remedy its weaknesses by the creation of an internal competency development programme, where technical marketing (CRM, database, analytics) featured highly, in order to make them part of the normal marketing skill set.

The charity is blessed with experienced and talented charity sector marketers with a broad range of skills. It recognises their value, so staff commitment is high and turnover is low. Staff also stay interested because of the marketing focus of the charity, its willingness to invest in marketing and in ambitious projects. Recognising the importance of a single view of the donor, it has been consolidating all its supporter data over the last five years and is on target to achieve a single database by 2007.

The charity currently has a detailed data set of transactions and promotional histories, enriched with additional questionnaire information. With the primacy of data, it created our respondent's hybrid role to act as interpreter between the less technically competent marketing staff and the IT team. This helped when installing desktop tools for database access for example.

Where the charity falls down is in its very product-oriented marketing and marketing structure. This means a product view, not customer view, overmailing and a dogfight between product teams for the best data. There is an elitist attitude amongst specialist staff that alienated the fundraising teams, and knowledge tends to be concentrated on a few key individuals with little wider understanding of how the business worked or any incentive to share knowledge. In addition, the passion and involvement in the charity's cause demonstrated by many marketing staff could affect their objectivity.

The organisation has recently undergone many changes. This improved its marketing structure, the amount of

resources at its disposal and its ability to remedy some of the weaknesses identified above. Its fundamental problems, however, stem from lack of marketing integration and its product marketing approach. The respondent had pointed out these weaknesses to the Marketing Director, but the charity was doing well, so the incentive to change was not strong enough.

Summary

Any general concerns over leading and motivating teams was not so much about peoples' enthusiasm but more about getting them to concentrate on the right things; however achieving this while managers follow a busy schedule can be a problem. Ensuring that individuals within teams continued to develop themselves in ways that benefited them and the business was probably the most common goal. In a few cases, wider business understanding of what the team was doing and valuing it properly was lacking.

In many ways, the respondents were facing the classic difficulties of managing a new function into a mature stage, from being innovative to being an accepted part of the business and being managed like any other specialist marketing team.

In the area of training needs, the answers were more varied. Both utilities looked to get the best value out their marketing. One was about to start using a new marketing resource management tool and would need training on its use. Currently, managing for better return on investment (ROI) was weak. As the depth and breadth of its data increased, the bank concentrated on training in advanced technical skills. Its technical marketing team was growing, so good management techniques were also becoming increasingly important. Similarly the credit card company needed

better communications and presentation skills, advanced SAS expertise and management talent.

The insurer had a very different answer. Having recently brought its life insurance technical marketers (used to marketing through intermediaries) together with its other marketing teams (used to direct marketing of products such as motor and household insurance), it needed to retrain the former group in different ways of working.

There were very different goals for the automotive supplier, whose main need was for technical training in the latest statistics, database marketing and research techniques, and for the grocery products supplier, where the requirements were more for improved line management.

The charity's main training needs were also technical: to grow its statistical, data mining and modelling capabilities. Its previous technical expert had recently been promoted to a more general marketing role with a staff of over 50 people, with over half of them based in another office 200 miles away. Specific training requirements included SPSS skills, training on its chosen selection tool and modelling. It also had more general management training and development needs, however, such as time management, cultural induction and understanding the use of data in campaigns, which was to be achieved by shadowing a product manager. Overall, training needs were split between technical and managerial, with much of the latter being due to the more mature role of technical marketing today.

BUILDING FOR THE LONG TERM AND/OR FOR SPECIFIC PRODUCTS?

The final question asked whether recruitment focused more on building a long-term team or for specific projects,

or some combination of the two. Both utilities focused on building teams for the long term, one pointing out that headcount planning was relatively fixed between each restructure, so could not be varied for projects. The three financial services providers agreed, with our bank adding that the team managed data as a corporate asset, so a long-term approach was required.

The automotive manufacturer also took the long-term approach, but using agencies, contractors and other specialist information systems skills bought in from elsewhere in the business to deliver specific projects. The charity also took the long-term approach, adding that many of its programmes were complex and took relatively bright people some time to get to grips with their intricacies.

Only the grocery products supplier recruited on a more an ad hoc basis and then worked out where to put people once a project was finished; however, our respondent added that given the lean nature of the organisation, the list of projects to be tackled rarely dried up.

Summary

Most of the respondent companies are building a long-term business capability. The teams are not encountering the same problems of balancing motivation and teamwork with technical skills that other marketing disciplines encounter and, by and large, are solving the problems. The important point is that they are well aware of the opportunities and problems and are responding to them.

The supply structure of the marketing services industry — including the professional associations — tends to encourage a rather fragmented approach to managing people. Each discipline, whether (as here) in technical marketing, or in advertising, PR, sales promotion or

market research, tends to see itself as very different, just because the technical disciplines used are dissimilar. They so, however, share the same managerial issues, even though they might occur in different ways.

The divergence between the technical disciplines can obscure this commonality but good managers can see their way through this to identify the way to improve things. Sadly, not all have the time, knowledge or experience to do this. There needs to be more emphasis in marketing training on the idea of managing marketing services people, not just as individual technical experts but also as teams of experts working within the business. Training that concentrates on influencing people and creating teamwork between experts and generalists has been available for some time, but is not used as widely as it should be.

ORGANISING FOR CUSTOMER MANAGEMENT – SOME CONCLUSIONS

Many companies have recently built up their customer management capabilities. They now want to deploy these capabilities more effectively in three main ways. One is through accelerated delivery of customer management strategy and programmes. Another is through delivery of enhanced service and value to their internal customers, by improving the quality of customer information gathered, used and shared within the business, and through using this information to develop stronger customer insights and ensure their use in the business. The final way is through creating a structure that will focus on unleashing their competitive strengths.

A sound customer management strategy can be compromised by poor

relationships among the groups involved — managers, users, specialists. This leads to conflict, misuse of resources, over-stretched specialised units and under-utilisation of specialist skills — all because companies are so busy moving ahead with customer management that they do not consider how their customer management people should be organised and managed. Organisations should be developed in line with customer management strategies. Through Nowell Stone Ltd's search and selection work, the authors have developed a good picture of how leading businesses work in these areas — what makes them successful in attracting and keeping good staff, and ensuring that they deliver — whether they be classic areas of customer management, eg data management, customer insight or campaign management, or wider areas such as customer-focused product innovation.

The response of the conventional HR consulting industry to the challenges mentioned above does not always satisfy client companies. HR consultants have a good toolkit, from interviewing techniques and personality profiling approaches, through advanced ideas about organisational strategy and design, to methods to help clients get to where they want to be. But, with few exceptions, these consultants do not have the in-depth knowledge of customer management that they need to recommend the right paths to their clients, without asking the client to pay for an extensive fact-find to discover what clients believe that consultancies pitching for business to them should already know.

Developing a comprehensive, balanced approach demands recognition of the technical requirements, human dynamics and strategic demands for successful customer management. This starts with identifying the main tasks to be carried

out by the customer management team — now and in the future — and the typical workload requirements they produce. It extends to reviewing customer management strategy for its people implications — this requires a good knowledge of the demands placed by the main kinds of strategies on those who create and implement them, it also involves more classic HR work. Some of this is cultural, eg reviewing values, beliefs, behaviour patterns and leadership styles associated with the culture or the informal organisation, identifying whether they are likely to aid or hinder delivery of customer management strategy and suggesting ways of making appropriate changes. This also involves ensuring that team culture and direction matches team members' professional objectives and values. Some of the work is structural, such as recommending alternative structures and accountabilities that will help the organisation achieve its targets. Some of the work is are operational, eg

ensuring that staff capability is fully utilised, through training, communication and motivation, and that staff understand any changes needed and are committed to making them work. Some work is more managerial, eg ensuring that senior management is involved in determining direction and supporting change.

Telling clients what to do and going through formal, rigid processes rarely brings the best results — coaching and mentoring are the best approaches. Working with clients to agree how to approach the problem is always better than laying down the law. This area of marketing is often a backwater when it comes to using the best change management and HR management ideas, so on some projects we need to go back to the basics of organisational design and development. Without clear thinking about how to manage a CRM organisation, clients risk wasting much of the money they spend on recruiting CRM specialists.