



Single White Female: Advertising for Success

*David J. Forrest, Ph.D.
February 2000*

In the film noir *Single White Female* Bridgette Fonda answers an ad for a roommate and eventually finds herself imprisoned by an eerie Jennifer Jason Leigh who wants to take over her soul. The ad didn't offer nearly enough information about the opportunity! Or as put in a humorous Leaning Tree greeting card, an old, grizzled, beat up cowboy exclaims, "There were a helluva lot of things they didn't tell me when I signed on with this outfit."

Print ads, where the bulk of new hires still come from, have always been problematic. What to say within the limits of the budget? Most ads are terse, state the position and the requirements, and give no clue about the environment and what it takes to be successful at that company. A longer ad is cost-effective only in retrospect, when both the candidate and interviewer have wasted their time. Or worse yet, when the new hire is unsuccessful because neither side addressed what was really needed to be successful on the job.

The goal should be to hire for success, not just to fill a job. For lower-level, high-volume jobs, hiring only to fill slots can lead to the "cannon fodder" effect – hiring lots of people and getting rid of lots of ones who don't work out. This is highly inefficient and costly, and it is disrespectful of applicants and their potential. Mostly, it is stupid.

Obviously, interviews and background checks are the final decision points in selecting potentially successful applicants. Yet more attention can fruitfully be paid to the initial point of contact, the employment ad. The worldwide web has added a hugely useful tool for attracting applicants who have access to it. Since it is becoming available in public libraries, the pool may soon include almost everybody. Many professionals in human resources and recruiting worry that, at least at the lower levels, putting jobs on the web will eliminate candidates. Not true. A motivated candidate, the kind they want, will find a way to get to the web and to learn what they need to know.

More importantly, the web can be an inexpensive way to really tell the applicant what the job is like and what it takes to be successful. One financial institution, always desperate for tellers, has been so brave as to have its successful tellers write a "Day in the Life of a Teller" for its web site. Brave because the narrative isn't all cheery and bright, but it is honest and realistic. It is an enormously helpful tool in the self-selection of applicants. Young people especially have little idea about the real world of work and need help in imagining themselves in a position. For example, a credit union is member-oriented and has a different service ethic and set of expectations than does a commercial bank.

A central problem with ads is that they too often state what the employer would like to have rather than what they need. Education and experience often seem overblown for

what the job really needs, as if the prestige of credentials is more important than a basic ability to do the job. If the employer really knows what the job requires, through in-depth job analysis, then screening and testing can often take the place of credentialing. People can be trained in technical skills with relatively little cost and time.

This points to the other major flaw in many ads. Education, technical skills and experience are easy to delineate. Beyond that, what makes an employee successful in your environment? It is usually behavioral skills – the fuzzy stuff. There are few ads that say, “Mean supervisor, unforgiving; thick skin and hard work required for success.” Yet in the health care industry, for example, an ad for a housekeeper in a charity-owned hospital could say, “Orientation to indigent patients requires extra patience and second-language ability. Family atmosphere among staff.” Some applicants would be attracted to this and some wouldn’t. Once more, the more effective the self-selection of applicants, the more efficient and cost-effective is the hiring process.

The initial job, whether in print, on the web or on the radio, is designed to attract applicants. The number it attracts is usually a gauge of its success. Too often the ad says, “The successful applicant will ... ” The successful applicant is the one who gets hired. But what a company really wants is a successful employee. Writing ads that give a potential applicant enough information to accurately self-select for the job takes an honest, self-informed approach. Skills can be taught; attitudes and behaviors cannot. Give a potential applicant enough information to know if they have a chance for success.

As a wise person once said: “Hiring is easy. Firing is easy. Making someone successful is hard.” Give yourself an edge by advertising with intelligence and heart.