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Balancing tactics key to your job quest

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Searching for work during a recession requires a delicate balance of patience, endurance, assertiveness and just plain luck. If you rely too heavily on a "scorched earth," assertive approach, you will no doubt end up alienating many of the same people who are vital to you in helping successfully locate that elusive and lucrative position lurking around the next corner.

At the same time, sitting too patiently waiting for a call back from the vice president with whom you interviewed two weeks ago is apt to result in someone much more savvy and aggressive snaking his way into the position on which you had your sights firmly set.

But how much is too much?

Of course, as with so much in life, there is no definitive answer to that question. On balance, though, it's better to err on the side of assuming an overly aggressive posture than one that is too passive. In the job-search game, nothing puts you in a deep hole more quickly than giving the impression of not being interested enough to follow up, ask for the order or close the deal. Employers want to hire candidates who aren't afraid to press hard to consummate a deal and will assume that lack of contact signals lack of interest and commitment.

Still, as anyone who has had an irritated hiring manager unceremoniously hang up the phone, there is a distinct point beyond which admirable assertiveness lapses into obnoxiousness. A degree of common sense has to be applied.

Here's a typical example. You interview with a search firm for a senior position on a Monday. The interview goes well, the position sounds terrific and the search consultant tells you he will refer you to his client. He ushers you out the door with a convivial "Be sure to keep in touch."

So now what to do? Well, don't call the next day, or the day after that. The normal tidal flow of business communications would suggest that the consultant won't call his client for a day or two, the client won't be there, so a message will be left. The message won't get picked up for a day, and then the hiring manager will have to cogitate, call the consultant (who won't be available, another message left), and then consider what the consultant recommends.

All that being done, you are likely a week away from any substantive updates. To call the search consultant back before that sends a message -- and not a good one -- that labels you as too available, too anxious and just too needy. Equally, waiting for two or three weeks to follow up suggests the kind of laissez-faire attitude toward the position, and job searching in general, that search consultants and hiring managers might interpret as lack of interest or just plain lethargy.

So, if you haven't been contacted one week after an initial interview, make the call, express your interest and ask for feedback. If you didn't make it through the screening, press hard for particular feedback as to why you didn't make it. That information, however difficult to hear, can be vital in helping you make midcourse corrections in your job-search strategy.

Let's assume that you didn't get the job, but the recruiter tells you that your credentials are top-notch and he may be able to place you elsewhere. He finishes the conversation with "I'd like you to keep in touch with me."

That's not an invitation to drive the consultant crazy with calls every other day, unannounced drop-in visits to his office or invitations to lunch.

The best way to handle such an invitation is to plan a call to the consultant or hiring authority perhaps once a month, but also to e-mail him two weeks before the call as a check-in method and means of keeping you in a "top of mind" status. E-mail is one of those more passive strategies that provides the recipient a feeling of being in control of the timing of communication, and therefore allows you to avoid becoming a pest. You might consider varying the time of month you make the call and send the e-mail, so as not to appear overly systematic or regimented.

There are some other subtle ways to establish and maintain that "top of mind" awareness with a hiring authority without becoming an irritant:

- Use information about the hiring manager or search consultant (it is hoped that you will have been astute enough to pick some of that up during the interview process) to work into your subsequent periodic e-mail and phone conversations. If he is a sports nut and you talked about football, mention something about a recent game you attended and in which he might have an interest. If you talked about a particular aspect of business (i.e., world-class manufacturing techniques), look up, excerpt and send him a pertinent article that reinforces what you talked about and perhaps even positions you as something of an expert.

- Rather than relying strictly on e-mail, try a handwritten note on nice stationery after a two-week period, mentioning that you recalled that his daughter played the piano and that you clipped this article out of the paper because you thought he might be interested to learn about a new piano concert series coming up in the local area.

- If the hiring manager or search consultant gives you an hour of her time to talk with you about the search process or otherwise advise you, think about sending her a personal thank-you with one of those coffeehouse gift cards for \$10 worth of lattes.

- Above all, always remember that the process of seeking, locating and securing employment is really, at its root, one human being making a connection with another. Attempts that appear coy, cloying or manipulative will not facilitate that connection and in fact may impede it. Appearing warm, genuinely interested in the other person or simply just human, on the other hand, may make that small but critical difference.

We enjoy helping those people who help us. It's as simple, and as complicated, as that.