

Wine Industry Recruiting Techniques: Enticing Talent to the Trade

Experts advise managers to take an active, innovative approach to the hiring process

Stacy Briscoe



Stacy Briscoe is the assistant editor of *Wine Business Monthly*. She has been writing about wine professionally since 2015, freelancing for multiple publications including *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Edible Communities* and *Napa Sonoma Magazine*, among others. She also maintains her own website, *BriscoeBites.com*, dedicated to wine reviews and tasting notes. Outside of wine writing, she also contributes as a freelance editor for the independent publisher She Writes Press. Stacy has a Bachelor of Arts degree in English-language literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz.

GOOD NEWS: ACCORDING TO the United States Department of Labor, the country is at an historically low unemployment rate—3.6 percent as of June 2019, matching the lowest rate in 50 years. In the San Francisco Bay area, the unemployment rate is just 2.2 percent, down from 2.5 percent just one year ago.

Bad news: With less folks actually active in the job market, the competition to find top talent has intensified. And the wine industry is seeing this in spades.

“Five, 10 years ago, there used to be a talent surplus. But today...the power is in the hands of the job seeker,” said **David Newlin**, founder and CEO of **Newlin Associates**. “We have had a huge swell of wine companies in play now. Ten years ago, we had a little over 6,000; today we have over 10,000. That’s a 65 percent increase. Plus, companies have raised the bar with the caliber of talent they’re willing to hire. So, there are more people chasing after limited talent pool.”

A common theme emerged among the experts: Hiring managers in the wine industry need to take an active, innovative approach to seek out the top talent needed to fulfill roles on any level. It’s no different than building and promoting a brand strategy to engage with and sell to consumers. Potential employees need something that catches their eye and interest before taking the first steps in the application process.

Tapping into the Top Talent Pool

“To me the talent pool is here but what each winery is doing to attract needs to change,” said **Nicole Cummings**, director of human resources at **Cakebread Cellars**. She continued: “The ways in which we are recruiting today need to be different than the ways we were five years ago. If your recruitment practices have not changed, then, to me, you’re going to find yourself thinking that there is a deficit. You can’t just put an ad out there and think and hope résumés will come to you. You have to go out and find the candidate.”

Newlin agreed, saying that when looking at the universe of future employees, only 15 percent of the population are “active candidates,” meaning those who are aggressively looking for new employment opportunities. The other 85 percent are what he called “passive candidates,” or those already employed and not necessarily looking for a change. “The ‘A’ players are hidden in that 85 percent,” he said.

The problem, according to Newlin, is that many wine businesses still rely on “traditional” job postings. “Job descriptions are just a checklist of skills and experiences, but it doesn’t tell you what the job is and what they have to do to excel in this position,” he said. Instead, Newlin is of the opinion that hiring managers need to look at their job postings as marketing opportunities, promoting the position’s opportunity, as well as the company culture. “Top talent needs to be sold, be convinced and shown why they need or want this particular opportunity,” he said.

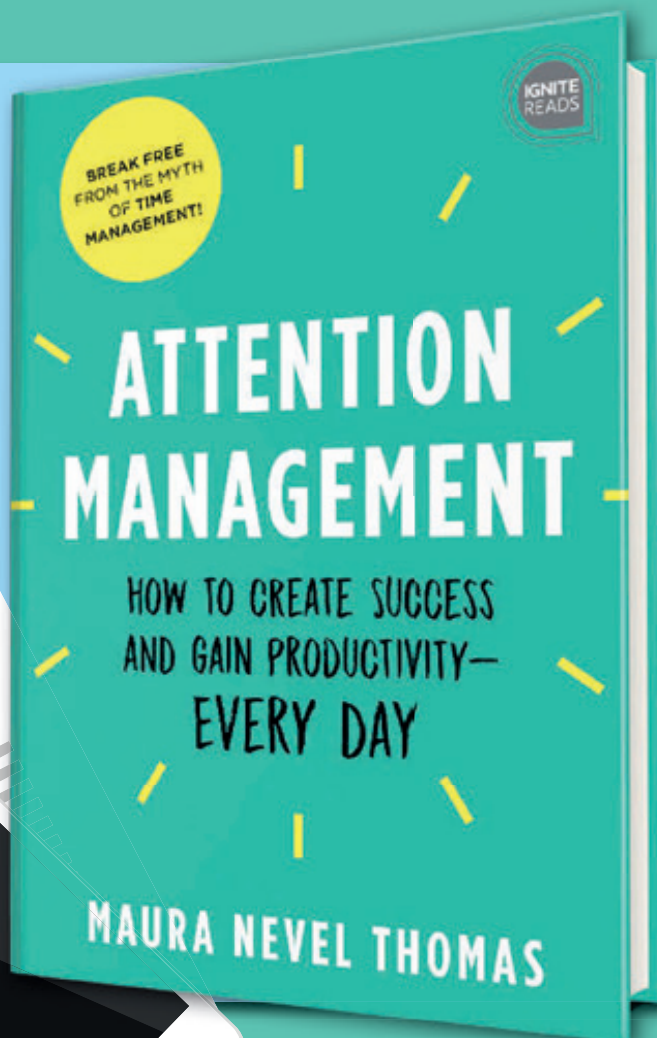
The first step, Newlin advised, is to sit down with the entire hiring team and “force them” to describe the company in detail—environment, culture, product portfolio. Then outline the ideal accomplishments this role should fulfill within the first year of hiring, describing why the position is a positive opportunity and where there is potential for growth within the company. “Then put it in a Word doc and send *that* to future employees. It’s more comprehensive; it’s marketed directly to them and will encourage them to lift their head from their current job, and you’ll find they’ll be more willing to engage and seek out an interview,” Newlin said.

Online job boards still work—**LinkedIn**, **Indeed**, **Monster**, **winejobs.com**—but both Newlin and Cummings stressed the importance of, again, maintaining an active role when utilizing these sites.

“It’s a different mentality. We used to think that the wine industry alone would attract people, but that concept is not as prevalent as it once was,” Cummings said. “You need to search within those websites, do a geo search for your candidates. I can search something like ‘hospitality’ with a specific skillset, within a specific state and region,” she explained. “I can target candidates.”

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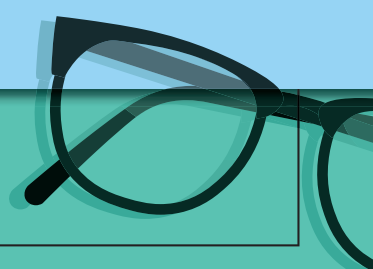
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Hiring Outside the Industry

Hiring outside of the wine industry can be tricky and very dependent on the specific role(s) that need to be filled. In Newlin's experience, senior management positions are more difficult to transition from outside the wine business. "Alcohol beverage is a complex industry. You have to have an understanding of the direct-to-consumer laws, the three-tier system. And often it's helpful (in these positions) to have existing relationships within the industry," he said. "Wholesale can be hard for those same reasons. There are a lot of rules and regulations that would make it a long and hard learning curve."

That being said, **Marcel Rodrigue**, director of talent acquisition for **Delicato Family Wines**, said he often looks outside the industry for more entry-level positions. "Labor shortage, talent deficit, same thing. I find that it's mostly in the skilled trade market and mostly attributed to the push we've had on university degrees," he said. "Some people can't or don't want to go to college and don't realize that a trade school is a viable option." For this reason, Rodrigue noted, trades-people, such as welders, electricians and mechanics, are some of the hardest positions to fill in the wine industry.

According to Rodrigue, Delicato takes an active approach to fulfilling these needs, tapping into tomorrow's workforce by getting in front of high school students in less affluent areas and talking to them about their aspirations post-graduation. "We let them know they don't necessarily have to go to college but can go to a trade school. Or—come work for us in our facility and we'll train you," he said.

Rodrigue said that Delicato has several such workers who have learned on-the-job, and the company recognizes top performers by sending them to a trade school to hone and expand their skill set. "It's a pilot program," he said. "Most of these people have been with us for a while and have a proven successful track record."

Sarah Davila, director of human resources at **Hess Collection**, said her company takes a similar approach. "We go to **Napa Valley Community College, Sonoma State University**, attend career fairs," she said, noting that these are great resources to fill vineyard positions, as well as find seasonal or hourly tasting room and cellar workers. "We've also tabled at the American Canyon flea market, put up flyers in local markets—whatever avenue, just to get the word out there."

Looking a little higher up the employment ladder, Davila said positions in finance are one of the "easier" to take from other industries as they don't necessarily need to have a background in wine. But positions in IT and high tech can be a bit harder, even though these roles don't require wine knowledge

either. "We (the wine industry) don't pay as much as high tech. You have to be willing to pay high-tech dollars to get the high-tech employees," she said.

But the counter to that can be employee benefits. "Most mid-sized wineries have good benefits," Davila said. "They can be competitive with other industries even if the monetary compensation is a bit lower." Looking at her own company, Davila said that Hess does a good job at building and maintaining a strong company culture. "We have team-building events, on-site lunches brought in three times a week, an annual wellness challenge, Friday 'wine-down' time. It's a professional environment, but it's important to have family values and that family culture built in," she said.

According to Cummings, money doesn't rank number one or even number two on the list of important job assets any longer. "When people come in for a face-to-face interview, the discussion is all about the culture: day-to-day interactions, the people, the job environment," she said. Often, Cummings said, she'll bring in a candidate's future coworker into the in-person interview. "I find applicants are asking more questions to the coworker than the manager because they want to know how they'll be connecting with the person they'll be working with, spending the day with. They want to know, 'who's part of my community?'"


And sometimes it's that community that can be the biggest advocate for why a company or position is a great career opportunity. Davila said that Hess has put more money into an internal employee referral program, providing cash compensation to those who refer candidates for open positions. "Last year, 60 percent of our new hires were from referrals," she said. And that's across all skill levels—from vineyard workers up to higher management.

The Wine Industry's Next Generation

According to Newlin, the wine industry's senior management is experiencing a huge generational talent pool issue: Baby Boomers (those aged between 55 and 74 years) are candidates most ripe for senior positions. But although they currently make up the majority of the population, they're also leaving the workforce as they enter retirement.

Generation X (38 to 53 years) would be next in line to take the reins, but there are just so few of them. And Millennials? Well, Millennials, in Newlin's opinion, don't have enough experience to qualify for senior management roles.

"Millennial has a negative connotation that I don't think is fair," Rodrigue said, acknowledging that many university graduates are unable to find jobs post-graduation because of the stigma surrounding the generation. It does seem a Catch-22: Millennials can't get hired because they don't have experience; yet, they can't gain experience unless they're hired. Rodrigue suggests




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people in such a position look for internship and lower level positions that offer growth opportunities and development plans.

It's up to businesses to supply these positions and opportunities, to recognize the growth potential of the younger generation. "I believe that the Millennial generation, while they may want to get to the most senior role the quickest, they really gravitate toward training and development," Cummings said.

How can hiring managers ensure they're attracting the top Millennial talent? It circles back to creative brand marketing and taking the initiative to seek out the qualified.

The Importance of Social Media

Cummings said that the biggest thing candidates want to talk about, regardless of the department they work in or the level of the position, is company culture. "I think that the workforce of today, they don't just send a résumé into a job because of an ad. They probably heard of the company for the first time from social media," Cummings said. Posts can come from an employer, employee or just a friend who shared or liked a company's post. "That's how they're learning about companies and opportunities; that's how people are affiliating themselves with brands," she said.

And these posts—whether on LinkedIn, **Instagram**, **Facebook**, **Twitter**—don't have to be job-related. Rodrigue said that Delicato is starting to dive

deeper into social media recruitment. "Not just blasting jobs—that would get really boring really fast—but selling company culture, showcasing who we are. 'Come join us, watch us grow and grow with us.' That's our message," he said.

Right now, Rodrigue said, Delicato's most used platform is still LinkedIn, but the recruiting team is using it as more of a social platform than a job-seeking site. He said they recently started a new video series called "Family Vibes," featuring a different employee on each video. "We're going to show all levels of positions, different demographics, and really show people what it's like at Delicato," Rodrigue said.

"Our point of posting isn't necessarily to target a specific position; it's more about showing the community and company culture," he said. Because when it does come time to look for a new employee, Rodrigue said, "I'm not looking for someone that wants a job. I'm looking for someone that wants a career." If he is loud and proud about what Delicato stands for, Rodrigue believes he will attract the right candidates.

Delicato is currently building out social plans for Instagram and Facebook as well. And that is a forward-thinking move on its part. If Millennials are resigned to grabbing entry- or mid-level opportunities today, finding the appropriate growth opportunities within the right company culture—it may be well worth the effort to learn how to seek their attention and plan ahead for the future when they're ready to take over for the retiring Boomers. **WBM**



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