

How to Market to HR Professionals: Top 10 Dos & Don'ts + 4 Pain Points

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By MarketingSherpa Contributing Editor Dianna Huff

If you've struggled with marketing to human resources (HR) professionals, it may be because you don't know to whom you're marketing and why.

Quick profile: Stats, daily challenges, who does what

Today's HR industry is huge – the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) boasts over 190,000 members in more than 100 countries – and its practitioners are varied.

You can liken HR and its job functions to the medical industry: you have the GPs, or general, who are usually aligned with a business unit and who know a little bit about every aspect of HR. Then you have those who specialize in one aspect of HR, such as:

- Compensation and benefits
- Compliance
- Community relations
- Crises communications
- Diversity
- Employee recruitment, development and training
- Health and wellness
- Labor relations
- Legal issues, including immigration
- State and Federal regulations, such as overtime, and new laws
- Workplace safety, including domestic violence
- Sexual harassment, including training and responding to complaints

Depending on the size and type of organization, you can find just one HR person

handling everything or a full complement of HR staff. Generally, GPs and specialists report in to Directors, who report to the senior VP, who reports to the CEO or CFO.

Finding the right person to market to, especially in companies that employ a number of HR people, can be difficult. “Do I want the benefits specialist or is the GP where I should start?” “Do I need to speak with the Director and specialist together or should I go straight to the Senior VP?”

HR professionals – at all levels – are incredibly busy (you’re lucky if you get one on the phone). In addition to having to put out day-to-day fires – GPs for instance, are usually dealing with employee relations issues and the like – HR professionals spend 10-40% of their time in meetings and the rest in dealing with strategic issues, such as lowering turnover, improving the recruitment process, or reviewing programs from a cost perspective.

One thing to note: MBA types are moving into HR, which is now seen as a respectable and results-driven field (versus its “pink collar” ghetto reputation of the 1990s).

Robert Bogosian, Principal of HR consulting firm RVB & Associates and formerly VP Performance Development at Wachovia/Evergreen Investments, confirms this assessment. “HR has shifted from policies and procedures to understanding a business’ challenges and how to meet them,” he comments. “In the 1990s, HR wrapped its arms around the ‘consultative’ approach with its business associates [those within the corporation]. Over time, we figured out how to get invited to the executive table.”

Mark Willaman, CEO and Founder of HRMarketer.com, agrees. “HR is now a very strategic functional area. This is so important given today’s ‘bottom line’ issues, from compliance and offshoring to finding and retaining top talent. And, more women are moving into senior level positions.”

Indeed, according to Human Resource Executive magazine, 19 of the 50 largest companies in the U.S. have women in the senior HR spot – up from nine in 2001 and “only a few” in 1991. Merrill Lynch Co. Inc., PepsiAmericas, Accenture, and SBC Communications are just a few of the companies that now have female Senior VPs of HR.

The Telemarketing Debate: HR pros hate it -- but it may work

Which marketing tactic is a big turnoff for HR professionals no matter what their level? Telemarketing was the number one complaint of the professionals interviewed for this article. Comments include:

“I receive so many calls, I’ve stopped answering my phone.” “Cold calls! Ugh! They drive me crazy.” “I delete the voice mails left by vendors – they’re usually selling something I don’t need, plus they always get my name wrong.”

Yet, according to Willaman, and John Brady, Executive Vice President for Business & Legal Reports, Inc. (formerly HRNext), telemarketing to HR professionals is actually quite effective.

So why the disconnect? Simply put, those making the calls that get deleted – and doing other marketing activities that HR professionals routinely ignore – do not understand their target audience or their jobs.

Four Key Challenges HR Pros Face Now

Use your knowledge of these challenges to craft your white papers, webinars, and other informational marketing. Real "pain points" equal real results.

#1. Regulations and inefficient processes

Says Pat Tures, Panera Bread’s Director of HR for Company Operations, “We have cafes in 35 states. Not only do I have to keep up on all the laws and regulations for each state, I also am trying to make our recruitment process more efficient and lower turnover. I need front-end assessment tools that will help me weed out unqualified people. Having someone call and hawk a benefit plan is not going to interest me.”

#2. Resistance to change

Marketers and sales people also need to understand how slowly change takes place in a corporation. According to Bogosian, HR professionals walk a delicate line. They have to instinctively understand how far and how fast to push change within a department or team and when to back off. This fine line, says Bogosian, is a challenge for HR execs, who also have the additional challenge of getting their executive colleagues to understand the connection between the business element and the human element.

Because change is slow, HR people keep information on file and will call suppliers – sometimes up to two years later.

Says Evelyn Flaherty, formerly of Parametric Technology Corporation (PTC) and Lotus, “I receive a ton of information, most of which I throw away. However, if a piece of collateral offers me solid information, I’ll keep it – and will call the vendor when I’m ready to purchase.”

#3. Technology solutions could be better

One major benefit HR professionals seek is Web-based employee self-service, according to SHRM’s 2005 HR Technology Survey Report. However, only 38% stated their HR technology included this functionality.

And while 80% felt HR technology helped them achieve measurable successes, many stated that they still encounter serious obstacles and challenges, including little or no improvement in recruiting effectiveness and employee satisfaction.

And, something to pay attention to – 65% of respondents indicated they are not measuring ROI for their technology systems! Show an HR professional how to do this – and how demonstrated ROI can help them build a business case at the executive table, and you’ll easily begin a fruitful sales dialogue.

#4. Executive ethics and compliance is huge

HR execs are struggling with defining metrics for measuring compliance and how to shift the mindset of an organization’s ethical value system.

Several of Bogosian's clients, which are large financial services organizations, are paying close attention to risk and compliance. “This is a major issue at the top of the house,” he says, “and can be a lucrative opportunity if you do it right.”

10 HR Marketing Dos and Don’ts

So how do you reach these people if they don’t answer their phone and routinely throw away information? Willaman offers the following strategies for breaking through the clutter:

Direct mail/email

DO: Use direct mail and email to send out non-salesy offers for white papers or case studies, which HR people love. Ensure your mailings are clean and professionally done, have little “glitz” and offer practical information an HR professional can use.

DON'T: Make over-the-top claims. HR professionals are skeptical of marketing, so something that reads, “Prove training and development ROI like never before!” will be instantly trashed. Says Bogosian, “This type of marketing is trite and insults my intelligence.”

Teleconferences and Webinars

DO: Invite A-list speakers to present at teleconferences and Webinars. Says Flaherty, “Webinars are great. I can share the information with my staff and more important, I can multitask while sitting at my computer.”

DON'T: Use a Webinar to pitch a product demo.

Case studies and PR

According to Willaman, HR professionals rely on their peers when choosing suppliers. As a result, case studies that show how you helped another company work very well in terms of gaining credibility. He also recommends positioning your company as an expert in the field. Write articles and send press releases to the major HR trades, develop reports or conduct surveys, and speak at industry conferences.

Industry conferences and meetings

DO: Regularly attend industry conferences. Despite being a large industry, HR is like a small village in that HR folks talk to one another. Sit at the luncheon table and listen to people and their issues/concerns. Adds Willaman, “Conferences are the places where people trade stories about suppliers and products – if you spend your time listening, you’ll pick up a great deal of competitive knowledge.”

Bogosian recommends joining your local HR association and regularly attending the meetings – to learn, not to sell. Says Bogosian, “Spend more time as a consultant, not as a marketer. Learn to understand and respect the challenges of HR.”

Telemarketing

Respect an HR professional’s time by doing your homework first. Know whom you’re calling and why. Use good phone manners and begin the call with, “I’m doing some interesting work with Morgan Stanley that is similar to what your company is doing. Do you have ten minutes to chat?” Instead of pitching your product, initiate a dialogue by talking professional to professional.

DO: Follow up – politely – to a white paper or report you’ve sent out.

DO: Call early in the morning or late in the day. You’ll have a better chance of someone picking up the phone.

DO: Hire a high-quality call center (if you outsource this function) that knows how to make professional, courteous calls.

DON’T: Employ telemarketing’s sins: Predictive dialers, boiler rooms, and rude, untrained callers. If you want to be successful and make sales, you won’t use them.

Sums up Tures, “Understand the HR world and how I fit into it. Give me information on how I can do a better job. Better yet, before offering me a free report, spend some time reading SHRM newsletters and other industry publications. If you sound like you understand me, I’ll be much more inclined to talk to you.”

Useful links related to this article:

Society for Human Resources Management and HR Magazine:

<http://www.shrm.org>

HRMarketer.com:

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