

CASE STUDY: Finding the perfect candidate in a niche market

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Filling the top executive positions in a niche market is always a challenging task for a recruiter. Jim Conley from Howard-Sloan Search (IMSA USA) shares his experience on the process of finding a Director for one the most worldwide recognizable Catholic brands.

“We are looking for people who are almost impossible to find” says Jim Conley, [IMSA USA](#). The case of finding an executive for Ave Maria Press is an excellent example of how to overcome all the obstacles.

The publishing company with the Mission

Ave Maria Press is a Catholic publishing company founded in 1865 by a Holy Cross priest Edward Sorin. The firm solely publishes books on the subjects of Catholic families, the Church, the Virgin Mary and showcases Catholic scripts. It is one of the most recognizable Catholic brands operating worldwide.

The company approached Howard-Sloan to fill the Director of Publication position, after the previous manager scheduled his retirement for early 2020.

The job description for the position was quite demanding. The person had to be a skilled publisher with an excellent understanding of the process and familiar with acquiring content for books and journals. They needed to have a grasp of Catholicism, know what resonated in the community, and have a good understanding of Holy Cross theology.

Last but not least, they had to be willing to re-locate to South Bend in Indiana, where the Head Office of the company is located.

Discovering ‘the one’ – networking is key

Howard-Sloan submitted three external and one internal candidate for this senior position in Ave Maria Press. But finding the four candidates was a real challenge. “I interviewed a hundred to find these four, and the most important thing turned out to be networking,” explained Jim Conley, [IMSA USA](#).

The first step was to find other Catholic publishers and approach them about the position. Even if none of them was interested in applying for the position, the conversations themselves led to the first clue. “Very quickly, I understood that I should probably start looking among the alumni of Georgetown University in Washington, DC. This is a prestigious Alma Mater, and it is also Catholic. The outcome of this first step was satisfying and led us to finding some valuable candidates,” admitted Jim Conley. But the search wasn’t finished and Jim’s team had to find a second approach.

“In every search, it is kind of interesting how important is to be open to a process and not fixate on initial assumptions. Our team knew that we needed to expand our search, but we had no idea where we should start looking. One of the interviewed candidates gave us a clue on another college she had attended. Although she decided that changing her job was not a good move for her, we started wondering if we could find more people like her. We searched her college alumni. We quickly found some promising candidates.”

Being patient

Even after finding the right candidate, the process of interviewing them was a real minefield. Finding an experienced publisher with a good sense of theology is not an easy task, especially if the recruiter has to be very sensitive about the questions he or she asks. “According to American law, I can’t ask a question about religion during the interview. Even in this particular case, where faith was a crucial factor in hiring. So, we needed to ask additional questions around the subject and hope that the candidate will volunteer the information we required”.

Introducing the candidate to the idea of moving to Indiana was not an easy task. Most people are tempted to move to big urban areas like New York, Boston or Washington, or places with beautiful weather. With its population around 100 thousand and continental climate (including snow in winter and a tendency to moderate temperatures year-round), South Bend is not on the list of top desired cities to move into.

“The weather may look like a tiny inconvenience, but candidates who were experienced enough for this job were also in their forties or fifty’s. At this age, some people are thinking not only about the opportunities the job will give to them, but also what may happen when they retire, and some candidates just don’t see themselves retiring in Indiana. As a result, many candidates turned down the position simply because of the weather” explains Jim Conley, [IMSA USA](#).

How to convince them? “Actually, the recruiter’s job is not to sell the location. We need to sell the position, and luckily Ave Maria Press is such a prestigious company, many people were able to move to work there” continues Jim Conley, [IMSA USA](#).

Patience was the key. Trusting the process whilst hearing many “no” answers, may be challenging. But in these cases, the first “yes” answer is extremely rewarding. Also, believing in the client’s brand potential is crucial, especially when it comes to the most demanding searches. “The easy part of this task was the fact that Ave Maria Press is a fantastic company, with a strong working culture and lovely people on board”, says Jim Conley.

“To be honest, the best part of being a recruiter is the fact that the job keeps my mind going. And this is all I want,” he adds.

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