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Farm Hands

By Katherine Field

(October 1, 2008) Hickory Farms may know beef sticks and cheese, but to staff its network of company-owned and franchised seasonal stores, the Maumee, Ohio-based retailer needed outside help from a hiring expert.

In July of last year, Hickory Farms, which generates approximately \$16.3 million (est. 2007) via catalog and Internet sales as well as 600 shopping-mall kiosks deployed during the holiday season, launched an 80-store test with Raleigh, N.C.-based Headway Corporate Resources to source, hire and payroll its seasonal staffing corps. The initial trial has since segued into full rollout mode.

"Because of the success of the trial program, and Headway's deep commitment and effort in exceeding our expectations, we decided to roll out the workforce solutions on a nationwide basis," said Jim O'Neill Jr., VP of retail and franchise operations for Hickory Farms.

The nationwide rollout for the 2008 holiday season began in May, and it has been no small job. "We are on track at our Headway Recruitment Center [HRC] to source, screen, hire and payroll more than 3,700 associates for the fall holiday season," said Suzanne Kinkel, executive VP of recruitment process outsourcing for Headway.

HRC contains the teams of specialists, including research analysts, recruiters, interviewers and project leads, that Headway utilizes to handle Hickory Farms'—and other clients'—workplace solutions. For Hickory Farms, the team's candidate pool numbered about 39,000 at the outset, gained from a combination of telephone inquiries and e-recruiting technologies that pull from a variety of Internet destinations including social-networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Spoke.

"We specialize in finding 'passive candidates,'" explained Kinkel, "people who aren't looking for work." Headway uses social sites to engage prospects and once the candidate pipeline is chock full of potential employees gained from both online sites, as well as telephone surveys and the company's proprietary database of a million candidates, then the process of paring the list begins.

"With Hickory Farms, we identified the competencies, the skills that they were looking for, as well as the characteristics and traits of the individuals," Kinkel said. "From there we built the pipeline of candidates." Initial qualification is followed by a pre-screening interview and, for those who keep moving through the pipeline, a second interview before submission to Hickory Farms for an in-person discussion.

Qualified candidates generally report to the mall location in which they are applying, interviewing with Hickory Farms' retail area supervisors or store team leaders.

Some employees find ongoing seasonal employment with the retailer. "As a result of our work with employees during the 2007 holiday season, we actually were able to re-hire some of them for the 2008 season as well," Kinkel said. "That's our goal—to build these candidate databases and ensure these people know that every year the position will be available."

Toward that end, because Headway represents other businesses as well, the company works to place qualified individuals on alternate assignments throughout the year, thus "keeping them employed and busy during other seasons—and available for Hickory Farms when the time comes," said Kinkel.



Maumee, Ohio-based Hickory Farms uses seasonal employees to sell its gourmet gift baskets during the holiday months.

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