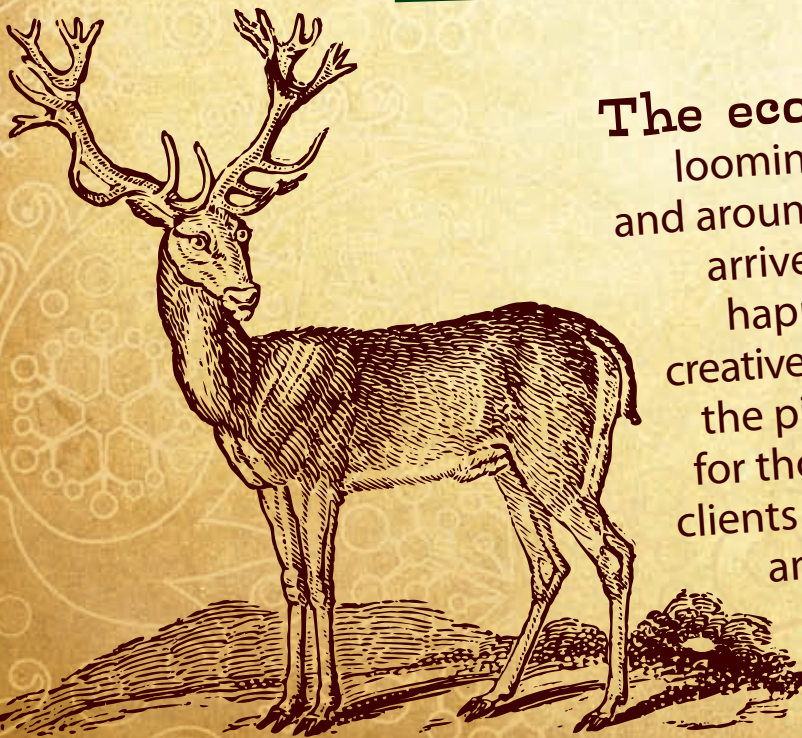




TEMPORARY BLISS

By Kate Siegel

The economy. It's a dark cloud looming in the news, at dinner tables, and around the water cooler. A rainy day has arrived. It's happened before, it will happen again. Veterans of Atlanta's creative staffing firms know how to navigate the pitfalls . . . and the opportunities . . . for those back in the job market, and for clients who still have branding, marketing and advertising messages to get out even though the full-time creative staff may have been cut.





THE TEMP TREND

As you might expect, "We have definitely seen a decrease in permanent placements versus temp placements," says Cindy Caldwell, a creative and technical recruiter at a national staffing firm, and "unfortunately, we have also seen a decrease in the number of positions available. The types of positions available have decreased as well, and demand for different skill sets has changed even in just the last three months."

Nancy Pineda, president of Hire Profile, Inc., concurs. "People you thought would be at their companies forever are now looking to us for help. People who were clients are now looking for work."

The talent pool is robust and skill levels are higher notes Amy Ingram, area manager at Aquent in Atlanta. "Agencies have a shifting talent base, with more creative directors, art directors and senior writers available. There's also less demand for photography."

While Caldwell agrees that the size of the talent pool has increased, "the quality has not necessarily improved. I am seeing less 'fresh' and 'new' talent as far as designers go."

Guy Tucker, a headhunter for advertising agencies nationally, says business has changed dramatically. He primarily recruits for permanent positions but has had more requests for temporary/freelance positions because companies don't want to take on the cost of providing benefits to full-time employees. More clients want RFPs, too. "There's more tire-kicking going on than in the past," he says.



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-Amy Ingram

He expects demand to continue to diminish with perhaps an up-tick occurring for freelancers this summer if the stimulus package takes hold. But since Atlanta had taken an earlier hit, it may take longer to recover than the rest of the country. "It's a waiting game," says Tucker. Everyone is waiting for the cash to start flowing again.

As a local firm, Hire Profile feels very connected and loyal to the Atlanta market. "We don't want to see our talent going to other markets, and we don't want to see other talent coming here and taking jobs," Pineda says. Her staff is often affected personally by news of job losses. "Our biggest challenge is overcoming sadness — the initial disbelief and sadness, the thoughts of 'We love you, and you've always stuck with us.'"

But it's not all grey skies, doom and gloom.



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-Guy Tucker

A firm may not be able to hire outright, Ingram points out, but it still needs the deliverables so it will contract freelancers instead. "People who would never have intended to be freelance are now out there," says Pineda, "and that's the best news for clients, because now they have access to them." With the higher level of expertise available, employers can get more bang for their buck. "It's cost-effective and a great value," she explains. "They pay talent for a single project, and then use the results for a year."

It's a smart way to try new people, too. Before committing to a permanent hire (or making a change to existing personnel), an employer can "test drive" freelancers. Then, when the workload increases or funding becomes available, there's a ready short list of candidates who could easily step in and get up to speed.



THE UPSIDE TO THE E-SIDE

"Some multi-media companies are doing quite well," Caldwell says. "Companies who can get creative with their offerings and business partnerships will succeed in riding out the recession better than their competitors and more traditional businesses." Says Caldwell, "Web design and graphic design positions comprised 75% of my positions before. Now the positions are more web development and technical-based."

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Ingram has seen a "big, big push" for anyone with web experience, in any area from marketing to development including Flash/HTML coding, information architecture, social media, global marketing, and mobile technology. Social marketing, in particular, has shifted how big companies look at their budget.

In the ad industry, Tucker is also seeing a trend toward new media positions, with agencies tending to hire personnel from the digital company they used to go to for occasional projects.

SELF-HELP AND SKILL SETS



Creative professionals looking for work must seriously focus their efforts. Experience is key, and employers want to see it. "Send fewer, choice samples," says Tucker.

Hiring managers will probably spend mere minutes looking at each resume, so you have to "brand yourself, market yourself, define what differentiates you," Ingram says. "It's no longer OK to have a resume and a cover letter. Punch up and tweak your resume for what they're looking for so that experience jumps out."

In fact, Aquent will develop a marketing plan for high-skill individuals, and then approach their contacts in the corporate world with a snap-this-person-up-while-



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-Cindy Caldwell

you-can pitch. In some cases, Hire Profile will take people who have never freelanced and coach them. "We'll actively profile talent to clients," says Pineda. "People we've known for years and have been friends with will get preferential treatment."

"Network, network, network," says Caldwell.

Hire Profile's Pineda is adamant about using sites like LinkedIn, Facebook and Plaxo. "You need to be in social media, even if you think it's for kids. Get over it. You're walking away from opportunities to connect. You never know who's going to be the one to be your advocate," she says. "The idea that you don't mix business and pleasure is sort of a myth. I grew up in a small town, and in the '50s and '60s, business got done on weekends, in back yards, at barbecues. Then in the '70s and '80s, we got so politically correct we stopped talking about life," she continued. "We like to connect real people and real personalities to projects." The status updates of a writer she is friends with on Facebook are so funny that Pineda said she would definitely recommend her for a humor writing job, something that wouldn't have occurred to her based on the woman's resume or portfolio alone.

While nurturing your network is important, it's equally important to make a good first impression. "Give yourself a presence online so that if a future employer does a search on you, the first thing they come across isn't your MySpace page," Caldwell recommends. (Try doing a Google search for "Cindy Caldwell" to see her QAlias page, for example.)

"Don't pigeon-hole yourself by restricting your search to just one industry or geographic location," says Pineda. Consider a wider range of salaries, too. "The candidates who are willing to accept a variety of hourly

rates get placed much more frequently than those who insist on a specific minimum rate for every job."

Flexibility is good, but Tucker cautions, "Don't overreach." Follow the established path of your career trajectory, and resist the temptation to try to morph into whatever position is available, especially when it's a long stretch. "Instead of

applying for 15 jobs that sort of match, go after the three that fit really well and do it with a passion," he says. "Tell the truth. Be prepared."

FIRM STRATEGIES

By the same token, employers should make it easy for creative talent to identify suitable positions. "Information is king," Ingram says, and job descriptions should include a specific deliverable or skill expertise at a minimum.

And even though it's a buyer's market out there, Caldwell says employers should still try to be competitive with salary and benefits. She recommends advertising a position on the company's web site and on job sites more specific to the industry, like AIGA, DICE and Computer Jobs, to reduce the likelihood of being bombarded by irrelevant resumes. "Of course, utilizing a staffing service may not be a bad idea either," she says.

Indeed. Employers do have more choices, but finding the right people can be difficult and quickly overwhelming. A staffing agency helps navigate the process and efficiently deliver vetted talent. Pineda says using her company can turn what could be a weeks-long search into placing a working expert in as little as 24 hours if needed.

Many corporate and agency clients have had their budgets slashed, so business, not surprisingly, is less than anticipated

for creative staffing services. In response, recruiters are getting more savvy themselves, working longer, harder, leaner and more targeted.

Instead of reviewing five portfolios a day, Tucker is looking at 15 to 20 and then refining his recommendations down to about three well-suited candidates in an effort to make it easier for his clients to make decisions.

Ingram has stopped using major job boards to advertise positions, although she will occasionally post on niche sites. She reaches out to companies announcing layoffs, such as Macy's in its recent downsizing. And she turns to her "tried and true talent" for referrals.

"I am continuing to leverage my networking relationships," says Caldwell, as well as educating her clients on their options: contract, temp-to-perm, permanent placement. "We are continually calling on our clients to remind them that we are still here and ready to help them when they are ready to hire again."

"Where others are retreating, we're moving forward," Pineda says. One of their key competitors has left the market, and Hire Profile is launching a new marketing campaign with a referral element. It rewards anybody who recommends a talent who is placed, or a client who fills a position.

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-Nancy Pineda



Freelancing as a work style will continue to grow. And that could be the silver lining for those who are prepared and adapt. Anybody "long in the tooth" in this industry has adapted to change and probably will adapt again. And anyone who wants to be considered a veteran of this industry will do the same.