



Bridging the Gap: Astronauts, Fighter Pilots, and Air Traffic Controllers Needed

By Laura Patterson

May and June signal the halfway mark of the year, the beginning of summer, and—of particular note—graduation. This year 900,000 people are expected to graduate from universities and colleges in the U.S.

This new and eager talent will be ready to enter the workforce, but as we all know, 2009 is a tough year for employment.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers recently reported just 19.7 percent of 2009 graduates who applied for a job actually have one. In mid-May, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported the number of job losses from closing and contracting establishments was 7.8 million from June through September of 2008. The difference between the number of gross jobs gained and the number of gross jobs lost yielded a net change of negative 932,000 jobs in the private sector for Q3 2008.

In yet more sobering news, according to the latest Labor Department report, there were 2.7 million jobs available nationwide in March—down from three million in February and four million a year ago. It's also the lowest number in the eight years the Labor Department has tracked job openings. And a mere 150,000 or so of these job openings are related to the marketing profession.

So, just what skills do the marketers of today and tomorrow need to secure a job? You've heard all the classics before: good communication skills, excellent problem-solving skills, asking good questions, and good research skills to make fact-based decisions. Then, of course, there's the ability to work in a team, meet the expectations of your boss, and use technology effectively.

All crucial, tried-and-true skills. But in today's competitive environment, it will take more than just the basics to succeed.

Successful marketers have a customer-centric mindset. They recognize the importance of being able to accelerate the customer acquisition process, demonstrate customer responsiveness, focus on customer retention, and improve customer satisfaction and loyalty.

And successful marketers understand the importance of accountability. They recognize organizations have a set of outcomes they are trying to achieve, and marketing must measure and report on how it is positively affecting these outcomes.

Marketing professionals everywhere know they need these customer-centric skills and tout them in their resumes and interviews. These are becoming another set of table stakes. Distinguishing oneself from the crowd is a hard nut to crack.

Marketers often try to tailor themselves to a particular job. Yet in smaller companies, a marketer needs to be able to perform a variety of jobs. And in today's larger companies, a marketer may actually be

doing the job of several people. So maybe there's a more creative way to look at what you can bring to the table.

We often talk about personas as a way to better understand customers and create messages that will resonate. We can apply this same notion to marketing. There are three broad personas every marketing organization needs, which we'll call astronauts, fighter pilots, and air traffic controllers. Let's briefly explore each:

First, there is a need for a small number of talented people who are the visionaries. These are the individuals who see the future and pursue new ideas—the ones who are willing to take extraordinary risks for what they believe is the right thing to do, even at the cost of their jobs.

These people are the astronauts of the marketing organization. These are highly trained, fearless innovators willing to travel into the unknown. They thrive on "what-if" scenarios and are valued for their out-of-the-box approach. The work they do is very important, because such trailblazers help us understand more about where we can and should go, and enable us to get there.

Second is a larger group of professionals trained to engage customers and in hand-to-hand combat with the competition. These are the warriors—the fighter pilots of the organization—who courageously participate in the daily battle of customer acquisition and retention. These professionals take all the attributes of a warrior such as courage, strength, agility, adaptability, stamina, resilience, acuity, restraint, stealth, cunning, and compassion and make them relevant to marketing.

They thrive on winning, both individually and for the organization. They deploy offensive and defensive strategies and tactics designed to grow market share and customer value. Without the warriors, the company cannot win in the marketplace.

Astronauts and fighter pilots would have high mortality rates without the last persona, the air traffic controllers. While often behind the scenes, they are just as important to the organization. These people create and operate the systems and processes that direct marketing activities efficiently and effectively, so as to minimize mistakes, delays, and costs. They thrive on order and precision.

These jobs may not seem as glamorous, and may not be on the front line, but they're every bit as critical to the organization's success.

As you think about your capabilities, preferences, skills, and personality, consider which persona you most resemble. Rather than focusing on a particular job with hundreds of applicants, synchronize your marketing skills to fit a persona.

Once that's accomplished, focus on finding an opportunity and a company that values your persona. Remember: Every company needs all three.