



Think Being a Recruiter Is Just about Selling? Think Again: Discover How Entrepreneur Jim Jonassen Parlayed His Years of Experience into a Top-Notch Executive Search Practice

By Lindsay Cicero

Today I sat down with Jim Jonassen, a successful entrepreneur and twenty-five year veteran of the high-tech and digital media recruiting industry, to learn from one of the industry's most talented recruiters what it is that makes him so successful. His firm, Jim Jonassen & Associates Venture Search, the fourth he has founded, is an executive search and placement firm that focuses on placing the West Coast's top talent, finding revenue producing leaders for venture and private equity backed technology and digital media companies. Jonassen's firm has more than 35 years of combined experience in the recruiting industry and has completed over 600 searches, with an unheard of 98% success rate for retained searches since 2001.



Jim Jonassen's career in recruiting had humble beginnings. "I was sitting on a bar stool," he told me. "I had just graduated from the University of Illinois and moved to L.A., and I met a human resources director from Hughes Aircraft Company at a local bar. After speaking with him for a while, he told me that I would be great at headhunting." Being as green as they come, Jim thought his new

friend was talking about bounty hunting and said, "Sure! Sign me up, that sounds cool!" Little did he know it at the time, but that chance meeting in a bar would change the course of his life and career.

Jim quickly signed on to be a recruiter for a technical recruiting firm in Century City, and when he showed up for his first day on the job, he walked into a room filled with young men and women dialing phones, smoking cigarettes, and having what looked like fun. He took one look at this boiler room and was hooked. When I asked him about the training he received, he laughed and responded, "My boss gave me the *California Manufacturers Guide* and a candidate's resume and told me to 'Get this guy an interview.'" He spent the next few days on the phone calling every single manufacturing company in the book, asking to speak to the head of the engineering department, and on day four, he told his boss that the candidate had an interview in Torrance the following morning. By that time Jim was hooked.

Though that first recruiting job left much to be desired, Jim plugged away and has since founded four highly successful search firms, personally led over 600 search assignments, and been recognized three times as one of the Los Angeles

Business Journal's Top 25 People in High Technology, as well as being named the 1999 Software Entrepreneur of the Year by the Software Council of Southern California.

As with most careers, Jim's has taken him down various paths. While running his first search firm in the mid-eighties at the dawn of the computing age, Jim immediately recognized the competitive advantage software automation could offer his firm by reducing response time and increasing effectiveness. He began searching the marketplace for a solution. Unsuccessful in finding anything that met his needs, Jim made the fateful decision to contract the development of custom software to run his firm. The resulting application took his firm to the next level and was so successful he decided to start the first of two hugely successful software companies, ushering in the entrepreneurial stage of his career.

Jim believes his experience as an entrepreneur has been the key element to his success in the recruiting field. Throughout his years as an entrepreneur, Jim became an expert in team building, product creation and development, marketing, sales, and the development of distribution channels. Before he learned these disciplines, he was merely reading words off a resume to prospective clients, trying to get interviews. Now he gets inside the clients' organizations, business models, products, and cultures to make his matches. "My firsthand experience with the operational side of running a company gives me a unique take on the search and selection process," he says. "Having been burned many times throughout my career by bad hires, I have a deep empathy for the hiring authority, whether it is a founder, a senior executive, or an investor/board member."

Instead of simply looking at candidates' skill sets and experiences, Jim focuses on their personalities and characters — their core values and beliefs. He says that a



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candidate's resume and references will back up his or her skills and experience, but what he is looking for goes much deeper than a qualification that can be found on a piece of paper. He likes to get to know his candidates on a more personal level, to learn about the "intangibles." He says, "I have always been as interested in a person's failures as in their successes. How those failures are handled speaks volumes about a person."

He wants to know what his candidates are made of, if they have heart, if they are leaders, and how they convey a thought or an idea. Jim says that ultimately those are the qualities that are going to secure a good match and not lead to a breakdown down the line. "I never set out to find 'a' candidate — I'm looking for 'the' candidate," he says.

A Day in the Life of a Recruiter — What Does Jim's Daily Schedule Consist Of?

Jim says that most of his days consist of meeting people and, most importantly, managing expectations. Recruiting is not just about selling a candidate to a company; it is about making sure a company understands what it needs and what it is able to attract from the market — i.e., the talent pool. "Candidates want to sell you on their ability to do the job. They want to overcome the objections and get into the interview." Much like a psychologist, Jim spends much of his day figuring out what a candidate's strengths and weaknesses are and then conveying them to the client in comparison to the available talent pool, not necessarily the client's idea of the perfect candidate. He's part coach, part advisor, and part salesman.

"Every search and candidate is different for me," he says. "Some days I just know the candidate is going to hit it out of the ballpark in the interview, and other days I'm on the phone with the company 'foaming the runway' because I know the candidate, while perfect for the job, is destined to 'burn up on landing.' This is another place where managing expectations comes in. These companies have retained my services because they know I can help them meet their goals with the perfect fit. I'm not selling the candidate to them, I'm showing them why he's the right fit — or where he or she falls short. It all comes down to managing expectations — to me, it's the most important part of my day."

The Best Part of the Job: Closing Dinners

Jim says that his favorite part of being a recruiter is attending the closing dinners. Every time his firm closes a retained search, he schedules a dinner with the client and one with the selected candidate to celebrate and get to know them

better. He says the closing dinner is all about solidifying a relationship. According to Jim, the big payoff of the job is not his paycheck but understanding the career and personal upside for the candidate, and helping an entrepreneur or executive to build his business. That is the true reward in his business.

Jim says this about his associates: "We love what we do. We are junkies for this stuff." He says he feels like a "baseball player" and that he wakes up every morning and thinks, "I can't believe they pay me to do this, because it is so much fun!"

An Entrepreneur with a Heart — How Jim Has Made Giving Back a Large Part of His Networking Events

An active Big Brother since 1992 and a longstanding member of the board for the Santa Monica and Cathedral City Boys and Girls Clubs, Jim is a firm believer in giving back to the community he lives and works in. I had the opportunity to speak with Jim's Little Brother of 16 years, who says that Jim "saved his life in many ways over the years."

I asked his Little Brother if he believes most Big Brother/Little Brother relationships last as long as his has with Jim, and he replied that he "seriously doubts it." It is a testament to Jim's commitment to goodwill and humanity that he has fostered a relationship with this young man for more than a decade.

Jim is so committed to giving back, in fact, that he has turned his regular networking events into an opportunity to give to those who are less fortunate. In 1992, Jim conceived his first industry roundtable, LAWnMoveR, which was focused on getting together the people exploring interactive multimedia. The events were so successful that Jim founded the Digital Coast Roundtable in 1998 with then-Mayor of Los Angeles and former venture capitalist Dick Riordan to carry the torch. Fast forward 10 years, and Jim is now hosting a regular networking event dubbed ThursdayNights (www.thursdaynights.org).

His ThursdayNights events are not a superficial schmooze fest, and no part of the evening is about making a pitch or a sale. His aim at these events is to instead bring together Los Angeles executives, entrepreneurs, investors, and professionals in a relaxed, intimate, safe environment where they can really "let their hair down" and foster personal and professional relationships and friendships. And, Jim says, "We buy the beers."

He says that most recruiters forget about the marketing aspect of the job. For them, it's all about "the sell." While



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most recruiters spend 98% of their energy selling and only 2% marketing, Jim tries to keep the two in balance. He says, "When you sell, you are pushing and you can only really push to one person at a time, [whereas] when you market, you are pulling with a message, a brand impression, or a story, and that can be delivered one-to-many — it's much more efficient"

"ThursdayNights is a highly effective investment," he says. "I can reach a large group of people at once." He hopes that at the end of the day, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists can come to the event, have a good time, meet new people, build relationships, and in the end remember Jim and his employees as good people.

The ThursdayNights events have also become a fundraising program for the Boys and Girls Clubs. Over the past several years, more than \$200,000 has been raised. Every single cent of the money is given to the Boys and Girls Club for the purpose of building tech and media centers at local clubs and schools to help at-risk youth. Jim believes that providing today's youth with technology and media programs will build tomorrow's skilled and talented employees who the executives at his ThursdayNights events might one day hire.

If you are interested in learning more about Jim, you can visit his company's website at www.VentureSearchLLC.com. Jim is also a regular lecturer at USC's Entrepreneur Program at the Marshall School of Business, at UCLA's Anderson MBA School InfoTech Program, and at LARTA University.

Conclusion

While Jim's charisma, charm, and personality have definitely played a large part in his success as a recruiter and entrepreneur, his background and experience have given him his unique edge in the industry. But at the end of the day, I believe it is Jim's large heart and unyielding integrity that have made him who he is in the business world. An entrepreneur with compassion is a rare find in corporate America. I am a firm believer in the mantra "You get what you give," and I see Jim as a testament to that. I believe his candidates and the companies he does business with feel the same way. And that is what keeps them coming back.

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