



TAKING THE CLIENT CONVERSATION IN A NEW DIRECTION

Steven Douglas

Associates

**Member Firm of EMA
Partners International**

Headquarters: Weston, FL

Additional Offices:

Los Angeles, Jacksonville and
Minneapolis

Founded: 1984

Practice Area: Generalist search practice with primary focus on assignments serving the financial services (wealth management), logistics, retail, non-profit, healthcare, manufacturing, high technology and service industries.



Principal:

Mark J. Sadovnick,
Executive Vice President
and Partner

Great things happen when you let your client do the talking.

That's probably the most powerful lesson that Mark Sadovnick, executive vice president and partner with Florida-based Steven Douglas Associates, has learned about the real potential of executive search consulting and the profits that come from tweaking the traditional approach to the business.

It means approaching executive search – and management talent in general – like an owner in the client's business, and it demands that search consultants take the conversation off-script to focus on business strategy first, and only then on the human assets required to execute that strategy.

“Our clients have always asked us to really know what's going on with their business,” Sadovnick says.

Shifting the conversation

But the rules of engagement really changed, he recalls, when clients started to seek out a broader perspective, not only on senior management needs, but also on all the external market dynamics shaping their companies' respective competitive analyses.

That is when the team of consultants at Steven Douglas Associates started to hear, “Come in and tell us about our business. Don't just talk about a search,” Sadovnick says. “Now, all of our clients expect us to talk about their business.”

That's an important distinction, especially for any search consultant who may confine their discussions with clients to dialogue about specific senior-management job vacancies, position descriptions and timelines for getting search assignments completed.

Sadovnick says that engaging in a kind of broad discussion about a client's overall business strategy and growth potential often leads to the identification of needs that go far outside the boundaries of a job specification for an existing vacancy. That kind of dialogue might just take the client-search firm interaction (and the emphasis on recruiting new executive talent) to a place that's more strategically aligned to where the business is going.

“All clients care about is their business working. Our number one goal is to listen to what they want to accomplish in their business, in the short- and long-term, assess where they're going and what their needs are, and if the search firm really can be a partner in that...it's powerful,” Sadovnick says.

“We've learned to ask all of our clients about the plans, objectives and obstacles their business expects to face in the coming year, not just in headcount, but what the business wants to achieve,” he adds. “What do they expect and want to happen in the next year or two years? To me, that's critical and exciting because now I'm not just doing a transaction or a search, but instead we're actually now representing the company as a strategic partner.”

Sadovnick says that knowing more about where the firm's clients want to take their businesses in the future allows the team at Steven Douglas Associates to attract the best executives – not just the best available at the time – to meet those companies' future needs and build a pipeline of people that want the firm to present them to meet the client.

“There's a difference between doing some searches and being a voice of the company in the marketplace on a long-term basis,” he says. “We're like a combination of search firm, public relations firm and consultant, always getting the message out. Candidates will find the message is uniform and consistent, and clients realize its positive image of valuing the search process and attracting high caliber talent is snowballing out there.”

Meeting clients' immediate needs

Part of the Steven Douglas Associates recipe for repeat business is being able to offer their clients a dosing of flexible management resources at a time when it might be straining from the departure of a key executive for whom the search firm is now trying to find a successor.

Besides retained executive search, the firm offers what it calls its Project Resources Practice, which draws on the skills and experience of several senior-level managers – some with as many as 20 years of management experience – to assist clients in the time it takes to recruit the permanent management individual.

These managers are actually employees of the firm, with “strong, financially oriented experience and business skills,” as

Sadovnick describes them, and essentially “People who have chosen to become full-time consultants in our business and for the benefit of our clients.” The firm bills out those individuals' time at up to \$150 per hour, and they report to a client's offices until the firm can identify a long-term solution through its retained search practice.

“When we deploy an individual to a company, that company can keep them as long as they want. These people are willing to do critical projects – like set up a financial reporting system, or lead an internal audit project – that a Chief Financial Officer might not want to do,” Sadovnick says.

“These guys work for us. They're not temporary or interim executives, who, in contrast to our associates, if they get offered a job, they'll take it,” Sadovnick adds. “We're very selective as to who we'll bring on as a permanent consultant and someone who can be ‘hands on’ with our clients. There's not a task about which they'll say, ‘I don't do that.’ These are hands on people.”

And the task of assigning the right project manager to help a client through a change of management assets is much better informed, Sadovnick says, because of the firm's ongoing strategic dialogue about where the business is heading.

“Our project resources practice emanates from various discussions with clients about their business and not, ‘We need a guy with 12 to 15 year or more of experience.’ You start to find out what their business needs and then you can determine the right individual who can execute these projects,” he says.

Sadovnick says clients appreciate the immediacy of support from the firm's project resources team and the concurrent launch of an executive search to fill the need more permanently because it helps to keep the business running smoothly while it's eyeing future growth.

“They're going in to help with the business needs, not necessarily to do what a CFO or a CIO needs to do,” he explains. “The most valuable thing is there's a great transition of knowledge to the permanent person coming on.” That results, in part, because the outside consultant is an employee of Steven Douglas Associates, and because the firm's performance is based in part on its associates' abilities to smooth the transition for the person who ultimately steps into the role on a permanent employee basis.

“It has helped our retained clients and thus our retained search practice and correlates to what our clients really said they wanted,” Sadovnick says, because it takes the client relationship “full circle to the business needs of the client and one team getting the message out, as well as meeting their [more immediate] needs during a transition.”

As a result, Sadovnick confides, he can get more excited about the business because he knows his firm's work aligns more closely to the strategic needs of the client, and also because his familiarity with the client allows him to sell the permanent opportunity better, and to more effectively attract ‘A’ players.

“Our clients want, as we do, the best person, period, not just the best person who is available at the time,” he says. ☒

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