

Washington firm begs for workers

BY SARAH PFLEDDERER

Lance Forsee might be the first panhandler to bum a resume off a passerby instead of a buck.

As a new employee recruitment technique, the president of Colonial Lawn & Garden took to the streets begging for folks to apply to job openings at the Yakima, Wash.-based company. He carried a cardboard sign and all.

A little more than a week later, a stack of 200 completed job applications sat in his office.

"It's been unbelievable," Forsee says. "We were just trying to stir up interest and get people in the door. Where were these 200 people before this campaign?"

Desperate times call for desperate measures

Fed up with failed attempts to attract candidates through traditional means, such as classified ads, job fairs and a few social media posts, Forsee grabbed a cardboard box out of his garage and had an office administrator write a message on it. "Desperate business owner will give \$ + benefits to outstanding workers! Every employee helps! God bless," it said.

He pulled on an old business suit, and with cardboard sign in hand, strutted down the sidewalk to an intersection in town where an employee snapped a few photos and posted them to Facebook May 7. The whole ordeal took about 30 minutes.

He went out two more days—once for an hour and then for an hour and a half—and each time Forsee had a few flyers in hand with the job descriptions and his business card. He'd direct passersby to the office to fill out applications, or some people handed him their resumes on the spot.

By that time his efforts had "gone viral." ABC News caught on as well as a local news station, which deemed his tactic "reverse panhandling."

"Ninety nine percent of people get it," Forsee says. "When I first went out there standing on the street corner with my sign, I saw through the eyes of somebody on the other side of the cardboard. I felt like I was that person."

The perspective

He had six job openings paying \$10 to \$12 per hour, depending on experience. Plus, he offers health insurance, paid holidays and paid vacation.

"The folks we have are great," says Forsee of his 25 employees. "We just need more of us. We're trying to grow, not just survive."



Landscape contractor Lance Forsee netted 200 job applications with his unconventional recruiting tactic.

A 29-year-old company, Colonial Lawn & Garden specializes in maintenance and lawn care for residential clients. It has an annual revenue of more than \$2 million.

Forsee's struggle has been getting people to apply for his company's jobs, primarily the 20- to 30-year-old demographic. He speculates the younger group is more attracted to technology-driven fields and "shying away from the getting-your-hands-dirty type."

Also, hiring practices have gotten stiffer than when he started out at age 19. Colonial Lawn & Garden requires employees to hold a valid driver's license and be a legal citizen. It also conducts random drug screenings.

Hitting the streets has paid off in at least one hire—for a clerical position—with several more expected this month.

Forsee says many candidates from the campaign were outside of the Green Industry. The clerical hire is one example.

"She would not have been likely to consider my company or industry otherwise," he says. "We used to hire for the skill. Now we hire for the person, not someone who has experience. We're looking for quality people with work ethic. They can learn the skills necessary to be successful in the Green Industry."

The panhandling ploy has offered a solution to the hiring obstacle, Forsee says, and added he likely will do it again.

"It's one of those things that could become cliché, the 15 minutes of fame thing," Forsee says. "I don't want to make it cliché, but why not? I would encourage somebody in another community to try it. See what will happen."