

Former Wal-Mart Vendor Team Member Opens Recruitment Firm

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SPRINGDALE -- If you're someone with no experience in selling to Wal-Mart Stores Inc. but have a notion you'd like to work for one of its vendors, don't come knocking on Marvelyn Stout's door.

"Wal-Mart is the largest retailer in the world. This is not an account that you can just break into. You have to earn your position within the Wal-Mart supplier community," she said.

Stout knows whereof she speaks. She spent 18 years working for two Wal-Mart/Sam's Club vendors and now has opened her own recruiting firm, called Stout Executive Search, in Springdale.

"We specialize in locating top-tier talent that currently sells to Wal-Mart and Sam's Clubs in all supplier categories. We connect the best and the brightest with companies that want the best and the brightest," Stout said.

Her agency operates a little "below the radar" to protect its clients' privacy, meaning Stout doesn't interview candidates in public places but insists on meeting them one on one in the office.

Taking a personal approach is what makes her agency different from other executive recruiting firms, she said.

"We believe in getting to know each of our candidates one at a time. We try to build relationships. We didn't set out to be the biggest, but the best," Stout said.

Not only that, Stout's agency is also the first Northwest Arkansas executive recruitment firm specializing in the Wal-Mart vendor community that is headed by a female, she said.

Stout should know. She dealt with recruitment firms often during her 10 years working for supplier Kimberly-Clark and another eight as team leader with Doane's Pet Care, manufacturer of Wal-Mart's Ol' Roy dog food, the largest selling pet food in the United States.

It was only natural that when she decided to start her own business, Stout called on her contacts within the vendor community.

"I received tons of referrals. People take care of their friends in this community," she said.

Stout, who is 45 and single, lives in Rogers and attended school in Springdale. She later graduated from Evangel University in Springfield, Mo., with a degree in teaching. Stout taught second-grade students until she realized teaching wasn't her calling, she said.

Ignoring her own advice to inexperienced people seeking jobs with a Wal-Mart supplier, Stout went knocking on doors and persuaded Kimberly-Clark that "sales is a lot like teaching," she said.

Today, however, she tells vendor candidates who lack sales experience to enroll in the marketing analyst program at NorthWest Arkansas Community College before trying to get a job with suppliers. The vendor of the future is going to be heavily invested on the analytic side of the business, Stout said.

"They're going to need people with strategic thinking and customer insight -- people who can do market research. NWACC is a great place to start," she said.

Marshall McCall is executive director of retail programs at NWACC. He said the marketing analysis class it offers was created by Wal-Mart and its suppliers back in 1999.

"Prior to that, the only place to find people trained in the industry was to steal them from Wal-Mart," he said.

The program, taught by retail specialists who work in the industry, has been popular, with almost 100 percent of graduating students finding jobs after completion, McCall said.

Stout opened her agency only in November but is already planning to expand her office and her staff of four to handle the "hundreds" of resumes that have poured into her office, she said.

There are not many executive search firms in Northwest Arkansas that specialize in recruiting people for Wal-Mart vendors, Stout said. Indeed, just three executive search firms in all are listed in the local Yellow Pages -- the top one being Cameron Smith Associates of Bentonville, self-billed as the country's largest recruiter for Wal-Mart vendor teams.

Smith, who knows Stout, said she is entering a "tough" market.

"Our business is tough in that we have to make three sales in order to make a deal. We have to sell the company on our service, sell the company on the candidate and the candidate on the company," he said. "And we have the only product that can refuse to be sold. Our products think, walk and talk. That's what makes our business very difficult."

Stout seemed to agree, as she said candidates have to "sell us on selling them." But she doesn't flinch from competition.

"I feel like there's room enough for everybody," Stout said.

*1,200 -- Approximate number of Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Sam's Club suppliers in Northwest Arkansas.

*12,000 -- Approximate number employed by the suppliers.

SOURCE: Bentonville-Bella Vista Chamber of Commerce