

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

NOW HIRING: WHITE CASTLE – FOUR YEARS AFTER YOU APPLIED

In a hot job market, McDonald's, Cheesecake Factory and other companies are getting back in touch; 'I was like ohhhhh, thank you, but yeah, I found another job'

By Te-Ping Chen
July 20, 2021

When Abigail Ezzell applied for a server position at Cracker Barrel, she was in high school. She was in college when she finally heard back.

The email landed last month, three years after she submitted it. "It was like, hey, Abigail, so glad to see you applied! They gave me a date and time to come in for an interview," says Ms. Ezzell, 20.

When Ms. Ezzell applied, she had been looking for an after-school job in Mount Airy, N.C. She's now living in San Francisco, where she's an undergraduate studying political science.

"I definitely did not email them back," she says.

Cracker Barrel declined to comment.

In the topsy-turvy labor market of 2021, recruiters are the new telemarketers and job ads are the new spam. In recent months, as the economy has reopened, millions of U.S. workers have found themselves besieged by unlikely suitors, including companies that spurned them with no reply years ago. For workers, that has meant bemusement – and in some cases, a dose of schadenfreude as well.

In the topsy-turvy labor market of 2021, recruiters are the new telemarketers and job ads are the new spam. In recent months, as the economy has reopened, millions of U.S. workers have found themselves besieged by unlikely suitors, including companies that spurned them with no reply years ago. For workers, that has meant bemusement – and in some cases, a dose of schadenfreude as well.

In Arcadia, Calif., Joseph Guerrero, 23, says he was puzzled to receive a recent call from a manager calling on behalf of a local Cheesecake Factory. "I knew I didn't leave my wallet behind," said Mr. Guerrero, a case intake worker at a law firm who helps evaluate prospective clients. He hadn't dined there in years.

The manager said that they had received his application, and wondered when he could come interview for a server role.

"I was like ohhhhh, thank you, but yeah, I found another job," says Mr. Guerrero, who had indeed applied to the Cheesecake Factory two years ago, along with a bevy of other restaurants, without hearing back.

More companies are increasingly adopting tactics learned from retail marketers, staffing experts say, and trying to maintain contact with prospects through regular emails or texts.

"The traditional sort of recruiting was post and pray," says Barry Asin, president of Staffing Industry Analysts, which researches contingent workforce trends. But amid the current recruiting crunch, he says, more companies are realizing they are sitting on valuable contact information for applicants who have already expressed interest in working for them. So they are attempting – sometimes after a long pause – to reopen a line of communication.

Such outreach often lands with a thud. "I thought it was hilarious," says Larisa Stepashkin, 22, who says she recently heard from the Cheesecake Factory about the chance to interview for a job she had applied for almost five years ago, when she had just turned 18.

"I guess it took them awhile to get back to me," jokes Ms. Stepashkin, a college student who's interning for an online retail company in Phoenix.

"The Cheesecake Factory has always engaged new candidates, past applicants and alumni in our recruitment efforts," said Dina Barmasse-Gray, senior vice president of human resources, in a statement. "As our dining rooms reopen to full capacity following COVID-19 restrictions and we increase our staffing levels, we have increased our outreach to all potential candidates through various third party job board databases and our own talent network database."

The company said it doesn't hold on to applicant data for more than three years.

Some companies say the strategy is getting bites. In May, hamburger chain White Castle – which has reduced hours in certain locations because of limited staff – reached out via email and text to 550,000 previous applicants dating back to 2017 about current roles.

Among them, 32,000 respondents said they were interested.

"We're really encouraged," says Jamie Richardson, vice president of marketing.

Another 5 percent asked that White Castle stop contacting them, which Mr. Richardson says the restaurant was happy to do: "We want it to be a conversation, not an invasion."

In Lexington, Ky., Thomas Nehemiah Wood keeps deleting emails from Appliance Factory & Mattress Kingdom, which he says keeps contacting him about the chance to work as a sales representative, a role he had applied to unsuccessfully three years ago.

"I'm just lazy about managing my Gmail account and haven't unsubscribed yet," says Mr. Wood, 23, now a musician who also does MC work.

Appliance Factory said that since June, it has reached out to around 10,000 previous applicants about current job opportunities. "It's a shotgun approach," says Chief Executive Chuck Ewing. In recent months, the company has also raised wages and quadrupled its recruiting budget.

When sending out resumes feels like dropping them into the ether, that isn't good for the company or applicants, says Art Papas, chief executive of applicant tracking system provider Bullhorn. These days, he says, around 10 percent of his company's clients have begun using automated tools to stay engaged with candidates, even unsuccessful ones, reasoning that even if an applicant wasn't right for one role, they might be a future fit.

Prior to Covid, its customers were sending out 290,000 job-related, automated messages to applicants in their databases a day, including interview offers or messages about new job openings; that figure has since risen to 1.6 million a day.

Especially for Fortune 500 companies, "the candidates they go after are already people in their database," says Anil Dharni, co-founder of recruiting software company Sense. He said some of his clients have databases of between 10 and 20 million applicants, and newer automation tools make it easy – and cheap – for companies to reach back out at scale.

In Boston, David Brady, 25, says he has heard from multiple companies who had ignored his applications years ago, only to reach out in recent weeks about job opportunities. Mr. Brady, a manager at a movie theater, says he understands companies are desperate, but the idea he hadn't moved on felt patronizing.

When he got a text from McDonald's inviting him to interview, two years after he had applied for roles with no reply, he couldn't resist firing back an irritated text: "I said, you guys ghosted me. You guys weren't there for me, I'm not going to be there for you."

Fair enough, he recalls the recruiter replying.

McDonald's said that in today's competitive hiring environment, some of its restaurants were reaching out to former job applicants, increasing pay or adding hiring incentives.

Not everyone minds. Earlier this summer, when Sid Diamond, 23, started getting texts from White Castle asking if he was interested in a job, he says he flashed back to summer in the Bronx four years ago, when he was new in New York City and short on cash, and had applied to work at a location near his apartment.

"It brought me back to how I used to walk by every day and smell its greasiness, and I was like, hell no," he says.

But the texts, he said, made him feel grateful. "I'm definitely happier and feel like I've grown a lot," says Mr. Diamond, now a sound engineer at a Brooklyn music studio. "A lot's happened in four years."