

Four Seasons Hotels Recruitment Strategy

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NEED/OPPORTUNITY / Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts is a luxury hotel company and one of the world's premium brands for service quality. At the heart of its offering are its people, who are considered the most important aspect of creating a luxury experience. Four Seasons hires only people who believe strongly in pursuing excellence and who fully embrace the Four Seasons service culture.

In 2007, Four Seasons anticipated the addition of an unprecedented number of new properties, which necessitated a dramatic increase in hiring across all levels of the organization, a task complicated by the need to hire only the most exceptional candidates. The most difficult task was hiring the highly sought-after graduates from the world's best hospitality schools for Four Seasons' training programs that lead to management careers.

The human resources (HR) department recognized it was not as successful at hiring preferred candidates as it had been in the past. Previously, HR could count on hiring the majority of graduating students identified as a good fit. Now, quite a number were accepting offers from competing hospitality companies.

Four Seasons was concerned that the critical element in the Four Seasons brand, the excellence of its employees, could be impacted. They asked Livewire Communications to investigate what had caused this change and to develop a new student recruitment campaign that would help reverse this trend.

INTENDED AUDIENCES / The primary audience was the predominantly "Generation Y" graduating students of hospitality programs at universities worldwide.

Secondary audiences included:

- Key Influencers:
 - Parents of graduating students
 - Professors and career counselors at international hospitality schools
- Non-graduating hospitality students (years one through three)

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- To communicate the Four Seasons brand and career opportunities in a manner that would appeal to graduating Generation Y hospitality students in order to increase the percentage of successful hires of targeted (desired) candidates by 10 percent (over 2008).
- To influence the influencers with the merit of the Four Seasons opportunity so that they would recommend Four Seasons in classes and at universities (professors, career counselors) and support the choice of Four Seasons as a good career path (parents).

- To create relationships with students early in their school lives in order to impart to them a clear understanding of the Four Seasons culture and opportunities, and to be able to identify promising recruits early.

SOLUTION OVERVIEW / STAGE ONE: SECONDARY SOURCE RESEARCH

From research, Livewire learned that Gen Yers (those individuals born in the '80s and '90s) want to know exactly what their opportunities are and to be hired with a clear career plan in place. They also want to know how a company will provide them with the best work environment in exchange for the benefit of their considerable education, creativity and work ethic. They grew up using digital technology, and they expect employers to make information easily available online. They also want to be recognized as individuals. Gen Yers are very family oriented and value the opinions of parents to a greater extent than did previous generations. They also value the advice of teachers and older peers.

STAGE TWO: PRIMARY SOURCE RESEARCH

The next step was to interview recent graduates who had been hired by Four Seasons and some who had gone to the competition. In addition, Livewire spoke with students in their final year at hospitality schools.

The team learned that the students largely viewed Four Seasons as stuffy and old fashioned. They felt that the company was far from their contemporary reality and would not meet their desire to have fun while starting their careers. They got this impression from the Four Seasons web site, recruitment print materials and the live recruitment presentations at their schools. Livewire reviewed these materials and noted that the imagery and copy aimed at students was largely reutilized from the messaging targeting Four Seasons' Boomer and older Generation X clientele. There was almost no imagery depicting younger people working at the properties. The team felt that illustrating the real Four Seasons experience of working with people of all ages and all roles in supportive and fun teams would resonate with this group. They also thought that upgrading the technology platforms used to communicate with students would contribute to establishing a new perception of the company as contemporary and dynamic, more in line with the image of a company these recruits would like to be part of.

Another key issue was perceived success. At Four Seasons, it takes employees longer to become a property general manager (GM) than at many hotel chains, which is the ultimate goal of many hospitality graduates. There are reasons for this, one of which is that being the GM of a Four Seasons property is equivalent to being a CEO of a multi-million dollar company and as such has much more prestige than being GM of a small- to average-sized hotel property. Because of the demands upon the GM of a Four Seasons property, more experience and expertise is needed than at average hotels. Four Seasons needed to communicate that the value of each title along the path to becoming a general manager is greater than at other, less prestigious companies.

STAGE THREE: COMPETITIVE REVIEW

Livewire researched current marketing and communication efforts by competitors, concentrating on direct competitors in the luxury hotel business but not neglecting less

luxurious brands, as some of the targeted students were lost to these companies because of prestigious-sounding titles or locations close to home and family. Many of the competitors had testimonials and photos of new hires on their sites so that students could see their contemporaries and hear from them about the experience of working at the company.

STAGE FOUR: STRATEGY

Four Seasons had to be very clear in communicating that the company offers:

- Real career opportunities that are even more prestigious than those of competitors; it may take longer to reach the top, but each stage is a great achievement.
- A family-away-from-home experience because Gen Yers often want to stay close to home or have a home-like, protected experience.
- A genuine interest in and support of individual new hires by mentoring and supporting them along the way to build their careers in a planned, structured manner.
- A contemporary setting of supportive people of all ages who have fun while doing great work together.

To accomplish this, Livewire devised a four-part strategy:

1. Treat potential management trainee recruits as investors. Potential recruits are looking to invest their time, their energy and their passion toward building a great career. Four Seasons positions itself as investors because Four Seasons invests in growing its people.
2. Use personalized attention where appropriate. Members of Gen Y want to be recognized as individuals; therefore, creating relationships with students at live presentations and with web resources would answer that desire while keeping in line with the Four Seasons “Golden Rule”-based culture and brand.
3. Use digital technology in an engaging manner: The primary community of interest grew up with technology and expects it to be used to communicate with them. Online technologies also presented the best opportunity to reach dispersed secondary audiences.
4. Emphasize flexibility and excellence: The components of the campaign needed to be used across many platforms by many individuals and, at all times, needed to respect the excellence required by Four Seasons.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CHALLENGES / The budget was CDN\$319,000.

Implementation required a full recruitment communication campaign solution, including the tagline, “Your Four Seasons Future,” which expresses interest in an individual “you” and shows that what is being presented is information about a future of opportunity at Four Seasons.

Four attributes extended the meaning of the tagline to define what a future with Four Seasons looks like. These attributes genuinely define the Four Seasons work experience and, at the same time, appeal to Generation Yers who are looking for the best place to grow their careers while enjoying:

- Prestige: Four Seasons is one of the world's best companies and has a dedication to excellence.
- Balance: The company has a family atmosphere where each person is supported and valued, and their goals are important.
- Growth: People invest in themselves by joining Four Seasons because Four Seasons invests in its people by helping them to grow and offering support and guidance as they build their careers.
- Integrity: The company culture is based on the principle "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," and this applies to how customers and colleagues are treated and expected to treat each other. This creates a great place to work.

The overall campaign design, including a warm "voice" in the writing, fresh colors and imagery of both young and more established people working behind the scenes differed significantly from the marketing aimed at customers, while retaining the integrity of the Four Seasons brand excellence.

Livewire developed a new, dynamic "Careers" web site including sections for students, parents and educators. Students in their early years could use the online resources in the students section and also look for summer internship opportunities online, both strategic ways for Four Seasons to offer value to students while getting to know them and teaching them about the Four Seasons experience early on. The new "Faculty" section allowed professors to reach out for information to help them teach and counsel students on their careers and to request in-class speakers who could add a valuable real-world perspective while sharing the Four Seasons experience with students.

A Flash-based career progression module used on the web site and in the live recruitment presentation responded to the students' desire to understand how careers are built at Four Seasons so that they could plan a path for themselves. A number of Four Seasons employees were interviewed and the stages of their lives and careers illustrated. The interviews brought out the Four Seasons culture and the very real support and camaraderie employees experience at Four Seasons. This module, the online Benefits module and the nonlinear recruitment presentation described below were also part of the strategy to use current technology to communicate with students in order to present Four Seasons as a contemporary and recognizable as part of their digital world.

A digital, nonlinear recruitment presentation allowed presentations to flow more as conversations than as linear one-way "information pushing." The presenter used a handheld Bluetooth device to switch easily from one section of the presentation to another while walking around a room. The visuals served as nonlinear backdrops for the verbal information being given by presenters.

A multi-piece print "Investor Kit" aimed at students and parents leveraged the four attributes to describe how a career with Four Seasons is an investment in creating a great future because Four Seasons invests in its people.

A modular banner system for use in multiple combinations at events represented the diverse range of individuals who work at Four Seasons. All nine used together created a conference booth; six together could create an entrance display or could flank a presentation screen, three together could be used at smaller events or at career fairs where space is sometimes an issue.

CHALLENGES

Generation Y students are very influenced by parents, and parents are harder to reach than students as they are geographically scattered. Livewire recognized that it was important to offer a parents section of the web site and to provide a complete print “Investor” information kit that students could show their parents and use as a discussion tool.

As the project progressed, the HR department at Four Seasons became very excited about the fresh look the student area of the site was taking on, and asked Livewire to extend the new design across their entire careers site. The team needed to be aware of the difference between the areas of the site and so color-coded the site to reflect the audiences—brighter for the students and more subdued for managers. The benefit to this extension was that students looking at the site would not get two impressions of the company; instead, they would see a contemporary and forward-looking company and images of people they could be working with in all roles in the company.

MEASUREMENT/EVALUATION / The global recession meant a sudden change in the hiring plan for 2009. In 2008, 150 managers-in-training were hired. In 2009, fewer than 20 were required as expansion slowed. This makes a numerical analysis of the stated goal difficult; however, Four Seasons held presentations to students to remain top-of-mind in preparation for the economic upturn to come and felt that the campaign put them at an advantage. Users sent in very positive comments about their experiences. Below are quotes from the client and users that comment on the success of this campaign.

“With the assistance of Livewire, Four Seasons has transformed the recruitment communication tools used to promote Four Seasons as an employer of choice in the hospitality industry, and we are thrilled with the end result.

The Four Seasons Career web site has been adapted to suit all audiences, whether it is a student, a manager or a nonmanagement applicant seeking employment with Four Seasons. It demonstrates the Four Seasons culture, captures the spirit of our employees and gives a wonderful insight to working life at Four Seasons. The career web site is intuitive to navigate, gives applicants the opportunity to apply for positions online and provides them with all the information they need when applying to Four Seasons.

The recruitment presentation and collateral feature the new branding, done by Livewire, which is modern and appealing to a younger generation. The presentation is visually striking and innovative with interactive videos, career path diagrams and rotating images.

In 2009, Four Seasons' recruitment activity was greatly reduced due to the recessionary economic climate, and we therefore have not been able to date to measure the overall success rate of graduate recruitment compared to previous years. We do, however, know that students are certainly responsive to the new Four Seasons image and presentation style, and we have seen an uptick in the level of interest shown in career opportunities with Four Seasons."—Debbie Cross, director of global recruitment, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts

"The student section of the web site is far better than those of other companies... The (career progression) videos are a great asset that enable you to get a feel for the company and the people who work there. The (live recruitment) presentation was very interactive. Students could ask questions freely and about all topics. This was really a breath of fresh air among the various presentations that we as students listen to and made you want to join a company whose approach was fresh, modern and different."—Maya Blattner, graduate 2009, Les Roches International Hotel School of Management, who was about to join Four Seasons as a manager-in-training at Four Seasons Resort, Seychelles

"The New Four Season career web site is very user-friendly for both students and educators. [It] is very interactive and provides a wealth of valuable information, most specifically the feedback from current employees.... The list of options available to the user is very logical and progresses you through a variety of career options. Our students are very pleased with the ease and overall informative nature of the site."—Jeff Shaw, careers and work experience co-ordinator, Oxford Brookes University

"I just have to send you a message to say how great the new Four Seasons career web site looks. The student section is so informative and includes really interesting divisions containing valuable information. I find the sections for parents particularly thoughtful, and the educators section is incredibly helpful for us, natives of the school career offices!! What student could not resist the desire to work for Four Seasons having visited the site? I couldn't!"—Joanne Norris-Smith, Career Development & Industry Placement Asia & UK, Les Roches International School of Hotel Management

"Every Four Seasons presentation I attended was interactive and never the same. I always looked forward to attending the next Four Seasons presentation. I joined Four Seasons Resort Maldives at Kuda Huraa as a manager-in-training after graduating."—Jin Seok KIM, graduate 2009, Ecole Hotellerie de Lausanne