

U.S. Military Recruiting Initiatives

by

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Introduction

The American Military must attract talented young men and women—bright, task focused, self-starters who can handle the growing complexity of military systems and operations with the character and values to put service before self. Efforts to recruit these young people are challenged by a variety of factors, including a strong economy and low unemployment rates. In addition, more high school graduates are opting to attend college, and high school graduates in the non-college market have found ample opportunities for civilian training and job placement.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2000, all four Military Services (Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force) achieved their recruiting objectives accessing over 200,000 new enlistees onto active duty. Recruit quality also was excellent with 93 percent of new recruits holding high school diplomas and 66 percent scoring above average in aptitude on the written enlistment test. Nevertheless, these recruiting achievements did not come easily, and FY 2001 will be no less challenging. Expenditures-per-recruit will be at an all-time high, and recruiter manning will be the highest in over a decade.

A slowing of economic growth is unlikely, by itself, to regenerate previous levels of enlistment interest, suggesting the need for new strategic approaches to recruiting. This paper will describe ongoing initiatives in military advertising, marketing, and communications with emphasis on anticipating long-term demographic trends and identifying policy alternatives and practices that will position the Services for recruiting success both now and in the future.

Market Research Improvements

The US Department of Defense (DoD) is the world's largest recruiter and trainer of youth. Accordingly, we must become THE national resource on youth and the adults who influence them. Beginning in Spring 2001, we will conduct quick turn-around polls to capture data on transitory youth attitudes, capitalizing on young people's reactions to what is happening now and judging their reactions to on-going marketing efforts. We also have launched a national print advertising campaign aimed at parents of recruitment-aged youth. We expect to raise the interest of parents in learning more about military opportunities and have established a web-site specifically designed to appeal to adults. As a result of the print ads, hits on this web-site

increased by 125 percent in February and March 2001 compared to the two-month period immediately before introduction of the ads in national magazines.

Moreover, we have initiated a comprehensive advertising tracking study to provide fast, continuous feedback on how well the advertising campaigns are working. We have hired Millward-Brown, one of the United States' most renowned firms specializing in this research. Millward-Brown will track all DoD advertising, broad-scale promotional activities, and current events that might affect attitudes towards the military. The results will be quantifiable measures of the effect of marketing activities on the attitudes of target audiences towards military service. This should enable us to prioritize expenditures on the basis of more immediate measures of effectiveness.

The Department has established a center for market research that informs Service marketing and advertising. We have identified several private-sector market research firms that provide information on youth and their adult influencers (e.g., Roper-Starch, Teenage Research Unlimited, Yankelovich) and are distributing this information to the Military Services for their use. Publicly available sources of information (e.g., General Social Survey) also have been identified and made available to recruiting analysts.

We are producing an ongoing series of "Market Research Executive Notes," made available by the Internet. These synopses supplement the stream of market research data provided to recruiting analysts and advertising managers and alert a broad audience to the breadth and depth of information available. As findings are obtained from youth and influencer polling (e.g., What media are youth using? To whom do youth turn for information on the military?), they are summarized and distributed to a wider user community via electronic mail. This user group includes senior DoD and Service policy officials, high-level military officers including the recruiting commanders, advertising and marketing personnel, and Defense contractors who work on manpower and personnel issues.

In addition to these initiatives, a National Academy of Sciences Committee on the Youth Population and Military Recruiting has been established to study current recruitment challenges and long-term, social, cultural, and demographic trends in the youth population. The committee is composed of social scientists, business experts, and private-sector policy analysts with expertise in marketing, communications, youth attitudes, personnel management, and military recruiting. This group is analyzing implications of projected population characteristics of youth, the military, and the US workforce, and will make recommendations about future recruiting strategies and tactics.

Engaging the American Public

While Americans express great confidence in our military as an institution, we do not necessarily see military service as a valuable and noble endeavor suitable for our sons and daughters. Consequently, recruiters are working in, at best, a neutral climate. A media campaign designed to elevate the image of the "corporate" DoD has never been attempted, even though such efforts are common in the private sector. To fill that void, we have contracted with J. Walter Thompson, a nationally recognized advertising agency, to build a strategy for repositioning the Department in the Post Cold War era. We also have contracted with Wirthlin

Worldwide, a firm renowned for its strategic market research, to develop an understanding of the way today's adults view the military. Based on these efforts, we will develop a corporate image advertising campaign, to be aired in Winter 2002, that hopefully will restore the concept of "nobility of service" to the minds of the American people.

This year we took some other steps to more effectively engage the American public. In partnership with Yahoo!, we sponsored a Fantasy Career in Today's Military contest. Using an essay contest format on the Internet, we invited candidates, US citizens, 18 years and older, to submit a resume and write a short essay. The Services hosted the winners in the Summer 2000 who experienced their fantasy careers – flying aboard high performance aircraft, riding in an attack helicopter, performing a tandem parachute drop, driving an aircraft carrier, and so forth. The contest generated over 600,000 page views, over 13,000 click-thrus to Service websites (four times the industry average) and over 3,300 contest applications with 40 percent of the applicants asking for additional Service information. The contest received excellent coverage in national print media and on television, as well as on other Internet websites. This effort highlighted the value of the Internet as a viable advertising medium to inform the general public about the military. It also allowed us to experiment with this new digital medium to inform the general public about the military. More importantly, it presented a broad base of Americans with an opportunity and a reason not directly related to enlisting to seek more first-hand information on the roles and mission of people in today's military.

We also are examining the effectiveness of our current strategies for locating and equipping recruiting offices. In the past, recruiting facilities were selected to minimize the cost to lease recruiting offices rather than focusing on appearance and desirability of location. This procurement strategy failed to take into consideration the initial impression and impact the recruiting station had on prospects and adult influencers. We believe that young people who meet with recruiters at storefront offices in undesirable or unsafe parts of the community often develop negative perceptions of the military. Accordingly, we plan to open offices that will market the Armed Forces in a contemporary, inviting atmosphere with an outward appearance that is consistent with our "brand identity" of a high-tech military.

These stations will draw youth and adult influencers into the facility for an introduction to the opportunities and lifestyle of military service. They will be equipped with private recruiter offices, conference/testing rooms, exercise areas with equipment, kiosks, internet capabilities, waiting lounges, Service (art work) displays, literature racks, and a civilian contracted station administrator. They will be located in high youth traffic areas. One such station opened in one of the larger malls near Washington, DC, Potomac Mills Mall, in December 2000. We plan a pilot program eventually of about 30 stations. With the help of the RAND Corporation, we will evaluate various configurations and site-selection criteria with an eye towards using recruiting offices as a basic element in our strategy to engage the interest of Americans in our military.

Access to high schools has been the mainstay of All-Volunteer Force recruiting since the 1980s. Many of today's youth, as well as those who influence their decisions, underestimate the military's value in providing a powerful foundation for personal and professional growth. Additionally, high school counselors often are evaluated on the college enrollment rates of their students. Continued dialogue between recruiters and high schools is essential, and it must be

coupled with visible involvement by those who shape public opinion. Today, about 1,500 high schools – nine percent of the total number of high schools in the United States – deny access to recruiters of at least two Services, usually by refusing to provide directory information needed to contact students. We must bring that number down. To that end, both the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of Education have written to State Governors urging greater recruiter access. Further, Service civilian executives and senior military officers are visiting high schools to urge principals and counselors to grant the greatest possible access to student information and to campuses. Such visits lead to a “softening” of attitudes toward military recruiting.

Expanding Use of the Internet

Research suggests that the recruit eligible population is in some ways more comfortable gathering information and exploring opportunities in the relative anonymity of the Internet. While we do not believe that Internet access will replace direct “face-to-face” contact with recruiters, we believe that not only must we expand our presence on-line, but we must modify our enlistment processes and procedures as necessary to capitalize on the power of the Web.

Initial analysis suggests that leads generated from the Internet have been twice as effective as leads generated from other sources. Unfortunately, the Internet is not equally accessible by everyone. Only about a third of White households and a quarter of Black and Hispanic households have Internet access. In an effort to bridge this gap today and in the future, we are procuring Internet and Internet-like kiosks for placement in high youth traffic areas. These portals will enable young people, who might not otherwise be able to access our websites, to obtain recruitment information, find the closest recruiting station, dial a toll-free phone number to speak immediately to a recruiter, and, eventually, pursue a personalized exploration of opportunities on-line.

As part of our long-term strategy to reach information-age youth, we plan to prototype an on-line “virtual recruiting office” that will allow young people to explore military opportunities at their own pace in their own domain. We expect this “virtual recruiting office” to project the “high-tech” image we want to portray. We envision young people being able to explore military opportunities, learn about the military, and actually start the recruitment process in private, non-threatening, and comfortable surroundings. A “virtual community” element will allow interactive communications with recruiters and other Servicemembers through such innovations as chat rooms, message boards, and Web-casts.

One of the most onerous tasks our motivated, highly successful recruiters undertake is cold-calling prospective recruits. This is onerous because the recruiters are often rejected by youth and parents who are not interested in receiving such unsolicited telephone calls. Nevertheless, cold-calling is a core competency within the private sector. Consequently, we partnered with the Navy to pilot a test of contracted cold-calling in three test markets. The test generated 865 leads and 12 contracts, and the costs were slightly lower than the costs to generate leads using direct mail. We also learned a number of lessons that will be relevant as we conduct a follow-on telemarketing test this year. One of cold calling’s greatest potentials is the “hot-transfer.” This would enable the civilian telemarketing company to pass on a hot lead, an individual who wants to talk immediately with a recruiter, to a local recruiter on the spot. We

are excited to work this and other best business practices from the telemarketing community into our recruiting process.

Expanding the Pool of Eligibles

We continue to seek ways to expand the pool of quality eligibles for recruiters to work. While recruits holding a high school diploma normally have the highest probability of completing their enlistment, we recognize that individuals holding other education credentials also have performed well in the military. The Army recently launched a four-year test program called GED Plus. This program will give some individuals who left high school before obtaining their diplomas an opportunity to earn equivalency certificates and enlist in the military. Holders of General Education Development (GED) certificates, as these credentials are known, will have to meet stringent criteria: they must have left school voluntarily, but now cannot return because of age; they may not require medical or moral character waivers for enlistment; they must score above average in aptitude on the enlistment test; and they must receive a passing score on the Army's motivational screen (Assessment of Individual Motivation [AIM]). As part of this effort, AIM will be validated as a predictor of first-term attrition. If proven successful in the Army pilot, AIM can be used as part of the enlistment process across all Services. Since GED Plus graduates will be required to have above average enlistment test scores, job performance should not be adversely affected.

Today, nearly two-thirds of high school seniors in the United States enroll in college immediately after graduation, and enlistment often is viewed as an impediment to further education. High-quality youth (high school graduates with above average aptitude) are preferred for enlistment because they perform better and have lower rates of attrition, but they are increasingly interested in attending college. Current policies are designed to attract high-school graduates using post-service educational benefits as well as enlistment bonuses. Future strategies must help recruiters communicate that the military is a bridge to a college education because it provides young people with the discipline, desire, and financial means of achieving their education goals.

To attract the increasing number of high school students who consider themselves to be college-bound, the Army and Navy have implemented several initiatives. The Army's "College First" program allows recruits to attend college between the time they sign an enlistment contract and when they enter active duty or while in a Reserve Unit. Active-duty recruits are paid a small monthly stipend while reservists receive their military compensation. The Navy has two pilot programs in place to try to better penetrate the college market. One program, "Tech Prep," prepares prospective recruits academically for technical training while offering an associate degree from participating community colleges. The other program, "CASH," enlists high-quality youth for the nuclear field. Prior to shipping to basic training, these young people attend community college while receiving full pay and benefits from the Navy.

Finally, we have contracted with the RAND Corporation for a two-year study of the college-oriented population. The study will include a survey of individuals who are college-bound, who have recently stopped or dropped out of college, or who have recently completed college. The survey will look at the impact that different enlistment options will have on these individuals and identify those who are most promising. The survey currently is in the field and

results will be available in Summer 2001. We will develop recommendations for appropriate incentives and enlistment programs based on these findings.

Strategies employed by recruiters for targeting the traditional high-school market may not be effective in influencing college-oriented youth. Whereas high-school students rely on guidance counselors for advice about the future, community college students rely on contacts provided by their academic departments. Thus, recruiters would have to work through many different offices on campus. Another concern is how well our recruiting force, typically people who have a high school diploma, will fare on college campuses. Will they be intimidated by college students and faculty? To this end, the Army has placed recruiters on three college campuses to evaluate how well recruiters achieve in this environment.

Conclusions

In conclusion, while we have accomplished much, the war for talent is not won. The economy is still booming, and our competition with colleges for high school graduates is keen. Today, we have fielded more recruiters than we have ever used and spent more money on recruiting efforts than ever before to move us closer to achieving our recruiting goals. We made great strides in FY 2000, but much work remains to be done. Since its inception, we have known that the health of our All-Volunteer Force would be fragile. It requires constant vigilance and an unflagging commitment by the American people. We believe the marketing and communications initiatives we have underway will strengthen recruiting productivity as we move into the 21st Century.