Recruiting in a COVID Environment

Systematic recruiting during a pandemic

by CWO5 Christopher Mayfield

>CWO5 Mayfield is a Recruiting Officer with over twenty years of recruiting experience. He currently serves as the Training Officer, National Training Team, Training and System Integration, G-3, MCRC.

Versatility and adaptability are the hallmarks of all Marines and recruiters—no exceptions. The last twelve months have proven to be among the most challenging for Marine Corps Recruiting Command, but our recruiters have sought to find innovative ways to conquer their mission. The 31st Commandant, Gen Charles C. Krulak, released *Marine Corps Reference Publication 6-11D, Sustaining the Transformation*, in 1999. Transformation is the process and proud tradition of making Marines, winning battles, and returning quality citizens to society. As noted in *Sustaining the Transformation*, it all begins with an individual's first contact with a Marine recruiter and continues throughout a Marine's life. In "making Marines," someone—the Marine recruiter—must first seek out and find qualified men and women.[1]

In 1974, the U.S. military transitioned from a conscripted force to an all-volunteer force. Though the decision to serve is voluntary, most people do not simply walk into the recruiting office and enlist. In practice, the all-volunteer force may be better described as an "all

recruited force." Without recruiters' determination and work ethic, adequate and consistent resources, and required support structure, there would not be sufficient numbers to fill the ranks.

The Marine Corps' strategic approach to recruiting relies on what is called "systematic recruiting." Developed in the 1970s under then-Marine Commandant Gen Louis H. Wilson, systematic recruiting aims to organize the variety of recruiting efforts in order to generate the required contacts, appointments, interviews, new working applicants, and contracts needed to meet the recruiting mission. This approach includes managing the pool and conducting an effective Command Recruiting (CDR) program as well as leveraging supporting assets such as the High School/Community College Program and Media Program to increase awareness of Marine Corps opportunities. Overall, this approach not only supports the requirement to recruit men

and women into the Marine Corps but ensures that new Marines meet the standards of high quality expected by the American people.

Systematic recruiting is comprised of five elements and eleven components. The five elements of systematic recruiting are: organization, standardization, management, training, and action. The eleven components of systematic recruiting are: Maps (Assets and Enlistment), SNCOIC Management Book, Programs Book, Working File, Command Recruiting File, Schedule and Results Book, Pool Board, Priority Prospect File, List Folders, Training File, and High School/Community College Board. The systematic recruiting elements and components complement each other in providing a framework essential to driving action throughout the eight-step Enlisted Recruiting Process (ERP) (see Figure 1).[2]

The ERP is an eight-step process detailing the sequential workflow of

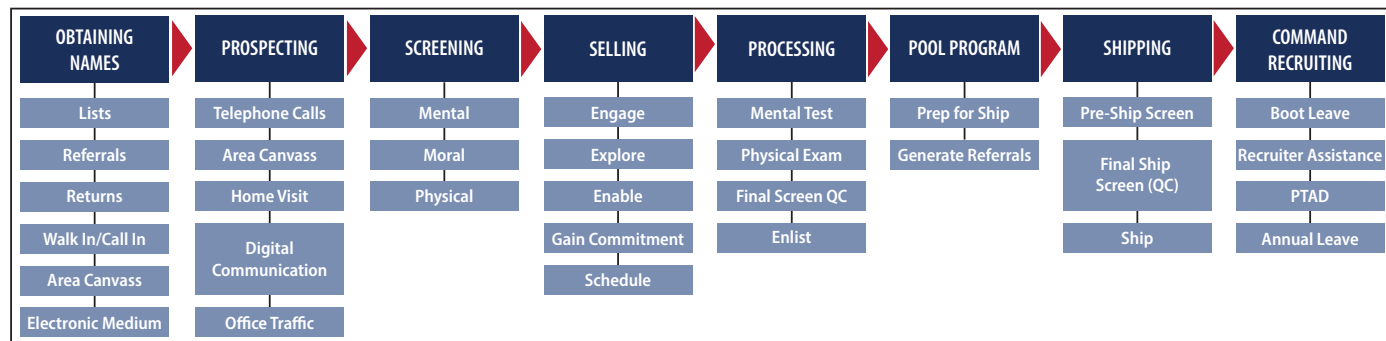| OBTAINING NAMES	PROSPECTING	SCREENING	SELLING	PROCESSING	POOL PROGRAM	SHIPPING	COMMAND RECRUITING
Lists	Telephone Calls	Mental	Engage	Mental Test	Prep for Ship	Pre-Ship Screen	Boot Leave
Referrals	Area Canvass	Moral	Explore	Physical Exam	Generate Referrals	Final Ship Screen (QC)	Recruiter Assistance
Returns	Home Visit	Physical	Enable	Final Screen QC			PTAD
Walk In/Call In	Digital Communication		Gain Commitment	Enlist		Ship	Annual Leave
Area Canvass			Schedule				
Electronic Medium	Office Traffic						

Figure 1. Enlisted recruiting process.

actions that must occur to successfully recruit quality men and women, prepare them for recruit training, and employ them as command recruiters. Each step of the ERP requires the elements and components of systematic recruiting.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the elements and components of systematic recruiting remained sound. They withstood the fluid environment of the pandemic and proved reliable in organizing and managing the recruiting effort. Still, there were threats to the elements; the most notable were to various recruiting and support programs, and the ERP (specifically Obtaining Names, Processing, and Command Recruiting). Adaptation through different means became the norm to counter those threats and innovation was the means of delivery to meet mission requirements.

Threats to Mission

The first step in the ERP is Obtaining Names. COVID made this challenging. Fortunately, the initial onset of the pandemic had minimal impact on this step since most names for the 2020 school year were already obtained. However, the continued closure of schools throughout the 2021 school year has presented a challenge. A significant portion of obtained names derive from the high school population, and with more and more high schools shuttered as a result of the pandemic, it is increasingly more challenging to obtain names from this population.

The loss of access to the students through campus visits, sporting events, and canvassing local hangouts created the need to have a greater presence in the digital space. Though there are opportunities to engage students using virtual technology (e.g., Zoom), interacting with students in a virtual classroom setting is not optimal and presents challenges (e.g., technical issues, students' ability to "leave" the classroom). Regardless, recruiters continued to adapt and find more effective ways to obtain names and interact in a virtual setting. Leveraging social media, recruiters are canvasing through Marine Corps-centric social media posts looking for potential recruits that comment on and "like" Marine Corps' content. Because

of social media company policies, this is the only authorized avenue for recruiters to target direct messages to prospective applicants without having an account suspended for spamming. Leveraging this approach created some opportunities but also a number of challenges. For example, there is no way to know where the applicant lives or if the recruiter engaging can effectively work the applicant (recruiters are assigned specific areas, social media canvassing does not comport with recruiter assignments). Additionally, virtual-friendly products developed as a result of operating in a COVID environment, (e.g. Virtual Benefit Tags) helped the force engage prospects. There is no illusion, we were essentially changing the engine on a plane midflight during the pandemic with the expectation of maintaining air speed and altitude to meet mission requirements.

The fifth step in the ERP is Processing. In this step, applicants are comprehensively screened and processed for enlistment at the military entrance processing station (MEPS). This includes taking the ASVAB, special testing, and the physical examination. While MEPS did a masterful job at supporting this step, several MEPS could not operate because of COVID exposure and even more operated under degraded services or limited schedules. Though most of these issues were largely mitigated by the MEPS staff, additional agencies outside the MCRC umbrella that are essential to the successful processing of applicants also experienced internal challenges associated with COVID. Compounded with school closures, obtaining education documents became particularly difficult, resulting in increased processing times. Medical documents from hospitals and social security/identification cards from government offices also became more difficult. Recruiters continue to find ways to optimize, innovate, and improve virtual processing, but this remains a coordinated effort with various agencies.

The remote nature of COVID protocols created additional technical challenges. The potential of utilizing several commercial off the self-products available (e.g., DocuSign) was stifled since

those products are not DOD approved applications for transmitting and receiving digitally signed documents containing PII. Recruiters found DOD SAFE a useful product to bridge this gap. However, this is reliant on the applicant having access to a computer, WiFi, and a printer to print, sign, and submit back to the recruiter. Having a "Docusign" type platform would give those same capabilities to the recruiter— all within the convenience of their mobile devices.

The eighth step in the ERP is CDR. The CDR program is comprised of four distinct categories (Boot Leave, Permissive Recruiters Assistance, Permissive Temporary Additional Duty, and Annual Leave/Liberty). Boot leave is specifically used to generate referrals and enlistments by employing recently minted Marines as proof sources in their home town. In order to prevent the potential exposure of new Marines to COVID during boot leave, this category of the CDR program was halted and Marines went directly to SOI/MCT and then to their follow-on MOS school. This required innovative solutions to keep the CDR Marines engaged and providing referrals even without boot leave, which is the number one source of referrals in the CDR program. Although the program is listed as a threat to mission if not executed, there were several TTPs developed to optimize and attain referrals through social platforms. Additionally, Recruit Training Regiment leadership found and employed ways to encourage fourth phase Marines to connect with family and friends while in training to solicit referrals.

While the above articulates the threats to mission and the continuing challenges associated with the pandemic and the "new normal," these challenges will continue to impact the mission for the foreseeable future. Unlike the 202k push in the mid to late 2000s, recruiters received little additional resources to overcome challenges in the recruiting environment brought on by COVID. At the onset, every recruiter worked from home, utilizing their personal home WiFi networks. For the vast majority, these home networks were limited in WiFi bandwidth, particularly for those with spouses that were teleworking and

children attending school virtually. Because most recruiters cannot afford the additional costs associated with increasing WiFi bandwidth on their personal home networks, most did what they could at the office. The increase of virtual tasks being conducted by all the recruiters in the office simultaneously proved too much for the existing bandwidth capacity—leading to dropped, lagging, and ultimately unprofessional video chats with applicants. The recruiters were also cut off from utilizing YouTube on the network to save on bandwidth and various virtual commercial off-the-shelf collaborative products that would assist in overcoming these challenges were banned from use because of various policy restrictions. Over time, some of these obstacles were overcome while others remain; however, as Marines always do, they faced this adversity with a "can do attitude" and worked diligently to find opportunities to innovate, adapt, and improve.

Opportunities to Innovate

The sixth step in the ERP is Pool Program. While a large portion of the pool is completing their senior year of high school, all poolees are charged with two missions while in the pool: prepare for recruit training and provide referrals. Because of the ongoing pandemic, leveraging poolees for referrals at high schools, sporting events, and local hangouts was greatly affected. In order to prepare poolees for recruit training, recruiters were forced to use various commercially available mobile applications (e.g., fitness apps such as Strava, Nike, Under Armor, etc.). MCRC also provided additional resources to improve MCRC's online and mobile application: The Squad Bay. These improvements helped recruiters prepare poolees with various knowledge testing and fitness tracking and included ways to better track referrals for enlistment. These tool upgrades were beneficial in preparing poolees for the rigors of recruit training and have proven an effective way of receiving referrals.

MCRC also found opportunities to develop new solutions to challenges related to training. Prior to the pandemic, most training required in-person courses and events. In response to COVID restrictions, MCRC quickly adapted to virtual means of training courses and events. After various attempts of finding the best virtual solution available within the DOD, the most beneficial virtual tool was Adobe Connect. Working with several government and non-government agencies, MCRC was able to bridge the virtual training gap. In addition to live virtual training events, MCRC implement online self-paced training courses, similar to non-resident courses offered throughout the Marine Corps. In-person training is extremely valuable; however, the use of technology to enhance or supplement training proved extremely valuable. MCRC continues to explore this domain in order to further modernize its training opportunities.

Conducting virtual training during the pandemic also revealed the need to professionalize the way virtual instruction is taught. A virtual classroom does not afford the instructor the means to walk the classroom and engage on a personal level or the ability to emphasize or reinforce material based on students' body language and facial cues. Since instructors taught in-person prior to the pandemic, instructors had not previously learned about the nuances of being "on screen" and how to maintain attention of the students who are staring at a screen for hours. Still, the instructors made vast improvements in professionalizing virtual instruction and are continually improving.

Communication is critical to any organization, especially during adversity. The ability to disseminate information and share ideas is a key ingredient for success. During the pandemic, Marines were adapting to the environment at the speed of change. COVID severely limited the ability to disseminate information and share those ideas to keep pace with the speed of those discoveries. Identifying this gap, the MCRC CG directed the Training and System Integration Branch to develop MCRC Connections—a low cost, easy to use, and sustainable platform for recruiters to share ideas. Instead of the previous ad hoc ways of information sharing that would often times not reach the

intended audiences, MCRC Connections efficiently and effectively provided the enterprise a central location for collecting and sharing best practices. As a result of this innovative solution, every recruiter in the Nation is now able to utilize numerous ideas and lessons learned by recruiters throughout the COVID environment.

The pandemic helped MCRC realize the importance of emergent technologies and how to capitalize on what the civilian sector already utilizes. Without these technologies, recruiters would not have been as successful as they have been. As MCRC continues to evolve and assess future risks to mission, it will continue to adapt and capitalize on available and emerging technologies that reinforce systematic recruiting and optimize its ability to maneuver in any environment. Although the current pandemic presented numerous challenges to normal recruiting operations, the Marines, as always, adapted to adversity and continue to overcome the challenges. As long as there is a mission, Marines will find a way. The tenets of systematic recruiting within Marine Corps recruiting doctrine proved that "brilliance in the basics" has evolved to using modern technology and finding innovative ways to educate the force.

Notes

1. This article focuses on non-prior service enlisted recruiting; there are similar systematic recruiting tenants and processes for Officer Procurement and Prior Service Recruiting.

2. The components of systematic recruiting are mostly digital (a software solution replaced the legacy paper system in 2011) and contained in recruiting command's enterprise information support system MCRISS.