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JAMIE’S MARKET: CHALLENGES HIRING AND ONBOARDING TEMPORARY WORKERS

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The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 was a boon for grocery stores. To slow the virus’s spread, governments announced sweeping directives to keep people at home. Only “essential” businesses were allowed to stay open, including supermarkets, hospitals and health-care providers, pharmacies, banks, and gas stations.[[1]](#footnote-1) Non-essential businesses asked their workers to work remotely or furloughed them. Uncertainty around how long pandemic-related shutdowns would last had led people to flock to grocery stores to stock up on non-perishable food items (e.g., pasta, dry beans, canned goods) and other household essentials (e.g., toilet paper, laundry detergent, medicines). As a result, grocery store sales were up by an average of 10−17 per cent compared with before the pandemic.[[2]](#footnote-2) But in some weeks, grocery stores saw business spike as high as 79 per cent compared with the same week in the previous year.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Unfortunately, the first two months of the pandemic had not gone well for the flagship location of Jamie’s Market, a two-store, family-owned specialty supermarket chain in northern California. The organization was unprepared for the increased demand. Store shelves were not restocked quickly enough, leaving many shelves bare while the products that belonged on those shelves sat in the stockroom. The store did not have enough staff to extend its hours or, as many other grocery stores had done, to create special shopping hours for senior citizens (to provide a safe environment for customers over 60 years of age, who were deemed to be at higher risk for contracting COVID-19).

Given the uncertainty around how long the pandemic would last, the management team at Jamie’s Market felt that, to accommodate the increase in customers, it was best to hire temporary rather than permanent part-time or full-time associates (store employees were referred to as “associates”). Since many other retailers were closing, the management team at Jamie’s Market believed that demand for these openings would be robust, as the small chain was in the unique position of being one of the few organizations that was hiring. But its first attempt at hiring during the pandemic had gone badly. The company received only 30 applicants for its temporary associate openings, which was far less than expected since the company was looking to hire 45 associates. As a result, Jamie’s Market was put in the unfortunate position of having to hire all 30 of the applicants, regardless of their abilities.

Jessica Diaz, who had been working as a department supervisor at the second Jamie’s Market location, was promoted to assistant manager at its flagship location. While the timing of this promotion was not ideal, as it happened two months into the pandemic, Diaz was elated. Unfortunately, any joy she had felt at receiving this promotion quickly vanished when she began her new role. Almost immediately, Diaz was tasked with addressing the worker shortage. She quickly realized that she had no choice but to hire all the available applicants, no matter their qualifications, because it was better for the store to be adequately staffed than to be understaffed.

As she feared, the next month was a disaster. The temporary associates that had been hired were unmotivated. Their poor work ethic led to the store failing to meet management’s revenue projections, increased complaints from customers, and a deteriorating work environment due to the lack of trust between the permanent (i.e., full-time and part-time) and temporary associates.

Diaz intended to terminate the employment of most of the temporary associates. But the store would still need more workers, which meant that she would need to determine what changes were needed to ensure that the next round of hiring would not repeat the mistakes of the previous round. How should she modify the temporary associate hiring program to ensure that the store could hire enough qualified workers to meet anticipated demand? How could she ensure these workers received the training they needed to be successful? How could she ensure these workers got along well with the existing workforce?

THE STORE

The flagship Jamie’s Market store was 40,000 square feet (3,716 square metres), organized into nine departments: bakery (breads, muffins, bagels, tortillas); dairy (including eggs and cheeses); beer and wine; health and beauty (skin care, vitamins); meat and seafood (including deli meats); fresh produce (fresh fruits and vegetables); frozen foods (ice cream, prepared foods, breakfast foods, frozen fruits and vegetables); grocery essentials (snacks, non-alcoholic beverages, specialty foods grouped by ethnicity, pastas, sauces, canned goods, coffee and tea); and café (coffee, tea, and juice).

The store currently had 107 employees. The management team consisted of a general manager, an assistant manager, and nine supervisors (one for each department). Each department was staffed by four to eight associates on a given day (typically broken up into two shifts), depending on their size and goals. On average, half of the workers in each department were full-time associates and the other half were part-time associates, although the ratio of full-time to part-time associates varied based on each department’s size and sales targets. The bigger the department’s sales targets, the higher the ratio.

THE COMMUNITY

The flagship store’s customers typically came from one of three cities, all of which were in California: Fremont, where the store was located, and two smaller adjacent cities, Newark and Union City (see Exhibit 1 for select demographic data on all three cities). Fremont was the largest of the three cities, in terms of both population and land area. It also had the highest percentage of college graduates. However, all three cities had annual household incomes over US$100,000.[[4]](#footnote-4) All three cities also had a large population of Asian residents, made up mostly of people from India, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

THE ASSOCIATES

In early 2019, Jamie’s Market hired a market research firm to learn more about its customers. A core insight this research firm shared was that most of the people who came to the stores chose to do so because of the new and unique products available at Jamie’s Market. Customers had a list of groceries they wanted to purchase, but many of those items could be obtained from any grocery store. They chose to shop at Jamie’s Market because they enjoyed walking along the aisles looking for products that allowed them to add more variety to their culinary palate. Maybe this product was a new Thai-inspired simmer sauce, a berry-infused sparkling wine from France, a plantain snack from Puerto Rico, a fresh Alphonso mango from India, or a ready-to-eat jalapeno cilantro hummus wrap.

Because customers were looking to purchase products that they had little or no familiarity with, they expected associates to have a good understanding of all the products in the store and to be able to recommend products that were tailored to their needs and tastes.

To ensure that its associates could meet the customers’ expectations, Jamie’s Market required them to possess knowledge and understanding of the top culinary trends related to the products sold in their department and of the top-selling products in other departments; be physically able to lift heavy items, walk around the store, and stand for extended periods of time (often for their entire shift); be comfortable approaching customers to extend help and discuss the store’s products and services; and upsell customers by providing them with additional options (such as a more expensive cheese or larger bottle of pasta sauce).

Temporary associates were tasked with duties that were intended to assist the permanent (part-time and full-time) associates. Temporary associates would be asked to handle customer inquiries that were relatively straightforward, such as locating merchandise or answering basic questions about a product. Temporary associates were also asked to operate the cash register on an as-needed basis (see Exhibit 2 for the complete job description for temporary associates).

The Hiring Process

When hiring associates, the management team at Jamie’s Market looked for people with the following attributes: drive, a passion for food, and good social skills. Drive referred to applicants being ambitious, conscientious, and intrinsically motivated to do whatever it took to get the job done. Applicants needed to have a passion for food and cooking so that they were well positioned to quickly acquire knowledge of the store’s products and to suggest products that customers could use based on their particular requirements. Because interacting with customers was an important part of an associate’s job, they needed to have good social skills, including being courteous and friendly, speaking confidently, showing good poise, and staying calm at all times. Applicants for associate positions needed to show their ability to establish and maintain good working relationships with their co-workers.

Given the ethnic diversity of the community, Jamie’s Market also looked for associates who spoke another language in addition to English, such as Spanish, Hindi, Mandarin, Cantonese, Tagalog, or Vietnamese.

The interview process for the temporary associate position at Jamie’s Market typically comprised two steps. The interview process began with a phone interview. Promising candidates then had an in-person interview with either the assistant manager or one of the store’s department supervisors. During the in-person interviews, candidates were asked the following questions:

* What are some of your favourite things to cook (or eat)?
* How has your work history prepared you for the position?
* What makes you the perfect person for the role?
* How will you contribute to the Jamie’s Market community?
* If a customer brought in a competitor’s ad with a lower price on an item already marked down, how would you address their concerns?
* Can you describe a time where you had to deal with upset or irate customers?
* How would you sell \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to us? Tell us about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ as much as you can. How could you meet a customer’s needs the best way you can?

The hiring decisions were typically made two to four weeks after receiving an application.

THE TEMPORARY ASSOCIATES

To learn more about the temporary associates, Diaz decided to seek information about how they felt about their work environment and how other associates felt about working with them. To learn how the temporary associates felt about the workplace, Diaz decided to speak with a few of them directly. To learn how the temporary associates were viewed by the part-time and full-time associates, Diaz sought the help of Tom Smith. During the brief period of time she had been working at the flagship store, Diaz had developed a good rapport with Smith and a deep respect for his work ethic. Smith had worked at that location for the past five years, which meant he had worked with temporary associates, as the store would often hire them to help with the spike in traffic that occurred around the Thanksgiving holiday. In fact, he himself had started as a temporary associate and was then kept on as a part-time associate.

The Temporary Associates’ Perspective

From her conversations with three temporary associates, Diaz learned that many of the temporary associates were in college and living at home with their families. Since they did not have big expenses such as rent, their main reasons for working at Jamie’s Market were to gain work experience and earn disposable income. A few of the temporary associates who were closer to graduating from college were also hoping to move up within the organization and earn permanent part-time or full-time positions.

As for the work environment, Diaz learned that the associates did not feel properly trained in any particular department. She learned that they were given no training or guidance on what information they were supposed to be learning. They were moved between departments frequently and received only brief and minimal training from every department. Yet they felt that the department managers and other (i.e., part-time and full-time) associates treated them as if they were supposed to have complete knowledge of all the products in the store and be able to perform their duties flawlessly. One of the temporary associates said, “It felt that we were thrown into a sea of sharks without learning how to swim.”

With the non-stop traffic in the stores during the pandemic, the temporary associates did not have time to build relationships with the other associates. Worse, the temporary associates said that they felt shunned by their (part-time and full-time) co-workers and that they were constantly “in the way” during the customer transaction process, undermining the store’s customer satisfaction scores and its ability to meet sales goals.

Smith’s Perspective

When talking with Smith, Diaz learned that he had noticed changes in the quality of the recent batch of temporary associates almost immediately. He felt that the new temporary associates were not as good as past hires. They seemed to have less relevant work experience and were younger than the temporary associates hired in previous years. Worst of all, they were not as motivated to do the work. They took several breaks and did not seem to care to learn how to do the job well.

Smith said he had tried to help some of the temporary associates figure out what they needed to do on the job, but was often rebuffed. They told him that they were not assigned to a particular department and were expected to shuffle between departments and “fill in” as needed. From the temporary associates’ point of view, this meant they did not need to develop mastery of the products offered in any specific department. Not surprisingly, Smith said that he and many of the other permanent associates were frustrated at the minimal amount of help they were receiving from the temporary associates. In the past, temporary associates had been instrumental in alleviating the intense workload that came with a large increase in customers in the store, during especially busy periods.

DIAZ’S FINDINGS

After spending a few weeks investigating the issue, Diaz concluded that there were two reasons why the store had experienced such a challenge in hiring and integrating temporary associates during the first two months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

First, the job listing for temporary associates had not been advertised sufficiently, which Diaz believed was primarily the result of an inadequate advertising plan. Diaz was confident the recruitment effort had been insufficient for reaching a suitably high number of applicants to result in enough reasonably qualified candidates. Jamie’s Market primarily advertised its job listing for the temporary associate positions by hosting a “job fair” at its flagship store: setting up a table just outside the store’s main entrance, where the assistant manager stood by, waiting for people to apply. However, Jamie’s Market did not advertise the job listing anywhere other than on the company website and on the table placed outside the store during the hiring fair. No social media channels were used, nor were mainstream hiring websites, such as LinkedIn and Indeed. Also, the store did not reach out to local high school or college students, even though these students made up the majority of its part-time associate workforce. As a result, Jamie’s Market received only about a fourth of the volume of applicants it had expected. Also, the applicants who applied did not meet the company’s requirements, which suggested that the job advertisement had not targeted the type of candidates that Jamie’s Market sought to attract.

Second, no effort was made to ensure the temporary associates felt like an important part of the organization. While the temporary associates were provided with some information and tools needed to perform their jobs, little effort was made to socialize them into the workplace. Most did not understand the norms and behaviours that were expected of them. But perhaps worst of all was that no effort was being made to help the temporary associates build relationships with the permanent associates. This lack of socialization exacerbated the hiring challenges, as the temporary associates who were hired were unable to work effectively with the other associates in a manner that allowed the store to successfully handle the increased volume of work.

CONCLUSION

Diaz wanted to hire a better pool of temporary associates to help Jamie’s Market cope with the increased demand resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. She wanted the store’s next round of hiring temporary associates to yield many more applicants than needed so that she could select a pool of temporary associates who were intrinsically motivated. She wanted temporary associates who would go above and beyond their job description and be the kind of people who could become permanent associates. To achieve this goal, Diaz wondered what outlets she should use to reach out to applicants, how she should screen them, what training they should receive, and how to integrate the new hires into the organization so they felt like they belonged. As a new manager, Diaz knew that if she could achieve these goals, it would be a win–win for her and for the store⎯the store would have a more successful holiday season and Diaz would be seen as an ideal candidate for a promotion to other leadership positions within the organization.

EXHIBIT 1: Demographic data for Fremont, Newark, and Union City

| **Demographic Data** | **Fremont** | **Newark** | **Union City** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Population | 241,110 | 49,149 | 74,107 |
| Population growth  (since 2010) | 12.6% | 15.4% | 6.6% |
| Land area | 77.46 square miles | 13.88 square miles | 19.47 square miles |
| Percent of population (over the age of 16) in the workforce | 66.8% | 67.6% | 64.9% |
| Top three ethnicities | Asian (54.6%) Hispanic (20.6%)  White (19.7%) | Hispanic (33.5%)  Asian (32.5%)  White (32.5%) | Asian (58.4%) White (24.1%) Hispanic (13.1%) |
| Education | High school graduates or higher: 93.4%  College graduates or higher: 56.1% | High school graduates or higher: 89.9%  College graduates or higher: 32.7% | High school graduates or higher: 90.6%  College graduates or higher: 37.3% |
| Median household income | US$127,374 | US$108,181 | US$105,448 |

Note: 1 square mile = 2.58 hectares

Source: United States Census, “Quick Facts: Fremont City, California,” July 1, 2019, accessed October 21, 2020, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fremontcitycalifornia; United States Census, “Quick Facts: Newark City, California,” July 1, 2019, accessed October 21, 2020, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newarkcitycalifornia; United States Census, “Quick Facts: Union City, California,” July 1, 2019, accessed October 21, 2020, www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/unioncitycitycalifornia.

EXHIBIT 2: Temporary Associate Job Duties

The position of temporary associate at Jamie’s Market requires you to regularly encounter a wide variety of customers in a specific department of the store. One requirement of working at Jamie’s Market is to maintain knowledge of current culinary trends that relate to the department you are assigned (such as bakery, health and beauty, fresh produce).

The primary duties a temporary associate at Jamie’s Market must perform include:

* Assisting customers with locating merchandise
* Stocking products in the store
* Bagging groceries, as needed
* Creating store signage
* Operating the cash register, as needed
* Up-selling additional products and encouraging customers to take advantage of current store specials
* Maintaining current knowledge of new culinary trends for your work area
* Answering any questions customers may have about potential purchases

Source: Company files.

1. Connie Lin, “What Is an ‘Essential’ Business Anyway? A Cheat Sheet for Getting through the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Fast Company, March 31, 2020, accessed November 24, 2020, www.fastcompany.com/90484557/what-is-an-essential-business-anyway-a-cheat-sheet-for-getting-through-the-covid-19-pandemic. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. LendingTree, “American Consumers’ Average Weekly Grocery Spending Increased by 17% during the Pandemic, Despite Fewer Trips,” LendingTree, October 13, 2020, accessed October 24, 2020, www.lendingtree.com/credit-cards/survey-grocery-shopping-food-buying-pandemic/; Michael Corkery and Sapna Maheshwari, “Americans Keep Spending, but Growth of Retail Sales Slows,” *New York Times*, September 16, 2020, accessed October 24, 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/business/retail-sales-consumer-spending-rise.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Lauren Leatherby and David Gelles, “How the Virus Transformed the Way Americans Spend Their Money,” *New York Times*, April 11, 2020, accessed October 24, 2020, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/04/11/business/economy/coronavirus-us-economy-spending.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. All currency amounts are in US$. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)