

# DO YOU SPEAK STAFFING?

Welcome to a new era in the staffing and recruiting industry—one where the talent pool continues to dwindle and the demand for skilled employees continues to grow. The new and exciting part, however, is groundbreaking research that reveals a new language of staffing—messages, terms, and tactics that resonate with today’s job seekers—and, ultimately, can help grow your talent pool.

*By Adam Stone*

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STAFFING  
**success**



American Staffing Association

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**In the staffing and recruiting world, language matters.**

A recruiter's words may attract job seekers, making clear the value proposition that her staffing company brings to the table. Her words can just as easily sour a candidate, evoking ideas or images that are out of sync with his or her needs and desires.

"Our focus is on putting people to work, and we need language to make that come across," says Jennifer Sauselein, director of marketing and brand management for Integrity Staffing based in Newark, DE.

In 2016, the American Staffing Association embarked on a landmark effort to define concretely the vocabulary that best conveys the staffing industry's value to the nation's job seekers. In a time of near-full employment, as staffing and recruiting companies struggle to keep the pipeline filled with fresh candidates, ASA leadership sought to lay out in clear terms the key words and phrases that are most effective in engaging talent. >>>

**Support for the New Language**

ASA thanks Maximus for its support of *The New Language of Staffing* handbook as well as other materials and resources related to this important research for the staffing and recruiting industry. Maximus Tax Credit and Employer Services

assists companies in the staffing industry in navigating the often confusing and overwhelming standards set forth by federal and state governments for screening and filing for tax incentives. Learn more about Maximus at [maximus.com](http://maximus.com).

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—Jennifer Sauselein,  
Integrity Staffing

The newly released result of that effort is *The New Language of Staffing: Handbook for Communicating Your Company's Value to Job Seekers*. It's a data-driven resource for staffing and recruiting professionals, the product of multiple rounds of focus group testing backed by in-depth quantitative research. The handbook offers point-by-point instructions for what to say and what not to say, what language attracts workers to staffing and what word choices push them away. ASA is backing the effort with online resources, coursework, and other tools to help staffing companies get up to speed.

Here is an overview of how ASA and its researchers culled and compiled the findings and strategies that populate the handbook, as well as how staffing and recruiting companies and their recruiters can start adopting these strategies right now to fill the talent pipeline.

### **Get Inside the Job Seeker Mindset**

New York City-based communications consultancy maslansky + partners has earned a reputation for helping clients find the words that best resonate with their key constituencies. The firm helps industries build messaging based on real-world needs.

Chief executive officer Michael Maslansky authored *The Language of Trust: Selling Ideas in a World of Skeptics*. In a world dominated by spin, he sought to help corporations break through to a sometimes jaded and doubtful audience. The staffing industry has struggled with these same issues over the years, with a public made wary by misinformation and job seekers skeptical about the value proposition. This made m+p the ideal partner to conduct research in pursuit of the new language of staffing.

"ASA already has huge bodies of research, a lot of it focused on policymakers and potential clients," says Catherine Farr, m+p senior director, who worked on the new language project. "The objective here was to look at job seekers, specifically, and determine: How can staffing companies become a first choice for job seekers and then fill that talent pipeline?"

The research firm began with focus groups, convening about 60 individuals representing job seekers and others who might influence the job search process, such as friends and family. Focus group participants came from a wide range of ages and backgrounds. In multiple 20-person sessions conducted in Baltimore and Chicago, researchers employed an "instant response" methodology to gauge how people responded to various messages around staffing.

"First, we conducted interviews with ASA stakeholders to get their perspective on the challenges, the landscape, and messages they have tried. We also did a communications audit to look at the types of messaging ASA has used in the past," Farr explains. This member-driven information helped to inform a handful of tightly crafted statements, each designed to open a different line of dialogue around the staffing industry.

"We wanted to test head-to-head some variations in language. For example, is 'staffing industry' even the appropriate term? Is there something else we could use that gives people a better idea of the benefits? We tried recruiting industry, job placement industry, and employee services industry," Farr adds.

### **Dial In to Strategic Messages**

Researchers tested a range of key concepts around job flexibility, the bridge to permanent employment, personal service, the transparency of the employment process, and other staffing fundamentals. Each respondent had a dial gauged from zero to 100: The respondent would dial up if the message resonated, or down to indicate a negative reaction.

The facilitator could see the feedback in real time. If a message sent the meter swinging high or low, a discussion would follow in which the researcher would drill down to better understand what participants were hearing in a given message.

"The dials are a great tool to start really rich, deep conversations," Farr says. "With the dials you get that real, true second-by-second reaction." Once the researchers had analyzed and delivered their findings, ASA decided to go beyond these qualitative results, bringing in the Harris Poll research firm to conduct quantitative polling to validate the findings.

"We want to help the industry fill that talent pipeline and to do that we need to understand: What will move people to consider working for a staffing company?" explains ASA chief operating officer Steve Berchem, CSP. "Quantitative research wasn't required, but the ASA board felt the research was sufficiently important—even groundbreaking—so we wanted to validate it further."

The Harris Poll data, based on surveys of 4,163 U.S. respondents, fell right in line with the focus group findings, and helped fuel the strategies provided in the handbook.

### **Use Language That Works**

The staffing and recruiting industry has spent much time and effort fine-tuning key messages

around flexibility and bridging to a permanent position. A sample message might be: Temporary assignments give you the flexibility to work the way you want and can be a bridge to permanent employment. Messages like this have worked well to define staffing's value proposition in the eyes of employers and have helped generate a positive public image for the industry overall. But those key themes don't get the job done when it comes to talking to job seekers.

"We found that language to be a step ahead of where job seekers are," Berchem notes. "What job seekers want is a job *right now*. To think about flexibility and bridge, that's 'nice to have.' But it is beyond their immediate concerns. Those seem like hypothetical luxuries to people who are unemployed and just looking for work. Maybe they'll think about that later, but right now they just want to get a job."

The handbook lays it out in fine-grain detail. For example, you say: "Staffing agencies serve as a bridge to permanent employment, helping job seekers get the experience they need for permanent jobs."

The individual likely will hear and interpret the message this way: "That makes it sound like the majority of temp placements end up with permanent jobs, and that's an oversell."

That example was among the focus group feedback and ought to give recruiters pause, because clearly the longtime vocabulary of staffing isn't always hitting the mark.

What does work? Broadly, researchers found that job seekers respond most to language that is crafted more like this: "We can help to get you noticed. We have the inside scoop and the contacts to get you in front of real employers with active job needs."

If a recruiter says "We have access to positions that otherwise may not have been posted," the job seeker is likely to think "Here's an industry that provides something I can't achieve on my own."

## Provide Valued Personal Support

Job seekers want to hear that the search process will be transparent and at least somewhat human. They're tired of sending résumés into a "black box" and never hearing back from anyone. This preference for personal support also is backed by the latest ASA Workforce Monitor® survey findings. In the survey of more than 2,100 U.S. adults, conducted by the Harris Poll on behalf of ASA in late 2017, nearly 70% of respondents said the job search is too impersonal. (See page 26 in this issue for more about these survey results.) The new language research found that job seekers and non-job seekers alike respond positively to messages about having

access to personal support and the idea that there will be an individual recruiter available who knows them and promotes their interests.

The handbook goes into greater detail around all these messages, spelling out the reasons why traditional language may fall flat, and offers alternatives that focus on the job seeker experience. ASA also has debuted a free online course for staffing professional members focused on the new language research and recommendations. The course, which features videos and interactive modules, also qualifies for continuing education hours toward maintaining an ASA credential. Those who complete the course can print a personalized certificate and share their accomplishment on social media using ready-made graphics. (Go to [americanstaffing.net/new-language](http://americanstaffing.net/new-language) for a link to the course.)

Here is a look at how staffing and recruiting professionals have started using the new language as laid out by the handbook and online resources—and how the information can become part of professional development and training materials.

## Start Speaking the New Language

The new language research findings make sense to Matt Rivera, vice president of marketing and communications for the Philadelphia-based staffing company Yoh. Rivera also is immediate past chairman of the ASA public relations committee.

"We are introducing it into our training materials," says Rivera about the new language resources



## Available Now: New Language of Staffing Online Course

ASA has offered two in-person, intensive workshops—presented at the most recent ASA Staffing Law Conference and Staffing World®—focused on the new language research and strategies. For those ASA member staffing professionals who have not had the opportunity to attend one of those

events, an interactive course is now available online that takes users through several modules that each feature videos and quizzes. Course completers can print a certificate, and ASA-certified professionals earn continuing education credit. Go to [americanstaffing.net/new-language](http://americanstaffing.net/new-language).

and information. “We had some of this language already, and now this data and this supporting information helps us to make it clear *why* we are doing this and *why* we want to talk this way,” he explains. “It bolsters and supports those things in a clear and concise way. Having the research makes it a lot easier to talk to our recruiters about what we do and why we do it.”

In Rivera’s experience, much of the successful messaging already exists among recruiters. He’s looking to the handbook to help them bring those key points to the fore in their interactions with candidates.

“We’ve always talked about having connections at certain companies. We’ve talked about how we work with the candidate one-on-one,” Rivera explains. “Good, experienced recruiters are already using some of these concepts, but they may not be using this exact language, or they may not know why they should use this language. We want our training materials to reflect that more clearly.”

The research also is driving new procedures at Yoh—in response to candidates’ concerns about transparency, for example. “We just implemented thank-you notes. Once somebody takes a job and they get there on the first day, we send a simple handwritten note: ‘Thanks for working with us and here’s where you can get a hold of me if you have any questions.’ It’s a personal touch that makes them feel like a valued part of the team,” Rivera says.

## Hone Messages and Methods

At Integrity Staffing, Sauselein is drawing from the new language handbook to help reshape the company’s online presence and marketing materials.

“We have started implementing a lot of this

research in our marketing strategies, taking up the language in our advertisements,” she explains. “We want to use those messages that speak most clearly to the wants and needs of our job seekers.”

The research is driving procedural changes, too. Integrity has added texting as a mode of contact, in response to the findings around the importance of one-on-one communications. “We are thinking about Millennials. They don’t want to answer the phone, but they want personal interactions, so we see texting as a means to communicate with those job seekers in the way that they prefer.”

The company also is leveraging the findings to review all its auto-generated emails, to ensure those messages also are striking the right notes. “When job seekers submit a résumé online, for instance, we want to send them warm, friendly language that clearly defines what the next steps are.”

Many staffing companies will find that the first step to incorporating the new language may be to adopt a new mindset—and the handbook, online course, and other resources help inspire that shift. “Put yourself in the job seeker’s shoes. Think about it from their perspective and let that guide you,” says Farr from m+p. Those who can adopt this frame of mind will find the vocabulary starts to come naturally.

To fully effect the change, however, staffing company leadership needs to make the case to recruiters, leveraging new language resources to motivate the team in a new direction.

“If you are driving institutional change, you have to tell people how you got there,” Farr adds. “You’re offering your recruiters a more effective way to talk with job seekers. This is language that directly speaks to their pain points. That’s huge, and you want to help your recruiters understand that.”

Rivera is hopeful that other staffing companies will embrace the new language and the tactics that go with it. While the research already is making his company more competitive, he says, an industry-wide shift could be a rising tide that lifts all boats.

“If we all use similar language, if we talk about things in the same way, it could give job seekers a more consistent experience with staffing agencies in general,” he asserts. “Right now, their experience can vary greatly from one agency to another, and that can lead to uncertainty. This helps us as an industry to sound more cohesive. We can all help each other.” ■

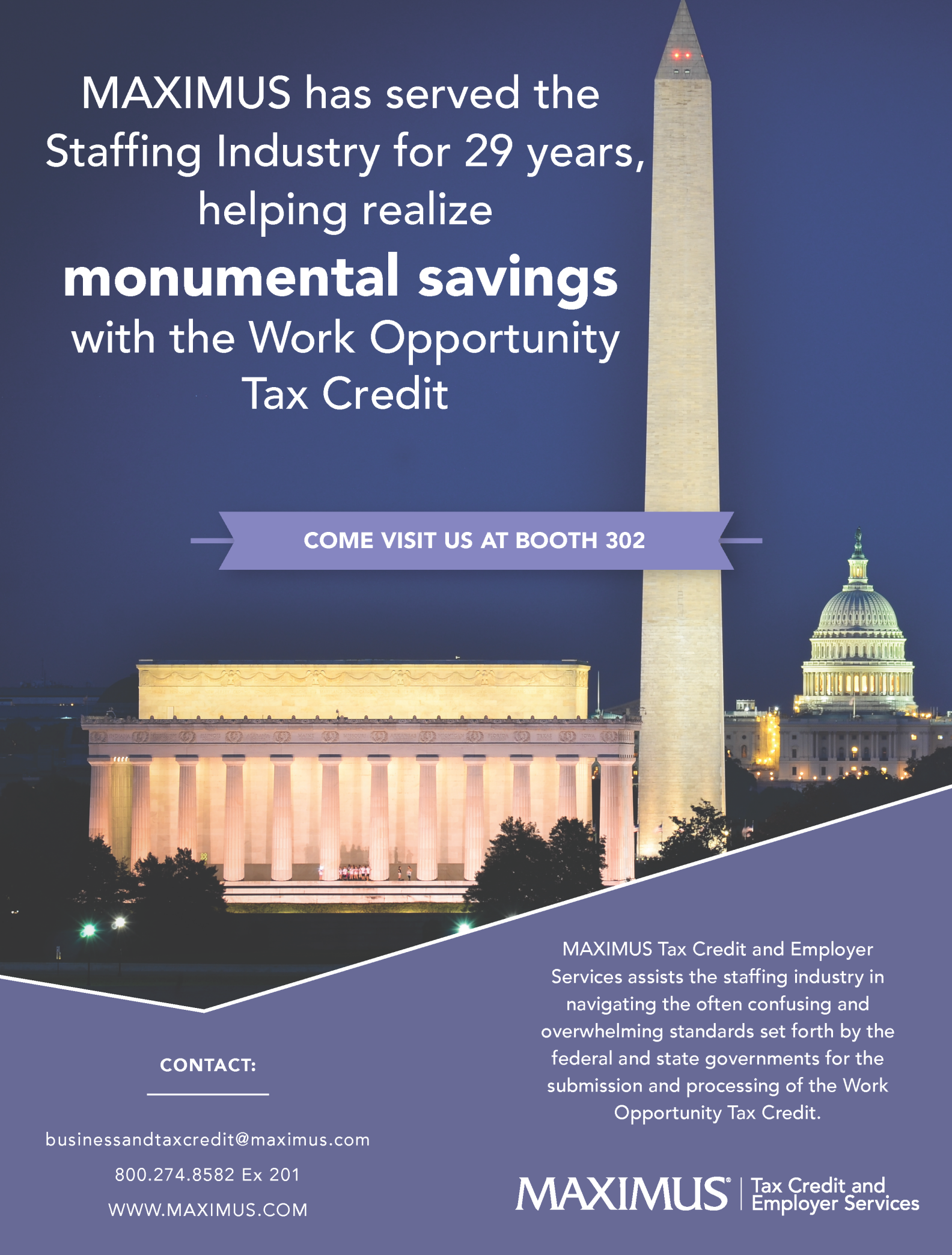
Adam Stone, a freelance writer based in Annapolis, MD, is a regular contributor to *Staffing Success*. Send feedback on this article to [success@americanstaffing.net](mailto:success@americanstaffing.net). Engage with ASA on social media—go to [americanstaffing.net/social](http://americanstaffing.net/social).



*The New Language of Staffing* handbook details the job seeker mindset and pain points, the industry’s value proposition to job seekers, a new lexicon for communicat-

ing with job seekers, and more. Purchase copies of the handbook—ASA member staffing professionals receive the lowest price available. Go to [americanstaffing.net/new-language](http://americanstaffing.net/new-language).

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