

# Be persistent, bold to steal away top talent

## Bar owner spent months courting new GM

By **JAMIE MCGEE**

jmcgee@bizjournals.com | 846-4276

Jonathon Scott was in his 11th year as general manager for the upscale restaurant chain The Palm, including three in Nashville, and wasn't looking to leave. So when his longtime customer Steve Smith told him that he was the guy to run Nashville's newest honky-tonk, Scott politely brushed it off.

About six months later, after winning The Palm's operator of the year award, Scott put in his two-week notice and signed on as general manager of Honky Tonk Central.

"These guys made me an offer I couldn't refuse," Scott said.

For many business leaders, recruiting top talent is a necessity. As the economy emerges from the recession, local companies are adding staff, looking locally or nationally for leadership and using both culture and income as selling points.

"You can have a great strategy, but unless you have the right leadership and the right level of talent to take that to the market and act upon it, it doesn't go as well," said Craig Buffkin, managing partner of Franklin-based search firm Buffkin Group.

For Smith, owner of Honky Tonk Central and the famed Tootsie's Orchid Lounge, snagging Scott was a priority.

Smith, who refers to The Palm in downtown Nashville as his office, said he spends as many as five or six hours a day meeting business partners there and was impressed by Scott. But it took time — several lunches and meetings and a tour of the honky-tonk — to convince Scott to make the jump from white tablecloths to live country music.

"I like how he carries himself and the way he runs his business," Smith said. "It wasn't an easy sell."

The offer included a 10 percent raise, "which definitely was a factor," but Scott said the most effective selling point was taking on a new challenge with more freedom and growth opportunities.

"They gave me the autonomy, saying you are the general manager, you make the calls and we'll support you," Scott said. It was "the challenge of it being in such a big building and doing something Nashville has never done with three floors and three large stages."

Buffkin said companies become more attractive to potential employees when they are able to distinguish themselves with a bold direction.

"You just have to figure out what's the uniqueness of the role of the company, the position they are in within the city, within their industry and really understand the vision," he said.

For former federal prosecutor Richard Westling, who joined Nashville's Waller Lansden Dortch & Davis last year from Washington, D.C.'s Ober Kaler, the compelling factor was the opportunity to offer his health care fraud expertise at a law firm in a city where that sector is growing so quickly.

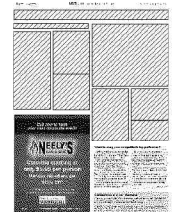
"They made a case for why working on the same cases in a city like Nashville, which has such a vibrant health care economy, really made sense," he said.

For Pinnacle Financial Partners, recruiting experienced people is critical to the bank's success and was a primary strategy used by Terry Turner when he launched the company 12 years ago.

"We don't hire people who send us a resume," said Turner, president and CEO. "We target the folks we know to be happy and successful and recruit them."

Those individuals may be more resistant to leaving their current position. But Turner said the bank is persistent, pursuing lunch dates or sending annual reports to reluctant candidates.

In one of Nashville's most recent shake-ups, Mississippi-based **Butler Snow O'Mara Stevens and Cannada** recruited 38 Nashville lawyers from Miller & Martin in June. The move positioned Butler as the seventh largest firm in Nashville, according to *Nashville Business Journal* research.



The recruitment involved several conversations with each hire and took more than six months, said Ryan Beckett, who heads recruiting efforts for Butler Snow.

“It never works as fast as you want it to,” he said. “The more you talk and discuss and make sure you are a fit for one another, the more assurances you have on the other side of the results.”



NATHAN MORGAN | NASHVILLE BUSINESS JOURNAL

**General Manager Jonathon Scott jumped from the white tablecloths of The Palm to the guitar-shaped bars of Honky Tonk Central. He says the challenge and growth opportunities of the new downtown venue led to the shift.**