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FIELD TRIALS

Leadership and talent insight from the field, by Retriever Talent Group

ISSUE 1 · NOVEMBER 2026

Steady to Shot

Why the best outdoor hires start with patience

By Scott Staelgraeve, President, Retriever Talent Group

Anyone who has trained a young retriever knows the moment. The gun goes off, the bird folds, and every ounce of that dog wants to go. A dog that breaks before it's sent might get lucky. More often it runs to the wrong spot, flushes the next flock, or never sees the second bird fall.

Steadiness isn't a lack of drive. It is drive under control, and it's the first thing a good trainer builds, because nothing else holds without it.

Hiring a leader works the same way.

The pressure to break

The outdoor industry is in a season of motion. Brands are being bought and combined, operations are moving across the country, and leadership benches are being reset. When a key seat opens in that kind of market, the pressure to fill it fast is real. A territory goes uncovered. A product line loses its champion. A dealer network starts asking who their contact is now.

Add the calendar: the ATA Show is January 7 and 8 in Indianapolis, SHOT Show runs January 19 to 22 in Las Vegas, and the distributor buying shows follow right behind. Many teams want a new leader seated before show season, and that deadline turns a hiring decision into a race.

That's exactly when good companies break before the send.

What breaking looks like

In my experience, a rushed search usually shows up in one of a few ways:

- **Hiring the first strong résumé.** The candidate who is available isn't always the candidate who's right.
- **Copying the last job description.** The role you need next is rarely the role the last person held.
- **Hiring the competitor's person on reputation alone.** Name recognition in our industry isn't the same as fit for your team, your channel, or your next three years.
- **Skimming the references.** In a small industry, the people who know the truth are usually one phone call away. Make the call.
- **Compressing the process to beat a date.** A show deadline is a reason to start earlier, not a reason to skip steps.

Any one of these can work out. Together, they are how a company ends up running the same search again eighteen months later.

What steady looks like

Steady doesn't mean slow. A steady dog leaves the line the instant it's sent, and it goes straight to the bird. The discipline is what makes the speed possible. Four habits make the difference:

1. Define the outcome before the opening. Before anyone posts a job, write down what this person must accomplish in their first year. Three to five measurable outcomes beat a page of responsibilities. (We'll go deeper on this in Issue 2.)

2. Decide your non-negotiables in advance. For many outdoor roles that list includes real time in the field, existing dealer or buyer relationships, or category knowledge that takes years to earn. Name them before you meet candidates, so a great interview doesn't talk you out of them.

3. Know the market before you set the bar. Who's realistically movable right now? What does the role pay at comparable brands? Is the person you're picturing likely to have a non-compete? An honest read of the field keeps the search pointed at birds that are actually down.

4. Set a timeline you can hold. If you want someone seated before SHOT Show, the search needed to start in the fall, not after Thanksgiving. Work backward from the date and protect the steps that matter most.

> FIELD QUESTION
>
> ### If your most important leader gave notice tomorrow, could you write down, today, the three outcomes their replacement would need to deliver in year one?
>
> If the answer is no, that's the place to start, well before any seat opens. Reply and tell me how your team would answer; I read every response.

BLINDS

The bird you didn't see fall

When a company is acquired or relocates, some of its best people quietly start wondering what comes next. They're not on job boards and won't be for months. If you're building a team, the strongest candidate for your opening may be sitting inside a company going through exactly that kind of change, unsure of their future and not yet looking. Reaching them takes patience, discretion, and a reason to trust the person asking.

JUDGE'S NOTES

Holding steady paid off for me during a search for a Director at a previous employer. For me, genuine humility is non-negotiable in any leader I hire: the courage to admit you're not the smartest person in the room, even when you might be. We interviewed several very competent candidates, and I couldn't see that quality in any of them. So instead of settling, I kept the posting open.

A late applicant turned out to have exactly the combination we needed: competence, confidence, and humility. It may be the best hire I've ever made, and it happened only because we were willing to hold steady a little longer than felt comfortable.

That patience isn't passive. It's the work of knowing what you need, so that when the right person comes into view, you can send with confidence.

Steady to shot. Then go.

Field Trials *is published by Retriever Talent Group, an executive search firm focused on hunting, archery, fishing, camping, and adjacent outdoor categories, and a member of the Dimensional Search® network. If you're thinking about a leadership hire for next season, I'm always glad to compare notes.*

Scott Staelgraeve, President

(734) 786-5832 · s.staelgraeve@retrievertalentgroup.com · retrievertalentgroup.com

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