

## Avoid Sophisticated and Saturated Markets

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the biggest mistakes people make in their job searches is going after jobs in sophisticated markets. A sophisticated and saturated market is one that's populated by a lot of people like you—with your qualifications, background, and so forth.

If you're competing for a job in a sophisticated market, you're going to be more harshly judged and more likely eliminated than if you're looking in a less sophisticated market. The most sophisticated markets will be the most concerned about things like:

- Where you went to school
- Whom you know
- How "solid" your experience is
- How you distinguish yourself compared to others with similar qualifications
- How specialized you are

In contrast, an unsophisticated market will consider you less rigorously. So whatever it is you want to do, you'll have a much better chance at it in an unsophisticated market.

I've seen numerous attorneys who graduated from unremarkable law schools insist on going to New York City only to end up as paralegals or contract attorneys, because they couldn't get any other jobs in the legal profession there. Though there's nothing wrong with those jobs per se, had these grads pursued positions in a smaller market, they might very well have ended up as respected attorneys with local law firms. But placing themselves in such a large, highly developed market, it was nearly impossible to get any traction.

Many law students seek out one of the 500 federal clerkships that become available each year. Federal judges can be found in every state—from New York to Alaska. But the typical law student looks for a clerkship in big cities like New York, Miami, and Los Angeles.

And the typical law student does not get a clerkship.

Those markets are unbelievably sophisticated: Attorneys from the most elite law schools apply there, and they have (on paper, anyway) the best possible qualifications. In fact, so many applicants clamor for these clerkships that judges can say to themselves: "Let me see, I'd really like to get a law student who's at the top of the class at an Ivy league law school *and* is an Olympic athlete ..." and be able to find such a person from the massive pile of applicants before them.

In contrast, a market like North Dakota is not going to have as many applicants. A judge might receive 20 or 30 applications each year, and many of them won't be all that qualified. The judge won't have so many options and will choose the best person from the bunch. But there surely won't be the 1,000 applicants that federal judges in New York or Chicago have to wade through. Fewer choices for them mean better chances for you.

If you're interested in a particular job, the best thing you can possibly do is put yourself where the market is not that fluid and you don't have a lot of competition. Your solution to finding a job is to seek out unsophisticated markets.

For years I ran an asphalt maintenance company in Detroit. Many businesses in that city have giant parking lots—sports stadiums, office towers, and so on – and my competition went after those jobs like white on rice. It was an extremely competitive market. In addition, property owners would issue multiple demands to companies bidding for the work:

- A bond (insurance) in case their property was damaged during work
- A long list of commercial references
- Guaranteed use of certain types of expensive equipment
- Worker's compensation policies
- Complicated contracts to be deciphered and signed off on
- Complex bidding procedures

Because these were "sophisticated" consumers with extensive experience dealing with contractors, they were adept at weeding out bidders and driving the price down.

I decided early on that the smartest thing to do was to simply work in places that my competitors did not seek out. I chose new areas being built up outside of town; I found smaller businesses in bad neighborhoods that had been ignored by others. Because I went after unsophisticated businesses, I was able to make far more money than most of my competitors who were doing more important jobs.

Certain employers can become too sophisticated in how they cherry-pick people. If you're applying to an employer that has a strong brand name that's been around for some time, you're likely to have a difficult time getting a job there. Because the longer the employer has been around, the more discriminating they become. They'll have all sorts of systems in place to eliminate applicants from consideration. In contrast, a newer (and growing) employer is much less likely to need these sorts of systems—and be much easier to get a job with.

The best way to market a product (and face it, you're a product) is to be the first to offer it. When you're dealing with an unsophisticated market where you are first, it's not too hard to market yourself. With less competition, it's always going to be easier to sell something than if there's more competition.

For example, if you were the first to sell a weight-loss product, all you'd need to say would be "Lose Weight with This Pill!"

and you'd likely sell a lot of the product. If you were the next to come along, you'd need to up the ante and offer something more than your competitor to take some market share from them. You'd need to "outbid" the competition—drive your offer to the absolute limit and look better. You might say "Lose Weight in 30 Days--Or Your Money Back!"

Since my mid-20s I've owned a succession of Porsche cars. Each year Porsche comes out with a new model that's a bit faster than the previous one—it always has a bit more horsepower, or else it's a bit lighter.

A few months ago I got an email informing me I could "flash" my Porsche by installing a computer chip to increase its horsepower and speed. Curious, I called the manufacturer of these chips. I couldn't understand how installing a computer chip in my car could make it that much faster.

"If I can take my car to 560 horsepower from 530, why don't they just make it with 560 in the first place?" I asked the man from the computer-chip company.

"Because they always hold a little back ... and then, in the next model year, they can tell people the car is better and improved."

Porsche, in effect, is "saturating" the market with one product before introducing a new one. As I read up on this practice, I realized it's something just about every auto manufacturer does with their products: They consistently one-up the previous product each year in order to stimulate sales. They need to do this because they're in a sophisticated, "saturated" market.

Again, the smartest job seekers avoid sophisticated markets that are saturated with people like them. So if you insist on working in a saturated market, then you'd better make sure you distinguish yourself from all the others. You need an edge—like Porsche allowing their cars to have a little more horsepower year after year. You need to look better than what's already on the market. You need to be perceived as having extra benefits -- being able to solve more problems, being easier, less expensive, a harder worker. It's the only way to stand out in a sophisticated and saturated market.

After law school I was interested in going back home to work in Detroit. Detroit at the time had three or four excellent law firms, but unfortunately Detroit was also losing lots of businesses, and the law firms were shrinking in size accordingly. Moreover, Detroit was in close proximity to some exceptional law schools like the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, and Northwestern.

Despite the fact that Detroit is not nearly as popular a market as Chicago or New York, its market at that time with those few firms was highly sophisticated. In my job search, I was somehow getting more traction with prestigious law firms in New York than I was in my own hometown, where the competition was turning out to be fierce. Even though Detroit wasn't "hot," the saturation level was way high.

One of my jobs today is running a legal recruiting firm. Something just about every recruiter attempts is to sell candidates on "hot" markets. So a recruiter working in, say, Chicago will concentrate on marketing candidates to big firms in Chicago. But this is what every other legal recruiter is doing as well. And so most recruiters make average livings, and a large majority of them end up failing.

You can, of course, make a living as a recruiter marketing attorneys to large firms in large cities—but you can do profoundly better when you market attorneys to good firms in smaller markets that other recruiters aren't paying attention to. This is one way to succeed at a deep level in recruiting, and it's something very few recruiters do -- pursue unsophisticated and unsaturated markets.

When you're marketing anything, it's critical to understand the sophistication and saturation level of the market you're in. If the market is too sophisticated or saturated, you're going to have a tough time getting a job. The greatest success comes when you sell a product in the least saturated and sophisticated markets.

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