

HIRING SALE SPEOPLE

By Joseph C. Ellers

The sad, woeful lament of the sales manager contains many verses. One verse goes something like this: "Where, oh where, have my salespeople gone? Oh where, oh where can they be?"

One of your major weekend worries is often, "Who will show up for work on Monday?" and another worry might be "Where can I find replacements?"

Many people take sales jobs because they either cannot find other jobs or because they believe sales employment is a shortcut into the greener pastures of management. These attitudes create two sales force problems: high turnover and low motivation.

To combat these situations, you need to do a better job of screening/hiring on the front end. There are different schools of thought about what you need in salespeople. One school believes you should hire people with product knowledge and train the sales skills. The other major school believes you should hire salespeople and train them in product knowledge. While either way can work, you should probably err on the side of hiring salespeople. An ideal candidate would demonstrate the following characteristics:

- Three to five years of sales experience with no more than two jobs comprising that experience
- Increasing sales volume from year-to-year
- A desire for work freedom
- Income as a motivator but "realistic" income goals. For example, if the applicant expects to be earning \$100,000 in three years and the realistic potential is for \$75,000, you may have a problem
- Evidence of some structure such as formal calendars, account profiles, opportunity tracking systems, etc...
- Realistic career goals

One of my customer's organizations was experiencing very high turnover in the sales area. I interviewed all of their current sales employees and determined almost all of them expected to be promoted to management within two years of their hire date. This was not realistic.

These are characteristics you should look for; failure in one of these areas does not signify the candidate is not right but it should raise a red flag. Multiple red flags should stop a hire, however.

While you should "accentuate" the positive, you also need to "seek" these negatives. Beware of candidates who exhibit the following characteristics:

- *Tell you they would be good in sales because they "really like people."* Liking people is not a bad thing but it can get in the way of selling if the candidate puts too much emphasis on the relationship part of selling.
- *Focus on wanting to be part of a "team."* While teamwork is essential, many people use the term euphemistically to signal their desire to avoid individual accountability.
- *Do not like to have their results compared to others.* If a monthly posting of sales results would offend them, they may not be the right person.

- *Cannot describe their selling process.* A professional does not try to convince you their sales success is an unmanageable art form.

As with the first set of "dos," a wrong answer here should not stop you from hiring but if all of the answers sound like this, you should think more than twice about that candidate.

I strongly recommend every candidate be asked to sell you something as part of the interview process. Pick something they are familiar with and role-play it. If you have an understanding of what they were previously selling, that's even better. The way they sell you will give you real insight into their sales process-regardless of the words they use to describe how they would sell your product.

Most organizations run potential employees through some sort of "gauntlet" interview process. A good sales interview process will consist of people who are like the people they will call on. If you are hiring a salesperson to call on technical people, make sure some of the interviewers are technical people themselves. Beware of an interview process that only puts the prospective hire in front of sales management (or sales people). Make sure they are interviewed by many different types of people and pay attention to the comments of the non-salespeople. These are the thoughts of the potential customers.

A final word about job interviews: Normally the best sales presentation a person ever makes is when they are selling themselves. If they do a poor job of presenting themselves as a candidate, they are likely to have more difficulty in convincing customers to buy the less than concrete value of "access to markets/customers." Do the best job you can in hiring and the reward is you have to do less of it.