

Hiring Salespeople for Fun & Profit



*A compendium
of articles and
hiring tips to guide
you through the
hiring maze*



Brian Jeffrey

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INTRODUCTION

Hiring salespeople may not be fun but it can be profitable... if done properly.

This compendium of articles and hiring tips evolved over my 40 years as a sales trainer and sales management consultant.

As a sales trainer, I was often faced with being tasked to train totally unsuitable people to become barn-burning salespeople. It was a fool's errand and one similar to training pigs to fly. It annoyed the pigs and frustrated the trainer.

Over the years I began to realize that non-sales managers believed that anyone could be a salesperson and therefore took no care in their hiring processes. If a person could walk, talk, and chew gum at the same time, they were a candidate for sales.

It was out of this frustration that I began to develop hiring techniques and tools that were designed to help companies make smart hiring decisions. Hence, the information presented here evolved out of the real world requirements of companies that were tired of hiring losers and knew that there had to be a better way.

On these pages, you will come across reference to the Sales Temperament Assessment (STA). This is an effective hiring tool that we developed many years ago. The rights to this tool have since been sold to Callidus Corporation in California and is still available through them.

Here then, are hiring lessons learned in the real world of hiring salespeople.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian J". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial "B" and a long, trailing "J".

Brian Jeffrey, President
Quintarra Consulting Inc

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The New Hire – Doing It Right

Too many companies still insist on pumping their new hires full of product knowledge and then dumping them on unsuspecting prospects, fully expecting the new salesperson to sell up a storm.

These “talking catalogues” start running around “telling” instead of “selling” and the expected storm decays to a light drizzle. The salespeople get depressed at their lack of success, become unmotivated and finally quit only to be replaced by a second line of newly hired replacements and the cycle repeats itself.

Product knowledge is good but it’s not enough by itself. People need to be shown or trained on how to properly communicate the knowledge to qualified prospects.

While formal sales training is good, it doesn’t need to be formal. Using the old blind-leading-the-blind technique, where you send the new person out with a successful old-timer, is certainly better than simply dropping the new salesperson into the deep end of the pool and hoping the weight of all the product knowledge doesn’t prevent him from resurfacing.

In addition to product knowledge training, time should also be spent covering company policies and procedures as well as providing some basic sales training that is specific to your particular marketplace.

Sales Training

This is a key area that is often overlooked when bringing a new salesperson up to speed. Keep in mind that most salespeople you hire will have had no formal sales training and probably don’t know what they don’t know. You can help them by either providing formal sales training, or as a minimum, enough information to get up to speed from a selling point of view. Sales training can be broken down into three broad sections:

1. *Customers/Prospects/Suspects*

- Who are current customers?
- Are there any house or protected accounts?
- Are there any split or shared accounts?
- What does a typical customer profile look like?
- Who has bought these products or services in the past?
- Who is a typical prospect for the product or service?
- How do I identify a suspect?

2. Sales Territory

- What defines my sales territory?
- What assistance will be provided in helping me organize my sales area?
- Will I have assigned accounts/clients/customers?
- Is there any historical sales information available?
- Who was handling the accounts previously?
- What problem accounts are there? Why?

3. Selling Techniques

- What are some proven sales techniques for these products?
- What are some of the things to avoid?
- What prospecting techniques have worked in the past?
- What questions do I need to ask to properly qualify a prospect?
- What common objections am I likely to come up against and how do I handle them?
- What are some time-tested closes that work in this business?
- What do your best salespeople do well?
- How could your best salespeople be even better?
- What selling habits should I avoid?

Joint Sales Calls

Should you send the new salesperson out on joint sales calls with more seasoned people? Yes, but only after he or she has had a chance to get acclimatized to the company and the other salespeople. This will probably take a few days to a few weeks. I know you want to get the person into the field as soon as you can but don't send him into battle prematurely.

If you do decide to send the new salesperson out on joint calls, I suggest you debrief him after the joint sales calls. Ask him what questions he might have as a result of the joint call. Also debrief the salesperson who travelled with the new body. What were his impressions of the new person? Were there any potential problems that arose? Determine if you have a keeper.

Don't depend on joint calls to provide any real sales training. The best that can happen is the new salesperson gets to see how the old salesperson does it, and there's no guarantee the old salesperson is doing it right.

Don't Do It All Yourself

There's no reason why the sales manager has to carry the whole burden of the new salesperson's training. If one of your existing salespeople has aspirations towards sales management, give him an opportunity to prepare himself for a future promotion by taking on some of the responsibility to get the new person started on the right foot. Not only does this remove some of the responsibility from your shoulders, it provides the new person an opportunity to meet and get to know others within the firm.

Take the Time to Do It Right

A common response to this list is, "It's going to take a lot of time to go through all this with the new salesperson and I don't have the spare time." You're right. It is going to take a lot of time, and nobody has any spare time anymore.

This is not a spare-time project; it's a prime-time project. That's why you have to plan it out in advance. That's why you have to clear your slate so you will have the time during the first few days (or weeks) to get the new salesperson up to speed as quickly as possible.

Your investment will increase the chances that your new salespeople will succeed and definitely reduce the odds of failure.

Onboarding Salespeople

Getting your new salesperson started off on the right foot is an important part of them having fun and you making even more profit.

A while ago I did another of my gems of wisdom titled *The New Hire – Doing It Right* where I provided an outline of the sales-related items that a new hire needs to know if you are to get the biggest bang for your hiring buck.

Some of you are old enough to remember when it was prudent to break in the engine on your new vehicle if you were to get the best from it over the long haul. It's the same when breaking in a new salesperson. There are a number of things you can do that will help you get the best from the new kid on the block. My earlier article covers some of them and this article will give even more food for thought.

Why Bother?

It's not like you're not busy enough. I understand that. I also realize that when you hire a salesperson, you are making a sizable investment and you want to get a good ROI. Bringing your new hire up to speed as quickly as possible can add real dollars to your bottom line.

Let me put it another way for emphasis: If you don't get the new hire up to speed quickly, you stand the danger of throwing hard cash out the door. I'll explain why I feel that way.

Let's assume your typical salesperson brings in \$50K of gross margin a month and it takes a new salesperson five months to reach that productivity level. Let's also assume that with the proper onboarding in place, you'll be able to get the new salesperson off the mark more quickly and get her to reach full productivity a month earlier.

Onboarding	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Totals
Not Done	\$5,000	\$15,000	\$30,000	\$40,000	\$50,000	\$140,000
Done	\$10,000	\$20,000	\$35,000	\$50,000	\$50,000	\$165,000
Difference						\$25,000

A quick review of the table shows \$25,000 worth of reasons why you should bother to onboard your salespeople properly.

The 3-Legged Onboarding Stool

A new salesperson requires orientation and training (onboarding) in three areas:

1. Company policies and procedures
2. Product knowledge
3. Sales training

Company policies, while usually dry as the Sahara Desert, are the new person's roadmap through the corporate quagmire and needs to be tackled sometime, but not today. I've already given you the information you need to know about sales training orientation in the article I mentioned earlier.

What's left is the topic of product knowledge. And that's what the rest of this article is about - the things you need to tell your new salesperson about what she is to sell.

Knowledge about Product Knowledge

Product knowledge can be broken down into two broad categories:

- the products themselves
- the product lines in general

Of course, the term "product" is interchangeable with the word "service," depending on what you are selling. When explaining the product lines, here's your checklist of some things to cover:

Profitability

- Which product lines or specific products are most profitable to the company?
- How do I handle low-margin products?
- Which products should I emphasize (push)?
- Which products should I downplay (why)?

While there are always exceptions to the rule, companies usually want their salespeople to concentrate on those sales that will bring in the most revenue. Your salespeople, on the other hand, will want to work on those sales that have the highest personal return (commission) for the least effort.

Product history

- What is the background behind the product?
- What is the history of the company's relationship with the supplier?

Product future

- How does this product fit into the company's future plans?
- What are some of the follow-on products that are coming along?

The more the salesperson understands about what she's selling, the better she sells it.

Price lists

- How do I read and use current price lists?
- What gets shown or not shown to customers?

In terms of the products themselves, your new salesperson will want to know:

Benefits

- Are there feature/benefit sheets for the products?
- Why should customers buy the product?
- What are some of the exclusive selling features (if any) of the product?

Availability

- What are the normal delivery times?
- How reliable is delivery information?

Reliability

- What has the service history been?
- What should I be careful of?
- Where shouldn't I sell the product?

Competition

- Who are our major competitors?
- How are we different from or better than our competitors?
- Are there any competitive product/service comparison charts?

Be honest here. If you have some dogs in your product line-up (a dog is a product that you have trouble giving away, let alone selling), alert the new salesperson to this fact and show her how to get around the potential problems. Don't let the new salesperson find out about a dog from a customer or, even worse, a competitor.

The Bottom Line

When your newly onboarded salesperson finally hits the streets, full of enthusiasm, you want her to not only know your products, but understand them as well. You want her to know why your prospect should buy.

With any luck, your onboarding efforts will pay off big time and you won't be offboarding anyone anytime soon.

The Boring Part of Onboarding a Salesperson

Every great author has a trilogy and this is mine. Well actually I'm not really a great author, but this is part of a trilogy. This is the third article on the topic of onboarding salespeople.

For the uninitiated, "onboarding" is what happens after you successfully complete the arduous process of hiring a new salesperson. It is also something that most companies do poorly.

I mentioned that this is part of a trilogy, sort of the third leg of a three-legged milking stool. The first article – The New Hire – Doing It Right – provides an outline of the sales-related items that a new hire needs to know if you are to get the biggest bang for your hiring buck.

The second article – Onboarding Salespeople for Fun and Profit – covers the less than exciting topic of product knowledge. I also explain why proper onboarding is important and how it can directly impact your bottom line by bringing a new hire up to speed even more quickly.

Dry as Dirt

This third article, the one that makes a trilogy a trilogy, covers the driest of the driest in terms of subject matter – company procedures. Dry though it may be, doing it right will help get your new hire started off on the right foot from the get-go by avoiding administrative misunderstandings and petty annoyances that can sour the new relationship.

So get yourself a cup of coffee, or better still a glass of wine, and read on. You may pick up a gem or two that you hadn't thought about when indoctrinating a new hire into your company's inner sanctum.

Policies and Procedures Checklist

If your company is one of the few that actually has a policies and procedures manual, don't just hand it to the new hire and expect the person to read it. There's no doubt it will be read, but will it be understood? It's impossible to get clarification from a manual, and there may be hesitancy on the part of the new salesperson to ask too many questions because he fears looking dumb. Take the time to review with the employee those items that are important in getting the person started.

Some things regarding policy matters include:

Travel and entertainment expenses.

- What's allowed and what isn't?
- What expenses require receipts?
- What are the rules for out-of-town travel?
- What mode and class of travel is preferred?
- Can I use my own vehicle for out-of-town travel?
- Are there accommodation limits?
- What are the rules for entertaining prospects? Clients?
- Are there dollar limits for entertainment?
- What expense forms are used?
- When are expenses due?
- When are expenses paid?

Automobile expenses.

- Who pays for the gas?
- What parking expenses are covered?
- Does the company pick up parking tickets?
- Are mileage records required?
- What mileage rates are paid?
- What are the restrictions on the use of a company vehicle?
- Can I use the company vehicle for vacations?

Company credit terms.

- Do we extend credit to customers?
- What credit applications are used and when should they be used?
- Am I expected to collect overdue accounts?
- Who approves credit applications?

Product return policies.

- When will the company take a product back?
- When won't the company take a product back?
- Any restocking charges?
- Is there a special form for returns?
- What or whose approvals are required for a return?

Product/service warranties.

- What are the warranty terms?
- Who determines what is in or out of warranty?
- What is the normal turn-around time on warranty repairs?

- What are some of the extra costs not covered in the warranty?
- Who normally does warranty repairs?

Company benefits.

- What are they?
- What is the employee's portion, if any, of the cost?
- When does the benefit plan become effective?
- Who, besides the employee, is covered by the plan?
- What forms, etc, are used when making a claim for medical expenses?
- Where should completed claim forms be submitted?
- What are some of the special features about the company's plan?

Remuneration plan/commission structure.

- When is payday?
- How do I get paid?
- What holdbacks are there?
- What are the normal deductions?
- Is there a draw against commission?
- What are the limits on draws against commission?
- What happens if the draw exceeds the limit?

A Cautionary Note

Make sure your new salespeople understand the rules under which they earn their income. At the first pay period, take the time to review the rules to avoid any misunderstanding and aggravation. Always be cautious when dealing with a person's livelihood.

Make Your Own

Now that you've made it through the policy and procedures maze, you'll realize that not everything on the checklist applies to your organization and perhaps I missed a few that are appropriate. Good. Use this list to make up your own and then tuck it away for the next time you have a new hire.

Bottom Line

Systematic onboarding of a new salesperson shows the new hire that he has joined a well-organized company and one that does things right. Start 'em off right and keep 'em.

The Killer Hiring Process

No, I'm not talking about a process for hiring killers... unless it's the type of killer that can track down and close a sales opportunity! I'm referring to a killer process for separating the wheat from the chaff when you're trying to hire that super salesperson all of us want to add to our sales team.

Hiring Salespeople is Different

People who are successful at sales are different in that they require good interpersonal skills, the proper attitude and temperament, and a resilience not found in many other people. Also, selling is a skill and unless you know what to look for it's difficult to determine whether the person is a super star or a charlatan.

The one thing that sales charlatans do well is sell themselves. In fact, sometimes that's the only thing they can sell! Because they are very good at selling themselves, it can be a challenge for the human resources person or recruiter to deal with.

It's important for the sales manager to be involved in the hiring process because most HR folks are very people-oriented and are an easy mark for the sales charlatan who is a master at building rapport, being extremely likeable, and presenting himself in a positive light during the interview.

The Seven-Step Sales Hiring Process

Here's a seven-step hiring process that I developed and refined over the years. As the candidate progresses through the steps, the interview questions become more challenging and tensions will begin to grow for the candidate. This gives you an opportunity to see how the candidate responds to a reasonable level of social pressure.

Step 1 – Telephone Pre-Qualification Interview

Purpose: To assess a potential candidate prior to setting up a face-to-face interview.

This interview lasts about five to ten minutes and is where you review the candidate's resume and gain your first impression of the candidate. If you don't feel the person comes across well over the telephone, neither will your customers. The call should contain one or two "knock-out" questions that might potentially disqualify the candidate.

Step 2 – Third-Party Sales Assessment Test

Purpose: To get an impartial overview of the candidate.

There are a number of them available but, of course, we want you to use our sales assessment. We recommend doing this type of assessment so you can weed out potential duds and not waste your valuable time interviewing people who are unlikely to be successful in sales.

Step 3 – Initial Face-to-Face Interview

Purpose: To uncover more general information about the candidate.

Use standard questions that are easy for the candidate to answer. This will provide the interviewer with insights into who the candidate is, where he worked, where he's been and where he wants to go. This step of the interview process takes between 20-30 minutes. If you like the answers, you proceed to step four.

Step 4 – Second Face-to-Face Interview

Purpose: To find out more of how the candidate goes about his or her selling day.

Use sales-based questions to uncover how the candidate prospects, how he manages his time, what kind of selling style he uses, etc.

Step 5 – Mini Competency Quiz

Purpose: To uncover whether or not the candidate actually knows anything about selling.

Can the person identify some popular closing techniques? Does he or she know what a trial close is? Can he or she tell you the three things you absolutely need to know to properly qualify a prospect? You get the idea.

Step 6 – Sales Simulation (Role Play)

Purpose: To test the candidate to see if he or she can really sell.

I call it a simulation because salespeople hate role playing. The candidate is given a simple sales scenario and allowed ten minutes to prepare. Then the person goes through a sales call with the interviewer.

I've had candidates refuse to do this step, in which case I thank them for coming in and politely send them on their way. In my mind, if a candidate isn't confident enough to showcase his or her selling abilities, I'm going to assume they don't exist and move along.

Step 7 – Subjective Assessment

Purpose: To capture how you feel about the candidate.

There are always a number of “soft” factors, or personal impressions—such as personal and physical appearance, voice, poise, tact, enthusiasm, communications skills, manners, etc—that also need to be taken into consideration when evaluating candidates. We’ve identified 14 of these soft factors. How many can you come up with?

Involve the Sales Manager

Because “it takes one to know one” I recommend that steps five and six be conducted by a sales manager, or a seasoned and trained salesperson, or someone who is familiar with professional selling and who will know what to watch out for in the responses and during the sales simulation.

Winging It

If all this seems like a lot to go through just to hire someone, you’re right. That’s why so many of us just wing it and muddle our way through the process of hiring. Because of this muddling, we often end up with people who don’t perform to our expectations.

If you want to minimize (or eliminate) the muddling, take the time to build a sales hiring process using the above framework. Or consider getting hold of our Hiring Interview Toolkit which is specifically designed for the sales position.

Either way, instead of winging it for your next hire, plan to do it right and hire right. Trust me, you’ll be glad you did.

Bottom Line

There’s a right way and a wrong way to do everything. Using this sales hiring process can help you minimize the odds of hiring a dud and increase your chances of hiring a winner.

It’s just possible that this killer hiring process may help you avoid hiring a sales killer... someone who could bring death and destruction to your bottom line.

An Effective Format for Developing a Salesperson's Job Description

If you've been in sales management for any length of time, you've probably hired a salesperson who didn't work out as well as you wanted. Sometimes it's because the wrong person was hired. Sometimes the right salesperson was hired but was given the wrong instructions or, even worse, no instructions or direction at all.

Getting started on the Right Foot

A good and thorough job description is one of the major keys to making sure the right person is hired and gets started off properly. If you don't know what you want someone to do, then anyone can do it! A good job description is not only a primary hiring tool, but it can become the performance standard by which your salespeople are evaluated.

Unfortunately, many companies don't have formal, written job description, and those that do have a description that looks more like a shopping list than a position description.

One of the reasons companies don't have good job descriptions is because they're not sure what should be included or how to go about making a good one. If you're one of those people, listen up. I'm going to give you an effective format/template along with an example of a simple, yet effective sales position job description.

Sales Position Template

A written sales position job description should include the following.

Position/Job Title:

[Use an appropriate title such as Sales Representative, Account Executive, Area Manager, etc.]

Reporting To:

[Use the title, not the name, of the individual that the salesperson reports to.]

Primary Goal:

[Briefly outline the salesperson's prime function/responsibility within the company.

Note: there is usually only one Primary Goal.]

Secondary Goals:

[Briefly outline any secondary goals that are to be done after the primary goal is looked after or under control. There may be several Secondary Goals.]

Performance Target #1: (Name of performance target.)

[Note: Performance Targets are what you want the salesperson to do or accomplish. In order for both the employee and the company to know whether or not the targets have been reached, you need to establish quantifiable performance standards. The actual number of Performance Targets will vary with the position.]

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

[Note: The number of standards will vary with the Performance Target.]

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Performance Target #2: (Name of performance target.)

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Performance Target #3: (Name of performance target.)

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Performance Target #4: (Name of performance target.)

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Territory/Account Responsibilities:

[Briefly define the sales territory and/or accounts the salesperson is expected to handle.]

Working Conditions:

[What special conditions will the salesperson be working under such as required travel, overnights away, heavy lifting, vehicle requirements, etc.]

Other:

[Any items or conditions that do not fall into one of the above categories.]

So there you have it, a simple template that will help you develop a more effective job description of your salespeople. Let's see what a typical one might look like.

Here's a sample job description for a sales position.

Sample Job Description – Sales Position

Position/Job Title: Account Representative

Reporting To: Sales Manager

Primary Goal:

To continue to sell the company's services into existing accounts and to develop a new base of clients.

Secondary Goal:

Develop, build, and maintain ongoing relationships with major accounts and key decision makers.

Performance Target #1: Sales Objectives

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

1. Made total sales of \$2,500,000 by December 30, 20XX.
2. Minimum monthly sales to existing accounts of \$150,000 between January 1, 20XX and December 30, 20XX.
3. Minimum monthly sales to new accounts of \$50,000 between January 1, 20XX and December 30, 20XX.

Performance Target #2: Account Development

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

1. Contacted at least 15 existing accounts each month.
2. Contacted a minimum of 5 new accounts each month.
3. Found at least 3 new sales opportunities each month.
4. Maintained detailed account records.

Performance Target #3: Sales Activity

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

1. Completed a minimum of 12 cold calls a week.
2. Prepared customer presentations, estimates, and quotations within 24 hours of a client visit or request.
3. Assisted in the development of sales and marketing plans.

Performance Target #4: Sales Administration

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

1. Prepared monthly, quarterly and annual sales forecasts.
2. Attended weekly sales meeting.

3. Maintained an updated Sales Opportunity Report (SOR).
4. Submitted your Monthly SOR within 2 days of month end.
5. Completed call reports on a daily basis.
6. Submitted monthly expenses within 10 days of month end.

Performance Target #5: Sales Tools/Promotion

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

1. Maintained a professional sales binder.
2. Maintained information on direct competitors, their services, and pricing.

Performance Target #6: Self-Development

This performance target will have been satisfactorily met when you have:

1. Successfully completed the company sales training program.
2. Read one sales and/or motivational book each quarter.
3. Attended sales, product/services information and other training sessions as required.

Sales Territory:

South Eastern Ontario and other accounts as assigned by the company (see Appendix A).

Working Conditions:

Up to 5 days of overnight travel are required each month.

Other:

You are required to have a late model automobile, no more than 5 years old.

As you can see, this format leaves little ambiguity about what is expected from the salesperson.

The Bottom Line

A good job description will get your new salesperson off to a good start by having your performance expectations set out in advance. It also provides a standard against which you can gauge the person's performance. No performance, no job.

How to Avoid Hiring a Bad Salesperson

We've all heard of the customer from hell, but some of us end up hiring a salesperson from the same place. Of course, none of us sets out to hire the wrong person, but occasionally it happens that we end up with the salesperson from hell. This is the person who looked good and sounded good during the brief hiring process but ends up either not performing or wreaking havoc within the organization.

Some of these people aren't the salesperson from hell, they're just non-performers. Their references often check out because their former employers still like them and don't want to give them a poor recommendation.

This can happen when you don't take the time to hire smart and you try to plug a round peg into a square hole. When this type of mismatch occurs, grief follows and takes the form of:

- lost and missed opportunities
- unhappy or lost clients
- wasted time
- demoralized staff
- lost money
- ...and more

Many managers, in an attempt to either save time or money, have no formal hiring process in place. This is often a false economy and may result in the hiring of an unsuitable candidate.

By the time you've figured out that the person isn't going to work out, too much time and money has been wasted. This is time and money that could be better used impacting your bottom line in a more profitable manner.

No one leaves the starting post at full trot. It can take a new salesperson, even a seasoned one, several months to a year to ramp up and become productive. You can usually tell pretty quickly if you have a winner, but it could take upwards to a year before you decide you have a non-performer. That's yet another reason to spend the time to hire smart instead of hiring quick.

Staff turnover can be a financial black hole. Whether you fire poor performers or they leave on their own, they have to be replaced. This means running expensive recruitment ads, spending time interviewing and doing reference checks, providing training, and many other time- and money-consuming activities.

Using a sales assessment test can improve your hiring odds and help you avoid costly hiring mistakes.

Three Criteria for Assessing Candidates

There's no foolproof way of finding top sales performers. Generally speaking, your best indicator of future sales success is past sales success. If a candidate is new to sales or you can't confirm past sales successes, hiring the person will be a bit of a crap shoot.

When hiring a salesperson, you are basically looking for three things:

- Ability: Can the person do the job?
- Character: Does the person have the drive, desire, and discipline?
- Temperament: How will the person do the job?

A well-executed interview process can usually help you find the answers to the first two qualities.

For example, our Hiring Interview Toolkit, which is available to clients at no charge, includes a generic mini-sales quiz and sales simulation to help determine if someone actually knows how to sell along with sets of behavioural-type interview questions.

Assessing the Third Ingredient for Selling Success

The third ingredient for selling success – temperament – is harder to assess and that's where a sales assessment can help.

There are a number of good sales assessments on the market that don't cost an arm and a leg. And our Sales Temperament Assessment is one of them.

Our assessment differs from some other sales tests in that it measures the basic temperamental qualities that make up a successful salesperson, which are:

- Competitiveness
- Sociability
- Drive
- Independence

It also gives insight into the types of selling the candidate is going to be most comfortable doing. In other words, the job fit. A good job fit means a happier salesperson and happy salespeople sell more than unhappy ones.

What Kind of Salesperson Are You Hiring

An assessment allows you to peek under the covers and see what kind of salesperson the candidate is going to be.

Will he be a Hunter, Farmer, Shopkeeper, Repairman, or Handyman? You don't want to hire a Farmer if you really need a Hunter, and you certainly don't want to hire a Hunter if the position requires a Shopkeeper.

These are some of the things you want to find out before you hire someone, not after.

Assessments Are Not a Silver Bullet

As they say, if the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail. It's the same when you're hiring someone.

If your only tool is an interview, that's what you're going to use, good or bad. A sales assessment should be just one more tool in your hiring toolkit.

The Bottom Line

No one deliberately sets out to make a bad hire and yet bad salespeople keep getting hired. Make sure you don't hire the salesperson from hell. Use all the tools at your disposal to avoid this and hire smart.

Determining Who's Pre-wired for Sales

I was chatting with a new client the other day about the challenges in finding salespeople, or even people who wanted to be in sales for that matter. Maybe you can empathize with his problem.

His company sells a pretty pedestrian, relatively low-cost tool that's in demand across a number of industries. Although it's a fairly simple device, the best salespeople have a technical background with preferably an engineering or engineering technologist degree.

One of the things that make this company so good is that they are prepared to invest in their people and provide fairly comprehensive sales training to new hires. While they realize that training makes them an employer of choice in their field, they still have problems finding people who have the potential to be good performers.

A Target Rich Environment

One of their hiring strategies is to go to job fairs. In general, job fairs are a good source of raw material. When chatting with the attendees, he'll often ask if they've ever considered a job in sales to which some will reply that they'd accept any job. While I appreciate their plight, that's not a good answer. It leaves the impression that they'll take whatever job is offered, including one in sales, but only until they can get a real job in their field.

Interestingly, some of these people might actually be good at selling and could end up really enjoying the job if given the opportunity.

My client was lamenting this situation and wasn't sure what he could or should do about it. His problem was that he simply couldn't determine who he should hire and who he should leave behind. Then he made a very telling comment, "If only I could determine which ones are pre-wired to be in sales." Man, what a concept!

That got me thinking about how miserable my hiring skills were in the earlier years. I wrote about this in my article "Luck is Not a Hiring Tool." I mean, I could have flipped a coin and had the same hiring success rate. That was before I knew what I know now.

Does Personality Matter

Some people still feel that the biggest indication of being pre-wired for sales is a person's personality. Extroverts were supposed to make the best salespeople because they like talking to people. That was before we discovered that most of them couldn't stop talking long enough to let the prospect buy.

There's nothing wrong with being outgoing and social as long as you strike a balance. A lot of these people only stop talking long enough to inhale, and they're pretty fast at doing that, so you've got to jump in when you get the chance.

Even when they're not talking, people who are excessively extroverted don't listen. They are generally thinking about what they want to tell you next.

Another client recently asked me to coach one of his salespeople who had lost his edge. At the client's suggestion, I made a mystery call to the salesperson who turned out to be an extrovert. He launched into his sales presentation and was extremely good at it. As I was listening, because I had no opportunity to talk, I was trying to analyze why someone with such a smooth sales presentation wasn't doing better. Then I realized what was happening.

I was being talked "at," not "to" or "with." The smooth presentation had become a sales pitch that I wasn't engaged in and could only avoid by terminating the call. The extrovert strikes again!

As Sampson said, "...with the jaw of an ass have I slain a thousand men." Many a sale has been lost by the same weapon.

Personality vs Temperament

Over the years I have come to learn that a person's temperament is often a greater predictor of whether or not a person is pre-wired for sales. This is why our Sales Temperament Assessment is based on temperament and not personality.

There's still some confusion as to the difference between personality and temperament. Any psychologist will give you a four-page explanation. Here's my short-form version.

Personality is similar to temperament in that both are developed at a very early age and generally don't change very much over the years. Think of personality as being the distinctive qualities or characteristics of a person, while temperament is a measure of how that person naturally responds and reacts to the world around them.

I told you it was short.

Temperament's Impact on Selling

What I've discovered over the past 20 plus years that I've been involved with this sales assessment is that different selling situations require different temperaments. The same temperament that allows a person to naturally do cold calls, open new accounts, or

pioneer new sales areas isn't appropriate for a sales situation that requires retail selling, team selling, or a high degree of client service.

Why Temperament is Important

If a person has the right temperament for a particular selling situation, it will be natural for the individual to do what's required to succeed. If the right temperament is combined with proper sales and product knowledge training, he or she can be a top producer.

If a person's temperament is not well suited for a particular sales situation, he'll find the job difficult and a chore. While the person may succeed, it will take a lot of effort. It would be far better for him to find a sales position more suited to his temperament.

The Bottom Line

My client was probably looking at all kinds of people at the job fair who may have a predisposition for sales (pre-wired) but didn't know it. Now he has a screening tool in the form of our online sales assessment that can help him determine who he should hire and who he should leave behind.

Don't Hire Sales Refugees

Companies, unlike countries, do not need to take in refugees, but all too often they end up doing just that.

Of course, I'm not talking about political refugees from other countries, I'm talking about sales refugees from other companies.

Refugees

Broadly speaking, a refugee is an exile who is fleeing for his safety from invasion, persecution, or political danger. A lot of countries have people showing up at their borders claiming to be refugees when, in fact, they just want a better life than the one they hope to leave behind.

Whenever a country opens its borders to legitimate immigrants, they are invariably flooded with refugees, imagined or real. A similar thing can happen when a company goes out looking to hire salespeople.

The Sales Refugee

Broadly speaking, a sales refugee is someone who is fleeing his current company for any number of reasons, some real, some imagined, and some because they are about to be subjected to a form of prosecution called getting fired.

Whatever the reason, hiring sales refugees is rarely a good idea. Because sales refugees are fleeing from something, they aren't too discriminating about where they flee to. This means that they are prepared to keep on fleeing until they arrive at what they perceive is a safe haven and your company may end up being an interim stop along the way.

Reasons to Flee

Whenever a company falls into financial difficulties or is under the spectre of bankruptcy, people will flee. In many cases, it's the good people who flee first because they are the most talented and want to be the first out the door in order to get whatever employment opportunities exist.

While these are often the best performers the company had, they still fall into the refugee category and should be avoided for the reasons noted earlier. Once on the move, they're likely to stay on the move until their personal dust settles.

An amalgamation between two companies will often set off a wave of sales refugees from the lesser of the two companies. Just like the newly formed organization doesn't

need two HR departments or two accounting departments, often they don't need all the salespeople they've acquired.

In this case, it's usually the weaker people who see the handwriting on the wall and pack their bags and start looking for the Promised Land, job-wise.

The Perpetual Sales Refugee

The perpetual sales refugee is the person who probably shouldn't be in sales in the first place but keeps finding employment in the profession anyway.

A company will know quite quickly if they've hired a winner. They come up to speed quickly, meet interim performance standards as they ramp up, and are on track to meet quotas.

Winners aside, it can, and does, take several months to sometimes longer than a year before we decide that we've hired a dud. No one sets out to hire a dud but it happens. There are only two types of sales managers, those who have hired a dud and those who will hire a dud.

The perpetual sales refugee understands this and can see the end before you do. He will start looking for a new position as the blade on the guillotine is being raised and seems to have the knack of getting his neck out before the blade comes down.

Because these people leave before they ever get fired, they have a somewhat clean employment record. As they are generally very amiable people, their former employers are generally loath to give them a bad reference.

At one time, the fact that a person held several jobs over a relatively short period of time used to raise a red flag. That's no longer the case. People are changing jobs every couple of years on average so longevity is no longer a valid criteria. Because selling skills are highly transferrable, salespeople can change even more quickly than most other people.

Avoiding Sales Refugees

I'm not suggesting that you shouldn't hire people who are jumping a sinking corporate ship or want to leave before a forced downsize. I just want you to appreciate the potential downside of doing so. They may not stay long. And not staying long means you may not recover your hiring costs before they exit, stage right.

You can minimize your chances of hiring a perpetual sales refugee by using a sales assessment to ensure that the person is not one of the 55% of salespeople who should be doing something else for a living.

Keep in mind that the sales refugee will have an absolutely logical reason for wanting to leave his current employer if he hasn't already left. Also remember that the former employer is often hesitant to give a bad reference. It's up to you to be sure you're not hiring a dud.

That's why a sales assessment, as part of a well-planned and thorough hiring process, can help separate the wheat from the chaff.

The Bottom Line

It's important that you be careful about who and what you hire. When you take the time to hire smart, train well, and coach effectively, you build strong, effective sales teams.

Digging Up Dirt Before You Hire

It's getting harder to know who or what you're hiring these days. Many resumes seem to be more of an exercise in creative writing than the fact-filled document we hope for.

Add to this the fact that former employers are becoming increasingly hesitant to give any references beyond confirming a person's employment for fear of being sued, and you can see why this whole business of hiring someone is becoming a pain in the butt.

Not that there is a big chance of hiring the next Jack (or Jackie) the Ripper, but it would be nice to have a better idea about people before they join your company ranks.

Don't Hire a Problem

It's important that you take care during the hiring process. If you end up hiring a problem, you may have an even bigger problem "unhiring" them as there is a growing tendency for people to sue companies for firing them. It can also cause you to run into major time-consuming problems.

For example, in some jurisdictions you can't fire the person who comes to work drunk every day. You have to provide him with, and pay for, an employee assistance program to help them with their "disability."

My question to you is, Would you knowingly hire someone who has a drinking problem? I'm probably not going out on much of a limb here when I say that I suspect the answer is no.

I grant you that this kind of potential problem (excessive drinking) is very difficult, if not downright impossible, to uncover during the hiring process. Often you have to trust your instincts.

For example, I'm not sure why but I had a suspicion about a candidate I was considering many years ago. During the reference check, which was going pretty well, I made a comment that I thought "Fred" might like to have a drink or two during the day. There was a long silence on the other end of the phone before the person said, "That's very perceptive of you." Suspicion confirmed.

Making the Extra Effort

Hiring someone is a little like getting married, easy to do, hard to undo. This being the case, you'd think that more managers would put a little extra effort into making sure they're hiring the right person.

While a sales assessment test can help you make a better match between the candidate and the sales position, the job of checking out a candidate's character and values is more challenging. However, there are new and different tools available to help with this, the Internet being prime among them.

Smart companies are taking the time to use these tools to take a closer look at who they let in the door.

Self-inflicted Wounds

A lot of people, particularly young people, shoot themselves in the foot by inadvertently advertising to the world how stupid they can be.

How else do you explain the plethora of poor-taste photos and inane writings that they post on their personal social networking sites such as FaceBook or MySpace? It's as though they think that the only people who will be seeing the stuff is their friends. They might as well just hire a billboard along a busy highway for all the privacy they have.

We tend to think that only teens use these social networks, but statistics show the average age of a FaceBook user as being in their forties.

Digging Up the Dirt

I'm not saying that you should deliberately dig up dirt on candidates. I am suggesting that you should use the publicly available information sources to round out your knowledge of candidates you are considering to hire.

In all fairness, not everything people put up on their social networking sites is in poor taste. Far from it. Having said that, these social networking sites can provide you with additional insights into the individual's interests and values.

Someone's social networking site that contains photos or videos of themselves and their families having fun paints a far different picture from one that shows a person holding a bottle of beer in each hand with a glazed look in their eyes. If nothing else, the former indicates someone with a sense of maturity while the latter indicates a fun-loving spirit. It's up to you to decide the type of person you want working for you and representing your company in the marketplace.

Too Much Bad Information

While the Internet is a great source of information, not all the information is true or valid. Case in point: At one time, if you typed my name into the Google search engine, you

would discover that I was secretary of the local Hells Angel's motorcycle club in St Catherines, Ontario, Canada and that I had a substantial criminal record. Trust me... that wasn't me!

Hey! Try Googling yourself and see what you find.

So, suppose you Googled a candidate's name and up popped a criminal record containing multiple DUIs and further investigation showed that the information was valid. You've just dug up some very important dirt. If this ever happens, be sure that you have the dirt on the right person.

Don't Go Overboard

Look, don't make a big deal out of this. All I'm suggesting is that it's prudent to type a candidate's name into an Internet search engine and a couple of social networking sites to see what comes up.

If there's nothing, good. Move along. If something does come up, check it out. See who their friends are and what videos and pictures they are sharing with the world. If what you see makes you uncomfortable, investigate it further.

Bottom Line

The idea is to check out possible piles of dirt before it gets dumped in your corporate backyard. If there's a problem, you want to find out before you hire, not after. So go digging for dirt and be happy if you don't find any.

Stop Hiring Poor-Performing Salespeople

Nobody deliberately sets out to hire salespeople who can't or won't perform. But it happens, and it happens more that you might expect. In fact, in my view it happens far too often.

I've certainly done my share of hiring what I thought was going to be a real barn burner, only to discover that he or she couldn't start a BBQ, even an electric one!

In one of my earlier articles, "Luck is Not a Hiring Tool", I pointed out that most of us would have had just as good a hiring record if we had simply flipped a coin instead of taking all that time sifting through resumes, interviewing, etc.

Improving the Odds

Nowadays, 50/50 odds are simply not good enough. We need a way to improve the odds. Using a sales assessment tool is one of the things that can help. Another way is to understand the three main reasons why the next salesperson you hire is likely to be a poor performer.

Let's explore these three pitfalls.

Reason #1: Can't Sell

Sometimes the only thing some salespeople can sell is themselves and they're good at doing it. These folks will sell you on hiring them by telling you what you want to hear and what they will do for you and your company.

They are charming, likeable, outgoing, pleasant folks, with a genuine affinity for people. They get along well with others. These are the people whose grade school report card always had the notation from the teacher reading, "plays well with others."

They're often good talkers, and that's the problem. Too much talk, too little results. Because these people are so likeable, once you hire them you'll find it hard to cut your losses and let them go. Before it's over, you'll probably end up investing too much time and money trying to get results.

Chances are you may already have one or two of them on your sales team now. These people have their place but if you need sales results, choose someone else.

Reason #2: Wrong Sales Environment

Then there's the salesperson who has great credentials and a good track record but in another field. Beware! Just because the person was successful selling in another field doesn't necessarily mean he'll work out well in your sales environment. That's because not every salesperson is good at selling everything.

The key for both the potential employer (you) and the salesperson is to realize that there are differences in selling environments and to know who fits where. Once you've done that, you have a better fit between the person and the position which improves the odds of making a successful hire.

Here are a few examples of what I mean:

The gal who's great at selling tangible products may fail miserably when forced to sell intangibles and vice versa. It's simply not her bag. It's a person to position mismatch.

The guy who is great at making cold calls and opening new accounts may be poor at developing long-term relationships and getting more business from existing accounts. Yet another example of the wrong person for the position (or is it the right person in the wrong job)!

And then there's the gal who's loved by her existing customers but can't find new business for love or money.

That's because these people are in the wrong sales environment, selling the wrong things. You've got a square peg in a round hole and trying to pound a square, or oval, peg into a round hole damages both the peg and the hole.

A good sales assessment test will help you identify the square (and oval) pegs.

Reason #3: Won't Sell

Finally there are the people who simply shouldn't be in sales at all but they get hired anyway. What usually happens is the sales manager is desperate to fill a sales position and this person has come along. It's a matter of the wrong person being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

They are like a fish out of water. They flop around gasping for breath until they either die or move on. Even with proper training, these people will succeed only by forcing themselves to do the job. And you know how well that works. Selling is hard enough when you enjoy it!

No matter what training, coaching, and support you provide to these people, they just don't seem to get it. They try hard but will never really get out of the starting block despite all your efforts.

Left alone, these people usually survive about a year before moving along to another unsuspecting company. In the meantime, you've been picking up the tab for their compensation, expenses, and lost potential business.

Any hiring tool that will help you identify these people before you hire them is worth exploring.

Been There, Done That

If you're a bit long in the tooth like me or have had too much sales management experience, you can probably think back over your previous hires and identify people who fall into one of the three reasons we hire poor performers. I certainly can.

Bottom Line

There is no need to buy the "I Hired a Dud" t-shirt. Save your money and spend it on something that will help you make better hires. That way you'll build even stronger sales teams. What's more... your bottom line will thank you.

Can Farmers Hunt?

For those of you who are pressed for time, the answer is, “Yes,” “No,” and “Maybe.” For those of you who’d like a bit more detail, here’s the definitive answer to every sales manager’s question, “How can I get my Farmers to hunt and prospect for new business?”

Different Strokes for Different Folks

To better understand why it’s impossible to provide one simple answer to this question, we need to have an understanding of human nature. We need to understand “personality.”

Your personality is a combination of your “temperament,” the qualities you’re born with, and your “character”, the experiences that you have in your formative years.

Have you ever wondered why two siblings who grow up in the same family environment and have many of the same life’s experiences can have such different personalities? I don’t know about your family, but I have two grown boys who are different as night and day. One of my boys would make a good salesperson and the other would make a good customer, and they’re not interchangeable!

The difference lies in their temperament, the basic qualities they were born with. As near as I can figure, whatever temperament someone is born with is a crap shoot and you never know what you’re going to end up with. Fortunately for me, I ended up with a sales-type temperament. I’m a Farmer.

Born Salespeople

I’m not a big believer in the concept of the “born salesperson.” I do believe that some people are certainly better suited than others for the role of a salesperson and the difference seems to come from differing temperaments.

Some people are born with the temperament to be Hunters, some have the temperament to be Farmers, and many are neither. So what are you if you’re not a Hunter or Farmer? At Salesforce Assessments we’ve labeled these other temperaments as Shopkeeper, Repairman, and Handyman, and all except the Handyman have a place in the sales food chain. The trick is in knowing where they fit.

The Hybrid Salesperson

While there are people who are pure Hunters and pure Farmers, I’ve discovered over the years that there are some people whose temperaments are such that they have an affinity

for both selling styles. In other words, there are Hunters who are equally comfortable farming and Farmers who can and will hunt.

So, there's the first answer to the question, Can Farmers Hunt? Yes, if they have the hybrid temperament that allows them to do so naturally.

The Maybe Factor

The "maybe" factor comes to play when we're dealing with people who have a pure Farmer temperament. Because being a Farmer is one of the two basic selling styles, Farmers can be trained to hunt, and may do it, even though it's not part of their basic temperament.

In other words, properly trained, managed, and coached, a Farmer "may" hunt but he's not likely to do it well or willingly.

Doing What Comes Naturally

We all have things that we seem to have a natural penchant for doing. We all know guys who are sports jocks and no matter what sport they undertake they seem to do it well. These guys have a natural affinity, or temperament, for sports.

I, on the other hand, represent another group of people who, no matter how hard we try, are hopeless klutzes when it comes to most sports.

Personally, it's difficult for me to engage in any sport without doing serious damage to myself and others. I simply don't have the temperament for sports and therefore avoid getting involved because it's certainly something that doesn't come naturally to me.

When we naturally enjoy doing something, whether it is sports or selling, we generally do it well and enjoy it. The fact that we don't have the natural temperament for something like sports or selling doesn't mean that we can't or won't do it well, it simply means we'll have to work harder at it if we're to do it well.

Who Would You Rather Hire?

So, would you prefer to hire someone who has a natural inclination for selling or someone who can sell but ideally would prefer to be doing something else?

To me it's a no-brainer. I'd rather hire the round peg to fill the round hole instead of hiring the square (or oval) peg.

Non-Hunters

Is there a type of salespeople who can't or won't hunt? No, every type of salesperson can hunt. The question is, Will they hunt?

You might be able to get some people with a Shopkeeper sales style to hunt but usually only under duress. For the most part, this is something that is very foreign to the person's basic temperament and it is simply out of character for them.

Don't even think about asking a Repairman or Handyman to hunt unless you threaten them with severe pain if they don't.

Some Shopkeepers and most Repairmen and Handymen feel that hunting is simply too pushy and they are hard pressed to ever do it.

Bottom Line

When you take the care to put the right person in the right job (the round peg in the round hole), he or she is more likely to do the job well. People who do their jobs well enjoy it.

Part of your job as a sales manager is to try to make as good a fit between the person and the job as possible. When you do that, you're well on your way to building a strong, productive sales team.

When to Fire a New Hire

Why would anyone in their right mind want to fire someone they recently hired? Smart sales managers, that's who. What would make them want to do such a thing? Non- or poor performance, that's what. Judging non-performance is easy to figure out but exactly how do you gauge poor performance?

Do You Have a Winner?

You'll know if you've hired a winner pretty quickly. These people come up to speed quickly and will normally reach a reasonable level of activity within the first 90 days, sometimes sooner.

The problem is often trying to figure out if you've got a less-than-a-winner, also known as a loser. Just because someone doesn't come up to speed within the first 90 days doesn't mean you've got a loser. Often, you will not be able to make that determination in less than six to nine months or even a year in some cases.

The normal ramp-up time is extended if a person is new to sales or new to an industry. First of all, it takes some time for the new person to find his or her way around the new company as well as the new sales environment.

If someone is new to sales, he or she also has to figure out what this whole selling thing is all about as well. This is one of the reasons I'm not a big fan of hiring people with no or inappropriate sales experience. Too long a ramp-up time.

Hiring Non-performers

I don't know of any sales manager who deliberately sets out to hire a non-performer unless he either has a death wish or is hiring a family member who should be doing something else for a living. Sometimes we hire family members because no one else will! Another bad move.

What normally happens is that despite our best hiring practices, we come across someone who is a master at selling himself but unfortunately nothing else. They are usually very likeable, charming people who present themselves well.

They usually last somewhere between 12 to 18 months on the job before they either get fired for non-performance or quit shortly before the axe is going to fall. In their heart of hearts, they know they can't do the job, but bless their tiny hearts, they keep on trying anyway.

Salespeople are a pretty transient bunch, but watch their resumes to see if they are changing companies every 12 to 18 months. That's a red flag you should check out before hiring, not after.

If you have inadvertently hired a non-performer, you should move quickly to remove them from your roster within six months.

Weeding Out Poor Performers

Poor performers are a more difficult problem, primarily because we have a challenge in determining exactly what constitutes poor performance. Before I give you some guidelines on gauging poor performance, let's look at some of the causes.

Here are two of the more common causes of poor performance, apart from the fact that the person is a square peg in a round hole and shouldn't be in sales at all.

The first is that the person is selling the wrong product or service. Despite the common perception, not everyone can sell everything. Even a seasoned pro can find himself in an area where he simply doesn't have the required expertise or experience to do a good job.

The second reason is that the person is burned out. Burnout may be caused by job or personal stress and the person simply doesn't have the energy to do what needs to be done to succeed. These people perform well during the job interview and will give you a good three to six months of effort before the pressures get to be too much and they coast to a finish.

Avoiding the Problem

There is probably no way to totally avoid the problem, but there is a way to minimize it. Set minimum performance standards or expectations for the new hire and make sure that he or she is fully aware of them.

Minimum performance standards will vary with the type of salesperson you've hired. The minimum standards will differ for the person who is new to sales, the one who is new to selling what you want sold but is an experienced salesperson, and different again for the experienced salesperson who is also experienced in selling what you want sold.

Here are some recommended minimum performance standards. I'm not suggesting they're acceptable, they're just the minimum. The percentages refer to the percent of annual quota that you expect them to do.

Timeframe	A	B	C
3 months	5%	10%	15%
6 months	20%	30%	35%
9 months	40%	50%	70%
12 months	70%	80%	90%

Note:

A = New to sales

B = Experienced salesperson, new to the industry

C = Experienced salesperson, from the same industry

Notice that even your most experienced salesperson may not make quota in that first year due to the normal ramp-up time. But he should be selling at the required monthly rate to make quota by the end of that first year (annual quota divided by twelve).

Not Meeting the Minimum

So what do you do if the new hire doesn't exceed the minimums? I certainly don't recommend that you dose him with gasoline and set him ablaze at your next sales meeting. While this might act as an example to the rest of the team as to what will happen if they miss their quota, it's not a good idea. Use the occasion to have a heart-to-heart chat with the person and set plans for how he can get and stay on track.

Also see if you can identify any other factors, personal or otherwise, that may be causing the person to come up to speed slowly. It could be that he simply needs more care and attention from you (coaching).

In the end, if the person is well below the minimums and you can't come up with a reasonable reason why, it may be time to part company. Time to fire.

Firing someone is never easy and certainly never pleasant, but it is a business necessity if you are to develop an effective sales team.

If you decide to do it, do it fairly, do it quickly, but do it. You can't afford to have poor performers on the team.

Bottom Line

Don't just hire and forget. It's important to keep a close eye on your new hire to ensure that he or she comes up to speed and becomes a productive team member.

Don't Hire Heroes

I asked the manager why he wanted to hire this particular sales candidate. "Well," he said, "Jack is a golf pro, has good people skills, and he feels that he's a natural salesperson." The problem was that our assessment instrument was telling me that Jack was unlikely to do well as a salesperson.

However, this manager and his boss, the general manager, were basically taken with this individual and had placed him on a pedestal. After all, he was a golf "pro," someone who others look up to, a hero to some people.

Most of us have a hero of one kind or another. Often it's a person who excels at sports. Sometimes it's not a specific individual but anyone who is involved in a particular sport at a professional level. One of my favourite clients likes to hire people who excel at skiing. I've never understood what excelling at skiing has to do with selling medical equipment.

Sports vs Selling

Maybe it's a guy thing, or perhaps the better word is a jock thing, where most men (and some women) want to excel at sports and admire others who actually do. For whatever reason, I'm not one of those people. I'm sports inert. I don't have a sports bone in my body, and that's why I look at people who are engaged in professional sports and wonder why they don't have a real job. Of course, the fact that they seem to make an obscene amount of money may be the answer to that question!

This is also why I don't get caught up in the glow of the aura that seems to surround these "heroes" and makes it difficult to see the real person and their capabilities.

Many people feel that just because someone excels at one thing, they'll excel at another. Mind you some do but many don't. Just because someone's great at golf or football or putting the puck in the net, that doesn't always extrapolate into success in sales.

Many of these heroes are extremely charismatic and very personable and more than capable of selling themselves into most situations. The problem is that selling themselves is often the only thing they can sell. In fact, they are more used to not having to do any selling but simply letting the other person "buy" them. In other words, our hero is usually counting on the other person being sold before they have to do any selling.

The Celebrity Sell

This can work well in what is called the celebrity sell. That's where we use a well-known person, a celebrity, to front or present our product or service. It's when we hope that dazzle will overcome reality.

When customers buy your stuff because of who is selling it and not on its own merits, you're going to have potential problems. Once the glow of having bought something from a "hero" dies off, the true value (or lack of value) of what they bought becomes evident.

Unless you have the type of product and service that will benefit from the celebrity sell, it's usually best to avoid hiring a hero. Are there exceptions to this rule? Absolutely.

Using a well-known individual is an excellent way for a company to get its product to stand out over the rest of the competition. So, if you're selling novel kitchen items like barbeque grills or knives that never need sharpening, why not put these items in the hands of an easily recognizable celebrity and hope for the best.

Competitive People

I mentioned my client who leans towards hiring sales candidates who have done well in professional skiing. I know why he does this. He was a highly successful skier and is a very successful business person and he somehow equates the two. He considers himself very competitive, which he is, and attributes this competitiveness to his sports background.

Once again, being good at a sport doesn't necessarily equate into success in sales. Competitiveness is just one factor in a salesperson's success. In my opinion, persistence is more important than competitiveness.

The Agony of Defeat

The one thing that sports can prepare a person for is the agony of defeat. If someone has a 30% closing ratio, that means they have a 70% failure rate. This is hardly good for your morale. One of the things salespeople need to prepare for is the lost sale — defeat. This doesn't happen now and then, but day after day.

Wouldn't it be nice to take a season off to get into shape and all pumped up for the next selling season and then only have to try to make one or two sales a week while beating off all the adoring fans? And, oh yes, making tens of thousands (or millions) of dollars even if you don't win. Are we in the wrong business or what.

A Different Profession

I'm not down on sports professionals. It's a very different business. Just the same way we probably couldn't take the average salesperson and turn him into a sports professional, it doesn't always work when we try to take a sports professional and try to make him into a salesperson.

Bottom Line

When hiring a salesperson, hire someone who is suitable for sales and who can sell. Both are important. Remember, you're building a sales team, not a sports team.

Where to Find Good Salespeople

One of the most critical functions you perform as a sales manager is putting together the right sales team. The right people, working together, can make business life a pleasure. On the other hand, hire the wrong people and your life can become hell. Where are all the good people?

With the economy being what it is lately, you'd think there would be all kinds of good salespeople looking for work. Well, there are all types of salespeople looking for work but they're not all good salespeople. Some of them, but certainly not all of them, are looking for work because they are the casualty of poor sales (theirs!) and were offered another career opportunity (unemployment).

Others become available for new opportunities because their former employers weren't financially nimble enough to survive in their marketplace.

So if you're looking to expand your sales team, cast a wary eye into the open market and don't ignore some of the candidate sources I talk about in my e-book "How to Hire Salespeople Who Can Sell." Here's a glimpse.

Start With the Obvious

Depending upon the stuff you sell and the class of the salesperson you're looking for, the careers section of your local major newspaper is a good, but expensive, place to start your search.

A less expensive alternative of this form of print advertising is to run a display ad in smaller community-based papers. Your advertising dollar buys you a bigger ad and will get you much more visibility than advertising in major newspapers.

You can cast a wider net by putting an advertisement on one or more of the web-based job search sites such as Workopolis.com, Monster.com, etc. The investment is nominal and the reach is broad, too broad in some situations. If you're operating on a small budget and you're looking for a salesperson in Canada, you can post your position, for free, on the government site called Job Bank (www.hrmanagement.ca).

Look In-house

I usually tell sales managers, "If you want a salesperson, hire a salesperson." Well, there is an exception to this rule. If the sales position in question is an entry-level one, you may have some ideal candidates right under your nose.

People within the organization know the company, are familiar with its products and services, and understand how you do business. Current customer or sales support people can often make an easy transition into the sales function. Service technicians or engineering staff usually have excellent product knowledge, and the person who has been typing up proposals may surprise you with his or her depth of knowledge.

Employee Recommendations

Your current salespeople and others within the company may have friends or neighbours who would be eager to work for your firm. When people read internal job postings, they don't always think beyond their own interests or needs. Make sure you ask the question, "Do you know a friend or neighbour who may be interested in this position?"

Some companies offer a financial or other reward to staff who recommend suitable new employees. You may want to make the reward system multi-tiered. For example, you might pay \$50 for anyone who is recommended and makes it to the interview stage, an additional \$50 if he or she gets hired and a further \$100 if the new person is still on staff at the end of one year.

Former Sales Staff

If you had someone in the past that was a performer but left for greener pastures, consider giving the individual a call. Sometimes the grass isn't always greener, but the person might feel embarrassed about approaching you. Even someone who was a marginal performer may be worth talking to again. Time and experience may have matured the individual.

Personal Contacts

Talk with other non-competing sales managers. Ask if they've seen or interviewed any potential candidates that they could pass along to you. If you belong to any networking groups or breakfast clubs, make sure the members know you're looking for someone. Bring along copies of your employment ad or job description to leave with interested parties.

Competition

Be cautious but don't be afraid to approach a competitor's salesperson. The advantages of hiring one are:

- they know the product or service
- they know the territory
- they require less training

- they come up to speed quickly, and
- you weaken a competitor while strengthening yourself

Be careful to avoid starting a raiding war. You don't want your competitor to start raiding your staff. Make sure your people are content and loyal. If you want to approach a competitor's salesperson, it may be better to do it anonymously through a recruiting firm or neutral third party.

Recruitment Agencies

Agencies can be costly – 20 to 40 percent of the estimated first year's income – but they can save a lot of time. The good ones will take the time to understand your real needs and attempt to make a reasonable match between the candidate and those needs. The poor ones will simply send you a pile of résumés with the hope that something catches your eye.

If you decide to use an agency in addition to conducting your own search, make it clear to the agency that if you are approached by a candidate as a result of your own efforts and that candidate is subsequently recommended by the agency, you reserve the right to deal directly with the candidate and no agency commission will be paid.

Remember...

Finding suitable candidates is just one step. The hiring process is complex and hiring mistakes can be costly. Not only in lost sales, but in lost customers and lost goodwill – to say nothing about your lost time.

If nothing else, remember this – hire for attitude and train for skill.

Luck is Not a Hiring Tool

Most sales managers figure they're an excellent judge of character and can spot sales talent from a distance of 500 feet, if not farther.

I used to think that too. That's why a lot of my earlier hires were done after a 15- to 30-minute interview and a brief assessment of what my stomach was telling me about the candidate. I simply didn't have the time for lengthy interviews or testing procedures.

Poor Odds

As more and more of the people who were reporting to me were the ones I had hired, I began to realize that some of my better hiring decisions had been more a matter of luck than skill. Salespeople who I thought were going to be barnburners turned out to be nothing but warm coals while people who I felt I was taking a chance on were turning out to be real brush fires. I had to fire some of the great talent I had hired because in the end, they were duds.

I finally came to the conclusion that my hiring skills left something to be desired. It turned out that my chances of picking a winner were about 50/50. Instead of spending all that time going through the interview process, I could have just flipped a coin and gotten the same results.

The Folly of the Interview

I began to realize that while the interview is important, it has to be structured if it is going to be of any value and, like most sales managers, I don't like structure. In fact, as Malcom Gladwell put it in a May 29, 2000 article in *The New Yorker*, structured interviewing doesn't come naturally to most managers:

"For most of us, hiring someone is essentially a romantic process, in which the job interview functions as a desexualized version of a date. We're looking for someone with whom we have a certain chemistry, even if the coupling that results ends in tears and the pursuer and the pursued turn out to have nothing in common. We want the unlimited promise of a love affair. The structured interview, by contrast, seems to offer only the dry logic and practicality of an arranged marriage."

Most of us simply ask questions intended to find people who will fit in with our perception of our workplace or culture. We're subconsciously looking for someone who will be easy to work with which doesn't help us predict how well the person can do the job.

Getting It Right

Research confirms the superiority of structured interviews over the standard “tell me about yourself” interviews that sales managers like to conduct. In a 1985 study and analysis of interviewers at a large US life insurance company, 19 sales position candidates were interviewed using two different methods – informal and structured. A year later, those who had been hired were evaluated according to the interview method. The results showed a validity coefficient of .61 for the structured candidates, and only .08 for those interviewed in a more informal method.

Developing Structured Interviews

So then, if conducting structured interviews is one of the keys to successful hiring, how do we go about structuring the interview? Here are some of the main guidelines and the order that they should be followed:

1. Start by writing a job description based on what an ideal salesperson must do to be successful in the position rather than on the traits that he or she must have to get the job.

Develop a set of six to eight performance standards you expect the new person to meet. Creating the standard isn't a simple matter of sitting down and jotting down some notes. To develop truly effective performance standards, first examine your successful salespeople to find out exactly what it is they do that makes them successful.

2. Prioritize the standards and then design a set of standard interview questions that help you determine whether your candidates have been successful at those tasks in the past. Past performance is your best predictor of future performance.

There are two ways you can ask for this information. The first is to ask the candidate to talk about a time in her past when she's excelled at one of the tasks on your list. For example: “What are some of the challenges you've faced in organizing your sales territory and how did you deal with them?”

Behavioural questions like this can be a problem, especially if there's one “correct” answer that you're looking for. Behavioural interviews are also risky because people don't always behave the same way in different situations.

Because of this, some sales managers like to ask “situational” questions that test on-the-spot problem solving. For example: “We sometimes have situations where you come back to the office and find that several customers have called in and left messages. How would you decide who to call back first?”

Because theoretical questions like these don't always give you a good sense of how the person actually behaves in real life, it's best to use a balance of the two types of questions. Use behavioural questions to learn about a person's experience in a related job, and situational questions based on real situations at work to see how the person would act if given the job.

3. Ask every candidate the same set of standard questions. Of course, you will have different follow-up questions for each person as you probe into their background or try to get them to expand on a particular answer. You can't accurately and objectively compare candidates if you haven't evaluated them in the same way.
4. Write down your first impression of a candidate after first meeting him, and then revisit that impression after the interview is over. This forces you to think about your first impression more objectively. Did you think the person seemed confident at first because of his strong handshake? Does he still seem like a confident person, given some of his responses to your interview questions?

Removing Luck from the Equation

There's more to structured interviewing than these four guidelines and becoming good at conducting structured interviews takes time. But every step towards a more formal process, and away from unstructured judgment calls and using luck as a hiring tool, increases the soundness of your interviewing techniques and brings you closer to hiring a potential winner.

Rank and Yank – Fine-Tuning Your Sales Team

There isn't a sales manager alive who wouldn't kill, figuratively speaking, for a team of super stars. We all wish we had our sales dream team, that group of over-achievers who not only make and exceed their quotas but make your day as well.

The truth is that no matter how hard you try, your sales team will have the usual selection of superstars and semi-duds (or perhaps outright duds!). In fact, when you take a close look at the capabilities of the people in your sales team, they probably follow the standard distribution of skills that is called the "bell" curve.

If you plotted the performance levels of everyone on your team, you'd probably find about 10-15 percent of your people are at the top end of the scale while another 10-15 percent are at the bottom, with the remaining 60-80 percent distributed across the middle.

Replace the Bottom

So what would happen if you replaced the bottom 10-15 percent performers with better people? Theoretically, you would improve the performance level of the whole team. In fact, I've heard of a west coast company that had a policy of letting the bottom 10 percent of their sales team go every month. Now that's an interesting incentive plan. Do a good job and you get to keep it!

That's the idea behind the "rank-and-yank" philosophy of fine-tuning your sales team. You rank everyone on the team in accordance to his or her performance and then yank the people at the bottom and give them a new career opportunity. Some companies do the rank and yank on a monthly basis while others may use a quarterly or semi-annual approach to culling the sales herd.

When to Stop

Because you will always have some people at the bottom of the ranking, you can continue to use the rank-and-yank technique forever, constantly improving the quality of the team. However, in addition to reaching a point of diminishing returns, you also create other problems that start to impact the people at the top of the pile as well.

Your people would have to be pretty thick to not see what was going on and even the top performers will know that, somewhere down the line, they may have a bad month and find themselves inadvertently at the bottom of the ranking and ready to be yanked.

Their survival instincts will cause them to constantly be updating their resumes and maintain a continuing watch for a position with another, less Draconian, company.

So, tempting as the rank-and-yank technique may be, it's probably best stopped before it even gets started, or as a minimum, used sparingly and with care.

When to Use R&Y Techniques

Probably the best and perhaps the only time to use the rank-and-yank technique is when a sales manager is new to either the job or the company. Now we have a situation where the "new broom sweeps clean" phenomenon can be evoked and a natural house cleaning can be undertaken without critically damaging the morale and spirit of the entire sales team.

An Alternate Approach

I'm still a big believer in ranking my salespeople. I believe it's important for sales managers to have a handle on who's performing, who isn't, who's getting better, and who's slipping. Without this basic information, you're flying blind.

If, as a result of your ranking you find someone who is consistently at the bottom month after month, you may have a dud and a candidate for replacement. But before you consider replacement, consider rehabilitation or retraining.

Dealing with Poor Performers

As a general rule, there are three reasons for poor performance: (1) the person doesn't know what to do. (2) He doesn't know how to do it. (3) He doesn't want to do it.

If the sub-performer is new to sales, then factor one may be the reason for your problem. It's possible you've made a poor hire and perhaps you have someone for whom sales and selling isn't a good match.

On the other hand, if the person has been in sales for a while and still hasn't reached his stride, it may well be a skills issue where he simply doesn't know how to sell properly and some training and/or coaching may improve the situation dramatically.

If the sub-performer has been a good performer in the past, then it's a safe bet that conditions one and two don't apply, which leaves us with reason three. For some reason, the person no longer wants to perform. This is a good time for a one-on-one, heart-to-heart talk with your problem child where you try to get to the bottom of the problem.

Tune-up Time

If you want to do tune-ups rather than complete overhauls, then it's best to have a plan in place to monitor your people so that you can catch any changes that may indicate potential problems.

The first thing to monitor is their actual sales, second is their sales activities, and third, their sales efforts. Once you've established a baseline of information, you can monitor the situation for changes.

For example, if one of your rep's sales numbers begins to fall, look and see if he is making the number of sales calls (sales activities) that are needed to make his numbers. If the number of calls is down, that's probably the problem and you need to find out why. If the number of sales calls is okay, you need to monitor the sales efforts by making joint sales calls with the person to ensure that he is doing what needs to be done during the calls to get sales (sales effort).

At any step in the process, you can get involved to coach and mentor (tune-up) the salesperson past the problem. By investing some time and energy to catch your challenges before they become problems, you can keep the team tuned up and ready to go.

Good luck with fine-tuning your team.

Part-Time Salespeople... Winners or Losers?

The question of whether or not to hire part-time salespeople is one that often comes up for many sales managers and it's a good question.

Mind you, some sales managers feel their full-time salespeople only work part-time but that's a problem and an article for another time!

Part-timers are an Attractive Proposition

The lure of hiring part-timers is strong, particularly if they are on a commission basis. After all, as part-time employees, they're mostly out of your hair (if, as a sales manager, you have any hair left). And being on commission means they won't cost you anything if they don't make any sales.

But wait. The idea of having salespeople, part-time or otherwise, is to get sales isn't it? It's not to hire a bunch of sales gypsies who wander from place to place trying to find the occasional sale. Of course these people get a sale now and then but, remember, even a blind squirrel will find the occasional nut! Selling shouldn't be more chance or luck than skill.

What you want are people out in the field beating the bushes for opportunities that they can turn into closed sales. Can part-timers do that? They can, but they rarely do. Why? Because they're part-time. Let me explain.

Three Reasons Part-timers May Not Work Out

First off, while there are many reasons for taking a part-time job, not needing the income from a full-time one is high on the list.

Another reason is not really needing a job but wanting to be employed. Put another way, these are people who want to be employed but who don't want to work. You may already have a few of those people now!

Of course, there are those people who take part-time work to augment their income from their main job. While I admire their intentions, I also realize that holding two jobs can be physically and emotionally tiring and tired people don't sell well. Basically, they're often too pooped to sell.

Selling is Difficult

You'll probably agree that selling isn't particularly easy. It's more than just going around and talking to people all day long.

If you're in retail sales where more customers make a buy than are sold to, you've got it relatively easy. (There are those who would consider the term "retail sales" an oxymoron!)

Outbound salespeople have to go out and find people who want their products and services. That's a completely different and much more difficult situation for many salespeople and especially for part-timers.

Just trying to find folks who want or need what you're selling can be a real challenge. Then, when you do find them, you need to get them to listen to your story. If you get that far without getting rejected, you have to overcome their objections in your attempt to help them make an informed buying decision. If you survive all that, you're exhausted! I know that selling shouldn't be this problematic but it is for those part-timers who are untrained and don't know how to take control of the selling/buying process.

After hearing a litany of, "I'm not interested", "I don't need any", "Your price is too high", "Not today", "Call back another time", etc., a person can get downright depressed and start having extended coffee breaks at Tim Horton's with all the other depressed part- (and full-) time salespeople.

It's not that these people are slackers, although some might be. It's that selling is difficult and requires a commitment of time and energy – ingredients that part-timers may not have a lot of.

So while they're doing little or nothing, you're pulling out what's left of your hair managing them. Actually, you're not really managing them. You're spending time trying to find out what they are and are not doing. This is time that you could be spending on more profitable activities like coaching the salesperson who wants or needs your assistance and has made the commitment to selling.

Commission-only isn't the Answer

I'm sure there's someone out there who is thinking, "No sweat. I just put them on commission-only, turn them loose, and let them sink or swim, so I'm not losing any time or money on non-performers." Not necessarily true.

Sure you didn't pay them for the sales they didn't get, but how much business did you not get because of them?

You hire salespeople, full or part-time, to get sales. If someone can't or won't get sales for you, help the person move on to a job that's better suited for his or her talents or lack thereof.

Are all part-timers losers? Not by any means. But, as a general rule, they don't usually work out for some of the reasons I've mentioned above and several more that I haven't covered.

Hire with Caution

If you're going to use part-timers, hire with caution. Make sure you know why they want part-time work. Make sure they know that selling is a challenging profession that needs a commitment on their part if they are to succeed. Set performance standards such as the number of calls or sales they are expected to make in a day, week, or month. Monitor their performance. Help them be successful.

Part-timers can work out well and can be winners if you hire smart and manage creatively.

Beware of the Sales Gabber

Some salespeople simply don't know when to shut up!

Recently I had set aside an hour to do an interview with a sales candidate. Now I do a pretty thorough interview and I came prepared with a list of 30 or so questions I like to get answered.

I usually start off with a brief review of the timelines in a candidate's resume so that we are on common and comfortable ground. With this particular individual, what should have been a brief five-minute review turned into a 20-minute monologue that not only broke the job timelines down to the year, but I swear, he got down to days and minutes before he was done.

Every short question was met with a long answer. On at least three occasions, I mentioned that I was getting pressed for time but he wasn't to be deterred. I was to get the whole story and nothing less would do.

My time was running out by the tenth question and I was now ten minutes late for moving on. I mentioned that fact to the candidate as he followed me out to my car where he spent another five minutes thanking me and engaging in further chitchat. When I was finally able to extricate myself from the fellow, I called the recruiter and told him to send the candidate the standard no-thanks letter. And, if he asked, he should tell the candidate that he talked himself out of a job.

Overly social salespeople are quite unaware that they are wasting other people's time. Don't hire them. You don't want them wasting your customer's time.

Know What You're Looking for in a Salesperson

If you're looking for the ideal or perfect salesperson, look no more. They don't exist. What's "perfect" for you and your company depends entirely on what you sell, your selling environment, and the prospects you sell to.

Every sales position has a degree of uniqueness about it. Smart companies take the time to define what qualities they will use to qualify and disqualify potential sales hires. For example, your company may need Hunters to get out and beat the bushes. Whereas another company may be better off with Farmers to continue to develop business within existing accounts. Again, depending upon your circumstances, a Hunter/Farmer or

Farmer/Hunter, may be the better choice. And yes, there is a difference between those two latter selling styles.

Knowing what you're looking for before you start looking makes looking easier.

Don't Let HR Hire Salespeople

One of the hiring traps many companies fall into is letting HR hire salespeople. I apologize if this blog annoys HR practitioners but the simple truth is that most (not all) HR people are unqualified to hire salespeople. What they are extremely good at is managing the hiring process and understanding the legal aspects of hiring. This includes resume vetting, setting up interviews, monitoring interviews, first-level reference checks, etc.

HR is good at hiring ordinary people for ordinary jobs. Salespeople, like any specialized group of people, don't fill ordinary jobs. Sales positions require someone who is intimately familiar with the job, not just the job requirements, to fill the position effectively.

As the old saying goes, it takes one to know one. That's why, in the end, doctors should assess doctors, engineers should assess engineers, and sales managers should assess salespeople.

On a cautionary note, most sales managers make lousy HR practitioners. Where the HR professional can really make an impact is on helping the sales manager do a better job at interviewing candidates.

It may sound like an unholy alliance but they work really well.

Getting Piles from Sorting Resumes

The piles I'm referring to is not the type that cause anal discomfort, it's the "Yes," "No," and "Maybe" piles that result from sorting through tons of resumes before we engage in the interview process.

When you think of it, we make our go/no-go interview decisions based on the quality of the writing in a resume along with what we read. In many cases what we are reading is a well-written fabrication, a skewing of the truth so to speak (or write). Some resumes are a masterful exercise in creative writing. Whatever, it gets the person the interview.

There has got to be a better way and that better way is to assess candidates early in the hiring process.

Studies have shown that companies who use an assessment very early in the hiring process end up interviewing a better quality of candidate. So why don't more companies use a pre-interview assessment with all their candidates? The answer is painfully obvious – it's too expensive to assess everyone.

An alternate approach is to be selective in who you assess.

You still need to go through the aggravation of developing piles (the paper ones). Then either test everyone in the "Yes" pile, or re-sort the "Yes" pile into mini-piles and assess smaller groups of candidates until you have enough people to conduct a series of interviews, usually 5-8 people if you're lucky.

When you do this, you may lose a few good candidates from your Maybe and No piles but don't sweat it. You can always go back if you run out of Yesses.

What assessing the "Yes" pile does is eliminate those people early in the process who would be cut later when you finally did the assessment, but with one big advantage. Unbiased decision making. Companies who use an assessment late in their hiring process have generally fallen love with their candidate by that time and tend to ignore unfavourable assessment results.

The key? Only assess those candidates in your "Yes" pile, but test early in your hiring process, preferably prior to the first interview.

The result? By using a sales assessment early in your hiring process, you'll end up with a better quality candidate, a lot less wasted time, and a stronger sales team.

Prime the Witness When Doing Reference Checking

I'm usually not a big fan of asking leading questions of a referee. But when I'm doing reference checks for sales candidates, I'm all for priming the "witness" before conducting the interrogation. Why? Because it helps avoid getting those sometimes ill-deserved, glowing reports during your reference-checking process.

By telling the referee in advance the concerns that you might have about the salesperson, you're priming the person to be truthful with you about information that might impact the candidate's ability to do the job.

For example, telling the referee that you have a concern that Mr. Candidate may be over-social and might waste time chatting often gets the person to admit to a trait that he might not have otherwise mentioned.

Remember, the main purpose for checking references is not necessarily to get a glowing report but to find out potential problem areas and management challenges. You want to ensure that you're hiring a possible performer, not a problem. A glowing report is an added bonus.

So prime the witness and get to the truth.

Hiring a Salesperson? Hire for Attitude.

Seasoning is great “on” food and “in” people! One of the things employers often look for in a sales candidate is past sales experience and “seasoning.” However, sometimes when you hire one of these seasoned pros, they come complete with complacency.

In sales, like in many things, attitude counts. I don't ever discount a salesperson's enthusiasm. In fact I look for it. Over the years, I've found that it's often better to hire an inexperienced but enthusiastic salesperson than a laid-back, seasoned one.

Like enthusiasm, I value experience in a salesperson. Sometimes the seasoned salesperson comes equipped with blinders on and doesn't easily accept or try out new ideas. This complacency can be the kiss of death in today's fast-moving sales world. Examples of this are those salespeople who are unwilling to embrace or experiment with social media and different networking opportunities to find new business. The blinders limit their view.

To hire an experienced and well-seasoned salesperson with a poor attitude is to hire a problem.

Remember the old axiom, “Hire for attitude and train for skill.”

Using Sales Simulations

A lot of hiring managers shy away from doing a sales simulation because they think it's a bit contrived and somewhat corny, while others fall back on the old “sell me this pen” technique, which is better than nothing.

In an earlier post titled “How to Find Out If They Can Sell,” I gave an example of a useable sales simulation that is quite simple, easy to administer, and works well.

What I neglected to include in that post is how I evaluate the candidate. Rather than just relying on my stomach to gauge the success, or lack thereof, of the exercise, I have a checklist of those things I want to see during the “sale.”

Those of you who are already clients can download the simulation from the Resource section of your account. If you’re not a client, why not become one (there’s no cost) and you too can download a copy of the Hiring Interview Toolkit that includes not just one, but two, sales simulations and the checklist. A \$97 value that’s free for signing up.

Set an Interview Time Limit

I’ve blogged in the past about sales candidates who have a propensity to be verbose and why you may want to avoid them (huge time wasters).

Whenever I’m tasked to do an interview with someone who our Sales Temperament Assessment has flagged as being over-social, I use the following technique to see if the person has the condition under control.

After the initial pleasantries, I set the scene by telling the candidate that I have to be done the interview at a particular time and that I have thirty questions that I need to get answered.

If I find that I’m getting overly long answers, I’ll mention that I don’t want to run out of time and I need to move along. I’ll give the candidate two, maybe three, of these warnings. If he doesn’t pick up on the fact that he needs to tighten up on his responses, I let the interview time run out and mentally disqualify the candidate.

If the candidate isn’t perceptive enough to realize the value of my time, he won’t respect my customer’s time either. We all live in the same busy world where time is at a premium and none of us wants our time wasted by an overly social salesperson.

There’s nothing wrong with being over social, just as long as the person knows when to rein it in and get it under control.

There’s nothing worse than a salesperson’s mouth running wild.

The Last Sales Interview Question

You're hiring salespeople, right? So, at a minimum, the sales candidate should know how to sell himself. That's why, when you've completed all the rest of the interview and testing process, you should ask what I call the last question, "Why should we hire you?" This gives the salesperson one last opportunity to sell himself to you. Sometimes the results can be startling.

Every now and then you strike gold. A mediocre interview turns around instantly and the salesperson really shines. He can articulate the value he'll bring to the organization. He demonstrates that he knows where you want to go as an organization and shows where he fits into that plan. He understands the concept that if he doesn't know why you should hire him, you probably don't know as well.

On the other hand, you might get a response like I did when one sales candidate said, "Well, I need the job." As a salesperson, he should have known that people listen to radio station WIFM-FM (What's In it For Me - For Me!) and the response he gave was all about what he wanted and had nothing for me.

The best of all worlds is when an interview is wrapping up and the salesperson says something along the line of, "Before I go, I'd like to take this opportunity to point out a few reasons why hiring me makes a good business sense on your part." And then he gives you a few sound reasons to make him a job offer.

This is rare, but it does happen and if it happens to you, grab the person. You're probably making a good decision.

The "Hi Good-Looking" Trap

According to an article in the Harvard Business review, 33% of all hiring decisions are decided on appearance alone.

This is great for people who use this technique as all they need is a photo or video of the candidate to make their decision on. I'm being facetious of course. Obviously the candidate's resume is reviewed before you get to see the person. But then, how many really good candidates are cast aside because of appearance and, equally as important, how many good-looking duds are hired?

The hiring process is like the selling process or the buying process. It's a process and when it gets short circuited, problems abound.

The hiring process doesn't need to be written in stone, but there should be some guidelines that can be reviewed whenever something goes wrong so that the process can be modified.

Hiring from the hip is just as bad as firing from the hip if you really want to hit your target.

Hire Sales Skills Over Industry Experience

This hiring tip may seem counter intuitive but it has a lot of merit. Many companies still choose industry experience over sales skills because of the potentially faster ramp-up time and potential business that an industry-seasoned candidate brings to the table.

While this is a reasonable assumption, you may be passing up the opportunity to hire the sales skills that could take the company further than any transfer of business would.

Successful sales organizations look for sales skills with the understanding that they can provide the industry knowledge and background in a reasonable timeframe. Mind you, experience is a wonderful thing just as long as it's accompanied by sales skills.

People with good sales skills are everywhere when you're looking for it. Instead of prospecting for new business, sharp sales managers prospect for new talent.

How to Find Out If They Can Sell

No sales candidate is going to tell you that he doesn't know how to sell, even when he doesn't know how. That's because he thinks he does know. So it's up to you to figure out if he really does.

I know that it sounds a bit corny to ask a sales candidate to sell you a pen or a coffee cup. But think if it for a moment. If he can't sell you something as simple as that, how will he ever sell your stuff?

You can avoid the potential corniness of this exercise by having a well-thought-out sales simulation that you put the candidate through. A well-thought-out scenario is one that has some substance to it, not just picking up an object off your desk and asking the candidate to sell it to you.

The scenario doesn't need to be complicated, nor does it have to be around what you sell. It's best if it's something common that the candidate can get his mind around quickly and demonstrate that he understands the selling process. The following is a typical example.

Here's what you tell the candidate: "You're selling advertising speciality items, calendars, coffee cups, pens, etc. I'm the owner of a small flower shop. I get 60% of my business from corporate sales and 40% from drop-ins. Most of my business comes from a radius of 5 miles from the shop. I'm busy but I could be busier and have room to expand. I recently met you at a networking meeting and agreed to meet with you today. This is that meeting."

In fairness, I typically give the candidate 10 minutes or so to collect his thoughts before I fire the gun. It works. Some candidates do very well and some die a horrible death.

I don't hire the dead ones.

When to Interview the Sales Candidate's Spouse

There are a couple of situations when it makes good sense to include an interview with a sales candidate's spouse.

The first situation is when you're seriously considering hiring a salesperson from a competitor. The salesperson may be playing you off against his current employer for a raise. Asking to include the spouse in the hiring process helps gauge how serious the person is. You don't bring your spouse to a meeting you aren't serious about.

Another situation is where the job is particularly demanding and you know that it may take a toll on the family. For example, there may be a lot of travel involved, or there's an expectation of excessive overtime or weekend time commitments. In these cases, you want to be sure the sales candidate has a sound personal/family life and cooperative spouse.

One last, less important reason for a spousal interview is where there's a high social aspect to the job that's expected to include the salesperson's spouse. This is another situation where you want to be comfortable knowing that the spouse is on side.

Interviewing the salesperson's spouse is not something you do early in the hiring process. In fact, if you do this, make it one of the last — if not the last — interviews before extending a job offer. By this point in the hiring process, you'll be pretty sure this is the salesperson you want to hire.

Two Critical Tests for Sales Candidates (Part 1)

When hiring for a position as critical as sales, I'm always surprised that companies don't take the time to test candidates better than they do.

I recognize that the HR department is ill equipped to test salespeople beyond the standard personality or temperament assessment but, even then, most seem loath to use these tools. It's as though they are showing a weakness if they have to use a tool to help with the hiring process. And that they are supposed to be able to divine the keepers from the ones they should be throwing back.

I don't expect HR people to be able to properly assess a salesperson's selling ability beyond the knowledge level. Like other professions, it generally takes-one-to-know-one in order to properly assess a sales candidate.

Even then, sales managers feel they have an innate ability to select winners. In actual fact, tossing a coin will often give them the same results as an interview. I wrote about this in my article "Luck is Not a Hiring Tool".

Somewhere along the line you should do some semi-formal testing. I'll tell you what those two critical tests are in my next post. Watch for it, you don't want to miss this important information.

Two Critical Tests for Sales Candidates (Part 2)

In part one I expressed my despair that companies don't do a more thorough job of selecting salespeople.

My concerns stem from my years in the sales training business where I was too often brought into a company and asked to basically train pigs to fly. They wanted to train salespeople who, at best, should have been selling something else, and at worst, should not have been in sales at all.

Don't get me wrong, not all the salespeople were misfits or duds, but many were. Too many, in my mind. I wondered how these people got hired for sales in the first place. In some cases, they were masters of selling themselves into a job but unable to sell little else. I started to use our Sales Temperament Assessment (STA) to assess workshop participants prior to the training so at least I knew which ones were likely to "get it and use it," which ones would "get it and maybe use it," and those who would "get it but not be able to use it."

While I recommend the use of the STA as part of the hiring process, of course, I also have two other “tests” that I like to see companies use.

The first is a mini competency quiz which consists of 10 sales-related questions that allow you to assess the candidate’s knowledge of selling. You’d be surprised what this short quiz uncovers. More important than what the person knows is what he doesn’t know. It will show you what areas the candidate will need help in should you decide to go ahead and hire him.

If you don’t want to create your own quiz, drop me an email and I’ll send you mine. I’ll even include the answers.

The second test is a sales simulation where you ask the candidate to go through an appropriate sales scenario with you as the prospect. Choose a neutral item or service as you don’t want to know if the person knows the product, you want to know if he can sell, period.

Many candidates talk the talk, but when it comes to walking the walk, they fail to make the grade.

We include a couple of simple sales scenarios, along with a detailed sales call checklist, as part of a Hiring Interview Toolkit we make available to clients who have signed up for our Sales Temperament Assessment services. Of course, you can always make up your own sales simulation fairly quickly.

I know you’re busy. Everyone is. But if you’re not going to take the time to hire smart and test your candidates, then you might as well just flip a coin. That way you’ll save time while having the same odds of success at hiring a winner.

Mandatory and Desirable Criteria for Hiring Salespeople

When you’re actively looking for a new salesperson, not everyone who passes over your electronic threshold is a prime candidate for the job of sales professional. To eliminate obvious misfits from the pile of responses you hope to get from your recruiting efforts, you need to have a filter through which you will pass the résumés and applications. You do this by developing a set of mandatory and desirable criteria.

Some general categories of criteria are:

- Education
- Past applicable work experience
- Previous training (non-sales)
- Special skills
- Hobbies or interests
- Socio-economic level
- Personality traits
- Stability
- Sales training
- Organizational skills

Take the time to build a filter for a sales position in your company. Look at the categories above and decide which factors are “must-have” (mandatory) and which are “nice-to-have” (desirable) and build your list.

Beware of establishing requirements that are too stringent and therefore may eliminate a good candidate. For example, a university degree may be nice to have (desirable) but don't make it a mandatory requirement unless it really is mandatory.

Rank your “desirables” as to what is most desirable, next most desirable, etc. This will help you select between candidates who may have many of the required criteria for the position. Now it's a matter of selecting the most desirable.

Using a mandatory/desirable criteria filter will help eliminate wasted interview time and help you find a better quality candidate.

Hasty Hiring Decisions Can Be Costly

An article in the Harvard Business Review pointed out that 43% of hiring decisions are made within the first 4.8 minutes of the interview. Talk about the importance of a candidate creating a good first impression!

If this is the case, why bother interviewing people for more than 5 minutes? The answer is because hasty hiring decisions can be incredibly costly when they don't work out. What's the cost to hire and train a salesperson these days? \$100 grand? More? Probably.

Can you imagine the consequences of a plant manager purchasing a \$100,000 piece of capital equipment based on a 4.8 minute interview with the salesperson? It would be more like a 4.8 month serious deliberation with a committee before such a purchase would be made.

Hiring haste doesn't only make waste; it can be a disaster for your bottom line. I'm certainly not advocating that you take 4.8 months to make a hiring decision, but 4.8 hours of serious consideration might be something to shoot for.

If you want to keep the hiring process short, consider using mandatory hiring criteria and a sales assessment to help filter out the obvious misfits.

Beware of the Gabber When Hiring Salespeople

Every now and then I get a call from one of my consulting clients who is all excited because he thinks he's found the ideal salesperson.

"Brian," he'll tell me excitedly, "This guy is great with people. He's a really good talker." And I'll respond with: "I've no doubt he's a good talker, but can he sell?"

And of course, the client assures me that the guy can, until he finds out that he can't. Many folks used to think that outgoing people who have the gift of gab made good salespeople. That was before they discovered that many of these outgoing people wouldn't shut up long enough to let the prospect buy.

We need to remember that there's a difference between making conversation and making sales.

There are a several reasons why we keep on hiring this type of salesperson:

1. They come across as being extremely likeable, and we think our clients will also find them that way. In actual fact, your clients will probably give a sigh of relief when the person leaves or hangs up the telephone so that they can get about their business.
2. They are extremely proficient at selling themselves into a job. Unfortunately, that's often the last thing they sell for you.
3. Reference checks come up clean because former employers still like them and don't want to give a poor reference.

Make sure you hire sellers, not just talkers.

Hiring “No-See’em” Salespeople

You’re probably wondering exactly what is a no-see’em? These are salespeople that your customers don’t see. Usually they don’t see them because their only contact is by telephone.

Telephone selling is often considered at the low end of the selling food chain and, as such, is low paying and attracts immigrants and other people with a poor understanding or ability to communicate effectively in English. This inability can cause aggravation and frustration on the part of your customers as they struggle to understand or to be understood. Here’s a blinding flash of the obvious for you — aggravated customers don’t buy!

If you’re hiring people to work the phones, make sure they are relatively accent free and can communicate effectively in English. There’s a big difference between interviewing someone in person where you can see and hear the person versus just hearing the person. In the case of no-see’ems, it’s best to conduct your interviews over the telephone.

If you’re having problems understanding the candidate, so will your customers.

Choosing Which Candidate to Hire Between Equally Qualified Salespeople

Now here’s a problem most sales managers and HR professionals would kill for — two equally qualified sales candidates.

Assuming that both candidates scored equally on our Sales Temperament Assessment and that they are pretty well matched against your mandatory and desirable criteria list, which one do you choose?

You want to choose the person who seems most enthusiastic about the prospect of joining your sales team.

In fact, if one of the candidates was somewhat less qualified but more enthusiastic, I’d probably choose him or her over the seemingly better qualified one. Why? Because, in my mind, enthusiasm trumps most other qualities including experience.

In my experience, a less experienced, enthusiastic salesperson will sell rings around a more seasoned, laid-back one who has grown tired of his job.

As I always tell my clients, hire for attitude and train for skill. Enthusiasm is an attitude that is worth hiring.

Sales Training as a Hiring Criterion

If someone is serious about being in sales, I expect them to have had some sort of formal sales training over the time they've been in sales. By sales training I don't mean the type of product knowledge training that too often passes for sales training. I want to know that the person knows how to sell and isn't just flying by the seat of his pants.

Selling is a skill and not an art. You don't develop skills by reading a book or listening to a CD. A lot of people taught themselves to play golf and we all know how great they are! The serious golfer gets some professional assistance or even coaching to develop his golfing skills. The serious salesperson does the same. He may not get one-on-one training but he does get formal training where he can develop his selling skills.

Ask yourself this question, If the salesperson hasn't taken the time to develop his craft, how serious is he about being in sales and how long will he last with your organization? I'm a big believer of making some sort of formal sales training one of your mandatory hiring criteria. If not mandatory, it's certainly one of my top desirable criteria and one that might give a sales candidate a competitive edge in a tight race for the job.

It's Prudent to Always Be Recruiting

Those of us who are long in the tooth remember the old ABC of selling – Always Be Closing. When you're a sales manager, it's ABR – Always Be Recruiting.

You never know when you're going to lose a good salesperson, or a bad one for that matter, and the toughest time to find a salesperson is when you need one! Because of this, you should always be on the lookout for prospective salespeople. Here are a couple of ideas that will help.

- Keep a file folder with the names, business cards, and/or resumes of potential candidates who impress you.
- What about the salespeople who call on you? Which ones stand out in your mind? Never mind that they might be from a different industry. People are trainable.
- How about salespeople from other industries that you meet in your daily travels? Do any stand out? If so, drop their business card in the file folder.

- Keep an eye on people within your own organization who might be ready to take on the challenge of sales.

It's prudent to ABR because you just never know when you might need to replace or add a salesperson.

Beware of Salespeople Who Interview Well

Hiring a salesperson who interviews well is an easy trap to fall into. The person is usually a charmer. He's answered every question eloquently and in depth, giving you far more information that you asked for. He's articulate, witty, personable, and obviously knows his stuff.

Maybe, maybe not. You may have just been sold.

You may be dealing with a highly trained interviewee who has a social streak a mile wide. What do I mean by highly trained? Keep in mind that there is much more material floating around on how to "ace the interview" than there is on "how to interview."

Websites abound to help salespeople second-guess your every question and come up with pat answers that they're told you want to hear. Unfortunately, not all these answers are truthful which is why reference checking is so important.

In addition to being well prepared to answer your questions, some of these people fall into the overly social personality category and have the gift of gab which enhances their likeability during the interview process.

When you suspect that the person is just too glib and you're getting long answers to short questions, beware. Sometimes you're getting long answers because the longer the answers, the fewer the questions you're likely to ask.

Remember that the salesperson who is sitting across from you during the hiring process has only one purpose and that is to "sell" you on making him a job offer. Be careful what you buy.

Consider Doing a Two-Minute Sales Interview

Before you go investing a ton of time and effort in setting up and conducting a face-to-face interview, consider a two-minute telephone interview with the potential sales candidate.

While this is particularly important if you're considering investing in an airline ticket to fly someone in for a formal interview, that isn't the primary reason for this tip. The main purpose of the call is to evaluate the salesperson's telephone voice and general demeanor.

Psychologists tell us that there's a correlation between language skills and intelligence. People who communicate well tend to be some of the brighter bulbs on the tree. However, there's probably an even more relative reason for conducting a two-minute telephone interview.

Much of today's selling is done over the telephone. If the salesperson doesn't impress you with his performance on the telephone, he won't impress your prospects either. Have a half-dozen, open-ended questions ready. Simply start with, "Tell me about yourself," and then shut up. Listen to the person's grammar, diction, pacing, inflection, etc. Does he have an accent that makes listening to him difficult and a chore? If he stumbles around, slurs his words, or can't string four words together in a cohesive phrase, thank him and move along to the next candidate.

Yes, you may throw out the occasional diamond in the rough with this approach, but how much time do you have available to do diamond polishing? It's far too easy to make a bad hiring decision these days and the two-minute interview might just improve your odds.

How Much Weight Should You Give to Sales Assessment Results?

There have been situations where possibly good performing sales candidates have gotten knocked out of the hiring process early in the game because they "failed" a personality test or temperament assessment.

This usually happens when HR uses a pre-hiring tool to make a go/no-go decision instead of considering the assessment results as just one part of the hiring puzzle. Until all the pieces of the puzzle are in place, it's often difficult, if not impossible, to see what you really have.

Having said that, many companies go to a lot of trouble to use an assessment such as our Sales Temperament Assessment to benchmark their sales team. In so doing, they have a pretty good idea of who is likely to be a success and, more importantly, who is likely to be a waste of time.

For example, two of the eighteen selling styles that our assessment identifies are usually ineffective as salespeople. That doesn't mean you shouldn't hire them. It means that you would be wise to do your due diligence before making the decision to move forward. If a candidate already has a verifiable track record of success in selling what you want sold, but the assessment says he's a no-go, check it out before throwing the baby out with the bath water.

So, if the candidate is so good, why did he fail the test? Well, first off, these aren't tests that you can fail. They are insight into a person, sort of a look behind the curtain so to speak. The person might not fit the profile the company has set, but that isn't failing any more than not getting a job as an airline pilot when you have serious vision problems. The person was simply a bad fit for the position.

Can an assessment misrepresent someone? Absolutely.

First off, no assessment will be 100 percent accurate. I suspect that the best of them are good to the 75 percent point.

Second, candidates may try to second-guess the test, answer untruthfully and thus skew the results, often not in their favour.

Third, the candidate may be having personal problems, either at home or at work, that cause him to respond inappropriately. Good assessments can usually detect that problem and will report it to you.

Finally, any personality or temperament assessment, including our Sales Temperament Assessment, is not an end unto itself. They are just one of the hiring tools available to you to assist in making an informed hiring decision. Use them wisely.

Get Sales Candidates to Check You Out

Smart salespeople will do their due diligence when they're looking for a sales job, but it doesn't hurt to present the less-than-smart ones with a bit of a challenge.

Here's what you can do. In your recruiting ad, briefly describe your company's work environment. Suggest that salespeople visit your web site to check you out and then send you an email as to why they feel they're a perfect fit.

Just add something like this to your ad, "Applicants are encouraged to visit MyCompany.com and send us an email with your reasons why we should hire you."

Keep in mind that if the candidate can't figure out why you should hire him, you'll have the same problem.

Doing this gives you a chance to see if the salesperson understands who you are and what you do. This helps weed out all the salespeople who either just need a job and apply for everything, or those who are only applying because they don't like where they are now. For those people, the extra work isn't worth the effort.

It might also help to shorten the pile of useless resumes that you have to wade through.

Stay Objective When Hiring Salespeople

It's far too easy to either fall in love with a sales candidate (the halo effect) or develop an instant dislike (transference). What generally happens with both the halo effect and transference is that the person under scrutiny reminds you of someone who you either really like or really dislike. If you find yourself moving too far in one direction or the other, pause and make note of the fact and why it might be happening.

It helps if you can identify the person you are thinking about or comparing the candidate with. This often helps you to better understand your feelings and often results in you being able to disconnect your feeling for the candidate from the other person.

If you're going to make a good hiring decision, it's critical that you remain objective to the very end of the hiring process. To do otherwise can skew the decision, often in the wrong direction.

Don't Lead the Witness

Too many untrained interviewers hear what they want to hear and subconsciously ask questions that get them the answers they want instead of uncovering truths. In a court of law, this process would be called leading the witness.

Asking leading questions that predispose the sales candidate to give you answers you're seeking is a waste of time.

Here are a couple of examples of leading the witness (sales candidate) from hiring interviews that I've sat in on as an observer.

"We're proud of our team environment here. How do you see yourself fitting in?"

As you might imagine, even the most introverted loner would become an incredible team player in response to this question.

"We get most of our business from new accounts. How do you feel about cold calling?"

Now the salesperson who is a competent Farmer suddenly turns into an avid Hunter in his quest to get hired.

Remember, you're using the interview process to uncover the good, the bad, and the ugly about the salesperson you're considering hiring and whose services you will be paying good money for. So, unless you want to waste your money, use the interview to dig for the unvarnished truth, not what you might want to hear.

Ask open questions and look for collaborative facts from other sources such as assessments or reference checks before accepting the information as the gospel truth.

When in the job-seeking mode, salespeople may not lie (although some will), but they'll certainly stretch the truth in order to get hired. It's the interviewer's job to find out where truth ends and fantasy begins by getting the witness (the salesperson) to tell the truth and only the truth.

Hire a Boomerang!

No, no, no! I don't mean the device you throw and that's supposed to come back to you. I mean a human boomerang.

What's a human boomerang? That's someone who left your company for supposedly greener pastures but found himself standing in the same brown stuff as before and is

now ready to come back. Even if the grass was greener when he or she left, times change and the grass may now be less green where the person is now.

It doesn't hurt to call someone whom you were sorry to lose and see what the person is up to. Maybe he's happy as a clam and maybe not. If he's happy, be happy for him and tell him to give you a call if things change. You may or may not have a spot for him when he calls but it's worth the try. On the other hand, if he isn't particularly happy where he is now, have a chat.

Like a boomerang, the person may come back. It's a win-win for everyone. He's happy to be back in an environment he's familiar with and you're happy to have a performer back in the fold.

How NOT to Staff Your Sales Department

I don't want to go on a rant here, but every now and then I'll stumble over a company who has fallen on tough times and feels the need to downsize but hates to lay people off. Instead of putting them on the street, they will sometimes offer to move them into sales.

My mind boggles at the stupidity of this business decision. Who in their right mind would come up with a solution like this? Probably someone with an MBA who undoubtedly sees people as resources to be moved around and used to fill whatever hole in the dyke needs filling at any given time.

Will they ever learn? Probably not, as this isn't the first time I've witnessed this business stupidity. I've seen situations where Fred is taken from accounting, where he's become surplus to the company's needs, and moved to sales where he dies a slow, horrible death and finally quits feeling he's a total failure.

Moving people from an administrative department and putting them into sales is like taking a fish out of water and asking them to run a race. They'll flop around for a while in a valiant effort to make a go of it but, in the end, they'll finally die. Not a pretty sight.

If you've got too many people in a non-sales department and you need more people in sales, it makes much more sense to lay off the excess people and hire proper salespeople. We should be capitalizing on our people's strengths and skills. Using people as cannon fodder to plug holes in dykes is plain stupid.

At least that's how I see it anyway.

Hold At Least One of Your Interviews in a Social Environment

There are a couple of reasons why you should take candidates from your hiring shortlist out for lunch or dinner and neither reason has to do with feeding a starving salesperson. I recommend that you hold at least one of your interviews in a social environment. Here's why:

1. The candidate may feel more relaxed and will be even more open and free with information during this type of relaxed interview setting. In addition to making note of their general manners, watch how they deal with the serving staff. Are they courteous or condescending? It gives you some indication of how they might act with other people.
2. If you expect your new salesperson to be meeting prospects or clients in a social setting, this is a great way to see how he or she reacts in that setting. Is the candidate comfortable in a social setting or somewhat awkward? Will he make your customers feel comfortable? How do you feel?
3. One last thing to watch for is the person's drinking habits. While you can't always tell if the candidate has a drinking problem, it may alert you to things to come. Sometimes alcohol can cause loose lips which can sink a person's career if he starts badmouthing a former employer or competitor.

Use TORC When Hiring

Not checking with a candidate's previous employers is a serious mistake that many companies make when making a hiring decision. Sometimes it's impossible to check a person's employment record or do meaningful reference checks because the candidate is still in his first job.

If you have someone you want to hire but the candidate is still employed, use TORC to deal with the situation.

TORC stands for "Threat of Reference Checks."

Tell the candidate that you always make job offers contingent upon receiving a satisfactory reference from his current employer. If the candidate is having problems with his employer, he'll disappear in a flash. If things are OK, he'll accept the condition and make sure he leaves his current employer on good terms.

Making the Job Offer

If you have successfully narrowed the field down to one candidate, then it's time to make an offer. If you still have two or three good candidates, offer the position to your first choice but DO NOT tell the other candidates that the job has been filled.

This is important because if your number one choice decides to decline the offer, you want to be able to make an offer to your next best candidate without making that person feel like he or she was your second choice.

If you have two equally qualified and desirable candidates, choose the one who wants the job most and/or the one who has the fewest doubts about leaving his or her current job. This reduces the risk of the candidate changing his mind before starting, or leaving soon after he starts.

After you have a signed acceptance, inform the other candidates the position has been filled. If you were filling a senior position, you may want to inform them personally. You want to leave a good impression with those who didn't get the position. Without lying, leave everyone with the feeling that they were your number two choice. Who knows, your number one choice may not work out, and you want to be in a position to re-approach your runners-up.

Assess Candidates Early in Your Hiring Process

As a sales management consultant, I find it frustrating when a company spends a lot of time and money hiring someone. And then when he or she doesn't work out well, the company has the person do our assessment to see if the person is suitable for sales.

Guess what? In many cases, the sales assessment shows that the person shouldn't be in sales in the first place, or the person is simply a poor match for the company's selling environment. Either way, a lot of time and money was wasted and the hiring process has to be repeated all over again.

If you are going to use an assessment in your hiring process, use it early. Too many employers go through a series of time-consuming interviews before using an assessment only to find that it shows the candidate may be unsuitable for the position.

Another problem is that there's a strong tendency to negate or ignore the assessment's conclusions if you've developed a liking for the candidate. That's why we recommend assessing candidates early in the hiring process before they've had a chance to sell themselves to you.

Any good sales assessment will tell you things you want to know before spending too much time with the candidate. Having said that, we'd prefer that you use our sales assessment.

Set the Candidate's Expectations about Pre-Employment Testing

One of the best times to mention a pre-employment assessment is right up front in your hiring process. Letting candidates know that they will be asked to go through an assessment as part of your hiring process has a number of advantages:

1. It positions you as being very professional in your desire to hire the very best.
2. It can save time by eliminating poor candidates early in the hiring process. The old adage that time is money is even more important in today's busy world. In order to effectively use an assessment in this manner you should have tested enough of your own performers (and non-performers) so that you really know what type of people you're looking for.
3. Letting candidates know that they will be asked to do an assessment will weed out those people who are not confident about their abilities and were hoping to snow their way through the interview process.

One company that I'm aware of adds the following to their recruitment ads, "Every candidate will be offered the opportunity to take an online Sales Assessment Profile which is required before interviews will be scheduled."

This is an easy way to set the candidate's expectations regarding your pre-employment testing processes.

Looking for Good Salespeople? Try These Unlikely Places

Advertising isn't the only way to find suitable job candidates. Here are some other sources worth considering:

In-house.

If the sales position in question is an entry-level one, you may have some ideal candidates' right under your nose, such as a customer support person or an employee who shows promise and who has expressed an interest in going into sales.

Employee recommendations.

Your current salespeople and others within the company may have friends or neighbours who would be a good fit.

Former sales staff.

If you had someone in the past who was a performer but left for greener pastures, consider giving the individual a call. Sometimes the grass isn't always greener, but the person might feel embarrassed about approaching you.

Other sales managers or networking groups.

Use your personal contacts with other non-competing sales managers. Ask if they've seen or interviewed any potential candidates that they could pass along to you.

Competition.

Don't be afraid to approach a competitor's salesperson.

Customer recommendations.

Talk with some of your best customers. Who do they have calling on them now who have created a good impression?

I don't have the edge on creativity when it comes to finding stones to turn over in my quest for good salespeople. So I'd really like to hear from you. What's the most unusual source of candidates that you've found? What have you tried that worked for you and may work for others? Put your ideas in the comment section below.

Keep Note of the Superstars You Meet

If you want to find a really good salesperson, don't run an advertisement. Use an even better resource – your experience. As you trundle up and down the road of life, keep note of the salespeople you meet that impress you.

Get their cards and home telephone numbers. That way you'll know how to reach them when you're looking to hire someone. Make sure you give them your card and suggest that they contact you if they ever get the urge to move on and leave their current employer.

If someone impressed you, he or she is likely to impress your customers as well. Professional selling skills are very transportable and if the person was good at selling

whatever it was you were buying, he or she may be able to sell your stuff as well. Really good salespeople have transportable skills and attitudes.

What better source of talent than real performance.

Talk to Three or More References

Some people quit after doing one or, at the most, two reference checks. Not good!

Only checking one reference is like only having one clock to use to determine the exact time. It might be right or it might be wrong. Two clocks (or references) may cancel each other out or be too similar. Three clocks (or references) are more likely to get you closer to the truth.

Asking a candidate to provide you with references is like asking the fox what time they'd like to start guarding the henhouse. Any answer is a bad one. Why? Because, unless they have a career death wish, they're only going to provide the names of people who are prepared to give absolutely incredible references.

Rather than ask the candidate to give you three references, ask him for permission to contact former bosses or supervisors and then get those names. If he can't, or is hesitant to give you any names, beware. The candidate may ask for time to do so. I prefer to not give them time to contact the people as I'm looking for candid and spontaneous responses to my reference-checking questions and I'd rather they not be forewarned that I'm going to call.

Always Be Looking For Good Salespeople

The time to start looking for a new salesperson isn't when you've just lost one. That's the time that's set aside to panic because you have a critical territory unmanned and vulnerable.

The astute sales manager is always on the lookout for possible candidates. Keep a "Resume/Prospective Salespeople" file folder close by. Put into it any resumes you might receive or even the names of people you might like to have work for you if the conditions are right.

Keep the business cards of salespeople who impress you as being professional. Even though they may not work in your specific field, maybe their skills and attitude are transferrable.

You know you're going to lose a salesperson at the worst possible time. (Is there a good time to lose a salesperson?) So best be prepared.

Set up that file folder today.

Do Your Own Reference Checks

I know it takes a lot of time to do reference checks, time that you don't really have. But DON'T succumb to the temptation of delegating this important aspect of the hiring process to the Human Resources department.

It's not that HR professionals can't do a good job. It's just that, when dealing with salespeople, beyond checking dates of employment, etc, they don't always know what to ask about, or how to interpret the responses.

Important information can be lost in translation when someone else does your reference checks for you. No one knows, better than you, what to look for in the answers (or non-answers) that you get because you know exactly how the answers relate to the role.

Get the HR people involved in helping you develop a reference call checklist that you can use. Just make sure that you add the sales performance and attitude questions that you also want the answers for.

Beware of the "Halo Effect"

Did you ever meet someone who you took an instant like to? That's because the person you've just met subconsciously reminds you of someone you know and it's called the "halo effect." Whatever qualities you attribute to the person you know are transferred to the person you've just met.

This is an all-too-common and dangerous phenomenon that often occurs during the interview portion of the hiring process. We take an instant like to the candidate and end up short-circuiting the interview process and not digging for the information we need to make an informed hiring decision.

The best way to deal with this potential hiring trap is to mentally note that you have this warm and fuzzy feeling about the candidate and try to identify who it is she reminds you of. Having done that, pause a moment to remind yourself that this person is NOT the same person and you need to look for the differences.

Another phenomenon to be aware of is the “reverse halo effect.” This is where you take an instant dislike to a candidate. This is because the individual reminds you of someone you dislike or someone who has caused you grief in the past and you’ve transferred the other person’s transgressions onto the new person.

Use the same techniques as for the halo effect to get your mind back on track again.

Why Use the Sales Temperament Assessment?

With the hard cost of hiring a salesperson ranging from \$1,000 to \$10,000 or more, and the soft costs of a mis-hire estimated as being 2.5 times the annual compensation package you offer, making the right hiring decision is critical. Psychological profile tests, such as our Sales Temperament Assessment (STA), can be a valuable cost-saving tool in the decision-making process.

When hiring a salesperson, you are basically looking for three things:

1. Ability: Can the person do the job?
2. Character: Does the person have the desire and determination?
3. Temperament: How will the person go about doing the job?

The interview process can usually help you find the answers to the first two qualities. The third ingredient for selling success – temperament – is harder to assess.

The STA is a tool designed to measure the basic temperamental qualities that make up a successful salesperson:

- Competitiveness
- Sociability
- Drive
- Independence

Here are some of the things our sales assessment can reveal about salespeople:

- Are they competitive, ambitious, decisive?
- Are they sociable, persuasive, optimistic?
- How good are they at pushing for results?
- Will they be overly talkative?
- Will they shy away from objections?

- Are they persistent?
- Will they be comfortable making cold calls?
- How likely are they to close a sale?

These are some of the things you want to find out before you hire someone, not after.

Firing Isn't Failure

I don't know about you but not every salesperson I've hired turned out to be a winner. If they were, I'd probably be spending my days at the racetrack getting rich.

If by some unfortunate stroke of bad luck you happen to hire a salesperson who doesn't work out and you have to fire the person, don't take the situation personally. Having to fire someone who, for whatever reason, didn't work out, isn't a crime, just a poor judgement call. Don't despair, you can regain or maintain your credibility by making the proper decision and correct the situation.

Whatever you do, don't blame the person who persuaded you that he was right for the job. When talking to the person, be candid and honest. Take responsibility for what went wrong. Then provide fair financial compensation and get the person out the door with his self-esteem and confidence intact. It's the least that you owe the person.

Making a bad hire is a mistake. Failing to fire is often a bigger mistake.

Stop Being the Farm Team for Your Competitors

Are you tired of having your salespeople poached by competitors or just leaving for greener pastures? If so, there are a couple of things you can do to eliminate, or at least, minimize the problem.

First, you can stop the hemorrhaging by profiling your successful, long-term employees and using that criterion when hiring new people. Understanding what you have now will help you find the winners of the future and the kind of salespeople that are likely to stay with you for a long time.

Second, have a sincere exit interview with exiting staff. If they tell you that they are leaving for more money accept that at face value and ask what, apart from the compensation, caused them to start looking around in the first place. Look for underlying reasons for the exodus.

If you're paying fairly, look for other reasons. Most people start looking around for other, more personal reasons, and find a better-paying job as a result.

Find the problem, solve the problem, and keep your people.

Good Sources of Salespeople

As sales managers, we're always, or should always be, on the lookout for new salespeople. Here is a sorely neglected source of potential salespeople — your top performers.

Ask them if they know anyone. Birds of a feather flock together and it's quite likely that your existing people may know someone who could be a candidate for the position.

Also, don't hesitate to ask your current salespeople if they know any competitive salespeople whom they respect. Be careful about approaching these possible candidates directly as you might start a raiding war.

Use a third party such as a flexible executive recruiter to make the approach and to assess the candidate's interest in making a career change. You've got nothing to lose and a lot to gain. When you hire a salesperson away from your competition, you're up one and they're down one. That's a big difference!

No References? Beware!

Although most companies, for some inexplicable reason, don't check references, you should still ask for them. Not being able to get references can tell you volumes about the candidate.

Whenever a candidate can't provide current references because "the person left the company and I don't know where he went", or for a multitude of other seemingly reasonable reasons, beware. Sometimes it's not because they CAN'T provide references, it's because they DON'T want to. Sometimes the candidate doesn't have any good references, or maybe he's afraid of what the references might say.

When you can't get references, this should raise a red flag in your mind and you should drop the candidate to the bottom of the eligibility list, if not off the list altogether. Smart employers not only ask for permission to call the candidate's former bosses or supervisors, they follow through and actually make those calls.

Don't Discard Badly Written Resumes

While it makes a lousy first impression, just because a candidate doesn't express himself or herself well on paper shouldn't be the sole reason for eliminating the person from the competition. Not every good salesperson has a great grasp of the written word or can spell well, but they may be able to sell up a storm.

A lot of well-written resumes are not the work of the candidate. They are often the result of a resume preparation service and don't give you a true insight into the person's ability to write. If writing letters isn't a major criterion for the job, don't worry that the resume isn't a work of art.

One way to avoid this hiring trap is to take the time to at least interview the person over the telephone. If the candidate sounds good, carry on with the hiring process and see if he can make the grade against your other hiring criterion.

While it's nice to have both, the ability to sell far outweighs the ability to properly express oneself in writing.

Beware When Hiring Extroverts

For some reason, employers fall into the hiring trap of assuming that extroverts make the best salespeople. Some do, many don't! Why? Because extroverts are so outgoing, they often talk "at" people instead of "to" them and this annoys many people, particularly introverts.

Too many extroverted salespeople take the approach of, "Let me tell you what I've got," instead of trying to help the other person make an informed buying decision.

Some of the world's most successful salespeople are reserved and introverted. This causes them to ask more questions and listen better. Prospects appreciate that.

I'm not suggesting you avoid hiring extroverts. I'm suggesting you hire extroverts who have developed their listening skills. How do you determine if they have good listening skills? You do that during the interview process.

Does the person respond appropriately to things you tell him? — good. Does he give you long answers to short questions? — bad.

Keep in mind that some of these people wouldn't listen at all if they didn't think it was their turn to talk next!

Define the Job

A good and thorough job description is one of the major keys to making sure you hire the right person. If you don't know what you want someone to do, then anyone can do it!

A good job description is not only a primary hiring tool but it can become the performance standard by which your salespeople are evaluated.

Unfortunately, most companies don't have formal, written job descriptions and those that do have a description that looks more like a shopping list than a position description.

One of the reasons companies don't have good job descriptions is that they're not sure what should be included or how to go about making a good one. If you're having problems putting one together, contact me. I have a couple of ideas that may help.

Using Auditions Instead of Role-Plays

Here's an interesting way to find out if a sales candidate really knows how to sell or is just telling you he does. Anybody can talk a good talk but can they walk the walk. Here's a neat way to find out.

Get the candidate to audition for you.

An audition is simply an extension of the role-play. Give the candidate some product information and ask him to come to the next interview prepared to "sell" the product to the interviewer. It needn't be one of your company's products or services that would require them to do research; it could just be something neutral.

If you go with the non-company, neutral product route, you might give the candidate a cup (somewhat expensive), a key ring (relatively inexpensive or even cheap), and a calendar (moderately priced), along with the following scenario:

"You'll be making a presentation to the owner of a flower shop that wants to reward repeat customers and encourage additional business. The owner has a limited budget and hasn't used advertising specialty items before. Which of these three items would you suggest? And, if suggesting more than one, in what order would you suggest them, and why?"

The resulting presentation should give you some idea of how creative the person is and how well attuned he or she is to the prospect's needs. It doesn't really matter which product the person proposes as being the best one just as long as he or she can properly justify (sell) it to the prospect (you).

The advantages of this approach are:

- it gives the candidate time to properly prepare for the “sales call”
- it gives you a better idea of the type of questions the salesperson uses to qualify a prospect (or to see if he qualifies at all).

The disadvantages of this approach are:

- you don't get an opportunity to see how fast the candidate is on his feet
- it requires an additional meeting

The Downside of Hiring Under-Qualified Candidates

Everybody seems to be concerned about hiring an overqualified candidate. This tip takes you to the other extreme – the downside of hiring the under-qualified candidate.

It's tempting from a salary point of view to hire the newbie to sales. The problem is that a salesperson's job is to get sales (income) but the newbie doesn't really know how to sell and therefore ends up costing you more than he brings you.

This cost deficit is not only measured in money, but in management time, lost sales, lost opportunities, and lost customers. An untrained and under-qualified candidate can do unimaginable damage to your business.

It's like recruiting someone into the army, giving him a rifle but no ammunition or target practice, and telling him to go to war. Bad news!

Even a seasoned salesperson can take six to nine months before he's paying for himself and contributing to your company's bottom line. An untrained and untried salesperson can take twice as long to get there. Some never do become profitable enough and have to be let go for non-performance.

If you want to hire a salesperson, hire a salesperson, not someone who is aspiring to be in sales. While it goes without saying, I'll say it anyway, our Sales Temperament Assessment can assist you in determining a person's suitability for sales.

When should you hire a newbie? Do it when you have no other choice or if you have an extensive in-house training program to bring the person up to speed. Otherwise, save yourself the pain and grief.

Don't Trust Resumes

It's wise to have a wary eye when reviewing resumes. Some of them are exercises in creative writing, second only to a salesperson's expense report, and accomplishments and achievements become embellished with the passage of time.

If someone looks good, take the time to call his or her former employer and confirm what was written in the resume. Check start and end dates of employment. Confirm performance claims. Was he really the number one salesperson? Did he really exceed quota every year? Ask!

Be extra wary if the former employer is no longer available to confirm the information (how convenient!).

If people are prepared to lie on their resume, they're prepared to lie on their expense records, sales reports, etc.

Take the time to check. The true cost of a bad hire is slow in coming so take the time to hire smart.

Conduct Group Interviews

If your firm is keen on using a team approach to selling, it might be wise to include some or all of the current sales team members in on the final selection interviews for a new salesperson. If there's going to be a personality or other type of conflict, better you find out before you hire the person than after. Make sure that each of the people on the interviewing team comes prepared with one or two relevant questions.

I recommend an informal setting for the interview. You don't want it to turn into a good cop/bad cop thing where the team tries to beat the truth out of the candidate. This is an interview, not a rubber-hose interrogation! Keep it light but meaningful.

Another advantage of having this type of interview is that it allows you to take a less active, observer role so that you can see how the candidate reacts to the situation and to the other team members. This is likely the way the person will react when dealing with your customers when he first meets them.

They Can Read, But Can They Write?

If a candidate's writing skills are an important part of the job qualifications, don't count on the resume or covering letter as being any indication of his or her writing abilities. In this day and age, many people are getting professional assistance in putting together their resumes. What you see is most likely the creative writings from one of these services and not that of the candidate.

If the candidate will be expected to write letters or respond to emails as part of his job responsibilities, have him write one for you as part of your hiring process. One way to make sure you don't fall into this hiring trap is to give the candidate a scenario. Here's an example:

"A customer is expecting delivery of his order by the end of next week. You've just found out that delivery will be delayed by six weeks. Compose a letter or email to the customer explaining the situation."

You'll be surprised how many people have no idea how to even set up a letter let alone handle the situation effectively. You may even find that they are atrocious spellers and have no ability to use spell checkers.

If there's a problem, better that you find out before, not after, you hire the person.

Interviewing Frenzy

If possible, try to interview all your candidates on the same day. Line them up to arrive one after the other at one-hour intervals.

I usually allow 45 minutes for the interview, 10 minutes to make post-interview notes and 5 minutes between interviews to catch my breath, clear my mind, and get ready for the next interview.

The advantage of this approach is that you can more easily compare one candidate with another. You lose this advantage when you're interviewing salespeople days or weeks apart. It's also more efficient use of your time.

Consider having someone sit in on the interview with you as an observer. Then compare notes after the candidate leaves. The observer is likely to see, hear, or sense things you miss.

Competency Testing

As a sales manager, one of your responsibilities is to hire people who will get the job done properly. However, finding competent salespeople is easier said than done. There is no process in place to certify that a person is capable of performing as a salesperson.

While there is no single secret to finding competent salespeople, here's an idea that will help you separate the wheat from the chaff during the hiring process and come up with potential winners.

If you were hiring an auto mechanic, you'd want to be sure that the person knew what the timing chain was for, the firing order of the engine, how to adjust the brakes, etc. In other words, you'd want to know the extent to which the auto mechanic understands the basics of his trade.

The same applies when hiring a salesperson. You want to be sure that he or she knows the basics of selling.

What you need to do is develop a list of 10 questions you can ask to determine if you have someone who knows something about selling. If you're having trouble coming up with 10 questions, contact me and ask for a copy of my Mini Competency Test for Salespeople.

Candidates May Be Better Prepared Than You

There are a ton of books out there for job seekers to help them prepare for the moment of truth — the hiring interview.

A lot of these people will not only know what questions you are likely to ask but what answers they should be giving if they are to impress you enough to get the job. Your job is to prepare a set of interview questions that will get the candidate to reveal his real self, not just the image he wants you to see.

You can side-step this hiring trap by reading the same books the job hunters are reading. That way you'll have a better sense of whether you're getting a stock answer out of some book or if you're getting close to the truth.

Another method is to have a set of standard interview questions that are appropriate to you, your company, and what the candidates are expected to sell and use those questions at every interview. After a period of time, you'll know what answers to expect and a red

flag will go up whenever you come across someone who is trying to bury you in BS (a technical term).

To paraphrase the old saying, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there,” when you’re asking interview questions, “If you don’t know what answer to expect, any answer will do.”

Your challenge is to be even better prepared for the interview than the candidate. Your bottom line may depend upon that preparation.

The Salesperson from Hell

We’ve all heard of the customer from Hell, but some of us end up hiring a salesperson from the same place. Of course, none of us sets out to hire the wrong person, but occasionally it happens that we end up with the salesperson from Hell. This is the person who looked good and sounded good during the brief hiring process but ends up either not performing or wreaking havoc within the organization.

This can happen when we don’t take the time to hire smart and we try to plug a round peg into a square hole. When this type of mismatch occurs, grief follows and takes the form of:

- lost and missed opportunities
- unhappy or lost clients
- wasted time
- demoralized staff
- lawsuits
- lost money
- ...and more

Many managers, in an attempt to either save time or money, have no formal hiring process in place. This is often a false economy and may result in the hiring of an unsuitable candidate.

It takes a newly hired salesperson, even a seasoned one, several months to a year to become productive. You can usually tell pretty quickly if you have a winner, but it could take upwards to a year before you decide you have a dud. That’s yet another reason to spend the time to hire smart instead of hiring quick.

Assessments are NOT the Total Answer

Sales assessment tests, ours or anyone else's, are an addition to and not a substitute for, a well-conceived and properly executed hiring process. You should never hire or fire anyone solely on the basis of this type of testing. However, it does act as an excellent selection tool.

At best, the results will confirm your feelings that you may have a winner. At worst, the results will raise red flags (concerns) that should be put to rest during the reference-checking and interview process.

A common sales management mistake is thinking that there are good salespeople and bad salespeople when in reality there are just people with varying degrees of certain traits — some of which can be managed and some which cannot. Some of these traits make for sales success and other traits are an impediment to success. A good sales assessment helps uncover these traits.

Once you find the right people for your sales team, you still have to manage them for maximum efficiency. Even self-starters need a boost from time to time while others need to be jump-started every morning. The key is knowing who requires what. Assessments can help.

Don't Hire a Liar

When asked why he left his previous employment, the candidate gave a plausible reason. When asked the same question at a subsequent interview, however, he gave a different answer. When challenged to explain the differences, the candidate stumbled around, saying that he didn't think it was important, but it became apparent he had gotten caught in a lie.

Asking the same question twice can often uncover a candidate who is being less than truthful. Liars sometimes have problems with consistency of answers because they are often made up at the spur of the moment, whereas the truth is always the truth.

People who lie before they're hired will lie after they're hired. If they lie to get a job, they'll lie to keep one, and they'll lie to a prospect to get a sale.

Is this the kind of person you want dealing with your customers?

Hire Slow, Fire Fast

The old proverb about one bad apple spoiling the whole barrel is also true for a bad hire. Bringing the wrong person on board can demoralize others and, at best, cause performance problems within the sales department. At worst, it causes chaos.

No one sets out to fall into this hiring trap of hiring a dud but if you find for whatever reason you've got one, swallow your ego and pride and get the person out the door fast.

Make sure you have measurable performance criteria in place for new hires so you have something that you can use to gauge whether or not you have a "keeper." Once you decide you have a problem employee and you can't correct the problem, make the hard decision and move along. It's the right thing to do.

Determining Who's Pre-Wired for Sales

I just put the October issue of our SalesTalk newsletter to bed. As is often the case, the essence of the article came as a result of a conversation I had with a client.

He was lamenting the problems of finding people who (a) want to be in sales and (b) would be good at the job. He made a very telling comment which was "If only I could find people who are pre-wired for sales."

Man, I thought, what a great idea!

That got me thinking (a rare event :-)). Is selling for everyone? Are some people better suited for sales than others? How do you tell? Can you tell? Does a person's personality matter? You'll be surprised at the answer to the last question. And, finally, would our sales assessment help?

Fear of Firing

Nobody but a sadist gets any pleasure out of firing someone.

Apart from the extreme discomfort, one of the main reasons managers don't fire someone, particularly someone they personally hired, is the fear of looking stupid. They're supposed to know what they're doing and to have to fire someone implies that they either don't know what they're doing, they didn't do a good job, or they made a hiring mistake.

You wouldn't be the first manager to make a hiring mistake and you won't be the last. Hoping your mistake will go away or correct itself is not a good strategy. Do the right thing, correct the mistake, and move past your fear. Not to do so is an even bigger mistake.

The experience we gain from the mistakes we make causes us to make fewer mistakes. It's a painful, but necessary, journey.

The Danger of Hiring Overqualified Candidates

What would you do in the following situation?

Your bottom line and your sales are suffering when along comes a saviour, someone with an incredible amount of sales experience and an impressive track record.

You can't afford to pay the person what he or she is really worth but good fortune has smiled upon you. The Great One will join your company for a mere pittance of what he is used to making.

Before you start jumping for joy, find out why. Why would someone take a cut in pay and benefits? If you can't find an acceptable answer to that question, beware, big time.

While your new, overqualified hire will do a great job in the beginning, he or she will probably get bored and slack off after a while if the job is not demanding enough for his capabilities. Or he may start feeling that he's underpaid. Then, before you know it he can start to feel hard done by and either becomes a pain in the behind or simply leaves.

When this happens, whatever short-term gain you may have had from hiring an overqualified candidate is more than offset by the long-term pain of lost sales, angry customers, and the cost of having to go through the hiring process all over again.

When should you hire an overqualified candidate? Hire the person when you're absolutely sure that his or her reasons for joining your company make sense and are valid. Listen to your stomach. It will tell you what to do. It's called intuition.

Finding Your Ideal Salesperson

A lot of sales managers wouldn't know their ideal salesperson if they fell over him. How about you? If the ideal sales candidate walked in your door today, would you recognize him or her? Probably not! If I asked you to describe the ideal salesperson for your business, could you do it? Again, probably not.

If you don't know what you're looking for, how are you going to know when you finally find one? You probably won't.

Here's an exercise for you. In four to five sentences, write a description of the ideal salesperson for your business. It's sort of like an elevator pitch and you can use it the next time someone asks you what you're looking for in a new hire. It will also help you recognize the ideal salesperson when you see one.

Here's an example:

"I'm looking for someone who is in his or her thirties or older, has at least five years of B2B sales experience preferably in our industry, or seven years selling something similar. In addition, I'm looking for a Hunter who also knows how to farm and who works well as part of a sales team. I'm not looking for a lone wolf."

When your description resonates with the right person, you know you've found your man (or woman).

Why Johnny Can't Sell

For some obscure reason, many people fall into the hiring trap of assuming that there isn't much to selling and anybody or everybody should be able to do it. If this is the case, why is it that so many people don't last in the profession?

This phenomenon probably explains why so many family businesses fail or falter when the original founder's children join the company in the sales role. Apparently they are supposed to use their innate sales abilities to carry on the business traditions. Sometimes it works out and sometimes it doesn't. Not everyone has the drive, desire, ability, or temperament to do the job successfully.

If it's simply a matter of no ability, you can train the individual. You might even be able to plant the seeds of desire for the job, but the drive has to come from way inside the individual.

Then there's the matter of temperament. How temperamentally suited is the person to sales. Having the proper temperament doesn't assure success in sales but it gives the person a running chance at success because selling will come more naturally to them.

On the other hand, having the wrong temperament doesn't mean the person will fail at selling but he better have a great deal of drive, desire, and discipline or he isn't going to make it.

It's important to match the person's temperament to the job if you want a better chance of getting the best performance from a new hire.

Test Your Interview Questions

Before inflicting your new interview process on a candidate, test your questions on some of your own people first. Gather up two or three people, preferably members of your sales staff, and tell them that you want to practise your interview questions with them. The idea is for you to see what types of responses you get from people you know and hopefully like. This will better prepare you for the answers you'll get from real candidates.

It also gives you an opportunity to receive feedback from the test people (I was tempted to use the phrase "test dummies" here but I resisted) as to how they felt about the questions. Did they feel threatened? Were they inclined to respond honestly, or would they have spun a story if this had been a real interview? Ask them how you can refine your questions.

The key to asking good questions is to know what answers you are looking for and what is and isn't a good response. It's also a good idea to have a list of appropriate answers to your questions as well.

Watch What You Hire

If you want a salesperson, hire a salesperson, not someone with no track record of sales success of some kind. It's an easy hiring trap to fall into. At a minimum, hire someone with the temperament to succeed in sales.

If you decide to hire someone with no previous selling experience, don't underestimate the amount of time required for that individual to come up to speed. Even an

experienced salesperson can take several months before becoming productive. If you hire a newbie to sales, consider yourself lucky if you break even on your investment by the end of the first year.

Another danger of hiring newbies is that they often leave after a year or two, just as they are becoming profitable, and move off to another job. Why pay to train someone else's salespeople?

Avoid this hiring trap by taking the time to hire the best you can afford. The cost of a hiring mistake can be crippling. Too many managers fall into the trap of hiring the first or second warm body that comes along in order to fill the open slot. Be careful of who and what you hire!

Cast a Large Recruiting Net

Just like professional fishermen catch more fish when they use a bigger net, you can find more potential sales recruits if you cast a bigger, wider net.

Don't get stuck always using the same old techniques. Broaden your reach. Don't discount competitors as a good source of potential candidates. How about salespeople in allied or similar industries? Use the Internet. Check out Monster.com, CareerBuilder.com, HotJobs.com, SalesLadder.com, SalesJobs.com, etc.

If you're in Canada, check out the services offered by the Canadian Professional Sales Association at CPSA.com.

The more candidates you can catch in your recruiting net, the more specimens you have to choose from, and the better the quality.

Standardize Your Interview Questions

Having a set of standard interview questions provides a number of benefits:

1. Keeps you on track.
2. Provides a consistency to your interview process.
3. Minimizes your interview preparation time.
4. You begin to know what to expect in the answers and are less likely to be caught off guard.

Having standardized interview questions does not mean having a script. Any one of your standard questions might lead to two or three additional questions as you seek clarification or to more fully engage the candidate.

Sales Assessment Tests – Why Bother?

I always delight in telling people that there are two types of sales managers in this world:

- those who have hired a dud and
- those who are going to hire a dud

One of the most critical functions you perform as a sales manager is putting together the sales team. The right people, working together, can make business life a pleasure. On the other hand – hire the wrong people and your life can become hell.

Most sales managers figure they're an excellent judge of character and can spot sales talent from a distance of 500 feet, if not farther.

I used to think that too. That's why a lot of my earlier hires were done after a 15- to 30-minute interview and a brief assessment of what my stomach was telling me about the candidate. I simply didn't have the time for lengthy interviews or testing procedures.

Here are some startling statistics that emphasize why sales managers should take the time to find the right person. In their book "How to Hire and Develop Your Next Top Performer" (McGraw-Hill), Greenberg/Weinstein/Sweeney point out that their studies show the following:

- 55 percent of those people earning their living in sales should be doing something else,
- 20 to 25 percent should be selling something else, and
- the remaining 20 percent account for about 80 percent of everything that's sold.

A sales assessment test like our Sales Temperament Assessment can help sales managers improve the odds of finding salespeople who fall into that 20 percent category.

And let's face it, when hiring salespeople we need all the help we can find. At least I do.

Check Out Sales Candidates on the Web

Interestingly enough, when hiring salespeople many employers have not caught on to the fact that the Internet is an excellent hiring tool. It's not just for finding candidates, it's also great for finding out about candidates.

It's absolutely amazing what you can find out about people on the Internet through things they either posted themselves, or that have been posted by others. For some inexplicable reason, people seem to think things posted on their personal blog stay there and are only read by a few personal friends. They seem oblivious to the fact that search engines catalogue these ramblings as though they were profound documents.

It pays to run a person's name through one or more of the popular search engines to see what pops up. According to BusinessWeek and U.S. News & World Report, 35% of executive recruiters who use the Internet to check out prospects have eliminated candidates based on what they found online.

Interestingly enough, most sales candidates fully expect that recruiters will look them up online but most of them have never conducted a web search on themselves. That may explain the continuing presence of photos showing someone holding a bottle of beer in each hand while balancing another on their head. And that's my next hire? Don't think so!

While you're at it, you may want to check out your own organization on the Web to see what's being said about you. Hopefully you won't find pictures of you with beer bottles.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Jeffrey is a sales management consultant and former sales trainer with over 40 year's experience. He's the author of *The Sales Wizard's Secrets of Sales Management*, *The 5-Minute Sales trainer*, 18 ebooks, and over 100 articles on selling and sales management.

Brian provides sales management consulting, coaching, and mentoring to business owners and sales managers. He has had many sales successes (as well as a few spectacular failures) and has learned what works, what doesn't, and why — information he readily shares with others.

Find out how Brian helps companies maximize their sales at **www.Quintarra.com**.



Quintarra Consulting Inc
1451 Donald Munro Dr | Carp, ON K0A 1L0 Canada
613-839-7355 | Quintarra.com