



RESEARCH BRIEF

Hiring Salespeople:

Best practices in recruiting from high-performing sales organizations

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About The Sales Management Association

The Sales Management Association is a global professional association focused on sales management's unique business and career issues. The SMA fosters a community of interest among sales force effectiveness thought leaders, consultants, academics, and sales management practitioners across many industries.

Through training workshops, online resources, and research materials, The SMA addresses the management issues of greatest concern to practicing sales managers. The SMA's focus areas include management leadership, sales force performance coaching, sales planning, sales process management, enabling technologies, incentive compensation, and sales force support.

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Hiring Sales People:

Best practices in recruiting from high-performing sales organizations

Hiring the right people is one of the most important tasks that managers have. When it comes to hiring salespeople, the stakes are particularly high. A great hire can make a critical difference both in terms of revenues and the morale of a sales force. A hiring mistake is costly not only because of the investment a company makes in training a new salesperson, but in the “opportunity cost” of missing out on the next star performer...or even worse, hiring unqualified talent.

Although there are never guarantees in a

process that is based on subjective judgments, you can increase your odds of hiring the right person if you take a systematic approach.

Based on experiences with “best practice” companies across multiple industries, Sibson has identified six steps that the most successful companies take when hiring sales people

1. The first step is to fully think through your need. What are your goals in making this hire? What are the short- and long- term plans for this person? Must this person be a high

performer from day one, or is there time for him to grow into the job?

Are you looking for a “hunter” —a person whose best skill is business development? Do you need a “farmer” — someone who will do a great job cultivating existing accounts? Would a product specialist who is not responsible for her own accounts be the right choice? The type of role you need may define the personality of your hire. The “hunter” may be more aggressive and assertive, whereas the “farmer” may be more congenial and relationship oriented.

The number of people you plan to hire also affects how you proceed. The more people you need to bring on, the more difficult it is to find perfect matches. Are you going to keep looking until all the right candidates emerge, or do you need to settle for people who may not be optimal in the interest of furthering other business objectives?

2. The second step is to identify the culture you are trying to build or retain. Is your organization a group of fiercely competitive high achievers who feed off one another, or is it made up of congenial people who thrive on compatibility and harmony? Sometimes hiring a superstar with a big ego can harm an organization; in other situations this is exactly what you need to do to energize the sales force. Understanding your culture and determining how the new person would fit into it is important for you, your current sales force and the new hire.

3. The third step is to assess the characteristics of the individuals in your sales force. Focus on their personalities, skills, abilities, background and training. Then you must decide whether you want to hire more people with the same essential characteristics, or whether you need to find people with complementary skills to balance your organization.

4. The fourth step is to formally prepare a written job description and/or hiring request that document the job responsibilities and characteristics you are seeking in a new hire. Just like a business plan or a budget, a written job requisition helps you to be more disciplined in your thinking and makes it easier to test whether you have met your goals. It also lets others in your organization, including potential internal candidates, know specifically what you are looking for.

5. The fifth step is to pursue multiple avenues in conducting your search. You will want to look internally for your new hire, particularly if people in other divisions already are familiar with the products you sell or the sales process steps. Or there may be someone in the company who you think has the right personality and skills and could become an effective sales person.

Consider offering a finder's fee to sales people in your organization. Be sure to ask your high performers for suggestions. They tend to know other people similar to themselves. Also ask your customers for recommendations. If you hire someone your customer likes and trusts, you solidify an important relationship.

You may want to think about using a headhunter, but be aware that this often requires sharing confidential product information, and may give competitors insight into your sales strategy. Also, headhunters often work through contact lists and rotate through names every few years, thus putting your new hire on a timetable to be showcased to another company in two or three years.

6. The last step is to decide who you are going to interview and how to interview. You will want to pre-screen the résumés you received, and weed out candidates based on the criteria you decided on. Plan to interview about 10 -15 people for every one that you hire.

When you decide to bring someone in for a day of interviews, make sure that several people in addition to the hiring manager have an opportunity to talk to the candidate. The VP of Sales, sales managers and other sales people, in addition to someone from the Human Resources department, should meet the candidate.

The interviewers should talk to the candidate one or two at a time (don't "gang up" on him!) and ask a predetermined set of questions. For example, the VP of Sales might ask about the person's previous company and what he or she would bring to the table in your organization; a sales manager can inquire about the candidate's sales techniques and past successes; and the HR person can ask about education, salary and benefits needs and availability. Afterwards, all the interviewers should come together and compare notes.

It is useful for the hiring manager to role-play different scenarios with the candidate. For example, you can role-play a difficult customer, a customer who uses a competitor's product and one who doesn't know anything about the product. See how the candidate handles each situation.

When you consider the sales impact and costs involved in recruiting and training a new rep, it should come as no surprise that making the correct choice is imperative. Yet in many cases, companies do not take the time to plan their process carefully, and subsequently miss the chance to recruit a top performer and add a valuable member to their sales team. By following these six simple steps, you can

avoid this mistake and increase your chances of hiring individuals who will become valuable, high-producing members of your sales team.

About The Author



Joseph DiMisa is Senior Vice president, Sibson Consulting, The Segal Company. As leader of Sibson's Sales & Marketing practice, Mr. DiMisa works with leading companies to develop and implement sales strategies and sales effectiveness programs that drive profitable growth. He specializes in the design and implementation of sales management solutions to increase sales and profits for clients.

Mr. DiMisa frequently writes for and has been featured in a number of well-known business periodicals. Mr. DiMisa's management book on the principles of selling, entitled "A Fisherman's Guide to Selling," was released in early 2007 and is featured in many sales centric business associations and is classified as a business best seller. He also speaks frequently on best practices and strategies for optimizing sales channel performance, and is generally recognized as an expert in sales planning and design. He can be reached at 770-403-8006 or jdimisa@sibson.com.