

Hiring a Sales Superstar

By Jerry Crowley

Finding a true sales superstar is never easy. It's especially difficult to hire a budding superstar - someone who is affordable, that you can count on to hit the ground running, who will produce superior results quickly, and who will stay with your firm for the long haul. The ten tips below will help you determine if the person sitting across from you can make the big difference you need in your bottom line.

Your overall goal is to establish the following:

1. Can this person do the job? Do they have the skills necessary to be successful?
2. Will they do the job in your environment? Are they a good match with your product or service?
3. Will they fit in with your company culture? Will they last?

1. Are they new to sales?

If they've never held a commissioned sales position, it is very important to determine if they can handle the rejection that comes with the turf. The most successful sales people in the world sell 10-20% of their prospects, meaning that the best they can hope for is an 80-90% rejection level. Most people who leave sales early in their careers do so because they can't tolerate this level of rejection. Questions such as these - "What is the most difficult thing you've ever done? Give me an example of how you are persistent. If I asked you to call thirty strangers right now, how would that make you feel? If I hired you, tell me what your first week would be like." - should help you assess their tolerance level and persistence.

2. If they've been in sales for a while, what is their approach or methodology to selling?

Ideally, the candidate will respond with a clear, detailed response that makes sense. It really doesn't matter if it's totally different from how your product or service is normally sold (see question 10 for the exception to this rule). The more detailed their response, the better. If the details seem to excite them, better still. They should also be able to explain how they respond to the different reactions of their prospects, and their process should end with a sale being made.

3. How successful were they in their previous sales position?

If they claim they were very successful, ask about their biggest sale. While being friendly, get very specific about the details. You're trying to determine if this person is a "sales fake", someone who tries to take credit after the fact for a sale made by someone else (or when he or she played only a minor role in the effort). You want figures, how the lead was generated, names of decision-makers, locations of meetings, names and roles of team members involved, what went right, what went wrong, and how they managed the process. Repeat this line of questioning for their top three transactions. If you really want to dig, ask about their first and most recent sale with their current employer. You can also go back to their prior positions and ask the same questions. A successful sales professional will have most of the details readily available and will be comfortable with this line of questioning. If they get nervous or uncomfortable or confuse themselves, this is a big red flag.

4. If they claim they were moderately successful, ask the same detailed questions as above.

Listen for their weaknesses and strengths. What weren't they doing right? What did their boss have to say about where they needed to improve? Would working in your company under your system produce better results for this person?

5. Have they had formal sales training?

A moderately successful sales professional who is working hard, but is not skilled, can sometimes be transformed into a top performer by a strong sales manager and a solid sales training program. It can therefore be a positive thing if a person who has been moderately successful has had little sales training. It's a red flag if someone has had lots of sales training and is still only moderately successful.

6. If it's unclear where they need improvement, ask them to rate themselves on a scale of 1-5 on the following criteria, with 5 being the best.

Interestingly, most people assess themselves fairly accurately on this type of test:

- Prospecting
- Contacting
- Qualifying
- Presentation/Information Gathering
- Trial Closing
- Managing Objections
- Closing

Do their strengths match your needs? If your product or service is highly dependent upon prospecting and they rate themselves a 2, this is a red flag. If they rate themselves a 5 on prospecting, a 5 on closing and a 2 on presenting, could you turn them into a sales superstar by strengthening their presentation skills?

7. Who was their best manager and why?

Hopefully, the profile described will match the sales manager and top management in your organization. If not, it's a red flag. (An example of a mismatch would be "I liked my manager because he really let me run my own show" when you know your manager favors a structured, report-oriented approach.) Also ask about their worst manager and why.

8. What was the best job they ever had and why?

Ideally, their answer should offer a close match to your culture and environment. Successful people generally leave a position within the first 12 months not because of a lack of results but because of cultural mismatches. Also ask about their worst job and why.

9. Ask them to describe a customer service problem that they solved.

You don't want a hypothetical situation. You want to hear about an actual problem that they solved on behalf of a customer. If they can't think of any, it's possible they either never had a customer or they were indifferent to their problems.

10. What is the sales cycle like for the product or service they are selling now?

Does it match your sales cycle? What sales cycle do they feel most comfortable with? Have they ever sold anything that matches your sales cycle? Some very successful sales people need transactions like the rest of us need air. They will never be happy if the sales cycles are long (actual sales cycles rather than wishful thinking). On the other hand, many big-ticket sales professionals may feel stifled by the process-oriented approach favored when selling in smaller transaction sizes.

Finally, ask yourself the following questions: Is this person credible? Would you feel comfortable working with them on an ongoing basis? Do they have energy and enthusiasm? Do they seem knowledgeable, trustworthy, and reliable? How you feel in your initial meeting is probably how your prospects will feel.

If you receive a positive response on all of the points above, you're sitting across from a sales superstar!

Jerry Crowley is CEO of Revenue Builders, Inc., a sales and marketing services firm.