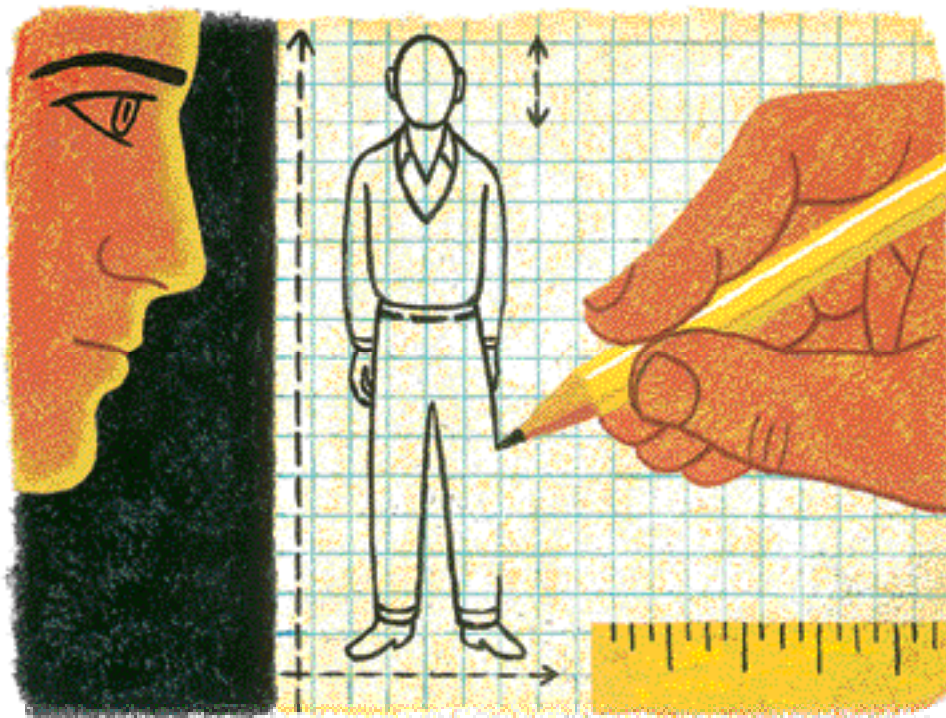


Hire Power

If you want great salespeople, build them. By Rick Davis



Rick Davis is president of Building Leaders, Inc., a Chicago-based sales training organization. 773.769.4409. E-mail: rickdavis@buildingleaders.com

“Hire for attitude and train for skill.”

This is the human resources credo at Southwest Airlines, and it’s a philosophy that has helped make the company one of the great American success stories. As such, incorporating Southwest’s approach to hiring into your own recruiting strategy can help you when you build your company’s sales team.

The most frequent question I am asked during my work with clients is “Do you know a good salesperson that is available for hire?” My answer is always the same: If they are any good, they aren’t looking. And if you want good salespeople, don’t try stealing them from a competitor. It rarely works. If you want top performers, you must build them.

Casting the Mold

For inexplicable reasons, many sales managers only hire salespeople with industry experience. Moreover, they

seek salespeople who possess experience for a specific product category. Window companies seek “window salespeople”; siding companies seek “siding people.” The result is a continual recycling of reps with mediocre track records.

The alternative is to seek out individuals who have the right mental and emotional makeup and then indoctrinate them into a proven sales system.

So just how do you build a salesperson? Numerous LBM dealers throughout the country have found that successful sales teams have a structured approach to molding their talent, and lengthy orientation programs are becoming the industry norm. For example, I know a Northeast dealer of roofing and siding that hires salespeople and puts them through a full year of training before positioning them in the field. A Florida lumberyard puts sales candidates through an 18-month orientation period before they hit the road, while a thriving Atlanta lumberyard created a tiered sales structure that brings salespeople up through the ranks over a period of many months before they become full-fledged account managers.

The key to success begins with a solid sales structure and administrative procedures. During training, the

salesperson learns the technical side of the business and how the company processes paperwork and deliveries, along with extensive product knowledge sessions and more. When the company finally places the trainee in the sales role, he or she is prepared. These companies know exactly how they want their salespeople to perform and ensure that each individual has all the technical knowledge needed to do so.

New Recruits

Successful molding, though, begins even earlier, during the recruiting and hiring process.

When screening potential employees, vision is critical. Successful sales organizations know the characteristics they seek in an ideal candidate, and those primary characteristics usually have less to do with business skills and more to do with personal traits. This does not mean that high-quality business skills would disqualify a

candidate, but rather asserts that personal traits—e.g. leadership, being a team player—are critical in the evaluation process.

Here are three keys that you should

forms, but is usually a high-pressure interview tactic that is recommended when you feel you might have a difficult management challenge. The potential problem with stress testing is

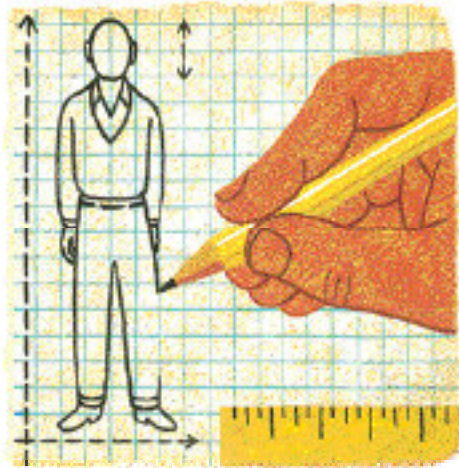
achieved, would provide ample opportunity to amortize the cost of the custom color. That initiative spelled a win-win situation for the organization.

Conversely, I often ask salespeople to tell me a time that they conformed to a company policy even when they disagreed with it. This question helps determine how manageable a new hire will be: If the salesperson has difficulty with this question, then a red flag should go up. For example, one sales candidate I interviewed stated that he ignored paperwork because he felt it was unproductive. Another candidate stated that he frequently pushed for better pricing for key customers. These are signs that the candidate might be difficult to manage as well as lacking in sound reasoning skills.

There are a multitude of behavioral questions you can prepare to help gain a better perspective on the talents of a potential hire. If you want to know how a candidate will behave in the future, learn about his or her past performance.

Key #3: Hire slowly, fire quickly. It is better to not hire a qualified candidate than to risk hiring an unqualified one. In other words, the conservative approach to hiring is the correct approach. Every manager and business owner feels, at some point in his or her career, the frustration of dealing with a bad hire—the costs continue to rise while the performance remains deficient. The best way to overcome the risk of a bad hire is to proceed with caution. Meanwhile, when you discover that you've made a mistake, make the right decision to cut your losses quickly.

Hiring is a percentage game. I've never met a sales manager who has a career score of 100 percent—someone who nails a top performer every time a sales position must be filled. However, some Sales Leaders have percentages a cut above others, and they are invariably the ones who take recruitment to a higher power by cautiously hiring talented people and then developing their skills! ■



Successful sales organizations know the characteristics they seek in an ideal candidate, and those primary characteristics usually have less to do with business skills and more to do with personal traits.

consider when recruiting new sales candidates:

Key #1: Create a vision of your ideal sales candidate. The characteristics you desire may differ from another organization or manager. Personally, since my management style is to work closely with individuals to coach their sales behaviors, I seek highly coachable salespeople. Another manager may prefer a candidate that is quite independent and requires little hand-holding. Regardless of the characteristics you seek, take the time to write them down. My list includes the following characteristics: leadership, teamwork, decision-making, persistence, administrative skills, and goal setting. The ability to evaluate these skills may not be as elusive as you might think.

Key #2: Past behaviors are the best predictors of future performance. Many recruiters and human resources specialists utilize a combination of four basic methods for evaluating new hires: personality profile, stress test, situational testing, and behavioral interviewing.

I am not a big fan of personality profiles such as Myers-Briggs and DISC Theory, as they often tell you who *should* succeed but not who *will*. Stress testing can take a variety of

that a high-pressure interview situation that is handled poorly may turn off—and turn away—a solid candidate. Situational testing, for example a typing speed test that might be administered to a secretarial candidate, is a great tool when you're hiring a secretary; however, it may be less suitable for hiring salespeople because it's difficult to create realistic sales situations that can predict future behaviors.

The most reliable interviewing style for sales is the behavioral interview, during which the manager asks a salesperson about past situations and the behaviors that the sales candidate encountered and demonstrated. For example, I often ask this question: "Describe a time when you made a decision that contradicted company policy and how you justified it."

Believe it or not, there is a correct answer to this question. The purpose of asking it is to learn about a situation in which the candidate took a calculated risk that helped achieve customer loyalty while costing little to nothing for the employer. In addition, this can be a gauge of confidence and a candidate's critical reasoning skills. One candidate told me that he offered his prospect a custom color on a window at the standard window price. He justified it by noting that the \$1 million order, if