

How to Hire Top Performing Sales Executives

Let's start with a fact: lemons can't sell. However, so many of us keep hiring them and – be honest for a moment – we've all hired them at some point! In this *Directional Selling Sales Manager's Note*, we will attempt to understand:

- why,
- how not to, and
- what to do if you have!



Let us start with the finish. What do you do if you have hired a lemon? The most important point here is that you recognise poor sales performance and do something about it... **immediately!** The cost of poor performing sales executives goes far beyond the missed targets, which is the visible side of under achievement.

The real cost – damage to your business – comes further downstream, the not yet visible side:

- Damage to customer relations
- Burnt sales prospects and new leads wasted
- Cash-flow difficulties
- Lowering of morale in your sales team and overall acceptance of missed targets
- Wasted salary and expenses

And so it goes on, making it essential that you do one of two things:

- remove the struggling executive (out of sales or out of the organisation all together) or
- address and fix the issues (sales assessment and sales training).

We can't stress enough the importance of taking action now. Unfortunately, many organisations, especially SMEs who can least afford poor sales performance, fail to take action quickly enough. Why? One of the most common reasons is the fear of 'lifting the lid' on the sales department. For many, it is easier to let this slip in the hope that things will improve next month. Note, the most dangerous word in sales is 'tomorrow.'

Many SMEs are led by the owner, founder, inventor or entrepreneur. They may well be clever, inspiring leaders but it is quite common that they have no formal sales management background and therefore will shy away from 'meddling' with the sales department in the fear of toppling a group that 'collectively' works. One or two lemons can hide quite comfortably here without causing too much damage, right? Wrong. **Fix it now!**

I think you've all got the message. If not, go make some lemonade.

So, let's look at the hiring of sales executives. Perhaps one of the key issues here is that a good sales executive should have no difficulty in winning over the interviewer. After all, isn't it what they do in the field? Correct, and all the more reason for having a clear strategy and interview tools when onboarding sales executives.

Sourcing New Hires

There is nothing wrong in using recruitment agencies or headhunters, but choose well. This, in itself, is perhaps a greater minefield than selecting the executive!

Referrals are an excellent way of reaching out to sales professionals. Consider the sales executives calling on your organisation. Who are you buying from, and could they be selling for you? Also, discuss vacancies with your existing team. It is important that they understand the position of the new hire (why and when), but they might also be able to recommend someone they have worked with in the past.

Keep your 'recruitment net' out, even when you think you are not hiring. Let's face it, there should always be a place for an excellent sales professional, as they will only add value to your organisation. Do this by keeping on top of your company's website and LinkedIn profile. Both should convey a positive story about your organisation and prosperity for its employees.

Don't shy away from sales apprentices either. There is a lot to be said for 'cutting your own cookie' if your infrastructure can provide the necessary support. With the right nurturing and training, sales apprentices can grow into extremely loyal company ambassadors, but it is essential to have clear career progression paths.

Equally, don't become obsessed with poaching a competitor's sales executives. This often brings more problems than opportunities and may well not be the single reason why they were winning contracts you lost. Sector experience can always be taught and often fresh eyes will open new sales opportunities that you may not have previously considered. The right hire should be capable of selling any service.

CVs and References

Just as important as experience, check their length of employment with each organisation. Someone who has hopped from one sales position to another, 10 months here, 12 months there, may well be hiding a performance problem. Remember, references from former employers are often meaningless but perhaps you know someone who they used to sell to in a previous organisation?

The Interview

Run two sessions: a screening interview and then a more formal one with presentations. Make sure all candidates are clear of the process and given the opportunity to prepare in advance (also an important quality for you to benchmark during the interview).

If you plan to role play selling scenarios, give them detail on what they will be selling and to whom. As with all sales, preparation is essential so if they haven't given it serious thought in advance, alarm bells should be ringing. This preparation includes you too. You should have a detailed description of your fictitious client and their specific requirements, as well as hidden opportunities for the sales executive to hopefully discover.

Don't forget to sell your organisation too. Top sales professionals do not jump ship without serious consideration, so while you will have sown the seeds in the job interview, the real work happens during the interview. Make sure they meet at least one of your key sales executives, who can add significant weight when it comes to selling the opportunity. This should include more detail about what it takes to be a top achiever within your organisation, which will then open up other avenues of frank discussion for both parties.

Don't rely on standard interview questions. Make sure you are fully aware of the type of sales engagement the role requires, for example, key account management, solution selling, transaction selling, cold calling, etc., and have specific questions relating to this environment.

Avoid closed questions such as 'can you,' 'have you,' and request that they expand upon experience relating to the identified selling styles. For example, *"Run me through a memorable time when you were cold calling and tell me why it was memorable."* Or, *"Give me an example of a solution sale that you were particularly proud of."*

As well as asking about sales that they are most proud of, probe for their sales failures too. This will tell you a lot about their recognition of errors, how they overcame them, and their understanding of the sales process.

Assessment

The combination of your experience, gut intuition and feedback from colleagues during the interviews will be your best pointer on whether the candidate will fit into your organisation and if your customers are likely to connect with this person.

But do they have the skills to sell? Don't be fooled by historical sales figures or references. Or even certificates of attendance at various sales training sessions. None of these are proof of retained (and therefore likely to be habitual) selling skills. Only through the role play in the interview, and then via external sales assessment, can you determine if your ideal candidate has the selling skills to hand right now.

We recommend sales skills assessments over psychometric tests for this simple reason. Behaviour is near impossible to change, whereas skills gaps and hard trainable selling skills can be assessed and fixed almost immediately.

And, do not worry about what these techniques might reveal. If you feel that you've found the perfect candidate with the most amazing sales track record, but they turn out to have a lot of sales skills gaps during assessment – great! They've achieved all that whilst carrying this burden, so just think what a 'super performer' they will be with the appropriate sales training.

Explain to the candidate that the assessment is a standard part of the enrolment procedure and not a test upon which their employment is determined. This is simply an assessment to understand their required, continual sales skills development to ensure that their careers progress as quickly as possible. However, it will also help you determine whether your new hire should undergo targeted sales training during their induction week or whether you can take them out in the field sooner.

It is generally accepted that hiring a sales person based on a good quality single factor pre-hire assessment will deliver performance benefits of up to 14% revenue increase, simply because you will be hiring 'best fit' talent.

Sales Executive Hire Checklist

- Do you have an attractive 'recruitment net' cast to lure super sales execs?
Check your website and LinkedIn profiles.
- Would you apply for your own job ad? If not, rework!
- When possible, engage your sales team with the role description.
- Make sure you understand your company's selling style in advance.
- Pre-prepare questions that are specific to your company's selling style.
- Run two interviews, pre-screening and presentations.
- Pre-prepare any role play scenarios and forewarn candidates in good time.
- Ask about both positive and negative sales experiences.
- Be prepared to sell your organisation too. If they don't care about your prospects, you shouldn't be hiring them.
- Run a sales skills assessment for all second round interviewees.