

potentials

Friday, August 24, 2007

By Rebecca Aronauer

Find Your Next Sales Star

How to use your intuition and outside help to find your next A-level seller

They're the driving force of any organization. The best ones are competitive, dedicated and elusive. Finding your next A-level sales rep is the greatest challenge for any human resources department. We talked to the experts to help you find your next star.

Trust Your Gut

Chet Bloom isn't a big believer in tests and intellectual assessments. The president of HFBC Ltd., a staff and recruiting firm based in New York, goes with his instinct. "A test will never show a person's eagerness and motivation," he says. For him, it's all about impression, such as how an interviewee dresses, if he shows up on time, and his confidence level. Education is meaningless to him, but background is crucial. Because a salesperson's salary is determined by success in the field, Chet looks for someone who truly needs to succeed. "I want someone who is eager and focused," he says. "Maybe they have a mortgage and kids ... I look for someone who is hungry."

For other sales managers, relying on instinct is too risky. A candidate who is good at interviewing may not be good at the job. Steve Grossman, the Chicago-based principal and leader of sales effectiveness practices for Mercer, believes that tests are a good way to evaluate a candidate without letting ultimately insignificant factors—such as an ugly tie or an overly firm handshake—overly influence the decision. "Assessment tests get objectivity and data. They take the emotion out of it," he says.

Trust the Test

There are a myriad of personality assessment tests out there, ranging from ones that take minutes to those that are extensively customized for the company. It's important to remember that these tests are not pass/fail. The results really depend on the type of sales position. Someone applying for a role within a short cycle should be a fast thinker who can handle rejection well. Longer sales cycles require more persistence and a more diplomatic type of personality to deal with clients. "You need to make sure the profile is a real match [for the position]," Grossman says. Assessment tests can help determine if the candidate has the disposition for the type of sales rep you want.

Stryker, a medical device company based in Kalamazoo, Mich., has been using a customized Gallup assessment for 12 years. "It gives us an additional source of information, and a bit more objective source of data on information on a broader set of characteristics," says Mike Rude, the company's president of human resources. He credits Gallup's assessments with creating a more uniform approach to hiring. "Certain hiring managers have a good gut feel, while others aren't as reliable," he says. "Certain people's gut feels are better than others."

In part, the test is based on Stryker's own corporate culture and is constantly tweaked to ensure it's consistent with the top performers in the company. "It's grounded in success within the Stryker organization," Rude says. This means approved candidates are not only a good fit for the job, but also a good fit for the office.

Because of Stryker's longstanding relationship with Gallup, the company is able to use the results of star sellers as indicators for future employees. Being able to cross-reference old Gallup assessments with new applicants allows Stryker to pick out the candidates who will most likely succeed at the role. "If you answer the question like the best, you'll probably behave like the best," says Randy Beck, regional managing partner of Gallup, who is based in Detroit. "The test is more accurate when it's based on the corporate culture."

Within the company, which has 13 sales divisions, there are different criteria for success. "What makes one sales rep good in one division won't make them great in another one," Rude says. Stryker looks at the Gallup assessment of top salespeople within each division to find the right match for every prospect. "It's incorporated in our day-to-day processes," Rude says. "It's truly why we think Stryker is great at identifying talent."

Even a less specific assessment test can have positive results for human resources. LexisNexis, the searchable content provider, has been using the Predictive Index since 1998 with great success. "It helps ensure that the people we bring into the organization are inherently a good fit," says Tom Rocco, the market vice president of LexisNexis who is based in San Francisco.

The Predictive Index is a universal test that takes less than five minutes to complete; participants check off from a list which adjectives they think people would describe them as, and then which adjectives they would describe themselves as. "People with certain behaviors check certain words and skip others," says Scott Lappin, president of Performance PI, a Predictive Index licensee based in Danville, Calif. "It tells you who you're dealing with."

If a candidate seems promising, but doesn't score well on the Predictive Index, Rocco might still hire him—with a plan to provide more training in specific weak spots.

"If someone falls short in a particular part, it indicates to us where we're going to have to provide more coaching," he says.

Like Styrker does with Gallup, LexisNexis uses the Predictive Index to compare their prospects with their top sellers. "The Predictive Index helped us determine what kind of salespeople we were looking for as we moved into a solution sale approach," Rocco says. "It helps ensure that the people we bring into the organization are inherently a good fit."

Trust the Experts

Your sales team is the most vital component to your bottom line. But finding a staff of qualified and hardworking reps is time-consuming. For an overextended boss without an eye for talent, outsourcing the hiring and management of a sales team is a good solution.

Acquirent, an outsourced sales vendor based in Evanston, Ill., can handle all of the headaches of finding and managing a successful sales team. Their roster of sales reps reports directly to Acquirent, but they carry business cards and use e-mail addresses for the company they represent. The company takes care of everything from hiring to pay structure to office equipment. "We're a full-cycle solution," says Pete Kadens, the founder and CEO of Acquirent.

One common mistake when hiring sales reps is looking for new talent only when there's an opening rather than continuously making connections with A-level sellers. Most managers are too bogged down with the logistics of running a business to network at sales events and speaking engagements—which is what they should be doing, according to Ray Taylor, senior vice president of sale for Signature Worldwide, a business solution firm based in Dublin, Ohio. "Too many people don't interview until they have an opening," he says. "You want to have a group of people to go to if a spot ever opens up."

Acquirent takes that approach to finding salespeople, and has a network of thousands of top sellers. "I've been interviewing 50 salespeople a week for four years now," Kadens says. "We've built a very powerful database."

For growing companies, hiring and managing a sales fleet is too much of a burden. In the case of Sittercity.com, a Web site devoted to connecting babysitters and dogsitters with parents and pet owners, outsourcing the sales department was the most efficient way to ensure it had a high-performing selling team.

"It's really hard to find, hire and properly staff a sales department, especially when you don't have a lot of experience doing it," says Genevieve theirs, CEO of the Chicago-based company. "Acquirent can keep your sales staff happy much better than a lot of the core members of the company could."

Theirs still meets with her sales staff once or twice a week and talks to them every day, but Acquirent deals with all the logistical headaches of managing a sales team.

Accept Help

A good salesperson is only as good as his manager. When hiring, you need to be honest with yourself. Does your gut instinct fail you every time? If so, maybe it's time to look into assessment tests. Are you too overloaded to find the best possible sales team? Outsourcing the hiring of your sales team might be a good decision. Knowing your limits as a talent scout and accepting help will make the hiring process smoother and more effective. As Theirs says, "You trust the experts. It's not possible as an entrepreneur to be an expert in everything."