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Finding the right people for the job

One of my favorite things about attending the annual AFCP conferences is the opportunity to see and meet the “Rising Stars.” The Rising Stars are a group of young people from all the professional disciplines (sales, journalism, graphics etc.) in our industry. These people are the best of the best, nominated by their publishers for the skill, dedication and demonstrated leadership abilities. These young people give me great hope for the future of our industry, they will carry our industry far into the future. The challenge for publishers and managers is to find the future Rising Stars of our industry. This is not an easy task, sorting through a stack of resumes and conducting dozens of interviews to find the right person to fill their open positions. Selling advertising in a tough, competitive market requires a special kind of person. No activity has a bigger impact on the future of your publications as recruiting and retaining the right people for your sales team. This month’s Link & Learn will address finding and identifying future Rising Stars for your team. Next month we will address getting these people off to a great start so that they will be able to realize their full potential.

What are you looking for?

On my first day in the advertising industry, my supervisor led me around and introduced me to everyone in the office. One curmudgeonly old graphic artist told me, “Don’t bother telling me your name, if you’re still here in a month, I’ll introduce myself!” His comment, while a bit cruel, reflected the high turnover rate of new hires in the industry. This turnover is expensive and puts stress on everyone on the team who have to pick up the slack. Researchers who have studied the reasons why new people fail to succeed have found that turnover had little to do with an inability to do the job, but rather with a lack of will to do what is required. While many new hires possessed the skills required to be successful, they were not a good attitudinal fit for the job.

The primary reason new hires fail is a lack of “coachability.” They simply refuse to learn from others or even from their own mistakes. They reject feedback from their customers, manager and peers, often seeing this advice as unwarranted criticism. Their inflexibility impedes their personal and professional growth and becomes a cause of great frustration. This unwillingness to learn from others is often a symptom of a general lack of emotional intelligence. Poor “people skills” are a handicap in any career field, but the ability to work and learn from others is absolutely critical in sales. Other attitudes which have a direct impact on sales success are motivation and the personal temperament. Salespeople often work

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on their own, they are alone in the field contending with competition and customers who challenge everything they say. While managers should support their teams and help them stay motivated, ultimately salespeople have to take responsibility for their own attitudes. In his best-selling book, *Drive*, Daniel Pink notes that successful people in every field are internally motivated. While they appreciate monetary rewards and positive feedback, they are primarily driven from within, by the satisfaction that comes from doing something well and achieving preset goals. Self-motivators hold themselves to a high standard and do not need their manager prodding them to go the extra mile. This internal motivation impacts everything they do. Instead of getting stressed out or quitting when confronted with an obstacle, they look for a way to get around, over or through whatever lies between them and their goal.

Finding winners

Unfortunately for managers, many job applicants are far more skilled at interviewing than at actually doing the job. There is an entire industry built on helping people dupe interviewers. There are websites, books and seminars all dedicated to helping applicants to figure out what recruiters want to hear. There are also many books and other resources filled with surefire interviewing techniques and clever questions for hiring managers. Of course, the interview preparation industry immediately got to work creating pat answers to these clever questions. Interviewing has become a real life version of the old Mad Magazine “Spy vs. Spy” cartoons.

Most managers dread the interviewing process. Recruiting new salespeople is time consuming and often frustrating. You go through a series of interviews only to have your top candidates turn you down or to hire a person who disappoints you in short order. Often the pressure to fill a position and get a new rep into the field leads a manager to cut the process short and “settle” on a candidate...inevitably a serious mistake. Because of the importance to your future success, making the effort required to find the right person for your team is time well spent.

Most managers understand that clearly articulated goals are critical to success, but few of them transfer this concept to the recruiting process. Managers should have a clear picture of the qualities they are looking for in a sales rep. As with sales goals, you should commit your list to writing and use it as a compass to guide your recruiting efforts. The focus should be primarily on the attitudes they are looking for rather than the applicant’s skill-set. Skills can be taught, but attitudes are generally set in stone by the time a person reaches adulthood. A good place to start in creating a

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description of your “ideal” candidate is to look at your current top performers. Look at the qualities that your most successful people have in common and at what makes them excel at their jobs.

To get the right information, ask the right questions

Most interviews are little more than extended discussions of the facts contained in the candidate’s resume—where they worked, what they did there. An effective interview is focused less on facts and more on attitudes. Your purpose is to ascertain the quality of the candidate’s interpersonal skills and what motivates them. A hiring interview has a lot in common with the fact finding portion of a good sales call. The hiring manager should ask good open ended questions designed to get the candidate to tell their story. The manager should avoid asking leading questions or putting words into the applicant’s mouth.

The most powerful words an interviewer can use are, “*Tell me about...*” For example, to learn about how a candidate responds to coaching, you can ask, “*Tell me about your manager in your last position, how helpful was he/she in helping you to be successful?*” or “*did you find the training offered by your previous employer helpful?*” The content of these answers is less important than their tone. If the person offers examples of learning from others, this indicates coachability. Responses that say, “*I did it all myself,*” indicate an innate resistance to direction and training.

You also want to ask questions about what motivates a candidate to excel. If you ask a sales candidate what motivates them, they will usually give the “standard” answer, “*I am motivated by money,*” which is what they believe you want them to say. I like to ask people questions like, “*What was your proudest accomplishment at your previous employer?*” or “*What would your customers tell me about you if I called them?*” The answers to these questions will help you to understand how the person sees themselves and how they want to be seen by others. It often helps to ask the same question several ways such as, “*What qualities do you think a good salesperson should possess?*” early in the interview and later ask them, “*What qualities do you have that makes you a good salesperson?*” If the candidate’s answers to these questions are consistent, their responses most likely reflect their actual beliefs. Inconsistent responses are a sign that they are trying to tell you what they think you want them to say.

Recruiting—A process rather than an event

Rather than making a hiring decision after one or two brief interviews, I like to base them on a number of factors. I review the candidate’s communications with me, were there errors in their resume (indicates poor

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attention to detail), the quality of their writing, did they follow-up with thank you notes etc. (customer focus) and how did they sound on the phone (communication skills). I put them in situations where they can interact with employees and sometimes customers. I suggest they spend a few hours in the field with a senior rep, after which, I will ask the rep if the candidate felt comfortable in the field and if they were curious about the job and the company. I usually involve several people in the decision making process. When I ran a large call center, my office manager was exceptionally good at reading people, though she had no sales experience. I valued her input when recruiting new team members.

In the final analysis, it is wiser to hire on attitude rather than experience. At the beginning of my career I worked for a large company that was always looking for good sales people. A senior manager was visiting from out of town and arrived late at a local hotel. The kitchen was closed, but a waitress who was about to go off shift said she would see what she could do. She went to the kitchen and made him a sandwich. He asked her a few questions and asked her to call him about an interview. Though she had never held a sales position, we hired her and she was a top rep until her retirement over 15 years later. We were able to teach her to sell, but her willingness to go out of her way to help a customer was something that no trainer could instill in an employee.

A manager's most important job

A sales manager's job description includes a long list of tasks, but no job is more important to their long term success than finding people who can sell advertising and build their customer base. Though one would need a fully functional crystal ball to make the right recruiting decisions 100% of the time, you can improve your hiring practices and greatly reduce turnover by carefully vetting the candidates. Recruiting is a tough job, but if you look hard enough, you can build a winning team of "Rising Stars."

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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