



What to Look For When Hiring a Lab Sales Representative

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If you want to build your lab business, much of your success falls on the shoulders of the field representative. Assuming you offer competitive services, your sales person can make or break the success of his territory.

One of the key pieces of the puzzle means understanding the personality profile of top producers. If a lab does not employ the right person, it can recast, literally, the lab's reputation and prominence. Of course, supplementing this scenario renders wasting financial resources and squandering precious time.

The Fallacy of Experience

Human bias allows managers/organizations to migrate toward hiring someone with "industry experience." They simply assume that the person can hit the ground running, activating a vast amount of accounts in a relatively short amount of time. They also feel that this "experienced" individual comes pre-packaged with a golden set of hard-wired excellent sales attributes. Why bother to train them when the person already "knows the business"? Why spend all of that precious time and money unnecessarily? On the other hand, is it *truly* a needless investment? Let us look deeper into this situation.

It remains important to understand the marketing person's employment background circumstances. Was he laid off or fired? Was there employee dissatisfaction with the job or compensation policy? Is the sales rep simply looking for a better opportunity to expand his horizons? If the salesperson had performance issues in his prior job, there may be an inherent feeling with both the new employee and the hiring manager that this newfound person can suddenly, somehow achieve new magical heights. This rarely occurs. He maintains his run-of-the-mill (or worse) sales methods. Laboratories need to seek out field people with fundamental sales potential. One can simply gain experience, but one does not easily acquire innate sales talent. The person's basic inner abilities count *more* than experience.

Many labs may not discover any problems until a rep has worked for a number of months. By then, it may turn into an uncomfortable situation to begin a counseling process. Even worse, lab management may conveniently ignore the situation, hoping their marketing person will "see

the light” and, miraculously, start producing. Sometimes, the manager feels he does not have the time or energy to replace the rep. Hospital outreach programs may struggle with sales-related issues because this transverses into unfamiliar territory within a hospital setting. Ideally, a hospital who ventures into the lab outreach scene should seek professional sales advice in hiring—and even managing/coaching—a field rep.

What Makes a Good Lab Salesperson?

A number of those engaged in selling lab services do so in a more-or-less pedestrian way. This evolves because of the significant amount of rejection intrinsic to the industry. The marketer feels they work for a “me-too” lab and, as such, comes across as a “me-too” personality. Part of this situation owes to improper (or lack of) training and coaching. Hiring managers need to peer much further into the mysteries of personality and psychology if they want real answers as to what separates the “me-too” from a very good representative.

There are three over-riding basic qualities that a first-class lab rep must have: (1) empathy, (2) ego drive and (3) an interest in medicine. There are additional elements, but these frame the foundation.

Empathy equates to possessing the ability to feel as other people. This differentiates itself from being sympathetic. A marketing person can know what the other person feels without agreeing with it. A representative with good empathy can sense the reactions of the client (prospect) and adjust to those reactions. Yes, he has to have good sales skills, but possessing an empathetic nature embodies a principle component that makes a difference.

In addition to this empathetic quality, there exists a need to conquer. It translates into an ego drive manifestation (some call it “high dominance”) that makes him want and *need* to make the sale in a personal way, irrespective of the financial incentives down the road. The salesperson has an occult energetic force that wants to consummate the sale—and the client helps him fulfill his personal need. The win-win relationship supplies a powerful means of enhancing his ego. He feels wonderful by virtue of the successful sale and, at the other end of the spectrum, feels somber defeat when he loses. The high dominance person likes control, avoids inaction and thrives on challenges.

It remains obvious that, in most situations, a sales rep will find disappointment more than he achieves positive accomplishments. Consequently, his ego must withstand the constant barrage of “negative” situations. The failure, in essence, should act as a motivational tool toward greater efforts that will eventually bring him success. Therefore, a delicate balance resides between (1) an ego partially compromised that requires reinforcement (a sale) and (2) a motivated ego strong enough to withstand the failure, but not conquered by it.

The third component, an interest in medicine, creates an obvious point. The representative promotes a laboratory service, so it remains significant that he must know the vernacular. In order to “talk the talk”—thereby gaining credibility—someone should provide training in basic diseases, related lab testing, methodologies, specimen transport supplies and even specimen

handling. Because of this technical constituent, many labs may go the route of interviewing medical technologists. The educational upbringing lends itself nicely to the job, diminishing (or eliminating) the amount of time required to bring someone up to speed on the technical portion. In addition, the candidate already has, ostensibly, an inherent interest in laboratory medicine. However (a *big* however), the applicant must possess additional sales-related characteristics. Unfortunately, many organizations try to fit a square peg through a round hole—believing the technical aspect supersedes any other attributes. Certainly, this is *not* the case if the organization expects to expand its business at a reasonable (or aggressive) degree.

The Role of Training

There was an earlier statement regarding training and follow-up coaching. One must underscore the point that without these two activities, even A-level salespeople become limited in their potential. However, something else relates to training. The best program in the world cannot turn a sow's ear into a silk purse. If the salesperson does not "fit" the job, the most comprehensive training and adjunctive coaching will fail to convert him into a superstar. Training succeeds only if the *selection* succeeds.

Assuming the laboratory picks a top individual, training should consist of both classroom *and* in-the-field mentoring. Sales people predictably fritter away most of their academic instruction unless real-life observation and coaching by an experienced person becomes customary. As humans, we cannot see our own swing, and we usually do not self-analyze. Consequently, having an expert observe a marketing person's methods and general characteristics provides an excellent opportunity to help develop a first-class sales rep.

Other Important Characteristics

Top-notch sales reps should also have attributes that relate to the following:

1. Creativeness
2. Multi-tasker
3. Steadiness (patient, persistent, thoughtful, deliberate)
4. Good listening skills
5. Strong desire to learn – open to new ideas
6. Strong communicator (written and oral)
7. Professional appearance
8. Good team player
9. Desire to please/follow through
10. Organizational skills

Finding the Candidate

How one finds a pool of nominees flows through various channels. Internal staff may offer not only a few aspirants but also the advantage of insight into the lab's culture and "who's who" within the organization. This becomes particularly helpful in a hospital setting, as questions from clients characteristically range beyond laboratory services.

Placing an advertisement on-line plays an often used search role. Pouring over resumes demands significant time, as does follow-up phone interviews. Hiring a search firm, especially one that specializes in the laboratory business, provides a focused, less time-consuming approach. They usually have a roster of job seekers, they spend time tracking down additional applicants, and they understand the industry. The recruiting company performs phone screening and offers a select few candidates for their client's final judgment. For these services, the customer typically pays the search company 25% to 30% of the first year's base salary.

If most of the individual's personality dynamics match the key functional requirements mentioned above, there probably exists an appropriate job match. The fact remains that many who do their own "search-and-hire" depend on the natural tendency to seek someone whose experience and education mirrors the job description. While this *may* prove fruitful, examples abound where employers have hired excellent people who possessed non-science and non-sales backgrounds. It distills down to matching the right people with the right intrinsic abilities.

Summary

The laboratory industry needs to seek ways to enrich its ability to select top salespeople. Failure typically occurs due to the belief that experience equals aptitude. Hiring managers need to investigate completely the applicant's empathy, ego drive and willingness to learn lab medicine as primary drivers that sculpt a first-class sales rep. Selecting someone with these characteristics, plus others mentioned in this article, will contribute to more successful sales programs. The employer can always provide the needed technical knowledge and functional selling skills through internal and/or consultative services. However, when the field person lacks the essential dynamics, training cannot fill the gap. Making the initial *correct* decision can mitigate the distressing situation of an under-performing employee and/or potential turnover with a concomitant high price tag.

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