

When It's Time to Hire a Lab Sales Rep

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... it is human bias to think, *"I'll hire someone with experience because he/she already knows the business. I won't have to spend precious time educating. They come hard-wired with excellent sales attributes because they have been trained by another lab."* Should I keep going? OK, one more: *"I'm going to look for someone who is a 'born salesman' — someone who exhibits the personality traits of the stereotypical sales person."*

There is no doubt that hiring a superstar from a competitor can be the best decision for your lab. There may be legitimate reasons why a top-producing salesperson seeks a new job. However, it may come as a surprise, you do not necessarily have to find a "born salesman" with lab sales experience.

Industry experts claim the average bad hire costs a company about \$50-\$60,000— yet most hiring decisions are made within a couple of interviews. Many companies fail to discover any problems until the new employee has worked for several months. By then, it's a painful counseling process. Or worse, you leave them in the job because you hope they will "turn things around." Or, you rationalize with yourself saying, "the person knows how to do the job." Or, you simply don't have the time or energy to do anything about it.

Why do managers hire salespeople based primarily on experience and conventional personality traits? The reason is they may not have a systematic method of determining the true ingredients of a star performer. Consequently, they revert to traditional qualification beliefs that (what they intuitively think) extend to exceptional performance.

Some organizations use a computerized assessment tool that asks the candidate to choose from various answers. This might be a good way to quickly obtain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of a potential salesperson. But, the question remains: what is the evaluation actually measuring? Many of these programs equate to a one-dimensional format — they aim to identify a common sales personality. It may seem incongruent, but it could point toward the wrong person that does not fit the lab's culture or the qualities the owner wants as someone representing the lab.

Three Important Interview Components

There exist three elements that stand as important factors of an interview:

1. A behavioral assessment giving insight into their selling *style*. This could be accomplished partly through one of the computerized tools previously mentioned, as well as interview questions that reveal *how* the person will sell. You should be looking for an applicant that prefers to be a "detective" — someone who is inquisitive (think Detective Colombo) and lives by the mantra, *questions are the answer*. One of the most compelling sources of credibility is asking insightful questions the customer

has not thought to ask him-herself. You also need to observe if this person has dominance, i.e., evaluate the strength of their ego. Strong ego is crucial in a sales position because it means the candidate will have the drive and personal ambition to move the sale forward and “don the armor” to protect him from rejection. High dominance people like control, they can’t stand inaction and they live for challenges. Creativity is another important behavior to look for under the “how” category. And, anyone who reveals him-herself as a “strategist” is another positive sign. Many sales reps feel that selling is all about the face-to-face encounter. But, the strategist looks at every challenge as an opportunity to out-think competitive approaches. Top companies seek to hire sales people who possess the amalgamation of excellent tactical skills *and* shrewd strategic abilities.

2. Uncover from the interviewee his/her personal areas of interest and values. This will indicate *why* someone will sell. You want to reveal the person’s attitudes and motivations and if he/she is a self-starter with a history of setting and achieving goals.
3. You want an appraisal that offers perceptions into *what* the candidate will do on an on-going basis. Does it appear the person has the mental discipline to consistently strive for greatness, always aspire to improve selling skills, to learn clinical aspects of the job, etc.? The key is whether that individual will have a high emotional drive many years into the career, as opposed to the first six months. Top representatives remain steady in their pigheaded determination for a job well done and to be the best.

To summarize: *how* — *why* — *what* stand as the cornerstone areas of concentration for every sales rep’s job interview.

The Lab’s Responsibility

Once you find someone, the lab should invest heavily in training and coaching the individual into a top-producing and professional field person. In fact, most professions—stockbrokers, lawyers, healthcare providers, financial planners, etc.—have mandatory continuing education. Without it, people (1) would not keep current with the information necessary to be accepted as a professional in their respective field and (2) may fall into poor habits that could prevent them from being more successful (or failing at their job). Many laboratories, unfortunately, provide minimal or no continuing education for their field staff—and mandatory training rarely exists.

Irrespective if the new employee has sales experience or not, it remains essential to set the standard for *your* expectations. Organizations have different educational methods and their own definition of “training.” Some labs exert time explaining the background of specific tests for which the lab wants more volume. They don’t begin to touch on strategy and tactics (those subjects are *expected* to be golden hard-wired already — aren’t they?). During the interview when the candidate asks about training, labs may speak positively about their educational program but offer only glittering generalities. For many labs, their “education” consists of visiting various lab departments and introducing the new employee to supervisors and professional staff. In addition, training may consist of showing where supplies are kept, where the billing is done, an example of a sample report, how to work the Client Relationship Management computer program, where the couriers dispatch, what paperwork is expected, marketing materials, etc. The good news: all of this ranks high for assimilation purposes. The unfortunate news: this may be the only “official” training the lab offers. To add more robustness to the indoctrination process, it would be well worth it to have the representative spend some time with a valued client service representative to observe the types of calls received and how that person handles questions/problems. The same holds true within the Billing Department. In addition, riding a courier route can be helpful in a number of ways for the new hire.

The laboratory should not make assumptions about the new representative's ability to organize the territory, how to develop specific account strategies, the right background questions to ask, and how to utilize effective tactical methods. The vast majority of upper management simply presupposes these topics are ingrained because—after all—they're "sales people." Haven't they been that doing all along? However, who is to say it exists at the level you want and expect the person to epitomize your lab? The new employee could have spent many years repeating the same mistakes over again or even be ignorant of certain sales techniques! This exists as the primary reason to *establish a standard*. As a lab within the community, you obviously want the best person representing it to the professional public. This individual can give your business (1) a boost in reputation *and* revenues, (2) an appearance of a me-too organization or, worse yet, (3) a poor reputation.

Adopting a Three-Prong Platform

Irrespective if your lab supports one or many representatives, the company should insist on developing best practices for its field team that can lead to sustainable competitive advantage in their marketplace. Most all professions—engineering, aviation, law, medicine, sales etc.—are called upon to learn, practice and master each of these three constituents:

1. A *system* — an outline of a process that can be repeated. This is where sales training comes in. The system translates into the "what to do" to be successful, i.e., proper strategy and tactical methods that respond to either the customers' critical business issues or the "we're satisfied" comment.
2. *Skills* — the sales professional's knowledge and ability to utilize the tools and techniques required for success. Skills represent the "how to" in executing the system. Skills can be developed and practiced with the help of an experienced coach (e.g., questioning, listening, presenting and closing skills).
3. *Discipline* — the mind-set, the attitude and standards of performance of the salesperson. It is the "fire-in-the-belly"—the desire to keep learning—that enables the rep to remain confident under any type of selling condition. This supports the "will do" of the successful representative.

A successful marketing rep must learn, practice and master all three areas. It should be a continual pursuit by not only the representative, but also the employer to assist in this quest for superiority.

Summary

When it's time to hire a salesperson, laboratories can find themselves fortunate if they locate a stellar representative from another lab. This is easier said than done, however. Upper management must not be prejudiced to believe that employing an individual that has "lab sales experience" equates to the ultimate in hiring decisions. This author has witnessed excellent sales people that have been bench technologists, as well as diverse backgrounds totally *unrelated* to reference laboratories. It distills down to digging deep during the interview into the *how*, the *why* and the *what* previously described. It then becomes the lab's responsibility to *set a benchmark* by providing (1) a selling system formulated specifically for the reference lab industry, (2) coaching to assist in enhancing taught skills and (3) on-going support and discipline to help make the sales rep become master-class. As a final thought, it may be best to keep these two axioms in mind when hiring a salesperson: (1) experience does not always equate to aptitude and (2) inner qualities count *more* than experience.

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