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Keep a competitive edge: Recruit sought-after sales talent

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts there will be 10 million more jobs than people to fill them by 2010 in the United States.

It's an understatement to say the competitive edge of the future will be attracting and retaining top sales talent. Smart and proactive companies already are putting in systems and processes to make sure they can fill openings with good people.

Here are ways to make sure your company wins the race for finding and keeping the best.

ABR: Always Be Recruiting -- Hiring and selecting great sales talent is a process, not an event. Great sales managers always are looking for and interviewing potential sales candidates -- even when there isn't an open position.

The president of a successful mortgage company has practiced the ABR principle for years. She's adding loan officers to her sales team while others in the industry are laying off or getting out of the business.

On top of that, the company is having record sales in 2007 while everyone else is talking about the slowing home market.

Emotional intelligence -- The research shows that EQ is more important than IQ for success in sales and sales leadership.

Because of the Internet, there's a greater commoditization of products and services, requiring a greater need for building business through relationships. Many companies don't have a formal interview process that tests and interviews for key competencies critical to success.

Assertiveness -- Be careful on this one. A salesperson can look and act like the hard-driving type and score low in assertiveness. It shows in various ways, such as promising customers something the company can't deliver, customers taking advantage of their time, discounting products and services, or setting poor expectations of a mutually beneficial partnership.

Empathy -- Finally, a salesperson who has turned off the WIFM channel (what's in it for me). The empathetic salesperson senses others' emotions and shows concern for their prospects and customers. Being interested isn't an act; it's a part of who he or she is. The salesperson who scores high in empathy knows how to adapt and adjust during a sales call based on what is going on in the meeting.

Empathy also is a key quality in great leaders, because they understand what motivates each person on their team. These leaders know that people work for people, not companies.

Flexibility -- Ever had a salesperson or sales manager who's not open to new ideas?

That's a dangerous situation in a flat world, because decisions need to change as new information comes in. And information is coming in at a faster pace than ever.

A flexible salesperson or manager is willing to change course with the input of new data.

Hire a salesperson who aligns with company values. -- You can hire a selling machine, but if they don't fit your company, culture and values, you'll end up with a bulldozer who is wreaking havoc and causing turnover in other departments.

If teamwork is a core value for your company, make sure potential candidates can give examples from their past life of how they played well with other departments.

If your culture is a no-excuse one, make sure your next hire isn't a drama king/queen. You'll end up hosting more one-act plays than you thought possible in a day.

Ask the salesperson about his or her biggest setback, what he or she did about it, lessons learned and how he or she applied them.

Always ask for more than one setback, because one failure doesn't make Jack or Jill a resilient salesperson.

Hire right and spend your time right -- Once you've hired that top performer, put in systems and processes to keep them motivated and on a continuous growth curve.

A sales manager's Monday morning to-do list should include names of people to recognize that week. This includes the sales team and other members of the corporate team who affect the customer experience.

Sales meetings always should include two agenda items: recognition and learning.

Invest your time wisely. Get your nose out of the reports and endless meetings, and get into the car with your salesperson. Top sales organizations that schedule weekly coaching meetings with their sales team experience an average of 20 percent to 30 percent growth each year.

Are you ready to compete for the top sales and leadership talent? Now is the time to get ready for the future.

About the Author

Colleen Stanley is president of SalesLeadership Inc., a business development consulting firm specializing in sales and sales management training. The company provides programs in prospecting, referral strategies, consultative sales training, sales management training, and hiring/selection. She is also the author of "Growing Great Sales Teams: Lessons from the Cornfield." Reach Colleen at 303.708.1128 or visit www.salesleadershipdevelopment.com.

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