

Know What You Need

by Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney

If new hires have not panned out, it's time to pin down a more detailed notion of what the job entails.

Sales jobs range from quick-closing, hard-selling, short-term, commission-only positions to the opposite extreme, where the persuasive element is much more subtle and takes place only a few times a year at the end of a long process. Similarly, many sales positions require little technical background, while others require the salesperson to be a technical expert in a particular product or service.

It is important to understand the key elements that are necessary and some of the key questions that must be asked to develop an understanding of the specific sales role and the personality attributes required for an individual to fill that role successfully. These are the elements that will go into creating a realistic job description, which then becomes your blueprint for finding the ideal candidate.

While this may seem fundamental, we have been continually amazed at how many companies come to us with job descriptions that are very unspecific and, as a result, set the stage for disappointment.

To make a rational judgment on who can fill a particular sales job, you need to understand the product being sold, the nature of the prospects being solicited and the very process through which success can be attained.

Frequency of Close – A sales situation that provides two or three closing opportunities per year would not satisfy an individual who has an intense ego-drive and perhaps possesses the impatience that frequently goes along with

that kind of drive. That individual hungers for closes as a key means of satisfying that drive.

Lead Production – It is a far more difficult sale when cold calling is required. The cold caller must, out of necessity, experience far more frequent rejection, often of a far more abrupt, even nasty, kind, than the individual who follows up leads that have been furnished. Thus a very clear definition of the job must be made internally and presented honestly to the candidate about the nature of customer conversion, cold leads, cool leads, well-screened leads and so on. Different people will be successful depending on an accurate definition of this aspect of the sales role.

Nature of the Customer – Many people would be highly successful at selling individual consumers a tangible product but would fail totally if faced with the necessity of making a full-scale, well-developed presentation to a committee or a board of directors. Others could deal extraordinarily well at connecting with purchasing agents, branch managers or office managers, but would find it extremely difficult to make presentations on the board room or CEO level. It is critical to know not only to whom we are selling (companies, individuals, etc.), but also on what level the sale is initially made and on what level the final purchase can be approved.



Technical Background – The technical background required for a specific sales job relates closely to the question of who plays the final part in the decision to purchase. If microcomputers are being sold to office managers who know little about the technical aspects of the machine, somewhat less technical proficiency probably will be sufficient for the salesperson as long as that salesperson can speak accurately about the machine’s capabilities and its potential benefits to the customer. On the other hand, if the buyers are engineers or heads of data processing divisions, the salesperson had better be exceptionally proficient in the technology, or his or her credibility and the credibility of the product will quickly be lost.

Support – There are many salespeople who relish their positions because they are able to function in a totally independent manner. They like winning on their own. There are equally successful salespeople who enjoy the camaraderie of working with other experts collaboratively. They want to know that, if needed, they have all the technical support needed to make the sale. These are team players. They derive gratification by being part of a group that connects with each other, relies on each other and succeeds together.

If companies and sales managers do no more than develop their job description using 15 to 20 pertinent questions, they will have taken a major step toward achieving the job match that is the key to sales success.

The exercise of putting together such a job description for their own edification will substantially improve their ability to make judgments concerning who can fill the job. In addition, presenting a job description of this kind to individuals in line for promotion or to applicants will help these individuals immeasurably to determine whether they really want the particular sales position given a clear description of all its aspects.

Alisa Barry, chef and creator of Bell Cucina Artful Food, offers a word of advice: “Creating the job description first, then searching for the person that fits that description, is a much more effective way of making sure you are bringing on the right talent.”

Excerpted with permission from “How to Hire & Develop Your Next Top Performer” by Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney. A revised and updated edition was published in 2012 by McGraw-Hill Companies. Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney are the CEO and president respectively of Caliper, an international management consulting firm.