To Test Or Not To Test

Here's the question: When you're hiring a salesperson, should you take the time and spend the money to have candidates "tested" before you make a decision?

In terms of the time involved, psychological testing usually adds at least a week to the hiring process. It takes that much time to get a candidate in to take the test, to get it off for scoring and evaluation, and then to get it back and consider the results. In terms of cost, the programs I consider suitable all run in the neighborhood of $100-$200 per test.

So it does take time and it does cost money. But I still say without qualification that you should always test a sales candidate before you hire.

Why? To me, it's really a simple issue. I know from personal experience that sales candidates can fool you in an interview. My pet theory is that 50% of all people can put an impressive resume together and say all of the right things in an interview, but only 10% of all people really have what it takes to succeed in sales. The odds are against you unless you have some means of looking "beneath the surface."

That's what testing gives you, and that's why it's worth the time and money.

Four Components Of Sales Management

One of the things I teach in sales management seminars is that effective sales management has four components: hiring, training, managing and motivating. I think the best way to put these four components in the proper perspective is to understand that they have to be addressed in a specific sequence. First, you have to hire the right person; then you must provide adequate primary training; then you must establish appropriate management systems (which should include ongoing "advanced" training); then you must motivate compliance with those management systems.

The point I want to make is that a failure at any point in the sequence dramatically decreases the chances of success with the next component(s). In other words, this is an endeavor in which your first mistake can really hurt you, especially if that mistake is to hire the wrong person in the first place. Again, that's why testing is worth the time and the money. I'd much rather spend $200 now to find out that a candidate may have fooled me in an interview than to find out three months—and maybe $5000-$6000 in wages—down the line.

Recent Cases

One of my clients recently hired a salesperson without testing him, and the results were unfortunate…and more unfortunately, predictable. But there's more to the story, so let me tell it.

I actually conducted a "screening" interview with this candidate before the client ever talked to him. It happened that I was in the general area on other business, and I was able to schedule an early morning breakfast meeting with the candidate. I had seen the resume, and I had a very enjoyable conversation with this young man who had recently moved into the area for an understandable reason. He even had some previous printing sales experience (although in a slightly different segment of the industry.) He looked good, and he said all the right things in response to my questions. I reported back to the client that this was a person worth taking the next step with.

My client scheduled an interview, and was also impressed…so impressed that he offered a job on the spot, and the candidate accepted. He started work the next day. My client said: "You liked him and I liked him…and you've had a lot more experience at this than I have. I thought you were telling me that I should move ahead with him."

I answered: "Move ahead, yes. Make a final decision, no. We've talked before about how testing and checking references was going to be part of the hiring process. We've also talked about how I'm good at evaluating sales talent, but I'm not infallible! I really wish we'd tested this guy and taken a look below the surface."

I then suggested that my client have his new salesperson tested anyway, even after the fact of hiring him. "We'll still learn something about his strengths and weaknesses," I said, "and that will help you to train him and manage him in the future."

It took 5-6 weeks to actually get the testing done—during which time the salesperson did very little prospecting, gained no appointments, and as you might expect, sold absolutely nothing. And what did the testing indicate? "We do not recommend this candidate for this position," the report stated, and it continued by noting that he did not posses a strong inner sense of urgency or a results orientation, would probably have difficulty with complex or technical information, and generally displayed the characteristics of a person who might "talk a good game" but not perform well in a sales position.

Before we even looked at the report, I had asked my client: "Would you have hired this guy if you knew him as well then as you do now?" He said: "Probably not." After reading the report I asked him how well the test results described the salesperson he'd come to know. "Right on the money this whole experience has cost me," was his answer.

Another Case Study

In another recent case, I spent an entire day with a client conducting second interviews with six sales candidates. (These six were the ones she felt were worth having me talk to, out of approximately 8-10 applicants with whom she'd had initial conversations.) We came out of these interviews with two candidates we felt were worth taking the next step with…one of whom we both liked a lot!

"What do we do now?" my client asked. I recommended that she test the candidate we liked the most, and hold the other one in reserve. "There's no sense spending the money to test two unless we have to," I said. The test was completed and the results were back within a week.

The results were disappointing. The report stated that our candidate might be very good at a "customer service" job, but seemed to lack the confidence and "ego drive" necessary to be an effective salesperson. The report also suggested that he would not respond well to criticism or rejection.

"I guess I can see some of the 'ego-drive' part," my client said, "but to tell you the truth, I liked the fact that he seemed to be a pretty low-key individual. I really don't want someone out there 'hard-selling' my company."

"In that case," I said, "let's not give up on him too quickly. Let's show this (the test results) to him, tell him what he'll have to do in order to compensate for what the testing says he doesn't have, and see what he has to say."

What he had to say was interesting. It basically boiled down to this: "Who are they to say that I can't do this job? I'm saying that I can, and if you don't believe me, maybe I don't want to work for you in the first place!" This was a completely different side of a person we'd initially been quite impressed with.

"Where did all that come from?" my client asked me after the candidate left. I answered: "It had to be in there all the time, but nothing in the course of a 'normal' interview process brought it out. Now aren't you glad we had the test report gave us a reason to look for that kind of behavior?"

This particular story has a happy ending. We called in our "back-up" candidate and tested him, and the test results were similar in several ways. Again, the report suggested that our candidate might not be "tough enough" to handle the rejection that is always part of a sales job. But when we shared that information with him, his response was quite a bit different than that of the first candidate.

"I guess that doesn't surprise me," he said. "I've been told lots of times that I wouldn't be able to do something. But I've always been willing to take on a challenge, and I've usually learned and grown from every challenge. If you'll give me a chance and help me to learn what I need to learn, I really think I can do this and I think you'll be glad you gave me the chance."

After several months on the job, this young salesperson is starting to show results. He needed quite a bit of support in the early stages, and there were a few times when the rejection really seemed to be getting him down. But because she knew to look for it, the owner of this shop was there on those days to say: "Look, we knew going into this that most of the people you talk to are going to say 'no' to you. You just keep making the calls and following the system, and before long you'll be hearing enough 'yes's' to make both of us happy."

Three Key Points

There are three key points that I hope you'll get from these two stories. First, it's easy to be fooled in an interview, especially by someone with an outgoing personality and the ability so say all of the right things. Experienced sales managers will tell you that there's no one more dangerous in an interview than a sales candidate who can talk but won't work, and you can really only accurately evaluate one of those factors in an interview.

I'm pretty good at evaluating sales talent, but as these two stories show, I'm not infallible. I've been fooled before at the interview stage, and I have every expectation that I'm going to be fooled again. That's why I would never hire someone to work for me without first testing and checking references. I want to see what's below the surface before I make a significant investment like hiring a salesperson, and you should feel the same way.

The second key point may not be so obvious, but it does reflect an important reality. When you're hiring salespeople at the lower end of the compensation spectrum, you can't expect to find "perfect" candidates very often. Another of my clients once expressed it this way: "When you can't pay enough to attract first-class salespeople, you have to find the best of the second-class, and then you have to work with their weaknesses."

Yes, we'd all like to have test reports come back with a "can't miss/hire immediately" recommendation, but if that's your requirement, it might take you a very long time in the real world to hire a salesperson. I've been involved in plenty of success stories where young and/or inexperienced salespeople were coached and supported by managers who understood their weaknesses and helped the salespeople to overcome them. It doesn't take a

genius to sell printing. Everything a quick printing salesperson needs to know can be taught and learned, even the so-called "personality traits." My experience is that the earlier you identify the weaknesses, the easier it is to "train in" whatever is lacking.

The third key point is simply this: You have to be crazy to make a hiring decision based only on what the sales candidate himself/herself tells you. That statement may seem like little more than a repetition of Key Point #1, but if that's the case, I think it's important enough to be repeated! You don't have to "hire blindly." Testing programs are available! I guess what I'm really saying is that I think you'd have to be crazy not to take advantage of them.

I also think you'd be crazy not to check references on anyone you contemplate hiring. Yes, I know that you may not learn much from previous employers, who are likely to be just as leery as you would be about getting sued for giving a less-than-flattering reference. But that doesn't mean that you don't ask! Doing "due diligence" should be considered one of the most important parts of the process in making any investment, and that's ultimately what hiring a salesperson represents, a significant investment in your business.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is this: It's easy to make a mistake in hiring a salesperson, but it's also easy to prevent mistakes. Take the time and spend the money—on products like the Caliper Profile, the Omnia Profile, or the Prevue Assessment. If the test report is positive, go ahead and hire with confidence. If the test report is less-than-perfect, then you have a decision to make. Just don't forget that one possible course of action is to abandon a candidate and accept the cost and the time involved in running another "salesperson wanted" ad.

I'd much rather see you do that than spend thousands of dollars on a mistake that could have been avoided.