

# Copier Careers Article

## Who Sells Who?: Recognizing Solid Candidates for Sales Positions

When it comes to attracting and hiring productive salespeople, especially those with a successful track record in the highly competitive copier industry, it's always a tight market. This hiring challenge is increased by the unique demands of sales as a profession. In addition to knowledge and drive, sales success depends heavily on personality – possibly the toughest quality for a hiring manager or HR leader to evaluate.

There will always be plenty of “art” and instinct in the process of finding a good fit for your Sales organization. But how do we introduce more “science” and objective criteria into hiring salespeople? What can you reasonably expect to learn before hiring a new member of the sales team? This article addresses those challenging questions with some sensible tips for better interviews and more balanced evaluation of viable sales candidates.

### Strong Personality Wanted

When we say someone has a “strong personality,” we are usually recommending caution – and sometimes expressing criticism. Yet it's hard to imagine a good salesperson without a strong personality. It's essential to their success. We simply need to remember that this strength can be shown in many different ways: some salespeople are excellent listeners; some are excellent talkers – the best seem to naturally strike a good balance that works with a wide range of customers. Certainly, most are able to adapt their approach to individual customer needs and preferences.

Working with (and buying from) productive salespeople teaches one thing for certain: there's no single ideal sales type or approach. The stereotype of a fast-talking, aggressive individual who “doesn't take no for an answer,” simply doesn't reflect the real world. Some outstanding sales professionals are outwardly very aggressive, but others are calm and collected. For every pro who succeeds by emphasizing technology and features, there is another who bases most sales on relationship-building and trust.

Still, we can agree that some salespeople “have it,” meaning they possess and develop the talent to hit their numbers consistently, and others do not. As a hiring professional, it's critical to separate our personal preferences from the reality that there are many different ways to relate to customers. From another point of view, some tend to take direct, personal responsibility for customer issues and others are best at involving team members. If the track record is solid, chances are excellent that your candidate applies a flexible approach that works with customers – and that may work well within your company.

### Making Sales Interviews Work For You

A glance through employment advertisements for sales positions yields a lot of general words and phrases, such as “excellent communication skills,” “results-oriented professional,” and “dynamic self-starter.” Many of these traits reflect what employers want from virtually all staff members, and it's very difficult to gauge what they mean in practical terms. Still, we can use interviews to help us identify essential traits among those who have developed a solid, effective sales approach that produces success.

The sales candidate interview is truly an interesting encounter, because it resembles a face-to-face “cold call” in many ways. As the buyer in this exchange, you must ensure that your needs are identified and explored. To respond positively, you need to be confident the “seller” understands those needs and is capable of delivering targeted, dependable solutions. You will ultimately hire based on your levels of trust and belief that your “purchase” will meet your needs. Here though, the product is the person, in terms of what he or she can do for your organization.

To evaluate a sales candidate effectively, it's important for the interviewer to work toward the good conversational balance that happens in a great sales call. As you introduce your organization and cover important points about the position, it's fair to expect a high level of engagement from your candidate, who should take this opportunity to assess your needs.

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As the discussion continues, you want to learn as much as possible about the candidate's strengths and style. Simply stated, this means offering opportunities for the candidate to sell his capabilities – and remember you've asked for this pitch. Recognizing this can ease any sense of "feeling sold," in favor of a fair evaluation of the facts your candidate presents.

## Putting Your Needs On The Table

One essential trait for a salesperson is what we often call "savvy." They must evaluate customer needs and motivations every day, constantly seizing opportunities to show themselves and their products in the best possible light. As a result, your candidate may ask strategic questions about the demands placed on your open position, total compensation potential, opportunities for growth, and other considerations. Responding to these inquiries honestly, as specifically as you can, will help both you and your candidate determine whether the match should be made.

## Providing Opportunities for Your Candidate to Shine

In turn, an experienced sales person is accustomed to being challenged. It's very fair for you to ask tough, targeted questions about the track record you see on the candidate's resume, the circumstances surrounding major successes he or she touts, and the reason the candidate moved on from previous positions and is interested in the position you have to offer. In fact, you can probably learn a lot more from these questions than from trying to evaluate whether the candidate's "personality" is appealing to you and right for your company.

For example, you will likely learn much more from your candidate's response to a question like, "What were the biggest factors in a recent large sale, preferably one in which the customer was skeptical or resistant?" than one like, "How would you describe your approach to overcoming objections?" Salespeople are often great storytellers, with valuable insight into human nature, and their success stories can reveal much of what you need to know.

## Looking to Qualify and Hire

Always remember that your real objective is to hire—benefiting your company and avoiding the tremendous "opportunity costs" of leaving open slots in your sales force. It's important to recognize these realities of our industry and many others:

- 1) There are valid reasons for leaving a position and seeking a better situation. Better compensation is one of those reasons, and a common one for sales reps and managers, but other reasons can be equally valid. Emphasizing the strengths of your organization is wise; so is honesty about the areas where you are looking to improve.
- 2) Not all companies are adept at supporting their salespeople, or at backing up the commitments those salespeople must make every day. Because your candidate has been on the front lines, he or she may be more openly critical of previous employers than candidates for positions involving different types of pressure.
- 3) Some salespeople do fall victim to the weaknesses of inferior products and services. It's a fact of life that Sales is a more "mobile" profession than many others, and rushing to harsh judgment on a candidate who has moved around a lot may cost you a great employee with potential to drive your business forward.

Asking and allowing your candidate to talk through their own job history can serve several important purposes. It keeps the conversation in the "comfort zone" of facts and history, and may answer concerns you have about resume gaps or other issues. By listening carefully, you may also learn about the candidate's motivations and decision-making process, setting the stage for a more personal discussion about current goals and needs.

## Learning What We Really Want To Know

After establishing a common understanding of the facts, you will want to steer the conversation to gain insight into your candidate's reliability, capacity for accepting responsibility (occasionally "taking hits" in the best interest of the company), problem-solving approach, and other important characteristics. In doing so, you will gather facts relevant to your hiring decision while also learning as much as possible about your candidate's overall personality and style.

## Adding it All Up for a Decision

In deciding whether to pursue your sales candidate further, or even extend an offer, you will probably rely on both science and art. With the information and impressions you have, you need to draw conclusions about personal qualities as well as "hard skills."

Any time we are able to add a little more science to the fine art of hiring salespeople, it's welcome assistance in addressing a real challenge. When talent is at a premium, your ability to recognize potential and fill positions efficiently becomes more important than ever. Any good salesperson will tell you it's hard to find reward without risk (the "no free lunch" theory). The idea is to minimize that risk and maximize the return with a great hire, and with sales professionals, each hire has the potential to be the most profitable one you ever make.