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The 2026 Sales Manager Market: Finding Leaders in a Limited Talent Pool

By Scott Cullen

Growth plans, succession concerns, and increasing complexity are reshaping the search for sales leadership.

When office technology dealers talk about hiring challenges, the conversation usually centers on sales reps and service technicians. Those positions generate the most openings and often receive the most attention. Another critical position key in every dealership is the sales manager. However, according to Copier Careers recruiters, sales managers may represent the industry's most difficult hiring challenge.

"There are only so many leadership roles versus X number of sales roles and technicians for one organization," explained Jessica Crowley, senior vice president at Copier Careers.

Yet demand remains strong. Dealers are looking to build teams, expand into new markets, replace retiring leaders, and strengthen succession plans. At the same time, the number of qualified candidates remains remarkably tight.

"We have a fair number of sales manager searches going right now," noted Crowley. "Clients are looking to add to their organizations, add teams, build new teams, or they're looking for succession plans for managers who are looking to retire."

Those factors are creating a competitive market for proven sales leaders and forcing dealerships to rethink how they identify, attract, and retain management talent.

A Small Talent Pool Gets Smaller

The recruiting challenges for sales managers differ significantly from those for sales reps or technicians. Although most dealerships employ numerous sales reps and service technicians, management positions are limited. "The pool is small," acknowledged Paul Schwartz, president of Copier Careers.

Can a Great Sales Rep Become a Great Manager?

As dealerships consider succession planning, some look inward rather than recruiting experienced sales managers from outside the organization. Promoting a successful sales rep can be an effective strategy, but strong sales performance alone doesn't guarantee management success. The skills that make someone an elite producer—competitiveness, independence, and personal drive don't always translate into coaching, mentoring, and team development.

The strongest management candidates typically demonstrate leadership traits before receiving the title. They help train new hires, share best practices, support teammates, and take ownership beyond their own territory or quota.

For dealerships with a limited pool of experienced sales managers, identifying and developing future leaders internally may become an increasingly important part of long-term workforce planning. The challenge isn't simply finding people who can sell; it's finding people who can help others succeed.

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That reality often surprises clients. "So often, clients tell us, 'Well, there are so many people in these types of roles,'" Schwartz observed. "Stop and think about it for a minute. Even in a large metropolitan area, how many dealerships are there? And then how many sales managers do they have versus how many sales reps or technicians?"

The numbers simply don't compare. The challenge becomes even greater when dealerships begin searching for candidates with specific experience, leadership accomplishments, market knowledge, and a cultural fit.

Adding to the pressure is a broader industry reality that Crowley says affects virtually every hiring category. "Every industry has been short of candidates," she said. The result is a highly competitive market for experienced sales leaders.

Succession Planning Returns to the Forefront

One factor driving demand is a growing focus on succession planning. For years, many dealerships operated lean organizations, concentrating on immediate operational needs. Today, some are beginning to recognize that key leadership positions may soon become vacant due to retirement.

At the same time, some organizations haven't consistently developed future leaders internally. Reflecting on when she first started in the industry, Crowley noted that companies were running so lean. "I think we're back to that point," she observed.

As a result, dealerships often face leadership gaps without clear internal successors. The challenge becomes particularly significant when organizations hope to maintain growth momentum while replacing experienced leaders.

Promoting from Within

Given the limited pool of experienced sales managers, many dealerships will still eventually look internally to identify future leaders. That naturally raises the question: Can a successful sales rep become a successful sales manager?

According to Copier Careers recruiters, the answer is yes, but not automatically. Some of the industry's strongest sales managers began as top-performing sales reps.

However, exceptional individual performance doesn't always translate into leadership success. The skills required to build a territory and close business differ from those needed to manage, motivate, and develop an entire team.

"The challenge is finding somebody who wants to move into management and then figuring out if they're going to be successful in management," said Schwartz.

Dealerships that successfully develop future managers typically look beyond quota attainment. They pay attention to sales reps who take initiative, support teammates, help onboard new employees, and demonstrate a broader interest in the organization's success.

As succession planning becomes a higher priority, identifying future leaders early may become just as important as recruiting experienced managers from outside the company.

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What Dealers Want in a Sales Manager

When dealerships seek a sales manager, they're looking for far more than someone who can sell. According to Copier Careers recruiters, the strongest candidates typically combine leadership experience, industry knowledge, and a track record of helping others succeed.

Dealerships often look for candidates who can:

- Coach and develop sales representatives
- Recruit and retain talent
- Build accountability within a sales organization
- Create and execute growth strategies
- Work effectively with ownership and executive leadership
- Understand the dealership's full portfolio of products and services

Schwartz also emphasizes the importance of communication skills and customer focus. Sales managers often serve as the bridge among ownership, sales teams, service departments, and customers.

While every dealership has its own priorities, the most sought-after candidates are those who can balance leadership, operational discipline, and revenue growth while helping the organization prepare for the future.

Why Industry Experience is an Asset

Unlike sales rep and technician searches, where dealerships are increasingly open to candidates outside the office technology channel, sales management remains largely an industry-insider position.

“Having that leadership coming from the industry is still the preference,” said Crowley. “And that's what we continue to see being successful.”

The reason is simple: sales managers must understand a much broader range of products and services than earlier generations of leaders did. “It's become a much more diverse role,” emphasized Schwartz.

The evolution from selling boxes to selling comprehensive technology solutions has significantly expanded management responsibilities. “There are more buckets they're selling from,” explained Schwartz. “There's more they have to know.”

That includes managed IT services, software solutions, production print, security offerings, and other technology categories that may vary from one dealership to the next. “If you don't know the solutions, how can you teach them and expect your reps to sell them?” Schwartz asks.

For most dealerships, that makes industry experience less of a preference and more of a practical advantage. Leaders who already understand the channel's products, sales cycles, and customer expectations can typically step in and contribute more quickly.

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Why Managers Leave

Compensation matters, but recruiters say it is rarely the sole reason a sales manager begins exploring opportunities. Instead, career growth often plays a much larger role. "Some of the candidates I've been talking to have felt stuck in their current leadership roles," revealed Crowley.

Many have spent years proving themselves, only to discover that opportunities for advancement are limited. "They're continually told there's no room for advancement because someone else is already in that role," she added.

In those situations, recruiters often find highly qualified leaders who are not actively looking but become interested when a realistic path forward is presented.

Burnout can also play a role. Sales managers often juggle recruiting, training, coaching, forecasting, solution development, and team management responsibilities simultaneously. "It's a lot," Crowley acknowledged.

Some managers eventually decide the responsibility outweighs the rewards. "We'll hear some say, 'I just want to go back to selling,'" Schwartz noted. "They're tired of being accountable for all those people."

In some cases, experienced sales managers find they can earn comparable, or even greater, compensation than high-performing individual contributors while carrying far less responsibility.

Compensation: No Easy Answers

Unlike sales rep compensation, where broad trends can sometimes be identified, sales manager compensation is extremely difficult to generalize. "There are so many variables," said Schwartz.

Compensation can vary by geography, dealership size, team size, revenue responsibilities, solution mix, override structures, and growth expectations. The complexity increases when organizations hire managers to build teams rather than inherit established ones. "If they've been at a company for 10 or 15 years and built their current quotas," Crowley explained, "why would they leave?"

That question often prompts dealerships to develop creative compensation structures that account for ramp-up periods and long-term growth expectations. As a result, recruiters spend significant time helping clients and candidates understand what realistic compensation packages look like for each opportunity. "There is no boilerplate," Schwartz reiterated.

Turbulence Creates Opportunity

Looking toward the remainder of 2026, both recruiters point to significant industry change. "There is a fair amount of turbulence happening in the industry right now," noted Schwartz.

Changes involving large dealer groups, OEMs, and evolving business models are creating uncertainty, but also opportunity. "It's causing candidates who may not have been open to a conversation to become open," said Crowley.

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For independent dealerships, that shift could help them attract talent that may have been unavailable just a year ago. Success, however, will depend on more than simply identifying candidates. Dealerships must be prepared to move quickly, communicate clearly, and create compelling opportunities that align with candidates' professional, financial, and cultural goals.

The Outlook

If one theme defines the 2026 sales manager market, it's scarcity. At the same time, the role continues to evolve as dealerships expand beyond traditional hardware sales and place greater emphasis on leadership, coaching, and team development to drive growth in a highly competitive market.

For dealerships willing to invest in leadership and remain flexible in their expectations, opportunities exist. For candidates, the market remains favorable. As Crowley summarizes: "There are a lot of companies looking and not a lot of candidates available." In a market defined by limited supply and strong demand, proven sales leaders continue to hold considerable leverage.

What Makes an Ideal Sales Manager Candidate?

While every dealership has its own priorities, recruiters consistently see clients seeking candidates with a combination of leadership ability, industry knowledge, and a proven record of success.

Eight common traits include:

1. **Strong sales leadership experience** — A history of building, coaching, and motivating successful sales teams.
2. **Industry knowledge** — Familiarity with office technology products, solutions, and sales cycles.
3. **Track record of growth** — Demonstrated success growing revenue, expanding market share, or developing new business.
4. **Coaching and mentoring skills** — The ability to develop both new and experienced sales reps.
5. **Solution-selling expertise** — An understanding of today's broader technology portfolio, including managed IT, software, production print, and other services.
6. **Strong communication skills** — The ability to work effectively with sales teams, service departments, executives, and customers.
7. **Customer-focused mindset** — A commitment to helping both clients and employees succeed.
8. **Cultural fit** — Alignment with the dealership's values, leadership style, and long-term goals.