



Hiring Salespeople From Outside Your Industry

Using customer buying patterns to identify top sales talent

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Sourcing sales talent from the competition is a tried and true recruiting strategy. The primary advantage of recruiting salespeople from your industry is it expands your company's sales funnel by capturing new hires' Rolodex of customers and prospects. The next advantage is that salespeople from your industry already know how to sell to your customers. Finally, industry recruiting can dramatically reduce the cost and time of onboarding. Yet the challenge frequently faced by sales managers and recruiters is what to do when the pool of candidates from your industry is sub-par at best. The strategy to recruit from the competition does not improve the odds of hiring a star. Rather, it propagates mediocrity through inbreeding.

For most positions, hiring outside of the industry is not a major headache. Accountants, software developers, and engineers are technical experts — people with clearly defined job skills that work within standard operating procedures regardless of the industry. Sure, technical experts may need to have experience in the financial or manufacturing sectors, but these are huge industry categories that do not limit recruiters. With a well-defined job description and a little creativity, we can source talented techs. Sales, on the other hand, has a hidden variable: the customer.

In every industry, customers follow predictable purchasing patterns. The predictability of customers' behaviors drives our ability to develop sales processes and sales training programs. It also provides us with the key insights to develop cross-industry recruiting strategies. Salespeople are tuned to respond to their customers. By mapping the purchasing behaviors of your customer base, you can identify similar industries where salespeople are trained, experienced, and focused on selling to a similar set of customer needs and behaviors.

How do your customers select your products and services? Is it a simple transaction based on price, or a process of needs assessment and evaluation? Software salespeople thrive in the complex sale. Their solutions are intangible, impact multiple business units, and are large capital expenses. They have a knack for uncovering the key challenges faced by their prospects and building a compelling business case to invest in their solution.

On the other side, salespeople in highly commoditized industries such as waste management, industrial products, or office supplies are tuned towards canvassing for business. For them sales is more of a numbers game to identify companies that are in a shopping mode. Their weapons of choice to influence the sale are price and convenience.

In every industry, customers go through four primary buying stages:

- **The Awareness phase** is the universe of companies that can be targeted. It is the process of how your customers become aware of your company, products and services. How do your salespeople gain access to their customers? Typical awareness activities include generating leads, responding to inbound requests for information, cold-calling, advertising campaigns, and providing introductory information on your products. Traditionally, much of the awareness phase is conducted by Marketing, but it is critical to identify the point of handoff from Marketing to Sales and the activities the salespeople undertake to fill their sales funnels.
- **The Pre-purchase phase** is where salespeople spend the majority of their time with customers. What steps do your sales reps take to move a prospect to a customer? Are they

working with existing customers trying to up-sell services? Do they take prospects through extensive discovery and value creation phases to build the business case to purchase? Selling activities in the Pre-purchase phase include explaining features and benefits, identifying customer needs, product presentations, and comparing solutions with competitive offerings.

- **The Purchase phase** includes the steps customers take to make their final decision: choose the solution, negotiate, and complete the appropriate buying commitments. In a formal bidding process — a procedure most often used by government — the salespeople may not have any influence on the purchasing phase. In more competitive environments, salespeople might be negotiating heavily over price and deliverables. Many of the critical incidents for the position will be defined by how your customers make their final decision. Complex solutions and large ticket items may require detailed responses to requests for proposals. The ability of the salesperson to assess the customer's needs and clearly articulate the solution may be the defining factor in the customer's buying decision. In competitive environments, salespeople with high persuasive drive and a persistent approach may do a better job of managing the sale and blocking competitive threats.
- **The Implementation phase** is the delivery and implementation of the solution. This is the stage that's most critical for customers because they bought your service, not a contract. In defining the requirements for the position, what responsibilities do the salespeople have with the customer once the contract is signed? In many organizations, there's a defined handoff from Sales to Operations, but in industries such as consumer packaged goods the salespeople are constantly involved with the customer: monitoring inventory, developing joint marketing programs, and performing market analysis.

The four phases above provide the foundational information to develop sourcing and selection strategies for sales talent outside of your industry. When you match the duties of a sales manager from one industry to the next, they largely say the same thing: achieve objectives through others; recruit and retain top performing salespeople; coach and develop reps to achieve their goals. You could also add in key elements of your sales environment such as the average size deal, the length of the sales cycle, the method of developing leads and the size of the sales team. Again, this is useful information, but the critical incidents that shape the sourcing and selection strategies exist in your customers' purchasing phases.

Let's look at an example. The waste-management industry is well established and a commodity service. The industry grooms talent from within, starting with truck drivers, and moving them progressively toward the top. The movement of people from one competitor to the next is one that facilitates comfort and security for all involved, but it also breeds complacency. Sales managers bring along their baggage (pardon the pun), and innovative selling techniques never get implemented because they challenge the status quo.

To expand the pool of sales management talent in the waste management industry, the critical element to compare candidates is density selling. Also known as route selling, density selling is the process of maximizing customers on a specific truck route. A company can increase profitability by increasing the number of pick-ups for each of its routes. The challenge is to identify sales management talent with the flexibility and creativity to maximize the goals of density selling. They could come from industries such as food-vending services, cafeteria services, or uniform services.

Recruiters are constantly trying to expand their pools of available talent. It makes a lot of sense to source from the competition, but if that is the only strategy, it can be very limiting. You will be able to dramatically expand your pool of talent, as well as sharply focus your sourcing efforts, by matching sales skills to your customers' buying habits. The above phases are a roadmap to identify sales skills attuned to the purchasing patterns of your customers. They provide that critical layer of knowledge to develop behavioral questions, industry sourcing strategies, and selection criteria.

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