

2008 Sales Handbook: Hiring – How to hook a sales hero

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If there's one thing Viive Tamm knows, it's how hard it is to find top salespeople these days. That's why the executive director of Tamm Communications, a Toronto-based advertising firm that specializes in recruitment, gathered her 28-person team to help create an eye-catching full-page ad for a sales job at her own company.

She whipped up some snappy copy, but it wasn't enough to fill the whole page. "Why don't we make it like a birthday card?" suggested one employee. Tamm gave everyone 10 minutes to dash back to their desks to write. In two hours, the company's designer had framed the ad with their hand-scrawled messages, including "Welcome aboard. Now make us some money!" and "I know a nice desk we can meet over for lunch." Within days, Tamm had dozens of responses, 20 of them from quality applicants, most of a far higher calibre than she normally gets from ads. They got the message that this was not your average place to work.

It was a lot of fuss for one phone-sales job, but that's what it takes these days. "There are oodles of jobs, and not enough salespeople," says Jeremy Miller, vice-president of sales at LeapJob, a sales recruiting firm in Mississauga, Ont. Of course, there are myriad methods for finding salespeople, but what works best? Seasoned entrepreneurs and sales gurus say it's a mix of old and newer tactics — all, of course, executed with precision.

Poach high performers

The most talented salespeople are selling right now — for someone else. To find most of his new sales staff, Chris Coulter, president of Markham, Ont.-based Summerlee Group of Companies, which sells office furniture and other services, talks to suppliers. "You can get a good feel for who they like to buy from and why," says Coulter. Then he tries to lure them away. According to the 2008 National Sales Survey, 54% of salespeople would consider moving to a direct competitor.

Some entrepreneurs recommend assessing every salesperson you come into contact with. Patrick Armstrong, CEO of Comtrex Communications, a Toronto-based communications and safety equipment firm, has been observing one office-supply sales rep for two years, and says he'll consider offering him a job when one comes up.

In some sales circles, poaching from competitors is so common, it's expected. Still, be discreet while you hire: don't tell anyone there's poaching in progress, and reveal limited information about your company to the targeted salesperson until you complete the hire.

Use staff referrals

Your current employees are an amazing resource when it comes to finding new talent. In order to boost their own reputation, most will refer only people they truly believe will work out. Razor Suleman, CEO of I Love Rewards Inc., a Toronto-based incentive marketing company, hires about one in 10 people referred by staff. To inspire the process, last January he gave his team information about positions to be filled and even a sample e-mail to send out. He also offered \$40 for every referral that led to an interview. After two months, his per-staff referral number doubled from the whole of the previous year and the process for each hire was a mere \$400. (Hires through ads cost him closer to \$2,000.)

Turbocharge your website

You may already have a “Careers” section on your website. But if it simply lists open positions, you’re not doing enough to attract the best and brightest. Invest in designing the section attractively, make it easy to find from your home page, describe your corporate culture with well-written copy and aggressively sell the benefits of working for you. The richer the content, the better. Nicki Weiss, principal of SalesWise, a Toronto-based sales training company, suggests loading some video or audio on your site to tell salespeople about your company.

Once your site is rich with career-related information, be sure it’s search-engine optimized with the right keywords so job seekers are more likely to find you. “When you’re looking for something, the first place you go is Google,” says Miller. “The same goes for job seekers.”

Advertise for ambition

Many entrepreneurs still swear by plain, old advertising. Print ads have a big appeal for experienced sellers, insists Tamm. And young, tech-savvy go-getters often peruse Monster or Craigslist for jobs. Still, there are right and wrong ways to advertise your position.

Make your copy easy to understand in the five to seven seconds most browsers will devote to an ad. And avoid telling people they need a specific number of years of experience and must possess such baseline qualities as “good communication skills.” Instead, focus on what talents will be needed for the specific job, and what’s so great about your company.

If, like Tamm, you can craft a unique and eye-catching ad, even better.

Use a recruiter — with caution

Whether or not to use a recruiter is a point of contention among business owners. On one hand, recruiters can save you tons of time. When Coulter found he was unable to focus on business development because he was spending so much time hunting down sales reps, he hired a recruiter who now sources about a quarter of Summerlee’s new hires. On the other hand, great recruiters are hard to find. At their worst, they’re just out to make their commissions (20% to 30% of the base salary) and aren’t adequately focussed on finding you the right fit.

Look for a recruiter the same way you’d look for a lawyer or an accountant: ask everyone you know who they use, and investigate only those whose

names come up repeatedly. A potential recruiter ought to show real interest in your company, your culture and your specific needs.

There are countless methods available to entrepreneurs to find top salespeople. But regardless of how you find them, what's most important is thinking of recruiting not as an event but a process. As Coulter says: "I'm not always hiring, but I'm always recruiting."

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