

Face-to-Face Interviews Are Essential to Making Great Hiring Decisions



by JOE RICKARD

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The market for great sales talent is heating up. This year, hiring a new salesperson will be a crucial decision at many small printing shops.

One-hour, face-to-face interviews are an essential step toward new sales staff hiring decisions. A productive interview requires well-constructed questions created from the information gained from the candidate’s résumé, application, testing and screening interview. These questions will help the interviewer determine if a candidate has the appropriate knowledge, skills and attributes to deliver the required sales results.

Building these questions is an important task, and the interviewer needs to devote adequate time for their preparation.

Knowing your business helps develop good questions

For starters, the interviewer should have a good knowledge of the shop’s offerings, customer base and business environment. The interviewer also should have a good sense of what makes the company unique and the particulars of how the shop communicates with its customers.

Fully understanding the shop’s business will help the interviewer construct questions that clearly assess a candidate’s likelihood of success. Once the questions have been determined, it is essential to develop ideal answers. This will provide consistency in judging candidates.

Make your questions specific

In developing questions, remember that many candidates will be prepared for common interview questions. Some candidates practice handling interview questions. The more general the question is, the less useful the response will be.

The interviewer should have the candidate’s basic background information before he or she is brought in for a face-to-face

interview. General questions such as “Why are you leaving your current job” or “Tell me about your education” should have already been answered.

Include various types of questioning

Printing companies we speak to often use many types of questions in their face-to-face interviews. FedEx Kinko Commercial Document Solutions strategic account executive Dave Brophy believes in the effectiveness of the situational question. He suggests this situational interview question: “You’re in a highly competitive sales situation where you are not the leading supplier. The customer perceives that your competitors’ prices and service are better. But, it is very early in the sales process, and there’s time to change the customer’s perception. How have you handled a similar situation and what winning strategies did you deploy?”

The answer to this question helps a hiring manager evaluate a candidate’s ability to think strategically, handle complex sales and influence others in internal and external environments. It also aids the interviewer in accessing a candidate’s leadership and teamwork skills.

Some interviewers focus on sales performance questions. Says Collins Digital Imaging founder and CEO Hal Collins, “In the interview, I always want to determine if a candidate not only believes he or she can produce a million dollars in sales but is willing to ‘pay the price.’ That is, will he or she be willing to devote long hours and effort to master the areas of modern and evolving technology, markets and applications, customer solutions to perform to the highest level of professional selling.”

AlphaGraphics franchisee Mike Sparaco recommends questioning that places a high priority on a candidate’s personal values, work ethic, achievement motivation, perseverance and customer orientation. He says,

“When I am in the hiring mode, my concerns are with the individual’s ethics and morals because I cannot teach these traits. These can be difficult to determine within an hour interview, but I usually ask a series of questions about a specific situation that isn’t knowledge specific but more ethically based.”

Successful companies hire sales people who represent their business philosophy and principles. We speak to many printing companies that find that personal values can set a candidate with a less impressive résumé apart from the group. Gord Gerrie of Colour Tech Marketing likes to find out what makes a candidate “burn” with enthusiasm. Steve Matteini of Jeffrey & Foster looks for commitment and work ethic.

Personality is especially important when considering a recent college graduate for a sales position. Says printing guru Frank Romano, “It is important to probe the sociability and personality of recent college graduates by asking candidates about their involvement in college social activities. Many graphic arts college graduates might have the technical skills but lack the personal skills to become successful salespeople.” In the absence of a sales track record, it is imperative that you consider whether the candidate has the personality skills of a salesperson and the drive to be successful in this industry.

Some examples of good interview questions

Although there is a multitude of good questions that can be asked during the face-to-face interview, many good interview questions share similar characteristics. Here are some sample questions along with the reason each question is effective.

1. **“Why are you interested in selling printing for our company?”** or **“How does this job fit in with your career goals?”**

Make the candidate tell you why he or she wants this opportunity. These questions help the interviewer determine if the candidate sees a position as a job or a career.

2. **“What are your key strengths and how will they help you do the job expected here?”**

If a candidate fails to link his or her skills and background to the job, you might have a person that won’t be able to do what you expect.

3. **“Tell me the two or three things that are the least attractive parts of selling in printing industry.”** or **“What are the two or three selling skills we can help you develop?”**

These questions help the interviewer determine if a candidate’s skills are a good match to the job’s requirements.

4. **“Given what I have told you, what are the first two to three things you would do to expand or open up the sales territory?”** or **“How have you been creative in developing a new prospect or customer?”**

This will help determine if the person is a problem-solver.

5. **How would you respond if a long-term customer stated that the shop’s prices are too high, and he’s looking at other suppliers?”** or **“How would you respond if I called your customer and the print buyer said you were not responding quickly enough to request for quotes?”** These behavioral questions will uncover how a candidate is likely to respond to sales objections and challenges.

Avoid common interview mistakes

When interviewing candidates, it is important to implement practices that help minimize common interview mistakes. These are interview practices that will help you avoid poor interviews:

- Make questions as straightforward as possible. Develop questions that have a single focus and are easy to understand.
- Maintain control of the interview. If candidates stray from the topic, redirect them with questions.
- Ask open-ended questions. Avoid “yes” or “no,” and multiple-choice questions.
- If you are not sure what the candidate is saying, continue to probe. Don’t rely on “gut” feelings
- Listen carefully, be patient and let the candidate do the talking.
- Be consistent and disciplined in each interview enabling each candidate to be judged using the same criteria.

Hiring top sales performers is a challenge for most printing companies and for people in all businesses. Implementing a well-planned sales hiring process and investing time in preparing for interviews will help interviewers make outstanding hires. ●

Joe Rickard is a sales training leader and consultant who works with printing and technology companies to improve their sales effectiveness. He is the founder of Intellectual Solutions, a provider of customized sales and sales management training material and services. Contact Rickard at 845-753-6156, jrickard@intellectives.com or visit www.Intellectives.com