



In the Crosshairs

How to target and snare the best and brightest new sales hires

By Henry Canaday

If you're looking for a better way to select new salespeople, take a page from the hiring book of Asher Training, which trains people for business-to-business sales in both the U.S. and China. CEO John Asher was asked by his clients to help with the selection as well as the training of new reps. When Asher wanted to pick an online tool for assessing potential candidates, he and seven colleagues took a half-dozen popular personality tests.

Of these tests, Asher believes that Craft System's Craft Personality Questionnaire (CPQ) did the best job at profiling himself and his Asher team. So his firm now uses the CPQ for both selection of new sales recruits and analyzing the aptitudes of current salespeople for clients.

Craft's CPQ costs about \$75 per applicant to administer and takes about 20 minutes to complete. It yields scores of 0 to 50 for four basic personality types: drivers, motivators, thinkers, and supporters.

Asher's clients want to get the right person into the right job. This means the new hires will not only be more effective at their jobs, but are likely to be more content and thus likely to stay. So Asher is always trying to match each candidate's major personality traits, as revealed by his or her CPQ scores, to the exact sales roles his clients are trying to fill. These vary widely, from new-account hunters and current-account farmers to telesales staff, customer service reps, and, of course, sales managers.

Company chief executives tend to be drivers, while financial officers and engineers tend to be thinkers. In the sales force, Asher says, natural hunters should show strengths as both drivers and motivators. The farming reps, in contrast, will score best as motivators and supporters. Customer service staff should be all the way at the end of the spectrum, showing high scores for support. Sales managers must obviously be very skilled and experienced. But their basic personality type should show strong support instincts, rather than the traits of top salespeople. "Managers have to be coaches," Asher says. "They must be patient, listen to reps, and spend time fixing the process."

The CPQ reveals these basic personality types. It can also be used to focus training on natural weaknesses, such as closing skills. But Asher cautions that it is best to get the right people in the right jobs in the first place, before trying to compensate for bad fits with better training.

Asher has found the CPQ correlates well with sales results. Reps with one Asher client generally score well on the traits needed for outside sales. This firm's revenue has been growing at a 70 percent annual rate. Another client's reps split about evenly between those with high and those with moderate aptitudes for their sales roles. Its revenue has been going up at a more moderate 40 percent per year. A third Asher client has a sales force that generally tests as very modest in its sales aptitude. Revenue has been inching up about 4 percent each year.

The CPQ can be given in English, Chinese, and other languages. The personality profiles are adjusted for local cultural norms. Having a formal selection instrument is especially important in an emerging market like China, where few candidates can be expected to have a long track record of sales success. The CPQ has thus proven very popular with Chinese managers. "The Chinese, even more than Westerners, like to measure themselves," Asher notes.

To exploit their fast-growing markets, Chinese companies must do a lot of things at once. They must learn and teach basic selling, develop a sales process, and train their sales force. And they must recruit and select new reps in a hurry. One Chinese manager hired 100 new stockbrokers in Shanghai, from whom she got a grand total of one sale. Asher advised the frustrated manager that basic sales aptitude might be the problem.

Another valuable application of the CPQ is finding the right mix of personalities on teams. For example, a firm with all its C-level executives manifesting the same dominant trait could develop some blind spots in execution. The firm should probably seek to add someone a bit different to a top job. The same general principle applies to sales teams.

The Basic Steps

For most major candidate assessment tools, the basic logic and steps are similar. The first step is always identifying and validating the skills and competencies required for the sales positions you are trying to fill, notes John Wood, vice president of business development at The HR Chally Group. This can be done by giving the assessment to a sufficient number of your current sales force, or by reviewing positions and comparing them to profiles kept by experienced assessment firms.

Chally has profiles of the skills required for 13 different sales roles, including both reps and sales managers. Some managers must sell as well as manage, while others, especially those higher up the management hierarchy, are purely managers. A single Chally assessment can be used to grade recruits for any of these roles. The Chally assessment is very robust, collecting 866 data points on each candidate.

Wood says that benchmarking on existing salespeople must include both top and bottom performers. Different ends of the sales force often show some common characteristics. The trick is to identify the ways in which the bottom and top performers differ, so Chally can look for these differences in candidates.

Wood recommends that Chally assessments be given after preliminary selection steps, such as review of qualifications, experience, and credentials, and perhaps after a brief telephone interview. The assessment is then given and used to support face-to-face interviews. On average, Chally assessments are used for about three applicants for each position.

No candidate is rejected simply for not doing well on the assessment. A thorough selection process requires four steps: 1) reference and background check; 2) a formal assessment tool; 3) a structured interview; and 4) managers' feelings, based on the interview, about how well a candidate will fit into the sales organization.

Three-quarters of new Chally clients have not used a formal assessment before. Wood says these firms often hire with about the same success as flipping a coin. Indeed, in some firms that do not hire frequently, the candidates have much more interview experience than the interviewing managers. Chally must persuade line managers that assessments can really improve results, not simply add time or burdens to hiring. Chally educates managers, onsite or through Webcasts, on the advantages of testing.

Other Chally clients have used other formal assessments, but are dissatisfied with their results. Chally must work harder to overcome skepticism about testing. Some of these firms have been using less reliable assessment instruments. Others have not adjusted the test for changes in their sales force over a number of years. Job requirements change as products, markets, and sales channels change.

Most Chally clients retain assessment results for career development purposes, such as training, reassignment, and future promotions to higher responsibilities. The Chally assessment measures inherent abilities for each different sales role, and these inherent characteristics do not change over time. Thus the test need not be retaken. Clients must only preserve and use the original results.

Best-practice companies do two kinds of update each year. First, they review their sales roles and check for any changes in responsibilities or the qualities they are looking for in new hires. Second, they review the performance of people brought on board in the past year, including those tested. Usually, the most important measures of performance are sales productivity, revenue per rep, and turnover. Early indications of improved selection may come from seeing how fast new hires learn the business and ramp up toward solid performance.

Firms must ensure that their expertise in using any assessment tool is preserved, even as managers change. Chally thus offers a set of one- or two-day seminars on its tools to an in-house selection expert, usually in human resources, who can ensure the tool continues to be used advantageously.

This kind of time commitment may seem more burdensome to smaller companies that do not hire very many reps per year. But Wood argues that smaller companies have much less selection experience, so they have the most to gain from a thorough selection process. "The relative impact of the assessment can be much bigger for a

company that is used to hiring two people each year.”

Along with assessment results, Chally provides a list of possible questions for interviews in each sales role. Many of the right questions are already asked in these interviews, Wood says. The tough part is judging and following up on the answers. So Chally provides guidance on these follow-up steps as well. “Managers can select the questions they want to ask, and we help them avoid just getting superficial answers.” Chally gives half-day and full-day seminars on conducting these highly structured selection interviews.

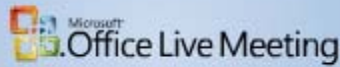
Quick Assessments

For some sales positions, an earlier, briefer, and faster test may be suitable, for example, SalesTestOnline. One firm substantially reduced its high turnover rate simply by requiring all applicants to take the 10-minute test. SalesTestOnline costs \$32 per applicant for very small firms and only a few dollars per applicant at much larger firms. CEO Dave Pearce says some clients give the economical Web-based test to all applicants; others give it only to candidates who have passed through a resume screen and brief telephone interview.

“The real thing clients use our assessment for is to avoid the problems inherent in interviewing people,” Pearce emphasizes. “Most hiring managers find that salespeople can look really good in interviews, but they later find out some are not what they seem. The bottom line is that they want to avoid being fooled.”

SalesTestOnline is a fast test, and results are available immediately. Apart from screening new hires, companies may test their existing sales force to see if they can get better performance from people in the middle of the pack by understanding their strengths and weaknesses and developing them further. And some firms test bottom performers to confirm a firing decision.

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