How to build a high performing sales team
Why do some salespeople perform better than others? What makes the difference between someone who can close a deal every time and someone who struggles to convert an inbound lead into an order? In this guide you will learn:

1. Introduction to what makes a sales team successful
2. How to find the right people for your sales team
3. How to equip them with the tools that make it possible to succeed
4. How to motivate and manage them to reach their potential
5. Successful strategies for rewarding salespeople
6. How to manage succession planning
Introduction

Why do some sales teams forge ahead and deliver outstanding results, while others simply flounder, bump along never reaching their potential? Some would argue that it’s down to the product they’re selling, the calibre of the team members, the tools they have available to them, the economic climate or the leadership in the organization.

We’ve done our research, surveyed 254 salespeople, spoken to psychologists and HR professionals and used our own case studies of sales teams that consistently deliver to produce this guide to building a high performing sales team.
We don’t need to tell you that if you get this one wrong and your sales department will never take off – it is broadly accepted that sales ability is more important than the product being sold - but there is widespread confusion around how to staff a sales department for success. How do we know what makes a great salesperson?

Characteristics of a successful salesperson

In a well-known study published in the Harvard Business Review in 2006, David Mayer and Herbert M Greenberg, presented the results of seven years of field research, in which they had been in contact with over 7,000 salespeople. The purpose of the study was to establish what makes a good salesperson – i.e. to identify and isolate the fundamental characteristics necessary for someone to be able to sell. They cited two important personality traits that correlate well with sales performance.

- **Empathy**: or the ability to work off signals from others, taking and reviewing feedback.
- **The need to conquer**: a drive to succeed that is based on more than just the financial rewards. Good salespeople are motivated by the personal gratification that comes with successful selling.

These were

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**Step 1: Hiring great salespeople**

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Also mentioned in the report as an important contributor to sales success was a degree of self confidence. In this role, even the highest performers will likely fail more often than they succeed, and they need the strength of character to overcome this.

**Attracting applications**

The sales managers we spoke to cited a whole range of different recruitment strategies when it comes to attracting applications. Many go beyond the traditional recruitment and advertising methods, using word of mouth, recruitment companies, referrals from staff, customers and clients, advertising, or, if time permits, waiting to be pitched by other companies and offering great salespeople an opportunity to apply.
The selection process

It often seems like the best recruitment strategy is to poach salespeople directly from competitors, however, sales managers should be wary of this. In the HBR article “what makes a good salesman”, the authors point out that experience is usually less important than the human qualities associated with successful selling. Furthermore, it is easier to poach someone from a competitor if they are underperforming at that company – they are more willing to leave. This is a trap that has caught out many sales directors.

We know that empathy and drive correlate with sales success, but how do we test for these characteristics in salespeople? According to Mayer and Greenberg, psychologists have been working on this for decades but have failed to produce a reliable test of the ability to sell. The tests that are available can often be easily faked, or fail to test for the right characteristics. Some of the sales managers we spoke to have found interesting ways of testing for empathy and drive.
During the interview, it is really important not to just have a list of questions and check them off as you go. The successful interviewer knows how to identify red flags - anything that suggests the candidate is just saying what they think you want to hear or that indicates that they are not going to bring positive energy to the role.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for testing drive</th>
<th>Strategies for testing empathy</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>First round rejection:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Empathy Quotient (EQ) test:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Each applicant is rejected immediately upon submitting their application. Those that come back asking for feedback, a second chance or more information are thought to possess sufficient drive.</td>
<td>There are various iterations of this test and other, similar psychometric tests on the web and through testing centres. These are used by some sales managers to identify levels of empathy.</td>
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<td><strong>School leadership questioning:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Worst-case questioning:</strong></td>
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<td>Asking candidates during the interview whether they were on sports teams, took leadership positions or were involved in other extramural activities at school. Drive at school is then equated with drive at work.</td>
<td>Asking candidates in an interview situation to tell the interviewer about the worst aspects of a role or an experience. This tests the candidate’s ability to read the situation: candidates who turn a negative into a positive for the purpose of the interview are judged to have higher empathy.</td>
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Step 2: Give them the right tools

Now that you have hired your ‘A Team’, you need to give them the best possible chance of succeeding by creating an environment in which they can flourish. You’ll need to train them and equip them with the technology that will help them succeed.

Training

Even those with an innate ability won’t succeed immediately without any training. If they do not already have sales experience, they need to be trained. Whether you outsource or run this in house, if you give the right sales and product training to someone with bundles of potential, they will soar.
Step 3: Motivating and managing

According to Michael Leimbach Ph.D., Vice President, Wilson Learning, “multiple studies have shown that effective sales management has a significant impact on positive sales results.” He notes that effective sales leadership can be broken down into two areas:

» Managing the sales process

» Leading for engagement and performance

“Multiple studies have shown that effective sales management has a significant impact on positive sales results.”
When it comes to managing the sales process, at sales-i, we couldn’t agree more, and we believe that the right technology could play a fundamental role in helping sales leaders to get the most out of their teams:

1. **Help them find opportunities**

Streamline your data so that it can easily be mined for opportunities (e.g. customer X bought 10 reams of paper, but no printing toner – might be worth calling them to make sure they don’t run out). That way your sales team doesn’t need to waste time making sales calls that are not backed by intelligence.

2. **Let them go mobile**

Make sure that your entire sales system can be easily accessed via tablets and smartphones while on the go, so that your sales team can spend client visits selling, not booting up their laptops and trying to find an internet connection.
3. **Provide honest feedback**

Track data on individual salespeople’s performance against real KPIs (not just calls made) so that they can identify where they are going wrong and improve.

4. **Save admin by collecting and managing data properly**

Make all information on clients and prospects available to sales teams across the company. That way, they don’t need to borrow each others’ little black books to get important insight into clients and prospects.

5. **Provide room for growth**

The highest performing salespeople are likely to get bored quickly, so ensure you reduce the admin burden on them dramatically so that they can take on more work and reap the benefits. This can only be done through technology.
Many sales managers we spoke to introduced public competition and highly social working environments to encourage stellar performance.

According to eminent professor of organizational psychology and health at Lancaster University Management School, Cary Cooper CBE, sales people are “social, competitive and driven, with a positive outlook on life, not just in their work and career.” In fact, in a recent survey that we carried out of over 250 salespeople, 67% rated themselves as competitive and 58% as outgoing as children.

With this in mind, many sales managers we spoke to introduced public competition and highly social working environments to encourage stellar performance. This can take the form of team building weekends away, the opportunity to win non-financial rewards when exceeding sales targets and investing in great offices and a fun culture.
Step 4: Rewarding

How to best reward a sales team is up for debate – there is an abundance of information on the web about different pay structures and it is not a simple one size fits all decision.

Whether you choose commission-only or a high basic salary with a small proportion of commission, most sales reps are rewarded on a performance related basis. This means that it is key to have accurate data on sales and performance so you are correctly rewarding people for delivering tangible business benefits.
Step 5: Succession planning

This is key in sales, where staff turnover is often as high as 50% per year, and where relationships and contacts are everything.

Sales leaders need to make sure that the company’s data is kept safe so that when people move on, they do not take all of their contacts with them to their next business. Succession planning is difficult, but it is absolutely paramount in securing the future of your company. There must be a contingency plan in place if your best performing sales person decides to up and leave.

Our final thought

The job specification of the sales person has changed little over time, their aims and objectives will always be to meet or exceed targets, to convert leads and to retain their existing client base. Perhaps for that reason, the observed personality of the sales person has remained fairly constant over time. However, the way that sales people go about selling, the way they manage their data and make their selling decisions has begun to change. With modern enhancements to technology, and the use of software such as sales-i’s business intelligence solution, sales professionals can stay one step ahead of the competition with better decision-making, easier customer management and a faster sales process.
sales-i is a Software-as-a-Service sales development solution. Integrating business, sales and customer intelligence, it has been designed to simplify the collection and analysis of business data, while cutting both time and cost. Through sales-i, sales professionals can clearly identify and target high-quality sales opportunities.

Give us a try, just 20 minutes could change the way you sell.

Contact us for a free, online demonstration and judge our software for yourself.

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