

Sales Hiring in 2010 – What’s Wrong with this Picture?

By **Marie Warner**

High unemployment among Sales Professionals – yet companies find it hard to attract top talent.

What’s wrong with this picture?

The national unemployment rate for non-retail Sales Professionals now hovers around 9.5%, higher than any month throughout 2009. There is strong sales talent “on the street”, and with signs of a strengthening economy, even “passive” job seekers, the currently employed sales professionals, are becoming more open to exploring new opportunities.

So why is it still hard for sales managers to find, attract and hire the best sales candidate?

There are four main reasons:

1. **Top Performer “Shell Shock”** resulting from corporate restructuring;
2. Candidate **Trust/Risk Perception** of new opportunities;
3. **Unrealistic Hiring Expectations** by hiring managers
4. **Applicant Overload** from the job search process

In this first part of a four-part series, we’ll address the first topic, “Top Performer Shell Shock”.

Top Performer “Shell Shock” - Let’s focus first on the currently unemployed sales candidate. Is your potential sales hire a top “Sales Warrior” who was just too close to the impact from his imploding employer firm? Or is the candidate a lower percentile under-performer who is always hired and fired – no matter what the economic climate? How can you - as the sales hiring manager - tell the difference?

There are many talented top sales performers who have lost their jobs even though their achievement was acceptable -- even exceptional. Some of these individuals may be newer sales hires, successfully ramping up their learning curve and a building a prospect pipeline when their company imploded. When a downsizing decision had to be made, the tenure and record of a longer-term sales performer outshone the efforts of the “newbie” – no matter how exceptional the potential of that individual.

Other unemployed sales candidates are talented sales professionals who were selling products or services to an overwhelmingly depressed industry or market, such as automotive, investment banks or residential construction. Just as a rising tide lifts all boats, a hurricane flattens everyone.

To be without a job is rattling for a high achieving, “Type-A” sales professional – like the front-line soldier who was too close to an explosion. Even if not bodily injured, they are “shell shocked” from the impact. Many top performers have a history of being aggressively recruited by competitors or a former boss, based on their stellar track record of selling success. They have little or no personal experience in a competitive, adverse job market. I have even encountered top selling professionals who, for the first time, must author a resume – and consequently do not present themselves accurately.

This “Shell-Shocked” sales professional may not portray the most positive and upbeat initial impression to the interviewing company and the hiring manager. It is necessary to look beyond that to see that the candidate may be a great asset to your sales team.

As a Hiring Manager, it’s understandable that you do not want to hire a “gloomy” or under-performing sales rep – would your customers ever buy from such a person? But how do you separate the candidate who is a talented performer, but just *temporarily* downbeat or “shell shocked”, from the non-achiever?

The answer is, “**Go back to the basics**” and here are two specific candidate screening suggestions.

1. Conduct Situational Interviewing – Adept **situational interviewing** can reveal the selling skills, work habits and attitude of a sales candidate. In addition to the usual performance related questions all sales hiring managers pose to candidates, I recommend that the sales hiring manager develop “scripts” of situational interview questions.

In a situational interview the hiring manager describes their challenging but common scenarios in prospecting and sales, client management as well as internal sales team relationships. Some scenarios should be described verbally (to judge the candidate’s listening skills) as well as in writing (to assess reading comprehension). The manager asks the candidate how he would respond to address that situation. Then dig a bit deeper. Ask the candidate to describe similar experiences, how she responded and the results. The sales hiring manager must map the company’s unique sales process to properly prepare for a situational interview. This is time well spent to help recognize top talent – and to avoid the bad sales hire. We frequently assist our clients in preparing situational interview “scripts” that reflect their unique selling environment and common challenges that can derail the performance of a sales representative. We also discuss the range of answers the manager might hear, and help them evaluate those responses.

2. Perform Sales Assessment Testing on qualified candidates - A superior sales assessment test measures a candidate’s underlying tendencies and work habits, attitude toward work and inherent aptitude. The widely accepted, commercially available test used by our firm, Warner Professional Sales also reveals whether a candidate is attempting to “fudge” the test by guessing what the “best” answer should be, rather than responding honestly and openly. Contrary to common opinion, these tests are difficult, if not impossible, to “game” – although we have had candidates who have tried!

We advise our clients that the sales assessment test offers critical insight in the evaluation of a candidate, but should only be assigned a weight of **30-40%** in influencing the **overall** hiring decision. In other words, tests are *not* substitutes for personal judgment in a hiring decision. Many assessment tests offer suggestions to the hiring manager for follow-up interview questions – very useful in crafting the Situational Interview Script. The sales assessment tests we use also generate a report to show how well a potential sales hire will work with the Sales Manager - provided that she also takes a sales manager assessment test. Assessing how well a candidate

will work with his superior is crucial for their “fit” in the firm and its sales culture.

We recommend that a current top sales performer also takes the assessment test to help management identify key characteristics of successful performers.

Since there is a fee for each test administered and scored, we advise that Sales Assessment Testing be conducted on only **qualified candidates**, those who are advancing to finalist stage. And should you include assessment testing as part of your sales interview process, we strongly recommend that you adopt *consistent* policies and guidelines on administering such tests so as to avoid any appearance of bias. Conversely, consistent use of assessment testing defends against a candidate’s claim of bias. One valuable way that we assist clients is to administer and score the test as a service. Our status as a third party shields the hiring company from any questions on testing fairness.

Benchmark studies indicate that that typical cost of a bad sales hire – loss of revenue, erosion of customer satisfaction, training costs, rehiring costs and productivity loss - is **over \$400,000**. Sales *hiring mistakes are more expensive* than the opportunity cost of an open territory.

In other words, you are better off leaving the position unfilled than making a bad sales hire!

With the sales talent pool available in today’s job market, each Sales Manager has a unique opportunity to rebuild a team of exceptional sales performers. Superior situational interviewing scripts and proven sales assessment tools make the critical task of identifying and qualifying top performers easier – and less prone to hiring error.

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About the Author

Marie Warner is founder and President of Warner Professional Sales, LLC. Warner Professional Sales helps companies achieve **sales force success through *People, Performance and Planning***. Warner Professional Sales helps firms get greater revenue growth from their sales teams by *recruiting* the right sales talent; *training and developing* those sales professionals to exceed revenue goals; and helping management to define and implement the best sales “process” and tactics.

Marie has over two decades of experience in sales and sales leadership of enterprise level and start-up organizations. She has hired and developed seven sales organizations in different industries, and recruits and trains sales professionals as though they **were to report to her**.

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