

## The Screening Sales Interview

### *Finding Winners and disqualifying "Also-Rans"*

By Marie Warner

As seen in....[EyesOnSales.com](http://EyesOnSales.com)

*"I need a sales performer who can lift my sales team to the next level, but I just can't find that individual."*

*"The last two sales hires we made both did not work out. Now I'm back to ground zero in hiring, and months behind on my revenue plan."*

*"I'm a 'sales guy' and I hire from the gut - but that doesn't work anymore. What questions should I be asking in the interview to find the right person for my sales team?"*

Sound familiar? These are actual quotes from sales executives who are under the gun to hire the sales talent needed to make their numbers.

A recent Manpower study revealed that the Sales Representative is the **#1 hardest position to fill** across the nation. Why is finding top performing sales talent so tough?

A recent survey of over 1200 sales leaders revealed the following:

- The sales force population is **declining at an increasing rate of 10%** due to employee retirement. *(So you have a smaller pool of candidates.)*
- Only 57% of the sales force population is at or above quota. *(43% are not!)*
- Hiring plans are up but most companies are just recycling the bottom 20%. *(Surprise! You hired someone else's non-performer!)*

How can the sales hiring manager interview to find winners so that your sales team isn't staffed with "cellar dwellers" - the non-performers from your competitor?

The first step is to change your **preliminary screening interviews**.

Many companies focus on industry experience, market knowledge and years of revenue achievement as the chief criteria in selecting a candidate. The initial interview questions posed to the sales candidate are intended to determine the candidate's success selling in a specific market.

**Examples of such preliminary screening questions are:**

*What was your quota achievement for the past five years?*

*How much new revenue did you generate? How much profit?*

*What companies did you prospect? What companies did you close?*

*What were your biggest deals?*

*What geography did you cover?*

This is a flawed technique if you want successful hires, because these questions, while important, reveal neither selling skills nor characteristics (good and bad habits) of the candidate. To gain greater insight to the candidate's skill set and habits with screening questions, you need to modify your questioning technique in the initial screening interviews.

**Try these interview questions instead:**

*What was your quota achievement for the past five years?*

*What was your most significant loss?*

*What was your poorest performance in a quota year?*

*What do you think you could have done to improve your performance?*

**What to look for:** A mature, top performing rep *will accept responsibility for lost sales or a bad year*, and will have gained insights from these shortfalls. Every sales rep experiences failure. Top reps overcome adversity and learn from those mistakes.

**Beware!** Watch out for *excuses or denial*. Those sales reps have decided to *stop learning*. Even a candidate from your top competitor must learn about your company and your unique value.

**Now you're on to something. Continue with these questions:**

*What companies did you close?*

*What were your biggest deals?*

*Why did those companies buy?*

*What were the steps you took from "cold call to close"?*

**What to look for:** Does the sales rep understand the *value of their offering* to customers, and can *s/he describe the value and capability clearly to you?* If so, they are likely to learn and understand the value your company and offering brings to your customer. In describing the steps taken to control the sales cycle from cold call to close, (the sales process) does the rep show an understanding of **how** the customer buys? Does the candidate's response show proactive control of the sales process, with each step advancing the deal to closure?

**Beware!** Watch out for the egocentric response, "Those companies bought because I knocked down the doors and sold them!" While tenacity may be an admirable sales quality, *it is NOT why customers buy*. Look for brains, not just persistence.

When the candidate describes the steps taken in the sales process, watch for ownership and accountability. Does the candidate abdicate the product demonstration to technical support? Does the candidate work only warm leads from inside sales? That individual may lack critical skills needed for success in your selling environment.

By making your screening interview more effective, you will achieve two things:

- 1. Disqualify candidates who do not have the skill set or characteristics needed for success in your firm.*
- 2. Broaden the base of potential GOOD candidates beyond your immediate market and competitors, by screening on desirable selling skills and characteristics, not simply industry experience.*

That's a wrap for the first interview - what's next in the hiring cycle? For preliminary qualified candidates, look for variances from your ideal candidate profile, and be prepared with follow up **scenario questions** to address these inconsistencies and to probe for your most critical success factors.

Only the best will survive the scenario interview, because **only you** know the answers!

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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 companies get more revenue growth from their sales force by *recruiting* the right sales staff, 2) *training and developing* those sales professionals to consistently exceed revenue goals, and helping management to define and implement the best sales "process" and tactics for sales cycle control, territory assignments and quota planning.

Marie brings to client engagements over two-decades of leadership in the sale of technology, consulting and financial products and services to the Fortune 1000 and major financial institutions. This includes nine years of experience as Chief Sales Officer, in both enterprise-level and start-up organizations.

Marie Warner has authored articles in ***Mass High Tech, SalesResources.com, SalesVantage.com, EyesOnSales.com, Software Sales Journal, SalesDoctors,*** and ***Women's Business*** addressing successful sales strategies and tactics. She is a member of NETSEA (New England Technology Sales Executives Association), WITI (Women in Technology, International), Human Capital Institute, The Commonwealth Group, NAPS (National Association of Personnel Services) and participates in numerous other entrepreneurial, technology and marketing organizations.

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