

Seven Interview Questions to Find Your Next Sales Star

By Marie Warner

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Recruiting one sales professional in today's competitive employment market typically takes **30 hours** of administrative effort, **15 hours** of direct sales management time to screen and interview, plus **40 hours of productivity loss** by other sales employees. And the "sunk" cost of these hours does not include the revenue shortfall of an uncovered sales territory and unassigned sales quota.

How can the hiring sales manager help ensure that all this effort and cost will result in adding a top sales performer to the sales team? One way is to improve your interviewing skills to include **behavioral interviewing strategies**. What is behavioral interviewing?

In a sales behavioral interview, the hiring sales manager asks a series of objective fact-based questions to determine whether the candidate has the necessary skills, experience and knowledge to succeed in their company. The basis for this line of questioning is that the candidate's *past performance is the most accurate predictor of future behavior and achievement*.

Many hiring sales managers attempt to approach behavioral interviewing by setting job requirements that are far too specific. Sure, it would be great to find the 25-year old MBA who has been a top sales performer at your major competitor, selling into the exact sales territory you are hiring to fill. However, you will bypass many very talented and qualified candidates with this narrow approach.

The first step in preparing for a behavioral interview is to determine the characteristics that lead to selling success in your company. What kinds of questions should you include? Any sales behavioral interview should include the seven questions below.

1. Revenue Attainment - What is the highest revenue achieved by the candidate? Most hiring sales managers prefer a candidate who has routinely achieved the revenue threshold represented in their annual quota plan. Some sales managers look for sales talent with the "potential" and drive to beat a bigger revenue number than previously attained. Both positions are valid - the question is, "What works best in your firm?"

2. Revenue Velocity - How many sales closed per year, per quarter, per month? In addition to achieving a revenue number, the hiring sales manager should determine the typical number of individual deals closed by the sales representative in a given time. The selling experience and skills needed to close two deals per month valued at \$50K each are quite different than the skills and experience needed to close twenty sales worth \$5K each.

3. What Business Managers, Senior Executives were called on and closed? - If your offering is sold to Chief Financial Officers and Controllers, then you should ascertain whether the candidate has sold to this functional area, and ask questions to see if the sales representative understands the business issues of those job titles.

4. What standard milestones in the selling cycle does the candidate track? Does this "resemble" your sales process? For example, if your sale demands that the sales representative call on several VP's to uncover needs and determine value, then to coordinate a demonstration or site visit as proof, and finally to prepare a proposal, you should look for a similar sales process experience in your candidates.

5. What is the candidate's experience and proficiency in lead generation? In final sale negotiation?

Two of the most critical selling skills are: 1) finding and developing new interested prospects, and 2) negotiating the final deal with the decision maker. In some sales organizations, these key selling tasks are not directly performed by the sales representative, but rather by specialized teams -- pre-sales teams (for lead generation), or by Sales Management or Subject Matter Experts (for negotiation). Does the experience and skill set of the candidate match how you conduct these tasks in your sales organization?

6. Phone or Field sale? Virtual/Home office or centralized shared office? Is your sales cycle conducted by phone or does it demand face-to-face visits to the client? Do sales representatives work in virtual home offices or from centralized sales offices? The background (and preferences) of a sales rep shouldn't conflict with your "logistics" - how and where you manage the selling effort.

7. Are technical or specialized skills required to sell your offering? Customers buy from sales representatives who are **sincere and competent** and who empower them. Are specific knowledge, technical skills and/or education demanded to sell your offering? Finding a candidate with a match to these skills is more important than number of years of experience in the field.

Like the disclaimer from your favorite mutual fund report, "Past performance is no guarantee of future results." However, the responses gleaned from behavioral interview questioning tend to be **40-50% more accurate** in determining how a sales person will perform than the general interview questions we have all heard (and asked); "Tell me where you would like to be in five years."

Use the seven questions above in your next sales interview, and plan on posing follow-up "probes" to satisfy yourself that the candidate's characterization of their experience and selling behavior make that individual "**most likely to succeed**" on your sales team.

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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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