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HIRE THE BEST:

Get the best people on board

Four-out-of-ten sales associates are underperforming in the typical retail store.
How can you get more of the right people selling for you?

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In his book *Good to Great* Jim Collins identifies a series of attributes that distinguish good companies that become great from those that do not. Foremost among these is “getting the right people on the bus in the right seats.” And no group of employees is more important to your success than your sales associates, who not only drive revenue but also represent your brand every day. The companies I’ve worked with that have the very best sales forces can precisely define the success factors—or competencies—that make their top sales people so effective.

Appraising the Situation

Answer these questions to determine how you compare to these leaders.

- Do you have a clear idea of the selling and services behaviors that you believe will distinguish your brand from the competition?
- Do you have a written list of behavioral attributes that separate your very best sales associates from those who are less successful?
- Do you know which success factors are “must haves” as opposed to “nice to have?”
- Do you have a clear hiring philosophy? That is, do you hire for skills, attitude, or experience?
- What’s your batting average in predicting how successful a new hire will be?

Best Practices

Here are ways to get more of the right people on your bus.

Begin with a brand strategy. The competencies that make the most successful sales associate at Nordstrom are not the same as those that create a top performer at Wal-Mart. One company has a service strategy, the other a best-price strategy. The foundation for any list of sales success factors is a well-defined brand strategy. How do you hope to distinguish your brand from the competition? What specific behaviors on the selling floor are likely to communicate this distinction? What skills, talents, or personality traits would a person need to execute these behaviors effectively? Watch what’s working. Carefully observe the actions of your best salespeople compared with the actions of the others. What specific behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs seem most closely associated with their success?

Prioritize! Seldom will you find a perfect candidate for a position. You’ll have to make trade-offs of one skill for another. Prioritize your list of success factors. One system classifies skills as “must have,” “very important,” and “nice to have.” Don’t compromise

your workforce by trading off “must have” competencies for those in the other two groups.

Know what can and can't be taught. Once you have your prioritized list of success factors, decide which ones you can—and are willing to—teach. Skills that you won't teach should become your hiring criteria. For example, if you decide that a warm greeting and creative buying suggestions are key behaviors for representing your brand, then the ability to break the ice when meeting someone new is important. So is effective questioning to learn what to suggest. Effective questioning techniques can be taught more easily than breaking the ice. Think about cocktail party behavior. Some people move easily through a crowd, introducing themselves and making friends. But that ability is not easily taught. Know which success factors you'll teach and which you'll hire for.

Rigorously apply your criteria. Once you define and prioritize your success factors, rigorously apply them in every facet of your business. In hiring, develop a behavioral interview guide with a structured scoring grid to make sure you're evaluating job applicants effectively. When planning training and development programs, focus on what you must have rather than what you'd like to have. Make sure performance reviews, rewards, and recognition center on critical teachable behaviors.

In my experience, up to 40 percent of a store's salespeople aren't on the right bus or in the right seat. A 20 percent improvement can make a stunning difference in revenues and brand strength.

About Shanker Inc.

Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.

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