

Are Your Recruiting Yesterday's Top Performers?

Here Is a Solution That Will Get Recruiting and Selection Back on Track

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Every sales manager is looking for "The Top Performer." The top performer is a sales person who belongs in the top 20% of the sales force that sells about 80% of what is sold. Depending on the organization and industry, top performers may go by various monikers such as "rainmaker," "hunter," "farmer," and "big hitter." According to Harry Mills, author of "The Rainmaker's Toolkit," these prospective sales recruits need to have personality characteristics such as empathy, ego-drive, service motivation, conscientiousness, and ego-strength. Unfortunately, while companies can test job applicants for these personality attributes, testing is labor intensive and expensive. On the other hand, it can be very difficult to infer these personality characteristics through a written resume. Thus, the recruitment process follows multiple steps, may involve several on staff whose time is valuable, and may even involve hiring external consultants to run expensive employment tests. Too often the effort to recruit, read resumes, conduct initial interviews, and test applicants is more expensive than it needs to be due to using an inefficient plan.

While making an assumption about how today's businesses want to operate, there is general consensus that companies do not want to pay an arm and a leg for fresh talent. One of the greatest benefits of hiring young talent instead of veterans is that young talent wants experience. These workers are often willing to forgo the big paychecks, at least at first, to get a few years experience under their belts.

The Pains of Recruiting Young Professionals Using Traditional Methods

Why recruit at all? Why not just interview from the pool of people who actively apply on their own initiative? By recruiting, sales managers can have at least some control on who comes in for a job interview. If managers do not recruit, they end up with way too many random applicants who do not meet basic qualifications. With a big pile of unqualified resumes and applications, sales managers have to filter through using short cuts such as the key word method. Hence, recruiting saves sales managers time because they can go about job tasks in the most efficient way possible. Recruiting also allows managers to eliminate unnecessary paperwork. Finally, and critically important, active recruiting is more likely to produce the desired result of hiring a top performer than accepting random applications.

It is difficult to identify that someone will be a top producer by reviewing a resume. One way that sales managers, recruiters and companies screen applicants for their selling skills is to infer that future sales performance is predicted by an applicant's big successes in previous selling situations. In other words, the process is to screen applicants based on selling at or over quota in the past. Unfortunately, the logic behind this method is only sometimes true. It is flawed from a statistical perspective if one is looking at applicants' short term successes instead of the big picture. A key word search may pick up an attribute such as "exceeded quota", but key word searches may not be able to easily find applicants who have repeatedly met and exceeded quota. If there is not sufficient sensitivity in screening the applicants, screening on past sales performance will only yield mediocre performers. Here's why. There is a law called "regression toward the mean" which states that extreme performance on a first measurement will tend to be closer to average on a second measurement. In other words, the salesperson who was the best in the office last year is more likely to have lower than average performance this year.

Here is an example of how highly qualified applicants can fall through the cracks. A young professional by the name of Nick Brodbeck works in automotive sales. Brodbeck has earned "Salesman of the Month" awards multiple times, not just once. Moreover, Brodbeck, who is still in college, competes against nine other salespeople with more experience than he has. Brodbeck could be just the sort of future top performer that recruiters are looking for. Unfortunately, unless the key words that sales recruiters are looking for perfectly match the words Brodbeck uses on his resume, recruiters may screen him from a job interview before they even get a chance to meet him.

It is too easy to exaggerate your skill level. Another issue with recruiting through traditional means is that applicants too often look better on paper (or on virtual paper) than they do in person. Some applicants exaggerate their skills and accomplishments to get through the initial screenings. Some applicants have asked their references to cover for them so interviewers will not be able to see their full employment background. People recruited through social networks may be unprofessional in the way they act or dress. Unfortunately, even when sales managers recognize that the applicants are falling short of hopes, they may feel pressured to hire someone because of the sunk time, time away from the office, sunk costs, and energy that have already gone into the recruiting process.

The best applicants may not be looking for a sales job. Finally, it is likely that best applicants for those top performer sales positions are not actively looking for sales work. Many are trying to pay off student loans, have 2 – 3 jobs, and do not have time to apply for another job. For instance, one young professional who was interviewed for this paper admitted that she already has three jobs to pay off her college education bills. Her day job was with a downtown retailer. Her night job was running the cash register at a grocery store in another part of town, and she also had a weekend job. When could she find time to interview for a better paying job? Also important to consider, some young professionals are ignorant of the value of the sales field and have not thought about applying for jobs in the field. Still other young professionals have aims to start their own companies or invest in their own ideas, not buying into the restrictions of working within an organization.

This last group, while highly attractive because of their obvious initiative, may be especially resistant to working in sales. As an interviewer, you are trying to sell them your company. You are trying to persuade these high potential applicants to want to work for you. When an applicant has a dream of working as an entrepreneur, it may be harder for a sales manager to explain the benefits of organizational life. Making the most of these applicant opportunities could be especially difficult if applicants are uncomfortable talking to people that they do not know except in an interview situation. If interviewers have a hard time talking to, reading, and understanding people and what motivates them, the interview process may not support success. A less formal setting may better facilitate screening the top performer.

Recruiting at Young Professional Events



Our class set out to address the challenges of recruiting young top performers at professional and informal events. To learn more about this topic, the class as a whole conducted 34 interviews with business professionals. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, but a few were conducted through the Internet. Respondents were selected based on willingness to participate in our project.¹ The following discussion highlights the results of our investigation.

What are the characteristics of the “right” professional event?

The class discovered that while most of the respondents felt that young professionals could be recruited at events, there is no consensus about what a professional event is. Some students took the approach that events ought to closely match professional interests, and some of the respondents who were interviewed supported this view. For instance, one manager emphasized several times that his organization would only pay his out of pocket costs, mileage, and overnight costs to attend professional events, not quasi social-professional events. On the other hand, another manager mentioned that it is not unusual for her to attend quasi-social events or even purely social events with the intent to look for new hires. Some students gravitated to events that centered around eating, such as Cincinnati (E.A.T.S.), the rationale being that

¹ 31 students had the opportunity to ask the respondents open ended questions of their choice. Some students opted to interview 2 people to get more depth. Respondents live in three countries: the United States, Spain, and Ireland. Respondents were not paid any compensation.

dining together allows for casual conversation. In comparison, other students were mostly interested in sports events such as 5 K runs, walkathons, and ski groups. Some respondents felt that professional events ought to include job fairs, but most did not.

From the recruiter's point of view, it really did not matter what the event was as long as the situation allowed the manager to see potential applicants as they really are. In other words, they want to get to know young applicants face-to-face without the pressures of a potential interview hanging in the air. They also do not want to face too much competition for the applicant's time. Professional events work best for recruiters when they are not overwhelmed with a sea of applicants, or underwhelmed, feeling ignored. Managers feel most comfortable about professional events when they can spend time with a few interesting people. In addition, recruiters want the opportunity to get to see young people in leadership roles, to see young people making speeches, and to hear young people in conversations. Hence, in order to have high visibility, young professionals should not just attend events but become involved in the programs.

Is there a single resource where all young professional events are listed? Or a time of year when these events happen? There is no single place on the Internet or in any publication where all young professional events are listed. Part of the issue is the range of activities that young professionals opt to participate in. Part of the issue is that new events are created almost overnight out of the blue. It pays to keep up with local business publications and websites to see what is happening. It also pays to know of meetings that are especially productive. Some professional organizations have annual events and meetings that are essentially held at the same time year in and year out. For instance, every year the American Marketing Association (AMA) has a nation-wide summer meeting that is held on just about the same week. The meeting has potential to help recruiters meet young talent, as many meetings are lead by professionals who are just starting their careers, and meals give folks the opportunity to network. If a particular event such as an AMA meeting is an especially productive place to meet young professionals, the sales manager ought to anticipate the date far in advance to make sure the calendar is kept free from other obligations.

What about social media? Could that save a sales recruiter time? There is almost unanimous agreement that the Internet, LinkedIn, and Facebook are not as effective as meeting people face-to-face. In social media, you do not get the personalization or the feelings from the person. Another issue is that if salespeople are going to make calls in person, then applicants' appearance, grace, manners, and the way they present themselves matters. The sales manager can best learn of these personal attributes during informal conversations, formal presentations, and other real life experiences.

Should an older person hold back from attending a young person's event? If sales managers want to take recruiting to a new level, they might need to pick up some new skills or brush up on some old ones. Some sales managers might feel out of place at a young person's event at first, but in almost every circumstance, the folks in the young professional group will warmly welcome anyone who sincerely wants to be a part of the occasion. Although the sales manager might feel nervous, she should strive to project an image of confidence and maybe even being a little "hip." She can always seek out someone who appears to be "in the know" and ask how to get started.

How can a recruiter avoid the pitfalls of attending young professional events? The biggest potential pitfalls of recruiting applicants through young professional organizations are: 1) wasting time and 2) wasting budget. If the wrong event is chosen to attend, there is the chance that no potential candidates will be found. Also, some events are quite expensive with the base cost being \$400 or more, plus travel and hotel expenses.

To avoid these issues, organizations should do extensive research into the young professional events they plan to attend. A Google search is a great place to begin the research using key words such as “young professional”, “professional networking guide”, “Jaycees”, “connected young professional,” and “American Marketing Association Committees.” Then, ask around to see if anyone you know has attended the meetings or events to get an idea of who is involved. Also remember, just because you cannot find anyone who has attended the events does not mean that it is the wrong type of event. Feel free to call for information from the contacts that the organization suggests and ask questions. Asking questions will also give recruiters, no matter their background, an idea of how welcoming the events are to newcomers and outsiders.

Consider the following situation. What if a sales manager is looking for a sales engineer who requires a Professional Engineer License? This scenario is complicated by the need to find applicants with a specific, difficult to achieve credential. In this case, the recruiter may want to think through a long term plan and to consider a range of events, their costs, and the likelihood of meeting applicants with a special skill set.

Events to Recruit a Certified Sales Engineer Hypothetical Event Comparison Chart				
Name of Event	Cost	Timing	Likelihood of Attendance by Professional Engineers	Comments
Chamber of Commerce Engineer Event	\$ 65	Oct 1 - 3	High	Local event, Small pool, Good likelihood to talk one-on-one
Ohio Energy Conference	\$400	Late Feb	High	Large Pool, Huge Event, Good place to hear someone talk in public
American Marketing Association Special Committee	\$50	Monthly	Unknown	May be off target because it is likely few attendees are certified
Crossroads Church “God on the Job”	Free	6 Weeks Late Summer	Unknown	Group run by an engineer from General Electric who may be looking to move
The Bacchanalian Society	\$20	Once per quarter	Unknown	Committee run by an engineer from Cooper Electric who may be looking to move

If a sales manager is considering attending these events, some may be better opportunities than others, depending on who attends and whether attendees have the required certifications.

Closing Thoughts

Recruiting young professionals through events will not work for every recruiting need. However, if a sales manager is looking for someone who is willing to make a little extra effort to build community, then young professional events are an important option to have as part of the sales selection process. The two primary advantages of young professional events over other means of screening applicants are 1) the ability to conduct a stealth interview and 2) seeing is believing. One of the students summed it up best: "I was blown away by the amount of events and organizations in Cincinnati alone for young professionals to meet clientele and get involved . . . I plan to attend some of these events and shake as many hands as possible to get my name into Cincinnati's sales marketing stratosphere."

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