

Wanted. Salesperson.

The tragically flawed Willy Loman, traveling from town to town and failing to make a living, and failing with his family. The entire scope of venal characters in the film *Glengarry Glen Ross*. The white vinyl belt, matching loafers and plaid polyester suits, coupled with the annoying personality of Herb Tarlek from television's *WKRP in Cincinnati*. Popular culture is full of references to salespeople, and most of them not particularly kind.

The stereotypical view of salespeople is that they are pushy, less than honest, and greedy, often not much better than a common grifter. Salespeople are frequently viewed by the majority of people with deep suspicion, with perhaps only lawyers and politicians being seen as less trustworthy. Sometimes seen as a necessary evil by businesses and often as an unwelcome intruder by prospective clients, the reality is that the field of sales is one of the most misunderstood professions.

So before learning how to recognize the red flags of a bad salesperson, let's start by understanding what makes a good one. The most successful salespeople, regardless of what it is they sell, leverage all of their skills in order to drive business, and make a lot of money for themselves and their company by doing so. Some key traits that good salespeople will have:

- **Strong interpersonal/communication skills** – Likeability is a huge asset, but on its own is limited. Good salespeople must have the ability to help the prospective client understand the benefits of purchasing and why they should act. They should also look the part, depending upon what and to whom they sell.
- **Strong work ethics** – In some ways, good salespeople never stop working. Whether it is a simple service or product that they sell or a multi-million dollar solution, they are always thinking about promoting and leveraging relationships in order to find the next prospect. Salespeople often work longer hours than traditional office positions. Since the majority of their income is frequently based on performance, they will go the extra mile in order to benefit the bottom line – the company's and their own.
- **Excellent networking skills** – Good salespeople have the ability to build relationships and take pleasure in the process.
- **Intuitive** – They know how to ask the right questions to get the answers that will lead the prospect to uncovering or visualizing why they need to purchase. Sometimes this involves helping create a vision of the client's unknown wants or needs.

- **Good listening skills** – They have the ability to listen effectively to what the prospect says, and understand and relate a prospect's wants/needs to the product or service offered.
- **Resilient** – They have a thick skin, and have learned not to take rejection personally. No other profession faces rejection more frequently. Those who let this occupational hazard eat into their sense of self, and those who are not capable of “bouncing back” are unlikely to succeed.
- **Versatile and adaptable** – They are able to quickly assess not only the needs of the customer but their personality as well, and are able to appropriately adjust their sales style to match. Believe it or not, some people do like to be hard-sold while others run screaming from anything but the soft-sell approach.
- **Achievement-oriented** – The best salespeople possess a competitive spirit similar to that of a skilled athlete. They like to win, and are hungry to do so. For the money, for the fame, for the respect, and for the thrill.
- **Quick study** - They are able to learn new information quickly and effectively communicate this information.
- **Conscientious** – They possess a strong sense of ethics and accountability... salespeople are only as good as their word, and the good ones always deliver what they promise.

These are just some of the traits that a good salesperson would need to make a successful career out of sales. Notice that product knowledge was not mentioned, but the ability to learn was. It certainly does help if a salesperson has industry knowledge and even more importantly, good relationships within an industry, if you are talking about B2B (business to business) sales. But someone with the right personality and combination of skills can develop the necessary relationships, product and business knowledge over time... and in the long term can be a very good fit for your organization.

One of the reasons that sales as a profession is so maligned is that almost everyone has experienced the pushy salesperson who somehow managed to convince them to purchase something they did not really want, could not really afford, or definitely did not need. It leaves people with a bitter after-taste and a negative feeling towards not only the product or company, but towards salespeople in general.

Good salespeople will ensure that they have listened and understood what a customer really wants or needs. They not only meet but exceed expectations by creating positive word-of-mouth advertising, and often repeat sales. And as a bonus, this limits the

amount of post-sale problems that a company will have to spend resources on fixing. By setting up customer expectations fairly, a customer will be happier with their purchase and the company won't have to deal with the cost of an unhappy purchaser, or negative word-of-mouth advertising. Good salespeople can avoid the majority of these problems by not pushing the sale of something the customer is not ready for, or that doesn't fit what the customer is looking for.

So how do you choose the right salesperson? Well, if you hire someone with appropriate social skills and personality, work ethic and honesty, reasonable intelligence, and invest in training and support, a good candidate can become a great salesperson over time. More importantly, one should avoid hiring a salesperson with deficient tactics; poor negotiations, pressured sales, and misleading promises will certainly cost your company more than just sales alone. Imagine the amount of resources and time that will be lost fixing problems and repairing relationships resulting from a salesperson's incompetence, over-zealousness or dishonesty. Do the basics; check their references, find out if they really sold what they claimed to have sold, etc. Look at the interview as an opportunity to see the candidates in action ... after all, they are selling their services to you. If, during the interview process, your candidate talks mostly about him or herself without asking any questions about your company or shows little or no evidence of research to learn anything about you, some warning bells should be going off.

For the more difficult aspect of determining whether you are being sold a false bill of goods in the interview process by a smooth talker, it may be helpful to consider some of the tools available to evaluate character, work habits and personality, such as online assessments. Listening to your gut can sometimes be helpful on this one as well ... to some degree you must trust your instincts. If you get a bad vibe from a candidate or have serious doubts about him or her, common sense dictates that your clients will also. Beware that you don't get deceived by a skilled con artist; confidence and talking a good game are rarely enough.