

Hiring the Right Sales People for your Agency

Financing for insurance professionals



a complimentary whitepaper for agents and brokers

Interviewing and hiring people can be an unpleasant, even intimidating process. How much of an expert are you when it comes to recruiting employees for your agency? Most business owners like to think that they are excellent judges of character who are very skilled at choosing the right people — but inside, they wonder how accurate their judgment really is and what the consequences may be if it's not so great.

Hiring the right people is critical to the well-being of your agency, and your own financial health as an owner. Hiring the wrong person can carry an amazingly high cost including lost business opportunities, angry customers who will never return, damage to your hard-earned reputation, and wasted time. Even worse, many agency owners are fundamentally nice people who find it tough to terminate employees, so problem personnel tend to stick around far longer than they should, causing even more damage.

Finding and hiring the right people may be one of the most important things you can do for your business and your own financial security. You can make all the promises in the world about providing excellent service, but promises succeed or fail based on the people you trust to deliver them. Here are some tips to help get employees in your agency who are well-suited to successfully perform their roles.

Know what you need

Number one: don't rush the hiring process. Yes, you may be in a hurry to find someone, but hiring the first person who comes along and hoping you can mold him or her into what you need is a recipe for failure and frustration. In a way, the relationship between an agency owner and a key employee is like a marriage. You wouldn't

marry someone based on a chance meeting or an enjoyable first date, would you? More likely, you'd take your time and get to know each other to ensure that you have shared values and attitudes.

Number two: know exactly what type of employee you need but be realistic. Finding someone who is an aggressive salesperson, provides amazingly attentive customer service, is very warm and friendly, and who is willing to cook lunch for the entire staff may be a great dream, but it's an unreasonable expectation.

Each time you hire, determine the type of salesperson you want, and then focus the process on those characteristics. You may be after a producer who will go out in the community to call on prospects. Or, you may need an inside salesperson who will double as a customer service representative. These positions necessitate two very different types of personalities.

If you want someone who will fit into your existing team, take an honest look at how your current employees work and identify the characteristics that mean the most to you. That way, you can evaluate applicants by how well they match those traits.

Build and sustain a culture

A culture is essentially your agency's attitude, environment, and business approach. It provides a framework and guidance for your employees, so they have a clearer understanding of what's expected, and so you have a standard against which you can evaluate prospective employees.

For example, you may want your agency to have a customer service culture that's built around a shared commitment to do more than simply meet a customer's basic needs or an employee's basic

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requirements. If that's the case, when you conduct interviews and evaluate applicants, you'll want to explore their personal attitudes toward serving customers and get examples of how they've done that in previous positions. Make sure they understand your expectations related to service.

If you want to sustain a customer service culture, you need to model the desired behavior throughout the selection process, because your actions will send clear signals to applicants. If they perceive that you share their values and will recognize what they can bring to the position, they'll be far more interested in working for you.

Focus on people, not skills or licenses

It's a given that you want to hire salespeople who are effective at selling. But if you want to ensure a good fit with your agency and its culture, you'll want to spend more time getting to know the person rather than simply reviewing his or her skills and past experience.

Keep in mind that you can teach skills to employees, but it's much harder to teach them how to have the right attitudes. As you go through the selection process, pay close attention to attitudes and behaviors. Approach licenses the same way. Having the right license doesn't automatically make someone a good salesperson. Better to hire the right person and help them get the license they need.

If the position will require the employee to spend a considerable amount of time on the phone with customers and prospects, you may wish to conduct the initial interview by phone. Why? It will give you a great sense of how they behave when talking with other people. How do they answer their own phone? Is it easy to understand what they say? Do they speak in a friendly and polite manner? Is it clear that they're paying attention to what you tell them, even though they can't see your facial expressions?

When conducting interviews at your office, watch for little things. How do they treat your receptionist or whoever they first encounter when they walk in the door? Ask them to wait a few minutes while you wrap up a matter so you can quietly observe them. Do they engage in friendly conversations with your other employees, or are they standoffish?

While many people believe that salespeople need to talk a lot, the reality is that the most effective ones spend most of their time listening, so pay close attention to their skills in this area. Do they listen patiently to what you have to say, or do they interrupt you? When they respond to a question, is it clear that they considered what you asked, or are they blurting something out? Watch their manner to see if they're comfortable and smiling. Everyone gets nervous in an interview situation, but a candidate who doesn't smile when being interviewed probably won't smile when talking to your customers.

Ask open-ended questions

To get a sense of whether the candidates would be a good fit for your agency, ask them open-ended questions that require them to do more than regurgitate facts. Past behavior is a great predictor of performance, so have them share stories of relevant experiences.



For example, instead of asking whether customer service is important to them, ask them about a time when they did something special for a customer. Have them tell you about a time they faced a very angry or upset customer, and how they went about resolving the situation. Ask them how their average customer would describe working with them. And ask how they handled a tough situation, such as having to say “no” to an irate customer.

As you consider their answers, look for confidence, initiative, and problem-solving skills. If customer service is important to you, listen carefully to how they talk about customers in the stories. When they describe customers negatively, it’s a sign that they won’t treat people well. But if they describe customers in warm, friendly terms, you can be confident they’ll treat your agency’s customers with respect.

Never stop hiring

Always keep your eyes open for people who would be great members of your team, even if they have little or no experience in insurance. Again, you can teach the skills they need to sell the products you offer, but it’s much tougher to teach them how to have the right attitude.

You know that friendly woman at the convenience store where you pick up your morning coffee? You’ve watched her handle long lines of customers and frustrating situations with no signs of annoyance. Could she do the same for you? The same applies to restaurant servers and workers in fast-food restaurants. If they can keep smiling and remain friendly and polite while putting up with rude customers and fellow employees who really don’t want to be there, they could thrive in your culture.

You’ll find potential team members in other sales roles, too, from retail stores to auto dealers. Cultivate a relationship with them on your visits. Offer to let them serve other customers first, so you can watch how they work. You could end up with an extraordinary salesperson, while they get a much more satisfying and rewarding place to use their talents.

Some people to avoid

When you’re in a hurry to fill a sales position, and you’re not seeing the caliber of applicants you’d like, it may be tempting to hire someone who falls short of the ideal. Be careful, though, because the wrong person can be damaging.

As an example, someone with a negative attitude can have a dramatic effect on your other employees’ morale. People who act that way will also give customers bad feelings about your agency. The same goes for people who are gossipy or sarcastic.

Just because someone is outgoing doesn’t mean he or she will make a great addition to your team. Some highlight extroverted types actually come across as pushy, which may make your customers uncomfortable. Others may spend all of their time talking and very little listening, which will leave customers feeling as though their needs and concerns are not being addressed.

Finally, watch out for salespeople who have changed agencies or other sales jobs frequently. That’s often a sign of someone who gets bored at a job or who tends to be disagreeable to work with. They move on to another job, and the cycle begins again.

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And finally ...

Don't make the mistake so many business owners do when hiring salespeople, and fail to check references and dig to learn more about candidates. It's human nature to trust people, and we all like to think we have a well-honed sense of judgment. Unfortunately, some of the characteristics that make many people seem charming and trustworthy can be the same characteristics that actually make them bad employees. Investing a little extra time in some social media research and a few phone calls may protect you from making a serious hiring mistake.

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