

Pick a Perfect Sales Job

How to make the most of new hiring opportunities

It has been a grim market for salespeople for quite a while. But at least things are not getting worse. When they do pick up, where should reps and sales managers look for new positions, in both the short term and over the long run? And what do they need to do to get ready for the future of sales? by Henry Canaday

down and up

Monster.com's index of sales hiring showed a dramatic 42 percent drop in 2008, but hiring rates stabilized in the early months of this year, even edging up slightly in April. The industries showing the healthiest gains in overall employment opportunities were transportation, lodging and food, healthcare, entertainment, and education. The states reporting the best hiring markets in April were Alaska, Maryland, Vermont, Delaware, and Rhode Island.

Jack Behar, an exec with Top Sales Positions, is seeing a lot of sales rep hiring in telecom, office equipment, and pharmaceuticals, but not much for sales management positions. And management salaries have gone down about 25 percent, Behar says.

"Most of our clients are waiting for two to four months to see what happens in the market," says Jeff Seeley, president of Carew International, which helps firms select and train salespeople. "But one sector that is hiring now is for-profit education.

There are a lot of people out of jobs who are looking for new skills, a BA, or a masters degree." Longer term, Seeley predicts firms will look for reps with more business skills and managers with more leadership skills.

DDI senior vice president of selection Scott Erker sees strong future growth in retail sales and entry-level sales positions. More salespeople in these positions will create the need for more sales leaders, as well.

Integrated Recruiting Consultants has built up a database of one million salespeople in its efforts to help Fortune 500 firms and others recruit reps. Senior managing partner Michael Palmore says some IRC pharmaceuticals, telecom, and business-machines clients have seen a drop in activity in recent months. "But," he explains, "one that is picking up, I don't know why, is companies seeking recruiting help in financial services and licensed brokers. They are very interested in hiring."

Palmore expects a rebound in sales hiring over the next three to six months in telecom, Internet and computer services, and advertising. Advertising firms have been especially bullish about their needs over this middle term.

IRC pharmaceuticals clients are also expecting a “nice little rebound next year,” Palmore says. This usually stable group has cut sales strength significantly in recent months.

Regionally, Palmore says, the northeast and southeast United States are relatively stable. “Boston, New York, and Philly are still not seeing levels we are used to but are definitely stabilizing.”

go west

In the southeast, IRC sees strength in Atlanta and many Florida locations. Farther west, the best markets for salespeople appear to be in Minneapolis; Kansas City, MO; Denver; and Phoenix. “We are still getting a lot of calls in these places from companies looking to hire,” Palmore insists, and he says the market for sales management generally follows the market for salespeople.

Longer term, Palmore thinks Internet and other computer-related sectors and telecom will have the strongest appetites for sales talent. Based on client discussions, Palmore believes sales needs in new technologies will be very healthy.

He urges reps seeking new positions to concentrate on the basics – presentation and, especially, follow-up. Some clients interested in candidates have been disappointed by only one follow-up call. “You have to do anything to make yourself stand out. If you can close a sales deal, you can close a job application.”

Steve Grossman, head of sales practice at Mercer Human Resources, summarizes his impressions from client contacts: “In industrial markets, we are not seeing significant layoffs in sales, but layoffs and salary cuts in other parts of the organization.” Even industrial firms that have lost substantial sales are holding on to sales talent, confident of recovery.

There have been cutbacks in travel and hospitality sales teams. “But these will come back, and they may be hiring in a year or so,” Grossman says. Service firms have been cutting delivery and production jobs but holding on to salespeople.

But one market in which Grossman does not see a strong recovery in sales strength is pharmaceuticals. He predicts pharmaceutical firms will shift to a new sales model and need fewer field reps over the next three to five years.

long-term prospects

James Canton, who heads the Institute for Global Futures, divides sales opportunities over the next 15 years into two types: “sunrise” and “sunset.” “Sunrise opportunities are dominated by technology,” Canton stresses. “The sales paradigm will be completely transformed over the next five to ten years. Sales executives will have to be even more tech-savvy.”

The first growth area is health enhancement, including consumer genomics, personal medicine, bioscience, and traditional healthcare. “Demands of baby boomers for health enhancement will bring one of the largest markets in the world, in such sectors as pharmaceuticals, devices, healthy foods, and general wellness.”

The second major opportunity will be in sustainability, which is expected to blossom into a market worth \$5 trillion within the next 15 years. “It is a wild frontier for sales, including green and

clean technology, pollution control, alternative and nuclear energy, solar cities, hydrogen, and biomass.”

Third, Canton notes, “people have not stopped making money.” He sees financial services coming back and major opportunities in finance, lending, stocks, retirement planning, and insurance. “There is twenty-five trillion in global, mobile capital looking for a home.”

New technologies moving from laboratories to common use now include IT, networks, and biotech and will soon include neurotechnology for the brain, nanotechnology, and quantum technology. All will require salespeople who thoroughly understand the technologies they are selling.

Canton points to Apple stores, which are designed to be both highly informative and consumer friendly. Professional salespeople will have to work toward the same goal: to convey complex information congenially. And they must be wireless and extremely agile.

Canton calls the future sales model “envoy sales,” with reps who are like diplomats seeking solutions and brokering knowledge and are proactive toward client needs – even toward needs clients do not yet realize they have. “The value proposition will be showing how to make or save money or how to get ready for a crisis.”

Traditional sales training in products, leads, negotiation, and closing will have to be supplemented. Continues Canton, “They will need training from entrepreneurs on thinking creatively.”

And reps will require new tools. “Not just BlackBerries and iPhones, but social media, like Twitter and blogs,” Canton says. “You want to build a personal following among prospects. Salespeople, not just engineers and marketers, must become innovators in their industry.”

prepare now

The youngest reps, the recent college graduates, will have to hit the ground running. Fortunately, more firms are working with colleges earlier to develop sales talent.

University Directories (UD), which sells advertising within campus media, gathers 700 rising college seniors to sell during summer vacation. “We spend \$1,500 on each unproven salesperson before they make their first call,” says sales VP Matt Loecke.

UD recruits from sales departments when possible and from career offices when not. Recruits are given eight days of training on presentations, territory management, and closing, then sent back to 250 colleges to make 30 cold calls a day.

These B2B sales range from \$500 to \$1,000 per customer, with a 15 percent commission and \$200 weekly draw. Reps average \$3,000 over the summer, but some make much more. UD’s partners, a dozen firms that meet the new salespeople at summer’s end, seek out these more successful reps.

“One company hired the first and third best performers, who made \$10,000 each over the summer,” Loecke says. “It is an opportunity to hire people who are experienced at making thirty calls per day for an entry-level salary.” He estimates that a fifth of student reps land jobs with partners.

Global English has participated in UD’s partners program for four years and recruited four of its 100 reps from the program. Tom Kahl, VP of USA sales and support, sold for UD in 1992 through 1995 and calls his experience “transformational, the best thing I ever did.”

Global English sells online language training for non-US staff at such major corporations as Pfizer and Procter & Gamble.

Looking at Reps during Downturns

This is the perfect time to evaluate the effectiveness of your sales team. Below are guidelines for assessing your team members based upon two criteria: their performance and your relationship with them.

As you consider performance, focus on how they contributed during the entire boom/bust cycle. The state of your connection with team members is important because it signifies how effective you have been as a coach.

High Performer, Cool Relationship

Restore: Productive sales reps leave companies when they don't believe they are getting a fair deal and don't get along with their manager. Don't lose this one; you can't afford it. It's time to rebuild the relationship, and it is your responsibility to take the initiative.

High Performer, Warm Relationship

Reward: This rep is a winner and is at the top of the class in good times and bad. Benchmark his or her best practices, and give the rep extra credit. Buy a ticket to the amusement park for the family, or treat the rep and spouse to a night on the town.

Low Performer, Cool Relationship

Release: You have a limited number of positions to fill. This person is taking up space that you can't afford to waste. Part of your job is to cut loose those who don't perform, especially if they resist change, professional improvement, or your coaching efforts.

Low Performer, Warm Relationship

Review: Perhaps you and this sales rep are just a little too comfortable with each other. Being close with your sales reps is important; however, losing objectivity helps no one. Don't make the mistake of thinking that others don't notice your favoritism.

As an executive, you are charged with the development and evaluation of your team members. That's the bottom line. It is not always pleasant and it isn't easy. But when you perform this responsibility effectively, you will reap the rewards of success while obtaining respect from those you lead.

— Stew Bolno, Team Builders Plus

"We see great growth opportunities," Kahl says. He hopes to add 15 to 20 reps over the next year.

Kahl is looking for recent college graduates for entry-level sales, plus high-end field reps. For entry-level, he wants natural sales ability, great work ethic and attitude, plus willingness to risk moving to San Francisco for work at a new, young company.

Kahl looks for the top 10 percent of performers at each year's UD meeting. "It is a great way to see what they can produce, and then we engage them and filter them for interest." New reps are given a month of training and are then mentored for a year by experienced salespeople. For senior reps, Kahl wants people with 10 to 15 years' experience and a background

"You have to do anything to make yourself stand out."

in international business selling enterprise software and human capital systems.

Kahl expects plenty of sales and management opportunities in enterprise software. "There is so much opportunity to change business processes from manual methods used in the past. We have a very bright future." Client corporations around the world are hopeful that the economic bottom has been reached and are starting to make buying decisions again.

Kahl advises reps and managers to seek positions they truly want. "Life is too short, and you have to do something you love and where you feel your work is impacting people. Our people have a passion, and it is a nice way to align both your personal and professional goals."

Valpak Direct Marketing has worked with UD for five years. "What I love about Valpak is that all its executives started in the UD program," says Mark Liston, director of sales recruiting. Volume and coverage are important to the national advertising firm, which employs 1,200 salespeople at 175 franchises and hires 400 entry-level reps each year. "I am not a proponent of hiring someone with twenty years of sales experience," says Liston. "We are looking for people who are fresh, trainable, affordable, and willing to grow with us."

Valpak also works with national sales and marketing fraternities and with the 30 schools in the University Sales Education Foundation. Each year it flies 20 recent college grads to its headquarters in Tampa to learn about Valpak and meet its president, who started in sales 31 years ago. Where there is mutual interest, grads are referred to a local Valpak franchise for an interview. UD graduates often make this cut. "They hit the ground quicker. After making thirty cold calls a day, they are absolutely fearless," Liston says.

He is looking for recruits who want to be in sales, not those who want to just try it. "Sales is not for everybody. We want people who will make a two- to three-year commitment, because it takes eighteen months for them to really come into their own." Liston looks for reps who want to be mentored and coached, and fortunately, he says, "this generation is the most coachable we ever had."

New Valpak reps are given a week of business training, and 35 are brought in each month for a one-week sales school in Tampa. Once a year, all 1,200 reps meet in Tampa for another two-and-a-half days of training. Frequent Webinars and monthly calls supplement these live sessions.

Liston predicts that sales openings will stay strong in his business and other sectors where compensation is keyed to solid performance. He says too many people still enter sales because "they have a nice personality and think people will like them, and then they find out how hard the job is." Replacing these reps is likely to keep sales recruiters busy for quite a while. •

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