

How to Spot a Potential Star Salesperson

"Six qualities that superstar salespeople possess, and how to spot them in a prospect."

By Dave Kahle

One of the best investments any businessperson can make is the hiring of a superstar salesperson. Not only will a star salesperson require very little of your management or supervisory time, but he/she will develop into a consistent asset for your business. The star will keep you informed of your customers' changing needs and views, regularly produce new customers, and generate a continuous, substantial income stream.

But, unfortunately, the 80 - 20 rule holds true in regards to salespeople. Twenty percent of your salespeople produce 80% of your volume. So the question for someone doing the hiring, is: "Is there a way to spot those 20% during the interview process?" Above and beyond the specific profile discussed elsewhere in this program is there a quality or combination of qualities that every star salesperson has in common, regardless of the business or industry? And, just as important, is there some way of identifying those qualities in prospective salespeople during the interview and selection process? After having interviewed literally thousands of potential salespeople, and after having hired and supervised many of them, and after having trained them and worked beside them, my answer to both questions is "YES." There are certain qualities that every star salesperson possesses. And there are ways to spot them.

If you can identify these qualities in a prospective salesperson, regardless of the industry you're in, then you can spot an individual who will bring you a great return on your investment.

Before we discuss them, let's consider what qualities are generally not important. In most industries, physical attractiveness is not a primary consideration. It's nice if your salesperson is attractive and it will help him/her in their initial contact with prospects, but it's not necessary. Too often, sales hires are made on the basis of how the prospect looks -- and that's often a mistake.

Probably the most overrated factor is that of "product knowledge." More business people make decisions about hiring salespeople based on the amount of product knowledge that person has than any other single factor. Product knowledge is nice, but again, it's not necessary. Knowledge is just that, knowledge, and it can be gained. If you have learned something about your product and your industry, so can someone else.

Let me give you an example. As a younger man, I was hired for a sales position by a company that sold surgical staplers. I knew nothing about surgical staplers, nothing about surgery, nothing about medicine, and nothing about doctors, nurses, and hospitals. Yet they hired me, not for what I knew (or didn't know), but for who I was. And in six weeks of training, I had sufficient knowledge to walk into the operating rooms of the biggest hospitals in my state and provide technical assistance to the surgical team.

Now, I can think of no other situation where knowledge was as critical as that one. And six weeks previous to that I had none of the necessary knowledge. Yet I became very successful for that company -- not because of what I knew, but because of who I was.

And that's the key to spotting and hiring a superstar salesperson. Don't be sidetracked by what he/she knows relative to products or industries, and don't be blinded by how he or she looks. Instead, concentrate on who he/she is.

These six qualities of character that mark superstar salespeople of any industry all describe who they are.

Let's consider each one. The first on my list may surprise you. *INTEGRITY*. That's right. Integrity. According to Webster's, integrity is "uprightness of character, probity (virtue tested and confirmed), honesty."

I believe that this "tested uprightness and honesty" ought to be the first quality we look for in salespeople. From time immemorial, people have appreciated and wanted to deal with honest people. That holds true today.

Put yourself in the shoes of your potential customer. Or, look at your behavior when you are the buyer, not the seller. Don't you appreciate an honest vendor? Aren't you drawn to the supplier who you know will treat you honestly and fairly? Fast talkers will come and go. Hard closers will get some business and create some ill will, experts in product knowledge will help us understand, but the thing that draws us to do business with a person, more than anything else, is that person's integrity. We know that we will be dealt with fairly and honestly.

So, if it's that to which we are attracted when we are considering purchasing something, doesn't it make sense that our customers and prospects will also be drawn to a person of integrity? That's the first, and most important reason for looking for integrity in our future salespeople.

But there are some other more selfish reasons, too. For instance, if we hire someone of integrity, we can feel certain that person will deal with us, as his/her employer, with integrity also. And that means that we can expect honest representation of our product and company, that we don't have to worry about shoddy or corrupt dealing ruining our reputations, and that our concerns for bribery or unethical maneuvers are gone.

So, the salesperson with integrity has a quality that draws people to him, and that makes our jobs as managers much easier.

How do you spot integrity in the interview process? Here are the things to look for. First, pay very close attention to the things your prospect says during the interview. Remember little things that slip out during an interview often turn into big things later. So, listen for little clues that point out an individual's moral values -- or lack of them. Let me give you an example.

I was interviewing several prospective salespeople on behalf of a client, with the assignment of recommending one of them to my client. One of the prospects was very knowledgeable in the product line and had a history of success with a similar company. He was dressed right, looked good, and said many of the right things.

However, he had just moved to this relatively small city from a much larger city and admitted to having difficulty finding a job. In an off-hand sort of manner, he mentioned that he had taken to falsifying the amount of income he had earned in the past because it priced him out of a lot of jobs in this smaller, lower paying area. To many people that admission would mean nothing. And, I'm sure that my prospect felt he was making a positive point -- that he had really made more money than his resume and application indicated.

But to me, that small admission in the interview was sufficient to rule him out. I reasoned that if he was willing to admit to this dishonesty, then what other devious or dishonest things had he done that didn't creep out in the interview? And, if he had falsified this information, what liberties would he take with the truth when he worked for my client? Working on the principal that little things that slip out in an interview turn into big things later, I felt that this small admission indicated that he did not have integrity, and so was not a finalist for the job.

So, the first place to look for integrity, (or the lack of it), is in the interview itself. Next, check with his/her former customers, employers, and associates. When you check on his/her references, check for that person's views on your prospect's integrity. You can ask for a conclusion from them, but this almost always will be very guarded and unenlightening. Rather, ask them for specific information from which you can draw your own conclusion. For example, you might ask a former customer if the prospect ever exaggerated, or if he/she kept his/her word. Ask them if they felt comfortable and secure with that person's ethics.

Ask former associates if they were aware of any improprieties, exaggerations, or falsehoods, etc. Then, make a determination about your feelings for this person's integrity.

The second quality that every successful salesperson needs is a **HIGH ENERGY LEVEL**. Whether we like it or not, it is still true, and probably always will be, that sales is, to some extent, a numbers game. We have to see a certain number of people in order to sell one. Or, we have to call on an account a certain number of times before we begin to do business with it.

So, the element of quantity is very important to a successful sales person. Given two salespeople of equal skills, experience, intelligence, product knowledge, etc., the one who works the hardest will be more successful.

There is no substitute for hard work. And in sales, hard work is often defined by quantity of effort. Sometimes, the difference between one sales person being successful and another being unsuccessful comes down to quantity of sales efforts. And, the quality of character that is at the foundation of hard work, of high quantity efforts, is the quality of High Energy Level.

We are all different in our metabolism and physical make up. Some of us are content to lay around every Sunday afternoon and watch football games, while others of us are out painting

the house, jogging, or golfing. The difference is energy level. Some of us just have a lot of energy to burn. And that energy often translates itself into our work.

The high-energy person is the one who will make that first call a breakfast meeting at 7:30, and schedule a sales call at 4:30 the same day. While the low energy person will make his first call at 9:00 and the last at 3:00 and won't make it out of the office past noon on Friday.

One word of caution. It's certainly possible that a high-energy person will direct his excess energy into avenues other than his/her work on your behalf. For example, one high energy person might put in his forty hours, and then invest another 20 - 30 hours in an outside interest like coaching little league, church work, etc. So it is possible for that energy to be directed outside of the job. But, without that high-energy level to begin with, there is no possibility of it being directed toward work. The first step, then, is to spot the high-energy person. The second step is to help him/her direct that energy toward work.

The best way to predict how great will be the volume of sales calls made by your prospective salesperson is to rate his/her existing energy level. The higher the energy level, the more likely the person is to make more sales calls. And, to some degree, more sales calls means more sales.

Here's an example. I was called to work with a client's salesperson who wasn't producing to the degree that the client wanted. My client felt that the salesperson had everything necessary to succeed. In his opinion, that meant a great deal of product knowledge, a motivation to be successful, and a manner that made him easy to talk with. But the numbers weren't there.

I was engaged to identify the problem. I spent one day with the salesperson, and the answer was obvious. Low energy. The salesman started late in the morning, lingered over every movement, and stretched every call out twice as long as it should have been. He stopped for

three breaks during the day, took a long lunch, and ended early. All together, his low energy level meant that he actually managed about half of the sales calls he should have been making. The result? An unproductive salesperson, and a costly investment for my client.

So, HIGH ENERGY LEVEL, is one of the foundational qualities of the successful sales person. How do you discover a person's energy level?

First, review his resume and application, looking for evidences of energy spent in quantities beyond that of the average person. For example, did your prospect work his way through college by going to school and working at the same time? Did he/ she hold down two or more jobs at one time? Did the prospect hold a responsible job, and commit to several evenings a week in community service? Any of these are evidences of higher than average energy level.

On the other hand, if your prospect admits to attempting to hold two jobs, "but just didn't have the energy" you know he/or she is of average energy level.

Pay close attention to his/her physical bearing and mannerisms. It's been my experience that many overweight people who have slow mannerisms have low to average energy levels. (I've also known some dynamic exceptions to this, too). Many high-energy people will have average or slim builds, and have an appearance of pent-up energy.

Ask their references specific questions about the amount of work he/she did, about the number of times he/she was early for work, or stayed late, etc.

Those are all indications of that quality of HIGH ENERGY LEVEL that directly relates to the high quantity of sales contacts necessary to be successful in sales.

The third quality necessary for success in sales is the ABILITY AND PROPENSITY TO LEARN. I'm not talking strictly about acquiring knowledge in the sense that one learns in school. For the successful salesperson, the ability to learn means the ability to evaluate a situation, and

then to modify or make adjustments in his/her behavior, as a result of acquiring new and constantly changing information.

In today's environment, there are a number of areas, in which a good salesperson must continually be inquiring, learning, and changing his/her behavior.

The first of these is his/her own sales skills. Sales are an area of endeavor where a person is never as good as he/she could be. There is always some skill that can be learned or enhanced. The successful salesperson never considers himself or herself to have arrived, but is constantly looking for ways to refine and enhance his/her sales skills. It's a lifetime learning process.

Then there is product knowledge. In addition to sales skills, today's fast-pace technology means that new products, new applications, and new technologies are entering the market at record rates. To keep up with all of this, the salesperson needs to be able to quickly understand the technical nature of new products.

But most importantly, the salesperson must learn how to change his behavior to meet the needs, drives, and personalities of his customers. The successful salesperson is a chameleon. He/she changes his behavior and, to some extent, his personality, to meet the ways in which different customers want him to behave. It is the ultimate business application of the golden rule: Do unto others that which you would have them do unto you.

The operative rule for a salesperson is this: Treat others the way they want to be treated. And this means, first, being perceptive to the way different people and accounts want to be treated. And, then, adapting your own behavior to that expectation.

That takes the ability and propensity to learn. That takes people who can be perceptive, who can think about their past actions and the responses those actions stimulated, and then change and adapt those actions.

Picture the mouse in a maze. The mouse who can learn from his actions only bumps into the dead end one time. The next time he tries turning to the right to avoid the brick wall in his path. While the mouse who can't learn drives again directly into the wall blocking his path.

That ability to assess a situation, to consider the affects of his behavior, and to change that behavior based upon the personalities and intricacies of each situation, requires the ability to learn. And that's the third characteristic of the successful salesperson.

How do you spot that quality? First, look at the prospect's academic record. We all know that many people are able to acquire good grades in school, but are never able to translate that ability to learn from books to the real world. So, academic achievement by itself can be misleading.

But it is also true that there are far more people whose inability to do well in school reveals an inability to learn. So, given two prospects who are equal in everything else, I'll take the one with a 3.5 GPA over the one with mediocre grades every time. Those grades are no guarantee of the practical ability to learn, but they are an indication of better than average intelligence. And that's the starting point.

If I'm building a sales force, I don't want average people, I want superior people. In addition to the scholarship history, look for a proven ability to adjust well to changing circumstances. The person who has sold one product to one market for his entire career is more of a risk that the person, who has demonstrated an ability to adjust to different products, markets, and situations.

Finally, pay close attention during the interview for your subjective feelings of the person's mental quickness and intellectual capabilities. If he/she's slow to catch on doesn't understand some of the things you say, he/she may be lacking in that ability to learn.

Number four on the list of necessary qualities is the **ABILITY TO BUILD BUSINESS RELATIONSHIPS**. Sales is, more than anything else, the activity of developing relationships with quantities of people which result in those people trusting the salesperson, feeling positive feelings about him/her, and believing the things he/she says.

So, the successful salesperson is the individual who can quickly build trusting relationships with all sorts of people. That requires some empathy, some ability to listen, some perceptiveness, and the ability to mold himself/herself into the kind of person the prospect needs.

Those are relationship-building skills. And the most successful salespeople are relationship builders.

I often have ruled people out of an interview when they interrupted me too many times, or weren't sensitive to what I was saying or communicating to them during the interview. If they weren't good at building a relationship with me, they certainly were not going to be able to build relationships with customers.

How do you discover this quality?

I believe that the best way is to see how aptly the prospective salesperson builds a relationship with you during the interview process. If you have two or more interviews with the prospect, and you find yourself liking him/her, trusting him, and enjoying the time spent with him, then that person probably has the ability to build good business relationships with people like you. So, if he/she can build a relationship with you, he/she can probably build those same kinds of relationships with your customers.

Next, call some of his former customers, if he/she has had sales experience, or some of his former associates, if not. Ask them about your prospect's relationships, both inside and outside the organization. Do people seem to like him/her? Is he/she a good listener?

Remember that you're looking for verification of this person's ability to build relationships, which become fruitful and productive for the company.

A side thought -- some of the most successful salespeople I have known have had lousy personal relationships. Sometimes salespeople can readily build business relationships, which turn into friendships, but are unable to build strong relationships in their personal lives. On the other hand, some people who have very strong personal relationships with their spouses, children, and friends, are unable or unwilling to build good business relationships.

We're talking about the specific ability to build good business relationships. Your job, as a prospective employer, is to find the ability to build those kinds of relationships -- to build trust, to have people feel that the salesperson is personally interested in them, to have people believe in them and in what they're saying. That is the ability which sets apart the mediocre from the good salespeople.

Fifth is A SELF-IMAGE OF SUCCESS.

Psychologists have long known that people tend to live up to their image of themselves. And we all understand that.

Every one of us can think of individuals in our own lives who have lots of ability and potential, but who never live up to that potential because of their poor self-image.

Somewhere, usually in their childhood, they developed a poor self-image, and began to think of themselves as incompetent, unable, or unworthy. And this view of themselves colors all of their actions as an adult and they live out a self-fulfilling interior prophecy.

That psychological truth of human behavior applies to salespeople also. It's just that it is sometimes more subtle and hard to assess.

For example, we've all heard stories about the \$20,000 and the \$60,000 salesperson. Put a salesperson who has made \$20,000 into a territory that produced \$60,000 in commissions and he'll eventually bring it down to \$20,000. Put the \$60,000 salesperson in a territory that produced only \$20,000 of income and he'll eventually bring it up to \$60,000.

While this example may be a little extreme, the point it illustrates is, nevertheless, true. Salespeople tend to live up to (or down to) their image of themselves.

I remember one of the first salespeople I hired. He had everything -- intelligence, experience, ability to create profitable business relationships, and even some appropriate product knowledge and experience. And, he had been in a couple of unfortunate situations in his past jobs and needed the financial success that came with the opportunity I was offering. I saw that as providing the necessary motivation to succeed.

But, what I hadn't counted on was his self-image. While he had all the necessary ingredients, and while he had reason to be motivated and work very hard, he also had an image of himself as a failure -- someone who could never shake that bad luck and economic hardship that he saw as his lot in life. He found a way to fail. And, within six months, the territory was vacant again.

Remember, while self-image can be changed, it's a long and difficult process with no guarantee. So, like so many other traits, it's much easier to hire someone with a positive, self-image of success, than it is to create that in a person after he/she's been hired.

How do you spot this elusive quality? A background check is probably the most telling technique. Look into his/her past. Have they been successful at something? Or, have they always had good excuses? What has been their income level? And, what was the socio-economic level they experienced while growing up in their parent's home?

As you look at these things, look for signs that this person has high expectations and has worked in the past to achieve those expectations and success.

The sixth and final quality is the most difficult to spot and the quality which drives all the others to optimum use -- PERSONAL MOTIVATION.

The best salespeople all have within them a drive to excel. All of us are motivated at one time or another by different things. And as sales managers and business owners, we're aware of the need to motivate our employees, especially our salespeople. So we provide money, trips, bonuses, recognition of all types, fringe benefits, profit sharing, stability and security, involvement in decision-making, etc., as exterior means of motivation. By "exterior" I mean motivation that comes from outside the person that is directed or provided by someone or something else. And, depending on the person and the circumstances, all of these work to some degree or another.

But that's not the kind of motivation I'm talking about. The star salespeople are relatively unaffected by the presence or absence of any of these exterior factors. Their motivation, their reasons for getting up at 5 AM instead of 6:30, for making that extra call at 4:30 on Friday afternoon, for taking that sales training class on Tuesday evenings, for thinking about that little account that nobody else wants, etc., is an interior, personal drive to succeed, to be the best, to excel.

The best salespeople are beyond the reach of all these programs of exterior motivation because they march to the beat of an internal drum, an inherent hunger for success no matter what the circumstances.

It's that internal motivation that lights the fire that makes every other quality work. And that drive to succeed is far more potent than any of the other qualities. Given a strong internal

motivation, I believe that sooner or later the individual who is driven to success will succeed. It's only a matter of time.

Now, couple that internal drive with an ability to learn, with a high energy level, with personal integrity, and add the ability to create strong business relationships, and you have the ingredients of a superstar salesperson.

But, how do you find and recognize that internal motivation? I believe it's the most difficult quality to spot. Every interviewee says he/she has it. But very few really do.

The best way to spot it is to look for the results of that motivation in earlier situations. For example, is there evidence that the person you're interviewing rose quickly from his starting position to a higher one in some job? Was he/she captain of the team in high school, or editor of the yearbook? Did he/she succeed in an earlier sales position?

As you examine the prospect's background, look for instances of success, of leadership, of excelling at something.

One extra thought -- it is possible that a person, because of a fortunate combination of circumstances, could have succeeded in some endeavor, in spite of not having this drive for personal success. Sometimes success is a result of a combination of technical knowledge and fortunate circumstances -- marrying the boss's child! So, the best indicator is success in two or more unrelated situations. If you find that, then you have in all probability spotted that person who has that internal, personal motivation.

And that's the sixth, and key, quality of successful, superstar salespeople.

One additional thought. I have been speaking about these qualities as if they exist in an either/or mode. Either they have integrity or they don't. Either they have the ability to learn or they don't. The truth is that, as with any quality of character, these are resident within a person

in various degrees. It's not a matter of having these qualities; it's a question of to what degree they have them.

One of the best ways to judge this is to make up a simple 0 to 10 scale for each of these six qualities. Then rate your prospects along that line in each of the areas. For example, you might rank one prospect a 7 in integrity, a 5 in energy level, a 6 in ability to learn, a 10 in relationship building, and a 4 in personal motivation. This will give you some way to compare your perceptions of a number of prospects, while keeping you focused on these important qualities.

And should you find a perfect 10, hold onto your hat, because he/she's going to make it interesting and profitable.