

21 Pretty Good Questions To Ask A Potential Salesperson

It's probably not too surprising that an article about questions will start with one. Here it is: "If you had it to do over again, would you still hire the same people you have working as salespeople for your company?"

Interesting question, isn't it? The scary thing is how often the answer is NO!

It's pretty well accepted that our industry has it's share of underachievers working in sales positions, and there's no question that part of the reason for this problem is insufficient training. But another part of the reason is that many printing salespeople should never have been hired in the first place, pointing to a problem with the interviewing and evaluation skills of printing company owners and sales managers.

Interestingly, effective interviewing has a lot in common with effective selling technique. In either situation, if you ask the right questions, you'll be able to make good use of the answers. Here are 21 questions I like to ask when interviewing printing sales candidates:

1. **What do you expect a typical day on this job to be like?** One of the most important sales management concepts I teach is that a salesperson needs to know certain things in order to succeed. I've developed that concept into the Printing Sales Knowledge Base, which consists of Product Knowledge, Market Knowledge, Operational Knowledge and Selling Technique. It's important to understand, though, that all the knowledge in the world won't lead to success unless the salesperson is willing to work hard. The answer I'm looking for when I ask this question revolves around starting early, working late, and putting plenty of sales-building activity in between. If I don't get that answer, I set the questioning aside and tell the candidate *exactly* what I will expect in terms of a typical day, and I close those comments by telling the candidate "if this isn't what you had in mind—or if you're not willing to make this your typical day—let's do us both a favor and end this conversation right now."
2. **On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your "printing product knowledge?"** Once you've established that the necessary work ethic seems to be present, it's time to evaluate other key elements of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base. The situation you face is pretty straightforward in that any necessary knowledge the candidate doesn't already have will have to be "trained in." Remember, a resume will tell you about experience, but it doesn't always tell you about knowledge. Also remember that a person trying to sell himself/herself into a job may exaggerate things like experience and knowledge. I recently interviewed a candidate who rated himself a "9" on printing product knowledge, so I asked him an immediate follow-up question. "Can you tell me," I asked, "how the ink gets on the paper?" The

candidate did a fairly good job of explaining the production process from “camera-ready” artwork to a printing plate to how the ink goes on the plate and then gets “offset” to the blanket and then deposited on the paper. I felt pretty good about his product knowledge at that point

3. **On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your knowledge of selling strategy and technique?** Obviously, this question takes the same approach to another of the key elements of the Printing Sales Knowledge Base. Remember that a low self-rating is not necessarily a disqualifying factor. We’d all like to hire “9s” and “10s,” but the reality of the situation is that many printers are forced by simple economics to hire salespeople at the low end of the compensation scale—which translates to low levels of experience and knowledge. Again, remember that any knowledge that isn’t already present will have to be trained in. Your objective during the interview stage is to make sure that you have a clear understanding of the training challenge ahead of you with each candidate.
4. **How much money will you need to make from Day 1 on this job?** Most candidates will try to answer this question by telling you how much they *want* to make, but that’s not the question you’re asking! The most critical piece of information for you at this point is how much he/she needs in order to cover food/clothing/shelter/etc. It’s important to understand that you don’t have to cover the “want” from Day 1, you just have to provide a reasonable opportunity to reach that income level. You do have to cover the “need” from Day 1, though—whatever it will take for this candidate to live some semblance of a normal life while he/she is building customer relationships and eventually bring in business—so you have to establish early just how much money that is. If you’re not willing to cover what any candidate really needs, don’t hire that person!
5. **How much money do you want to make in your first full year? By your third year?** Here’s where you establish the “want” level. If the first-year and third-year “wants” are reasonable, you can move forward with the interview. If not, you’d be wise to stop and tell the candidate *now* that he/she may not be able to earn that much money within a one-year or three-year timeframe. Remember, if the money doesn’t work, neither will the relationship between you and your salesperson. Remember also that the interviewing process is a two way street. You’re trying to make a good hiring decision, and the candidate is trying to make a good career decision. Both parties need the truth on the table to provide a win-win situation.
6. **What would you say your greatest strengths are as a person?** This question takes us into the “getting to know you” part of the interview. Remember that what you’re getting here is an opinion—a salesperson’s opinion!—which is likely to be at least a little bit self serving. The trick here is to *listen* to that opinion, and then hold it up to examination in terms of everything else the candidate says and does during the interview process. For example, if he/she says that being “hardworking” is a personal strength, listen for examples of previous hard work in the answers to subsequent questions.
7. **What would you say your greatest strengths are as a salesperson?** This question provides a subtle opportunity to measure how much a

candidate really knows about selling. Personal strengths definitely translate into selling strengths, but there are a few things that stand out especially as selling strengths, like organization, the ability and willingness to *listen*, self-discipline, and perseverance.

8. **What are your weaknesses as a person?** Everyone has weaknesses, and an intelligent manager takes a three-pronged approach to dealing with them in a job candidate: (1) identify any weaknesses early and decide if they're really important within the job description, (2) start the process of shoring up those weaknesses, or else (3) make the decision not to hire this particular individual. Shoring up any weaknesses falls into the category of *training*, and just as any necessary knowledge that isn't already present will have to be trained in, any weaknesses and/or bad habits will have to be trained out! Keep in mind that some personal "weaknesses" can be turned into real positives in a salesperson. I recently interviewed a sales candidate who told me that his greatest weakness was impatience, and I told him there's a fine line between impatience as a weakness and impatience as a very strong motivating factor. "If you're willing to work on finding the balance," I said, "we can use this to make you a more successful salesperson. But if you expect great success and big money to come quickly in selling, hiring you would be a big mistake for both of us."
9. **What do you think my next question is going to be?** The answer—which I hope is obvious to you!—is: "What are your weaknesses as a salesperson?" So why not simply ask the question straight out? Because this is an opportunity to measure both the listening skills and the intelligence of a candidate, and it's my feeling that anyone who doesn't pick up the pattern of the three previous questions either isn't listening—which is a *very* serious weakness in a salesperson—or isn't smart enough to get you the results you're looking for. With candidates who do pick up the pattern, you're back to the three-pronged approach to any weaknesses mentioned above. By the way, in all four of these strengths/weaknesses questions, look for the sense that you're getting an honest and objective appraisal—not a sales pitch!
10. **What is the single biggest reason behind your desire to make a change right now?** Unless you're interviewing a person looking for his/her very first job in life, any interest in the job you're offering represents a desire for change. The reasoning behind that change can be very important, especially with a person who wants to leave another job to come to work for you. From my perspective, there can only be two situations that would bring this about...either there's something wrong with the other job or else there's something wrong with the person! (One of my clients recently interviewed a woman whose only reason for looking for a new job was that her husband had been transferred to my client's area. What was "wrong" with her old job was that it was now 600 miles away! Another client recently interviewed a young man who had also moved, but in this case, his resume showed a pattern of moving—not just from job to job, but from state to state. Do you see what I'm getting at?) Some candidates will have a whole list of reasons to give you. I recommend that you try to keep the conversation focused on

“the single biggest issue,” if for no other reason than to see if your candidate can identify his strongest selling point and drive it home!

11. **If I called your last employer right now, what would he/she say about you?** To this point in the interview, we’ve given the candidate the opportunity to tell some of his/her own story. This question introduces an element of corroboration. In a way, you’re asking the candidate to furnish his/her own reference. Do you accept it at face value? Absolutely not! After the interview (assuming that you still feel you have a legitimate candidate after the interview is over) you call that last employer and ask for a reference! Sure, you won’t always find the other person willing to talk much about your candidate, but even *that* tells you something about the relationship they had. What’s important is that you do everything you can to learn about the candidate and evaluate his/her suitability for the job. By the way, the first time I heard this question, I was on the other side of the interviewing process...being interviewed for a job that I wanted very much. The interviewer listened to my answer, then he picked up the telephone and called my last employer with me sitting right there in his office! My old boss wasn’t in as it turned out, but that technique certainly gave me something to think about if I was tempted to “stretch” an answer during the rest of the interview!
12. **If I called a few of the people you’ve worked with over the years, what would they say about you?** This question invites a perspective other than that of “the boss.” The truth of the matter is that there are many legitimate “personality conflicts” in the workplace. Haven’t you ever worked for someone you thought was less capable as a manager than you’ve turned out to be? Again, though, don’t accept the answer to this question at face value. Get the names and phone numbers of these former co-workers and call them. As Ronald Reagan said about the Russians during the nuclear arms reduction negotiations in the 80s: “Trust...but verify!”
13. **How are you going to go about finding new customers?** The next few questions are intended to facilitate a “conversation” about the nature of the job itself. I put that word in parenthesis because I want to emphasize that the flow of the interview changes here. For the most part, up until now it’s been you asking questions and the candidate answering. Now I want you to take a more active role in the discussion. Let’s say that the candidate mentions buying directories and networking through the Chamber of Commerce, but what you have in mind is more of a “feet-on-the-street” strategy—cold calls to identify decision-makers followed by an introductory letter followed by a telephone call to ask for an appointment. “I have something different in mind,” you tell the candidate, and you describe your approach. “What do you think about doing it that way?” Remember what I said earlier...you’re trying to make a good hiring decision, and the candidate is trying to make a good career decision. Getting everything on the table in the interview stage increases the likelihood of a successful experience.
14. **What do you think will be the most important thing(s) you’ll have to convince people of in order to turn them into customers?** Again, listen to what he/she thinks and then explain your own thoughts. I get excited

when a candidate says something to the effect of “I have to sell myself,” or “I have to build trust and confidence.”

15. **Do you have any thoughts on how to meet those challenges?** You're still in “conversation mode,” but this is also an opportunity to evaluate your candidate's previous experience and/or basic instincts. Please consider, though, that “I have no idea, and I hope you're going to be able to teach me” may be a legitimate answer from someone with no sales experience. If that's ever the answer you get, remember that any necessary knowledge which isn't already present will have to be trained in. If you're not up to the training challenge, don't hire the individual!
16. **How do you plan to go about learning what you need to know in order to do this job?** This question starts a transition back out of “conversation mode.” It's an opportunity to gain your candidate's thoughts on this issue, and to describe your own thoughts on a training program. I think it's important, though, to establish early on that you're both going to have to deal with limited training time and training resources. Make it clear that some self-directed training will be required, and try to come out of this portion of the conversation with some idea of how that will happen.
17. **How do you plan to make yourself part of our team?** This is a critical issue! There's probably nothing as disruptive to a printing company as a new salesperson. The new person is “elsewhere” for much of the day—at least hopefully!—and still tends to stimulate questions/problems/mistakes that everyone else has to deal with. I'm interested in the candidate's thoughts on this issue, but truthfully, I'm more interested in simply raising the issue and getting the candidate thinking about his/her relationship with the rest of the organization early on.
18. **What is it going to take to motivate you to get out there and work hard at this every day?** You can talk all you want about salary and commissions, the bottom line is that money is only one of the motivating factors for most people. It's also probably the least effective motivator in the early stages, when the things a salesperson *should be* doing—lots of prospecting and follow-up—don't usually lead to “instant cash gratification.” If you want to give yourself the best chance of success with an outside salesperson, it's important to understand the entire motivational mix. Don't guess at what will motivate this particular candidate...ask!
19. **OK, we're at the point where you have to try to close the sale. Why should I hire you?** Now you're completely out of “conversation mode.” This question gives you a great opportunity to evaluate the candidate's selling skills. The most important sale a candidate has to make, after all, is to sell you on the idea that he/she is the right person for the job.
20. **If you were me right now, would you be most worried about in terms of making an investment in you?** This question asks the candidate to play the devil's advocate (which by the way is another important selling skill.) A candidate who told me there was nothing to worry about would scare me to death! So would a candidate who gave me an honest answer, and then left it at that. What I'm looking for is the candidate who will identify the problem and then present a solution. “I guess I'd be most concerned that I'm pretty young and not very experienced,” a candidate might say, “but I think the

other side of that coin is that I'm very enthusiastic about an opportunity like this, and the experience I do have suggests that I'll be a good investment." Again, this is a means to measure selling skill (or perhaps instinct in the case of a young or inexperienced candidate.)

21. **What question(s) haven't I asked that I should be asking?** This last question gives the candidate an opportunity to put anything else on the table that he/she feels is relevant. It also provides a nice transition for the candidate to ask a few questions. I'm always impressed by a candidate who takes that opportunity without waiting to be asked if he/she has questions. Questioning, after all, is an important selling skill.

The way I see it, your primary objective in conducting a face-to-face interview is to get to know the person you're talking with. A resume or application form will tell you some—maybe even much—of what you need to know about a person's background and experience. Remember, though, you aren't simply hiring background and experience...you're hiring a *person* whom you hope has been truthful about his or her background and experience, and will ultimately be able to put some of it to work for your company.

If you look at it that way, do you see *how little* you might learn if you limit an interview to quickly "going over" the resume or application form? You're a lot better off if you can identify and confront some of the "success/failure issues" that surround every position and every applicant. Hopefully, these "Pretty Good Questions" will help you to do that.