

ARTICLE REPRINT

Myth of the Sales Personality

The so-called “*sales personality*” is a myth. Belief in this myth may be as responsible for bad hiring and disastrous promotions by employers, and poor performance by salespeople and sales managers, as anything else in the sales talent management equation.

When managers want to hire sales superstars, they tend to hire people with stereotypical *sales personalities* – people who are outgoing, talkative, personable and gregarious. And because sales managers – for a host of reasons – prefer this personality type for their teams, they convince themselves that customers will prefer them as well.

Unfortunately, the traits that make up the “*sales personality*” have little to do with success in the game of sales. It doesn’t hurt, of course, when a salesperson has a pleasant, extroverted personality, but there are lots of outgoing, talkative, personable and gregarious people in the world with pleasant, extroverted personalities. Some are teachers, some are physicians, attorneys, plumbers and circus performers. But just because these folks share some pleasing personality traits doesn’t mean they have the talent or competencies to succeed as sales professionals.

Anyone who has ever hired a salesperson can cite an example of a “*sales personality*” who failed. Hiring Mary, “Miss Personality Plus”, was a sure bet. Talk about quintessential sales personality traits! Mary had them all. Everyone loved her, especially her customers. Mary could stroll in to see any of her customers, almost anytime, for a casual conversation. No one would think of treating Mary unkindly.

There was only one problem with Mary – she never closed a large order. Mary was a terrific schmoozer. She talked in great detail about her company’s products with her customers, and most customers revealed valuable, “inside information” to Mary. Despite these good relations, Mary’s customers always awarded their largest orders to her biggest competitors.

Mary is a classic example of the disconnect between personality traits and success in the sales profession. Although Mary’s company believed in skills training for their salespeople, the training never helped Mary recognize sales opportunities or close those opportunities. She had a great personality, but she lacked the innate talent, competencies and tendencies to sell a warm blanket to an Eskimo who is wearing only a T shirt in an ice storm.

The manager who hired Mary, unfortunately, used an “off-the-shelf” personality test as the primary methodology for evaluating Mary as a new hire. It is rapidly becoming clear among prominent personnel psychologists that personality tests, while useful in describing personality traits or emotional intelligence, are poor predictors of job performance. These psychologists concluded that “the validities of personality measures are so low that using them for selecting employees should be questioned.”

Instead of measuring Mary’s personal characteristics, the hiring manager could have used a tool to measure the competencies, conduct, traits and temperament that predict actual job behavior. It is critical to know whether Mary *can* do the job, and to predict with a high degree of accuracy whether or not Mary *will* do the job.

A statistically validated performance assessment could have given the manager visibility into Mary’s work DNA. How is Mary wired? Does she have high potential for job success as measured against the performance of proven, successful sales professionals? Is she a potential leader? How would her strengths and weaknesses affect performance of the job? To maximize her potential, how should Mary be coached?

A statistically validated performance assessment would have revealed to the manager that Mary, a very nice person with a charming personality, did not possess the innate talent to perform the job she was hired to do. It would have revealed that Mary’s temperament and natural work conduct were incompatible with the on-the-job behavior required for success.

Mary’s failure at her job could have been predicted with 85% accuracy by a performance assessment designed to measure narrow job-related competencies. In Mary’s case, belief in the myth of the “*sales personality*” caused an unfortunate hire and poor job performance by someone with talents, work behaviors and temperament that were better suited to another job.

Copyright © 2008 Selling Up™. All Rights Reserved.

About the author: Steve Chriest is the founder of Selling Up™ (www.selling-up.com), a sales consulting firm specializing in sales revenue improvement for organizations of all types and sizes in a variety of industries. He is also the author of *Selling The E-Suite*, *The Proven System For Reaching and Selling Senior Executives* and *Profits and Cash – The Game of Business*. You can reach Steve at schriest@selling-up.com.