

What Makes an Excellent Education Market Sales Executive?

by John Meeker, Ph.D.

An excellent sales executive for the education market is easy to find. What's the big deal? All you need is someone who walks on water, whose heart-rending speech can bring grown men and children to tears, and who motivates field-hardened salespeople to accomplish what they never thought possible, year after year. Easy!

Well, just in case you haven't yet found the perfect sales executive, here are a few other ways to identify this extraordinarily important member of your company's management team.

Why Is It So Hard to Find the Right Sales Executive?

More than any other leader on the executive team, the sales executive must exercise multiple skills to be effective. In addition to meeting or exceeding sales objectives, he or she also needs to demonstrate excellent interpersonal skills, superb management ability, and exceptional strategic talents.

Each of these skill sets is intensely demanding. What makes the matter even more difficult is the diversity of the skills required—they are not logical extensions of one another. It's unusual for any one person to have had the constellation of career experiences necessary to be fully equipped to perform the range of responsibilities required of a sales executive.

It isn't that many individuals don't have some of these skills. The scarcity of individuals in whom these three difficult skill sets coalesce is what makes top sales executives few and far between.

Adding to the difficulty and diversity of the skills required, the sales manager must be able to work effectively with three distinct groups of stakeholders or constituents: customers, company managers and sales representatives, and the company's executives and board/investors. Even as the necessary skills are different from each other, each constituent audience requires the sales manager to perform a very different role as well.

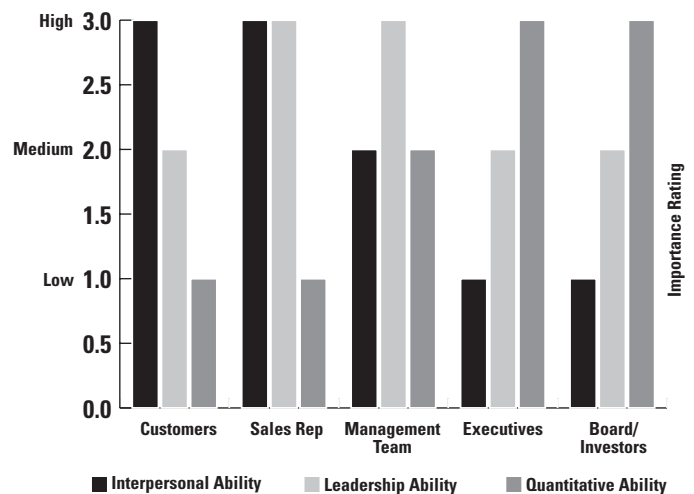
For example, customers need to feel genuineness, trustworthiness, and to some extent, even friendship with the sales executive.

Company managers need a sense that the sales executive can deliver the assigned quota. The sales organization needs to feel that quotas are achievable and fair, and that sales representatives can count on the support of "their boss."

The third constituency is the company's executives and its board or investor group. To succeed here, the sales executive must frequently perform tasks that require abilities quite different from interpersonal and management skills. For example, the board or investors typically think in highly quantitative terms using an array of analytical tools. The sales executive must portray field experiences and management wisdom in language that is cogent and useful to these critical decision makers.

As illustrated by the following chart, the three critical skill sets are valued very differently by the three constituencies with whom the sales executive interacts.

How Constituents Value Sales Executive Skills



Source: Meeker & Associates, Inc.

So, What Are the Criteria that Determine an Excellent Sales Executive?

While walking on water may not be a formal requirement, there are eight essential criteria that do define the successful sales executive. Depending on a

company's immediate and long-term needs, these criteria will be weighted differently. But strength, if not excellence, is required in each.

The criteria may be grouped into three categories:

1. Industry expertise
2. Management expertise
3. Strategic capabilities

Industry Expertise

1. Passion for education

To be successful in this industry, a sales executive must feel and demonstrate passion about education and children. The education “market” or “industry” is different from other markets because the key players are essentially mission-driven. Teachers, administrators, and even many support staff are motivated principally by a sense of purpose and the desire to make a difference in the lives of children. A sales executive who is anything less than passionate about making a difference with children will be perceived by prospects as “just a vendor.” Without sensing such passion from the sales executive, the prospect is likely to remain a prospect rather than becoming a devoted customer.

2. Knowledge of the education market

Leading a successful sales effort in the education market demands an accurate understanding of the many cycles and timing milestones that influence educators' buying decisions. In addition to these decision-making cycles, the sales executive must also understand how trends in public policy and changes in funding sources affect purchasing decisions. Educators face many overlapping challenges such as standardized objectives, high stakes testing, etc. The sales executive must appreciate these sufficiently so that the sales organization can respond appropriately to customer needs and recognize opportunities for sales.

3. Building relationships through listening

Listen! Listening is the cornerstone ability of successful communication. This is true whether meeting with customers, sales representatives, management team members, or investors.

The common presumption is that a successful salesperson, and even more, a sales executive, is a “silver-tongued orator” who can motivate through

powerful speeches and make the sale with clever “closes.” Not so.

Educators make purchases. They do not like to be “sold to.”

It is the case in most industries, but especially so in education, that sales are built on relationships. Trust, along with all the other ingredients of a relationship, is the basis of an education buyer's decision in favor of a product and a company.

There are many dimensions to establishing and growing a relationship with a customer. Listening is the essential underpinning that allows the relationship to develop.

The importance of this criterion—building relationships through listening—is emphasized here because so many education customers state how infrequently representatives of companies really do listen. Whether it's the regional sales rep or the national sales manager, building a relationship is hindered when salespeople start “selling products” rather than listening. As a relationship develops and the salesperson begins to understand customer issues from the perspective of the educator, solutions can be presented that the buyer will welcome.

Modeling listening skills is the most effective way to train sales reps to listen and ultimately achieve sales. Thus, the behavior of the sales executive sets the tone for the entire organization.

As with all relationships, whether romantic, parent-child, or business, creative listening establishes understanding, trust, and friendship. And purchasers like to buy from friends.

Management Expertise

4. Compensation plan expertise

Sales executives face two challenges in developing and implementing compensation plans. First, the plan must provide incentives for representatives to sell and to exceed quotas. The key here is not only to give financial rewards, but also to creatively shape compensation to engage the different motivational “hot buttons” of individual reps.

Second, compensation plans can be used as strategic tools to achieve goals other than simply producing revenue. Depending on the company's objectives, particular

products may merit some difference in sales incentives. Incentive payments can also be used to accomplish other strategic business objectives.

The sales executive needs to be an expert in the wide variety of compensation approaches that can be designed to meet a broad range of company objectives.

5. Recruiting exceptional talent

Sales executives tend to recruit sales representatives who have an established sales track record and a “rolodex” of long-term relationships in a territory. This approach can result in a reasonably satisfactory sales force, but not always a great one.

The most outstanding sales executives target not just “the usual suspects.” In addition to hiring people with proven sales track records, the objective should be to build a sales force comprised of individuals who have consistently excelled in their chosen endeavors across the board. The dimension to capture is not necessarily competitiveness, but excellence at whatever the individual has been passionate about, whether in academics, arts, human services, politics, or sports.

Being a successful sales rep should be only the price of admission to an interview. The outstanding sales executive seeks to recruit sales representatives who consistently outperform their peers throughout their lives.

6. Team and infrastructure building

Excellent sales executives build teams of people, and they also work to create the essential infrastructure needed to support those teams in multiple ways. Moreover, they recognize that the sales organization is one of many company teams that together are responsible for customer enthusiasm, company profitability, and individual sales quota performance.

Building an effective infrastructure means creating and/or refining the operational resources throughout the company that are necessary to support the sales organization.

Essential components of the sales infrastructure include:

- Recruiting;
- Sales training;
- Shared objectives between related functional units, such as customer support, technology services, and marketing;

- Reporting systems that are accurate and timely;
- Accurate accounting for and prompt payment of incentives and expenses.

WORDS OF WISDOM FROM THE MASTERS

David Benoit, Sylvan Learning Ventures

“Help your team to recognize that they are not selling a commodity to schools but building a consultative relationship. More so than any other business, success in education sales is dependent upon developing and maintaining the trust of customers.”

“Salespeople need to see their role as requiring that they can serve as a resource to the district, avoiding being ‘labeled’ as strictly a vendor.”

Deb deVries, NetSchools

“Most salespeople spend too much time telling prospects about their company/products and never enough time listening to their prospects.”

“If someone tells you to do something and they are wildly successful, it’s best if you imitate or do it even if it’s awkward.”

Sheila Fernley, Voyager Learning

“Who Wants to be a Millionaire...get as many lifelines as you can, even if you never need to use them.”

“Develop processes and templates that define the sales steps and provide the tools to sell your solution.”

Tom Fitzgerald, Gateway

“Help your customers find their money sources.”

Jeanne Hayes, Quality Education Data

“Be sure to limit requests for your salespeople to do non-sales activities. Don’t distract them.”

“Don’t ever select an employee because their resume ‘looks right’ without having a gut connection to the candidate—your customers will probably have the same reaction.”

Brenda Raker, Education Resources

“Get to know your sales team as individuals. Learn what each of them needs from you in order to be successful and motivated.”

“Balance hard work with fun. Team meetings should provide opportunities to learn, but they can also be opportunities to have fun.”

Steve Salmen, Co-Nect

“In the world of consultative sales, there are two absolute characteristics of a great sales person: patience and persistence.”

“The challenge in sales management is finding the balance between discipline, advocacy, and service.”

Strategic Capabilities

7. Forecasting accuracy

The essential quantitative skill sales executives need is forecasting accuracy. Sales executives must be able to translate an ocean of individual field experiences and anecdotal encounters with customers and reps into a highly reliable forecast.

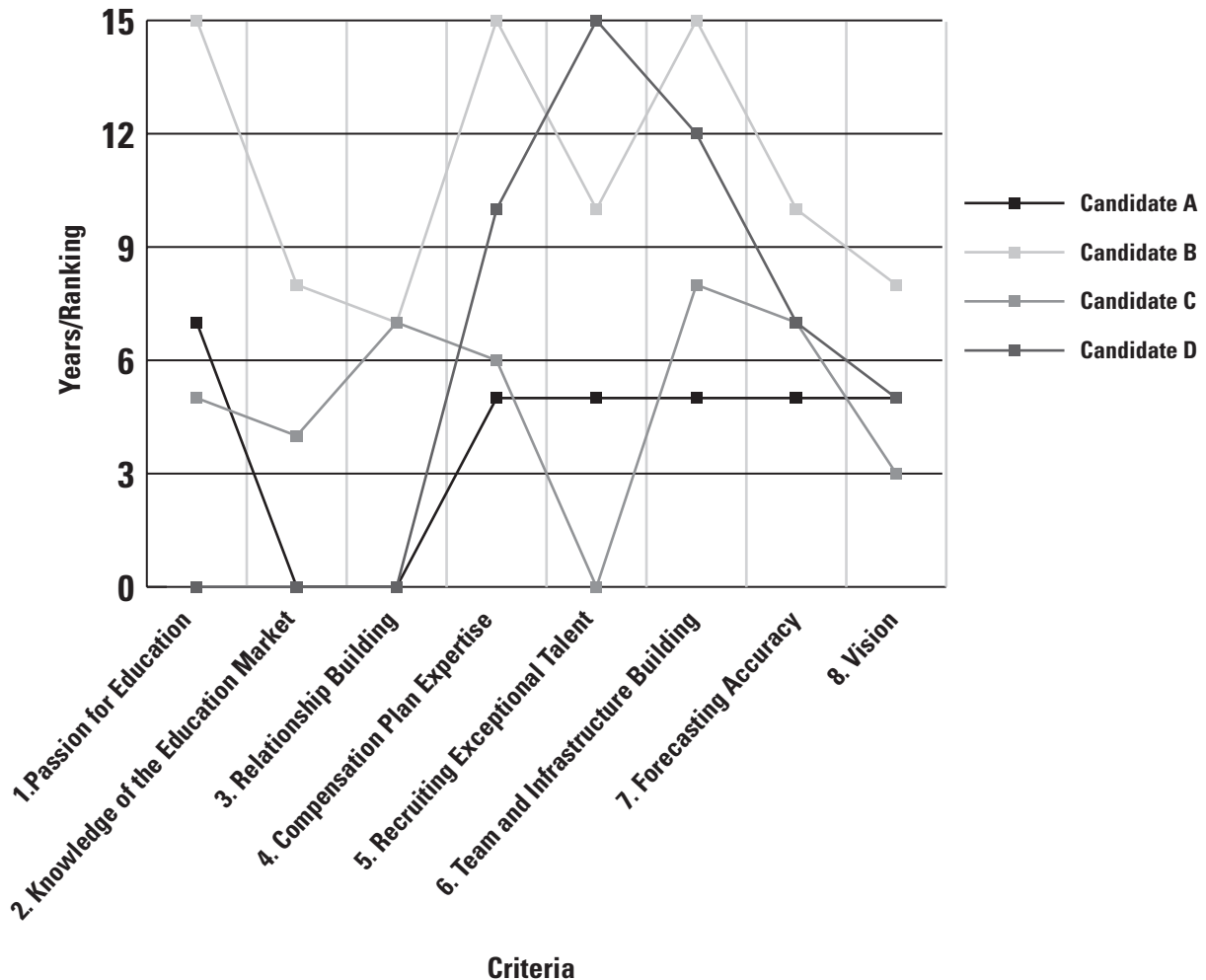
Other company managers base crucial decisions on the sales forecast, including what products and services are to be available to customers and when. Pricing and procurement are contingent on accurate forecasts. Financial decisions made by chief financial officers are inextricably linked to the sales forecast. The chief executive officer

decides about strategic alliances or acquisitions based in part on forecasting. And board members and investors sift through forecasts very carefully as they decide whether or not to make substantial financial investments.

Sales executives are expected to make quota. However, the professional sales leader becomes most valuable to the management and investment process when he or she not only makes quota but also accurately forecasts when and how much revenue will be booked.

If the sales executive anticipates a shortfall, it is critical that he or she present an accurate revised forecast to company management as soon as possible. Although making quota is the number one responsibility of a

Position Criteria Matrix



Source: Meeker & Associates, Inc.

sales executive, the ability to foresee when expected numbers cannot be achieved—and to understand and explain the reasons why—can be invaluable to company decision makers.

8. Vision

In designing company strategy with other managers, executives, and investors, the sales executive plays an efficacious role by sharing his or her vision of the point on the horizon that the company should aim for. In this role the sales executive is a team member working in concert with others who also are staring at the horizon trying to determine the most appropriate long-term targets.

Being competent to discuss the state and direction of the entire education industry is also essential because the sales executive may have the opportunity to represent the company with high-level education leaders. For example, the sales executive may meet with state education department leaders, political executives such as governors or even, given our current political climate, the president. Chief executives and other senior management people from major companies or investment banks may also merit a “sales call.”

How to Hire an Excellent Sales Executive

When recruiting a sales executive, the company’s current needs together with its long-term strategic goals should shape the search. In addition, there are two dimensions to consider in evaluating any candidate.

First, candidates’ backgrounds and prior experiences should be measured against the criteria described above. Meeker & Associates, a professional executive search firm, typically performs a quantitative analysis to compare candidates on various criteria important to the client company. As illustrated below, no single candidate is likely to fulfill every criterion at the highest level.

This comparison can be instructive in highlighting candidate strengths that may be of particular value to the client company in making a hiring decision. But the quantitative analysis is only half the equation.

For any company hiring a sales executive, it is also absolutely essential to engage intuition or gut instincts. Selecting the best candidate requires a dual process. Quantitative analysis alone is sterile. Hiring based solely on personal feelings also risks missing the mark.

Hire the best candidate based on how his or her track record stacks up against your company’s criteria plus your gut instincts informed by years of professional experience. Target those who excel in all their achievements and those who are persons of the highest integrity.

Working with an excellent search firm is a good idea, too. There are several of us!

About the Author

John Meeker has an extensive background in executive recruiting, education leadership, and corporate management. His business experience includes responsibilities in educational technology and telecommunications corporations, as well as in entrepreneurial private and public companies throughout the United States. His firm, Meeker & Associates, Inc., conducts searches for sales and marketing executives, technology management, and corporate executives. Clients include industry segments in publishing, software, telecommunications, and Internet delivery of educational and corporate training. John can be reached in Minneapolis, Minnesota, at john@johnmeeker.com or by calling (952) 921-3262.