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## Finding *the Right People* to Make the Sale

By SIMONA COVEL

When Daniel Sheridan came to Exensis Group LLC in 2007, only 18% of potential clients who expressed interest to a sales employee ended up signing on the dotted line.

"The first thing I could tell was that we didn't have the right salespeople," says Mr. Sheridan, senior director of sales for the human-resources outsourcing company. And, he adds, the sales teams weren't trained to close the deals, which entailed persuading small-business owners to place their employees' health insurance and benefits in the company's hands.

Today, though, the closing rate at the Woodbridge, N.J., company is up to 26%.

Mr. Sheridan credits a new regimented, step-by-step sales process and a hiring procedure that ferrets out assertive salespeople who can both handle a long sales cycle and pitch an intangible product. Each chunk of the strategy -- from a personality assessment during the interview process to sales training -- contributes to the increase in closed deals, he says.

### FINDING A FIT

**The Issue:** Only 18% of Exensis Group's prospects ended up becoming clients because the human-resources outsourcing company didn't have the right people and proper training in place.

**The Fix:** A system was created to ferret out good candidates -- including a personality assessment and an interview in a social setting. And a new step-by-step sales process was implemented.

**The Upshot:** The firm's sales closing rate has gone up to 26%.

With fewer resources than their larger competitors, small companies often must make the most of their sales employees, who may be pitching a little-known product or service. And installing a systematic approach -- even though it requires more initial setup time -- can help the sales staff at a smaller company stay focused.

"It's about building the system," Mr. Sheridan says, "and putting the right people in the system."

### Getting to Know You

Under Exensis's old system, salespeople were referred to as account managers. That was a little misleading, Mr. Sheridan says, and it attracted applicants who weren't focused enough on generating and closing sales. Today, salespeople are called sales representatives, a simpler and more accurate description of their duties.

"To be successful," he says, "people need to be fully aware of what the expectations are."

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To further ensure that people were the right fit, interviews were expanded to as many as three or four meetings, from one or two. They include what the company calls the "social interview" over lunch or coffee offsite. Some people, Mr. Sheridan says, are adept at selling themselves in a traditional interview setting, but may give a different impression when they let their guard down.

Applicants who make it through that social interview then undergo a personality assessment, called the Caliper Profile, from Caliper, a management consulting company in Princeton, N.J. The profiles cost less than \$300 each, and Extenis receives a written report highlighting a candidate's strengths and weaknesses. The assessment helps distinguish between salespeople who are assertive and those who are simply aggressive, Mr. Sheridan says, and helps identify people who are organized.

And those who can't handle rejection are quickly sidelined. "If you get frustrated or depressed hearing the word 'no,' you'll always be in a rut," Mr. Sheridan says.

The company has to interview more people, he adds, but those who are the right fit are more likely to succeed and stick around.

When sales representatives finally walk through the door, they begin three weeks of classroom and field instruction, which includes role playing to give trainees a better idea of what they might encounter on a sales call. And all sales representatives brush up on skills three days each month. Extenis also uses the Caliper Profile to identify skill gaps in new salespeople. Sales managers work one-on-one

with them to beef up specific skills -- such as listening well or asking difficult questions.

### **Step by Step**

When it came to making the sale, employees used to simply rely on building relationships with clients. Under the new system, the company trains salespeople to follow a series of steps. Step one must be completed before step two begins, and so on.

The first step is building trust and rapport. "The most important meeting in our sales process is the first meeting," says Mr. Sheridan.

That's when the salesperson lays out an agreement with the prospect, explaining what he or she can expect from the company. Laying out the steps of the deal -- how the sales process works and what the salesperson will provide -- helps head off surprises down the road, Mr. Sheridan says. At each step, the salesperson won't move on to the next one unless the prospect agrees that those expectations have been met.

In that initial meeting, a salesperson should find out who the decision maker is and what his or her timeline is for making a decision. Getting such thorny questions out in the open early on might cause the salesperson to lose more prospects upfront -- but that's preferable to spending 60 or 90 days courting a sale only to have it fall through. Before, Mr. Sheridan says, what caused deals to fail "was usually something you neglected to address early on," like a prospect's limited budget.

### **A Done Deal**

Next, the salesperson will set up a meeting to review documents, go over information and provide a quote. Subsequent meetings may include different decision makers at the prospect's company, to review additional information and price quotes. When meeting with a decision maker for the first time, the process begins again with that initial step of building trust.

Finally, the salesperson presents a proposal and closes the deal. But each of the steps represents a sort of mini-close, Mr. Sheridan says.

At that last meeting, "if you're waiting for a proposal to close," he says, "you're too late."

### **About Caliper**

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