

THE SALES HIRING PLAYBOOK

STARTING FROM NOTHING AND
SCALING TO YOUR **FIRST 25 REPS**



STELI EFTI

CLOSE.IO CEO AND CO-FOUNDER



The Sales Hiring Playbook

Starting from nothing and scaling to
your first 25 reps

Close.io Co-founder and CEO, Steli Efti

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DEDICATION

To my mother Anthoula, my wife Diana, and my little super hustlers
Georgios and Leonidas.

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I truly believe appreciation is the currency you pay the universe. I want to give a huge shout-out to Ryan Frazier, Justin Gold, Ken Grace, Matthew Himmelstein, Paul Kudlow, Sarah Landstreet, Roland Ligtenberg, Michael Momsen, Josh Morgan, Christopher Sheehan, and Jilian Voegel for reviewing this book. Thank you for your thoughtful feedback.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2011, we started a "Sales As A Service" business called ElasticSales. The vision for Elastic was to build a massive sales infrastructure and empower startups and companies around the world to tap into that infrastructure in order to scale their sales efforts.

Think Amazon AWS for Sales.

Our mission was simple: never again should a great company fail because of a lack of sales.

We started hiring top sales talent, opening offices and signing up clients within the first few weeks. It was clear that there was massive demand for this service out there. Much more than we were capable of handling at the time. We didn't have a huge sales team with hundreds of reps readily available. We needed to hire more people, fast.

However, there was no experienced VP of Sales around to manage this. We had to figure things out on the fly. How could we quickly scale our sales team and get all those new reps productive in minimum time?

We didn't know "the right way" to do this. We didn't know what the best practices for sales hiring were or how to properly recruit, interview and train sales reps.

So we hacked the whole process and discovered new shortcuts to building a high-performance sales team. What started out as a motley assortment of tactics over time evolved into a more coherent system for hiring sales reps.

For the first time, I'm sharing our playbook in a well-structured and actionable way so that you can build out your team much faster than ever before.

There's only one thing I ask of you: **commit to taking action.**

All the knowledge in the world is of no use if you don't act upon it. So whenever you come across something in this book that makes you think, "Hmm, we should be doing this", either put the book aside and do it right

then and there or write it down and make time in your schedule to execute the task.

If you have questions, comments or encounter a specific challenge in the course of hiring salespeople that I don't address in this book, just send me an email. At the end of this book, you'll find how to get in touch with me.

With all that out of the way, let's get started!

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Steli Efti. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Steli Efti, CEO of Close.io

IT'S ALL ABOUT TIMING: WHEN TO HIRE SALESPEOPLE

The 4 stages of sales hiring for startups

During my sales office hours, I often talk with startup founders who are beginning to see success. They've developed their product to a point where the few customers they have keep using it regularly. Their retention rates are okay and they have early signs of revenue growth.

It's time to ask the question: Should I hire salespeople?

Here are the four stages of sales hiring for startups.

Stage #1: Founder-driven sales (founders only)

The first person to sell your product should be you—the founder—and your co-founders. Even if you hate sales and suck at it. Even if you don't have any sales experience and know-how. Do customer development yourself, and be as close to your prospects as you can.

Begin with the low-hanging fruit and tap into your network:

- Friends and acquaintances
- Co-workers
- Past employers
- Alumni
- And always ask for introductions left and right

At this point, the objective is not closing deals. Instead, focus on early stage sales exploration:

- Gain insights into your market
- Understand and listen to your customers better
 - What objections do they have?
 - How do they describe their problems?
 - What are their pain points?
 - How do they respond to your solution?

- Figure out which metrics truly matter for your sales outreach and your business
- Test different strategies, methods, and tactics to make sales and drive business
- Get started with cold emails
- Learn sales hacking 101
- Write a sales phone script

This phase is all about getting your hands dirty in the startup hustle and figuring out what works in the real world. It's all about lean sales and validating your idea with the power of the hustle. The experience you gain will help you later evaluate salespeople.

Stage #2: Founder-led sales team (2–3 sales reps)

Once you have some success (made some sales, generated some revenue), the question you will ask yourself next is, "How do I grow this? How can I take this to the next level?"

This is challenging, because you still need to focus on developing your product further as well. Balancing these two responsibilities isn't easy.

Now is the time to hire your first sales reps. It's about bringing others on board and having them replicate the results you achieved in stage #1.

Don't hire expensive sales veterans here. You want them young and hungry. And hire two or three salespeople at the same time. It's about adding firepower to your sales efforts.

Why hire two sales reps at a time?

There are four simple reasons why you should hire two sales rep at the same time:

1. Friendly competition
2. Less dependence on individual performance
3. More data for future sales recruiting

4. More firepower

With two or three sales reps, you will be able to do a lot more, try out more things. It will energize all your sales efforts and add friendly competition.

Now you have a sales team—you're responsible and accountable for them. Sales thrives in this kind of competitive environment and team spirit. And staying afloat in an ocean of rejection will be a lot easier with a supportive team, too.

When you tell your sales reps to try a new sales approach, it might work for one but not for the other. In that case, you know that the sales approach is working, and the problem is with someone's ability to execute.

If you have only one sales rep, you don't really have anything to measure against. Two or three sales reps are still far from perfect for validating data, but it is a lot better than just one.

At this stage, you still need to be deeply involved. You're managing and leading this team. You're still pitching, doing outbound and inbound, working with your sales reps, listening to feedback.

You can't outsource this. There are still too many critical decisions to be made. You need all these one-on-one experiences with customers, different sales channels, and lead generation methods. It's not enough to monitor numbers. You need to be living them.

Goals you should accomplish before transitioning into the next stage:

- Try and test cold email templates
- Use an effective sales lead management system
- Be experienced at negotiating deals and know how to handle discount inquiries
- Use drip marketing emails to convert leads better
- Have the ability to see early levels of predictability in your sales funnel

Stage #3: Junior sales leader (3–15 sales reps)

At this point, your sales exploration has matured: Results are a lot more predictable. You've established an effective sales funnel. You're generating consistent growth. It's not about exploration anymore—it's about time you start focusing on sales execution.

Let's bring in some experienced sales leadership: a sales manager or sales director.

What should this sales manager accomplish for your company?

- Fine-tune the rough sales approaches you've developed
- Expand on the things you've learned
- Grow and manage your sales team
- Set up quotas, train, and coach your reps

You want to look for someone who has experience overseeing the growth of a tiny sales team of three people to 10, 20 or 30 people because that's the next transition you're going to make. And it's one you don't want to be in charge of as a founder yourself.

These people should have started out as junior sales reps in a previous company, and then grown into a managerial or leadership role there, and have already managed a team that's a bit larger than yours, at a company that already is where you want to be in one or two years.

Good sales managers will improve existing structures and optimize processes. They usually do not excel at building something from scratch and figuring things out. But they will propel your business forward if they can build on something that's already there.

Stage #4: Senior sales leader (25+ sales reps)

Once you're beyond that barrier of around 15 salespeople and you want to go really big, the next breakthrough will happen at 25+ sales reps.

You'll need a senior sales leader, a VP of Sales who can manage a few sales managers/directors.

Someone with a proven track record of scaling things big, who is a VP of Sales at a company that already is where you want to be in three years from now.

A VP of Sales will work on sales strategy, scaling and expanding your sales channels and partnerships, and moving your customer base upstream as well as improving your unit economics. The VP will:

- Build an organizational structure for the sales team
- Develop hiring and training plans
- Reorganize your commission structure
- Groom sales talent to sales management positions
- Open new offices
- Add new channels like field sales to your inside sales team
- Close larger deals

To bring such a person on board, you'll need to throw a lot of money and some equity at them—that's why this is such a crucial hire, and one that you shouldn't make light-heartedly. They will guide your sales team on a journey that can either make or break your startup.

It's hard—but it's worth it

Startup sales is tough. Nothing about it is easy. If you focus on the right things and hire the right people at the right time, you're going to be able to see your startup go from sales exploration to sales execution and ultimately sales scale.

DO THEY HAVE THE RIGHT STUFF: WHAT
TRAITS TO LOOK FOR IN SALESPeOPLE

What I learned from Jack Welch about sales recruitment

One of the most useful frameworks for assessing a potential sales hire is something I learned a long time ago from reading a book by Jack Welch, former chairman and CEO of General Electric.

CEOs of giant corporations like General Electric usually aren't admired much in the startup world. However, ever since I've learned about this concept, it has stuck with me and been a guiding principle in all my hiring decisions.

He had a quadrant in which he would place each of his hires, categorizing them by their capability and willingness: capable and willing, incapable and willing, capable and unwilling, and incapable and unwilling.

Let's look at each of these in more detail.

Capable and willing

These are the obvious **rock stars**. They're both great at their jobs, *and* excellent culture fits. Rock stars work hard to cooperate with other team members, and their sales skills are spectacular.

You want to have them in your organization, and they can really propel your company forward.

When you find one of these people, do your best to hire and empower them.

Incapable and unwilling

These are the **misfits**. These are also easy to spot—when someone doesn't bring the skillset to the table that's needed to get the job done, and they have a lousy attitude, don't hire them.

And if they're already part of your team, fire them as quickly as possible.

Incapable and willing

I call these **underdogs**. If someone doesn't possess the necessary skillset to create the results you need in your company, but they have a great attitude and are a perfect cultural fit, should you hire them?

This is a tough decision. Personally, it's one of my weak spots, because I myself have been in this quadrant for much of my professional life.

Why you should hire them

If you provide them with the training and support needed to acquire the necessary skills, and they learn fast enough, you've created a tremendous amount of value: for your company, for that person, and for society at large. These people will often also be the most dedicated employees to the success of your company.

Why you shouldn't hire them

If they don't learn fast enough, or if the gap between their qualifications and your needs is too large, they will slow your company down.

If this happens, you need to intervene. Otherwise, it'll taint the performance culture in your startup. Others will see the leniency towards those who don't produce, and think, "Well, it's ok to not hit the numbers." That's not the kind of idea you want to spread among your employees.

With an incapable but willing person, consider these questions:

- How much training, time and money *are you willing to* invest into bringing that person up to speed?
- How much training, time and money *do you have to* invest into bringing that person up to speed?
- Do you already have a strategy in place to develop their skills?
- Who will take responsibility for training them?
- How quickly do you need a strong performance from them?
- How will you evaluate their performance and provide them with feedback?

You can't answer all these questions with 100% accuracy—it's impossible to know what's required to develop talent. But just take a couple of hours to think this through and then make your best guess.

Capable and unwilling

These are the **assholes** and they're toughest kind of hires you can encounter. They have what it takes to deliver the goods, and they can hit their numbers. They're high-performers and can make you a ton of money.

But, they're dickheads. They'll have a negative effect on your company culture and your team cohesiveness.

What do you do with these people?

If you're a small company, you might feel you can't afford to be finicky. It's tough to pass on smart and talented people.

A little voice in the back of your head will tell you, "Yeah, this guy might be a highly qualified douchebag, but we need someone with his skill set, and none of the other candidates have it. Just hire him to drive growth. We can keep looking for someone with the same level of expertise and a better attitude."

Don't listen to that voice.

Don't bring someone who's a poor cultural fit on board, even if this looks like a bad move on a spreadsheet.

This is even more important in your early hiring decisions, where a single bad hire can have a strong impact on your overall culture.

7 ways bad culture fit hires can screw up your startup

1. If you bring in someone who treats others disrespectfully, schemes against colleagues to rise up the ranks, lies and closes bad deals to earn commissions or get on top of the leaderboard, these misaligned behaviors will spread throughout your company because other team members will conclude they're acceptable, even if you verbally condemn them.

2. Office politics can lead to separate factions that are divided from your core company culture.
3. A highly skilled person has plenty of career opportunities. If they're not aligned with your culture, they'll probably leave your company as soon as a better option pops up, and you're again faced with the task of recruiting someone for their position.
4. A study conducted by LeaderShipIQ has shown that 46% of new hires fail within 18 months. Out of those hiring failures, 89% were due to poor cultural fit.
5. Hiring mistakes cost tens of thousands of dollars (and sometimes, even equity when it comes to startups,).
6. They will demoralize your highly engaged and fully aligned employees.
7. They can take away the joy you gain from your own company. (Nowadays, Tony Hsieh, the CEO of Zappos, is famous for his focus on workplace culture. However, do you know why he made it his number 1 priority? Because he had previously founded LinkExchange, a very successful company that grew to hundreds of employees and was worth hundreds of millions of dollars ... but dreaded getting out of bed in the morning because the culture of his own company made his stomach turn. He didn't want the same thing to happen with Zappos.)

There are plenty of other ways how hiring unwilling high-performers can cause havoc, but rather than making this into an endless list, let's focus on ...

The benefits of a strong company culture

It's important to differentiate company culture from some mission statement or a written list of values that's never put into practice.

A strong company culture is incredibly valuable for a startup. It will inspire and motivate each team member to produce the best work they can, rather than just the required minimum. And its value increases exponentially when things go wrong (which they always do in startups).

Think of all the time, money and resources you spend on recruiting and developing people. It's a huge investment, and its ROI increases the longer your employees stay at your company.

How to assess the culture fit of a job candidate?

The first step is to have a clear understanding of your own culture. What do you value as a company, and how do you reward it? Then elicit what your candidate values, and compare the two.

When you're interviewing, keep in mind that job candidates project a persona, which is not a 100% accurate reflection of who they really are in their day-to-day life. It's your job to break through the facade.

Let's say a sales rep tells you he cares about always creating win-wins. Ask him to share a specific situation where he could have earned a big commission, but advised a prospect not to buy. Ask for details and see if it's a credible story.

If a job candidate has a hard time coming up with a couple of examples where his values affected his behavior, then you should question whether that value is actually important to him. If you get a sense that it's just empty talk and a person isn't really emotionally connected to a value, challenge them to convince you of their sincerity.

Take everything with a grain of salt

If someone seems to be a promising candidate, don't hire them right away. Get to know each other in steps. I've outlined this in a later chapter, "Hiring for startups: How to recruit the un-recruitable."

Have them visit the office, work on a small project together, and if it all seems promising, have them join your team on a trial basis for a number of weeks or months. Get to know them in different environments and situations before you make long-term commitments to each other.

And if you make a wrong hiring decision despite all these precautions ... fire fast!

Do you need a wolf or lamb in SaaS sales?

What's the right attitude, mindset, and energy to sell SaaS products?

According to the infamous psychologist Timothy Leary's interpersonal circumplex (or circle), interpersonal relationships are based on the intersection of two base axes: Power and Love. Power is defined by dominance or submission; Love is defined by love or hate.

To oversimplify things, the combination of these traits creates four basic types of interpersonal styles: hostile strength (dominance/hate), friendly strength (dominance/love), hostile weakness (submission/hate), and friendly weakness (submission/love).

Salespeople should sell from a place of friendly strength—warm yet assertive. However, many people, particularly those whose first profession isn't sales, get this wrong.

They either believe salespeople should:

- Use hostile strength to go for the close like a sales assassin and bring in deals like the Wolf of Wallstreet
- Or use friendly weakness to sell like a gentle lamb, simply offering a choice and letting prospects decide on their own

Neither of these sales styles will lead to sustainable success.

Let's take a closer look at these two styles, and then explore why sales candidates need friendly strength to succeed in SaaS sales.

The wolf

A wolf is effective at closing deals. He operates with strength, free from inhibition, and doesn't hesitate to apply pressure to make the sale happen. It's the archetypal pushy salesperson, utilizing hostile strength to get what they want.

The problem is, particularly in SaaS, this is a subscription business. If a sales rep brings a customer on board who simply won't renew their contract after 30 days, you've gained nothing. In fact, the cost of selling to

them, onboarding them and supporting them during the setup phase is probably higher than what they paid your business.

And more importantly, that sales *modus operandi* is just unhealthy. You don't want an asshole—it's not worth it. They might be the number one closer but that doesn't count for much if it hurts your business.

The lamb

The lamb is on the other end of the spectrum. Instead of hostile strength, the lamb operates with friendly weakness.

It's a "soft" sales approach, without influence and leverage, without power over the prospect, without confidence.

The problem is that prospects don't want to invest their money in companies that employ "weak" people. And those prospects who do? They will often be the kinds of customers you shouldn't take on in the first place: abusive customers who exploit sales reps and treat them like doormats. Lambs attract "wolf customers."

Consultative sales?

Many self-proclaimed sales experts advise salespeople to take a *consultative sales approach*. They say selling has changed.

Which is all well and fine, but in the real world, too many people use this explanation as an excuse to avoid doing uncomfortable things.

If a salesperson is a consultant, their job is not just to dispense advice. A salesperson's job is to:

1. Figure out what needs to be done
2. Find a way to get it done
3. And make sure it actually gets done

If a salesperson isn't doing that, their "consultation" has no value.

The good parent

I personally think that rather than act like a consultant, a salesperson should act like a good parent.

Good parents have the best interest of their child at heart, but they also communicate from a place of strength:

- They give clear directions
- They confidently take charge of the conversation
- They lead with clarity

Imagine seeing your son stick a knife into an electrical outlet.

What would you tell him? “Well, I think there might be other alternatives you could consider to have some fun. I’d be happy to inform you about the choices available if you could spare five minutes of your attention.”

No. That’s not what you’d say. You’d communicate with strength and authority.

A good parent will communicate in whatever way necessary to get the right behavior from the child.

I can already hear some people taking offense with this: “Prospects aren’t kids! They’re adults, they’re equals.”

Of course, they are, but a truly good salesperson knows more about their product and marketplace than their prospects. They’ve dealt with the challenges and problems their prospects are facing many times already, whereas, for the prospects, it’s probably the first time.

A good salesperson should have deeper domain expertise, and be able to see some of the “juvenile” mistakes their prospects might commit due to a lack of insights and experiences.

A good salesperson will *respectfully* exert influence—and even put the screws to a prospect—if that’s what’s required to get them to make a good decision.

A good salesperson sells with friendly strength.

Dealing with rejection in sales: The \$8 million difference

Before she became a household name on the show Shark Tank, Barbara Corcoran built The Corcoran Group, a \$6 billion real estate business. For Barbara, there are two simple traits that differentiated the top performers from the underperformers in her sales team:

1. Having something to prove or a chip on your shoulder.
2. Being able to emotionally deal with rejection.

These two traits made up the difference between salespeople making \$40,000 and those making \$8 million per year in her organization.

It doesn't matter if they're selling real estate or SaaS; salespeople must embrace rejection.

If rejection is so awesome, why does it feel so bad?

It's one thing to talk about embracing rejection and logically understand the concept. It's a completely different thing to translate this idea into behavior.

We're hardwired to fear and avoid rejection. When our ancestors still lived in caves, being rejected from our tribe, and cast out on our own was akin to a death sentence. The desire to belong, and avoid rejection, is deeply programmed into our brains.

Most people struggle to deal with rejection.

However, if you want to hire the best salespeople, you need to find salespeople who can handle rejection.

Can you train salespeople to embrace rejection?

Hire salespeople who already have a high tolerance for (emotional) pain. People who have weathered a storm, overcome a crisis, and gotten bruised.

Don't make your life harder than it has to be by hiring salespeople that can't handle rejection at all and trying to completely change them into rejection crushing sales ninjas.

Most likely, it's going to be a waste of time and energy. It's a lot easier to coach a resilient person and help them develop that tenacity further, than it is to take someone who's super-sensitive and try to teach them perseverance.

Why salespeople need to handle rejection well

While hearing the word “no” is never fun, think about it this way: If everyone said yes, there wouldn't be a need for salespeople. The reason why salespeople have a job is because people say “no,” **all the time**.

Because rejection is something that everyone struggles with, it provides salespeople with an incredible opportunity to distinguish themselves and rise to the top of the pack. If you want to hire great salespeople, they have to love the “no's.” This will give them the edge they need to excel—and help your company excel.

How to find the best sales talent for your cash-strapped startup? Hint: it's not where 90% of entrepreneurs search.

Most founders and managers look for salespeople in all the wrong places: job boards, recruiting sites, LinkedIn, Craigslist, etc. What's the problem with these sites? After all, the people you'll find there are looking for a sales job.

You know who the only salespeople are who are actively looking for sales jobs?

Bad salespeople.

The good ones are too good at selling to be out of work. And the last thing you want is a bad salesperson.

If you want to get good professional salespeople, you need great compensation plans, big bonuses, expensive perks, predictable and scalable sales models, a brand, and operational infrastructure.

As an early-stage startup, you most likely can't offer that.

Don't look for salespeople—look for salespeople material

Look for people who have the emotional and mental blueprint of a great startup hustler. This kind of person typically doesn't want to be a salesperson, though. They usually have other goals and aspirations in life.

Help them view the sales job at your startup as a step that brings them closer to achieving their long-term goals. Many startup hustlers have founder aspirations in the long-term.

Find those entrepreneurial youngsters and give them a chance to grow in your organization while applying their natural "hustle" power. So how do you spot someone who could be a great startup salesperson?

Characteristics of great startup hustlers

These are the key questions you need to ask yourself:

- Do they have hustler DNA? Are they willing to do what it takes?
- Do they have an entrepreneurial spirit?
- Are they self-driven and ambitious?
- Are they competitive and do they enjoy a good challenge?
- Do they enjoy communicating and interacting with others?
- Do they have a high tolerance for pain? Can they handle rejection well?

Are they coachable? Are they willing to listen and learn, willing to try new methods? Are they receptive to advice and able to handle critical feedback?

Where do you find startup sales hustlers?

The first place to look for these people is always your own network: friends, acquaintances, fellow founders whose startup just failed or is on a path of failure, family members. Always ask if they know somebody who might be a good fit. The most obvious choices are often overlooked.

Hire for attitude, not experience

In the world of startup sales, you need resourceful and talented people with a good business sense, not trained sales monkeys. Hire for attitude, not experience.

The magical formula salespeople need to master sales: Competition & compassion

The two main pillars of great salesmanship are being **competitive and compassionate**.

This isn't a contradiction.

To excel in sales, salespeople need to be **hyper-competitive**.

- They need to compare themselves against others.
- They need to keep score of revenue generated, commissions earned, deals closed.
- They need to be driven by this. They need to look at the leaderboard and feel an intense desire to be number one, to be the best, to be better than everyone else.

But if they want to achieve true sales mastery, it can't just be about them. It has to be about something bigger than them. Ultimately, they need to be driven by a mission to make the world better and help others.

Sales people need **compassion**. Tons of it.

- They need to care intensely about their customers.
- They need to believe in what they sell, and have a more encompassing understanding of how their product/service helps people to solve a problem or improve their life or business.
- They need to be mission-driven. They passionately feel responsible for empowering others with their solution. This is one of the biggest differences between true masters of the sales game and everyone else.

Why does mission matter so much?

Salespeople who are stuck in the old school used car salesman mentality are ego-driven and selfish. They just care about their commissions, their quotas, and their paychecks. They're in it because of greed.

Being mission-driven is almost like possessing a superpower in the world of sales. It's a secret source of strength. If your sales reps ever fall on hard times, it's their mission that will compel them to keep pushing, rather than giving up as most people do.

And the deepest learning happens beyond the point where 99% of the people have already given up. If they're driven by something bigger, they will persevere when others would already have lost hope.

Which brings me to the next big thing ...

Daily defiance

Every single day, your sales reps need to resist the temptation of complacency. Every single day, they need to push themselves one step further. *They always have at least one leg outside their comfort zone.*

Most people don't have it in themselves. They don't want it bad enough. They want a break from all the pressure. Everybody feels that way—it's normal. But normal won't lead to excellence.

Your salespeople must condition themselves to thrive at this. In sales, the score starts at zero every single day. No matter what they have accomplished in the past, what matters today is only what they achieve today. Nobody gets a head start.

Sales is like a sport. Every time your reps walk into the arena, it's a completely new game.

Every single day, they need to get back in the ring, take the hits and throw their punches.

Years, not months

Most people think too short-term. Because they don't have the patience. And they don't want to put in their 10,000 hours.

Getting great at sales takes years.

Do what's difficult

Great sales reps take on jobs that others shy away from. They avoid "easy money" jobs and low-hanging fruit.

They can sell things that are hard to sell. They will find the best people in these markets and learn from them.

They would even go into areas where they have to be really great just to survive. They might go broke—but *desperation can turn them into a totally different kind of beast*. It's going to give them the muscle, the strength and the energy to go into a market where things are easier and totally crush it there.

Seek out risk

Great salespeople ask themselves, "What am I still afraid of? Where are opportunities outside of my reach?"

They're comfortable taking risks and going for things others are scared of.

"To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often." — Winston Churchill

Lifelong learning

Great salespeople study communication. Read as much as they can. Learn. Practice. Constantly sharpen their saw. Listen to audiobooks. Go to seminars. Find mentors. Become students of human behavior. Master the art of the pitch. Work in places with the best sales culture and surround themselves with other great salespeople.

Most importantly, they keep up their daily practice, day in and day out. It's the 10,000-hour rule, the deliberate practice method.

They stay motivated and both intellectually and emotionally engaged on the path to sales mastery.

IGNORE JOB BOARDS: HOW TO FIND AND RECRUIT GREAT SALESPEOPLE

How to recruit your first top-notch sales rep

Most startups suck at outbound sales recruiting.

They recruit either too early, or too late. Too aggressively, or too passively. They pursue the wrong candidates or no candidates at all (FYI: good salespeople are not going to come to you).

The good news is they don't have to. Create an outbound recruiting machine and you'll have a pipeline of high-quality sales candidates. Here are the steps you can take to start building your recruiting process today.

When is the right time to hire a salesperson?

Hiring your first full-time salesperson is a huge step. Are you sure the timing is right? Too soon and you risk losing touch with your market.

Ask yourself these three questions to find out if your startup is ready for a full-time sales hire:

1. **Is my customer lifetime value high enough?** You should have a CLTV of at least \$1,000 before you consider hiring a full-time salesperson.
2. **Are my larger customers struggling to convert?** If larger trial accounts convert at the same rate as smaller accounts, you don't need a salesperson.
3. **Is there complexity in the sales process for my larger accounts?** A salesperson probably won't make a difference in a frictionless sales process.

If you can answer "yes" to all three questions, you're ready for a salesperson! But where do you start?

Talent trumps experience

It might be tempting to browse job boards like Craigslist or Indeed to find a qualified salesperson with 10+ years of experience.

Don't! That's the biggest mistake startups make with their first sales hire.

Good salespeople aren't looking for work. The kind of candidates you'll find on job boards aren't salespeople; they're scam artists who are great at selling an inflated resume.

Instead of looking for sales experience, look for sales talent. Here are some of the key characteristics of successful startup hustlers:

- A compassionate and competitive nature
- Excellent communication skills
- A high tolerance for rejection
- Charisma and charm
- Shamelessness

The best place to find people with those traits? Your immediate network.

How to recruit sales talent within your network

Who do you know with hustler DNA?

Don't limit yourself to salespeople. Your next great sales hire may be working as a teacher, engineer, or mechanic. Identify the people in your network with an entrepreneurial spirit and talk to them about joining your startup.

If you can't find anyone in your immediate network, then ask for referrals. Explain what you're looking for in a salesperson and ask your contacts for introductions.

If that doesn't work, start looking outside your network.

How to recruit sales talent outside of your network

Forget job boards. When recruiting outside of your personal network, start with businesses in your market who are a couple years ahead of you.

Find one with an established and successful sales team and reach out to one of their junior reps. Say:

"Hey Janet, this is Steli from Close.io. I really admire what your company is doing and I'm hoping you could help me out. You're part of an incredible

sales team and we're trying to hire amazing sales talent like you for our inside sales CRM. Would you be willing to hop on a call with me this week and tell me what you were looking for when you joined a company?"

Most reps will be flattered and take the call. Use that opportunity to explore whether or not they'd be a good fit. If it seems like a match, be upfront. Say:

"This might sound crazy, but is there any chance you'd join our company? You're exactly what we're looking for."

If they're interested, keep the momentum going by setting up a formal interview. If they aren't, thank them for their time and ask one final question.

Turn rejections into referrals

Some of the best hires start as referrals.

If the rep rejects your job offer, that's okay. Thank them for their time and, just before you get off the phone, ask for a referral that's totally out of your league. For example:

"Thanks for your insights, Janet. Before I let you go, I have one more question. Now that you know what we're looking for in a salesperson, who do you know that's so insanely talented at sales that they'd probably never work for us?"

This twist on the standard, "Who do you know who would be interested?" makes people really think and leads to higher-quality referrals.

Create long-term relationships

When you reach out to this referral, keep in mind that the goal isn't to hire them on the spot. If you rush it, you'll lose the opportunity. Approach the conversation like this:

"Hi Cathy, this is Steli from Close.io. I was speaking with Janet about building an amazing sales team and she said you're the best salesperson she knows. She also said that I'd never be able to hire you, so I'm not even going to try. But would you be willing to talk with me about your sales experience?"

If you'd be interested in working with this person in the future, start building a relationship immediately. Find a way that you can provide lasting value on a consistent basis and check in with them once or twice a month.

It may take a while (I knew my Close.io co-founders for *five years* before I could convince them to start a company with me), but if you're willing to invest the time no one else is, you'll win them over.

And if you don't? You still developed a powerful relationship that can be valuable in other ways.

Always be recruiting

Outbound recruiting is a lot like outbound sales.

You identify a prospect, qualify them, and go for the close. If you don't get it on the first try, you follow up relentlessly.

And if you don't start looking for prospects until you really need them, you're in trouble. **Don't wait until you need to hire to start recruiting.** If you start making those connections today, you'll have a list of highly qualified candidates when you need them.

Like sales, recruiting is a never-ending cycle. Start preparing today for tomorrow's crisis, and there won't be a crisis at all.

Hire above your talent class: How to recruit the un-recruitable

Startup recruiting is hard. The challenge is twofold: finding incredible talent and then making them want to join your team.

I've been doing the impossible task of hiring *way* above my "talent class" for over a decade. And here's what I've learned about startup recruiting.

Little steps, not giant leaps

Don't ask amazing people to make a life-changing decision like coming to work for your company right away. That's a giant leap. It's too easy to reject that.

In fact, the type of person you want to hire should reject that. You probably don't want to hire anyone you can hire that easily just by throwing out an offer.

Instead, make the first step compellingly small.

Relationships progress in increments. Deepen the commitment step by step, rather than requesting someone go full in before they've even had a chance to fall in love with your startup.

"A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step."—Lao Tzu

Make it noncommittal, seemingly small and insignificant.

Step #1: Say hello

When you deal with rock star talent, you need to get on the phone with them as soon as possible. As I talked about in the last chapter, the goal is not to offer them a job right away, but to get to know each other and start building a relationship. Make sure you keep it casual so people can put their guard down. Here's what you say.

"Hey, Mike! We just hired your friend Bob. Every time we make a new hire, we have a conversation and ask:

Who's the most amazing person you know who would never ever change what they're doing to consider joining us?

You know who Bob thought of first? Yep, you!

I know you're happy and there is no way you would come and work here right now, and that's fine. All I want to do is get to know each other since Bob made me very curious. :)

You are one of the most impressive people that Bob knows, so now I want to get to know you as well.

And in full disclosure—obviously, if there is ever even a glimpse of hope, I'm probably gonna attempt to hire you. But for now, let's just put that aside. Let's just get to know each other."

Ask them questions:

- What are their goals in life?
- What do they want to accomplish?
- What are they passionate about?
- Etc.

Once you've gotten to know them, and you sense a potentially good match, initiate the next small step.

"I'd love you to just stop by our office at some point, meet the team, and give us some feedback. You seem to be really creative and really cool."

With this process, it's all about small steps. You go from a first phone call (first tiny step) to the next step (come in and meet the team, and give us a chance to meet you).

Step #2: Dating

The first meeting is usually them stopping by the office and spending time with the team, anywhere from an hour to a whole day.

Do you sense there's a great connection? Are both sides getting more engaged and excited?

Now is the time to come clean and tell your potential superstar hire your intentions:

"I told you I would not attempt to hire you. I know there's not much hope. But I'm a bit of a romantic. It seems like this could be really great for both parties. Maybe there is a way for us to work together and get to know each other better before making any long-term decisions."

You indicate that you are interested, but you're not asking them to join full-time just yet! It's too early.

Remember, little steps, not giant leaps. It would be too easy to refuse your offer at this point and both sides have to do a bit more homework in order to really know that this is a great fit.

Instead, you say this:

"Hey, why don't you come for a whole weekend? We can work on a little project together. That would be fun!"

Step #3: Small commitments

So Mike spends a whole weekend with your team, and you have great work chemistry. You sense there's a perfect culture fit. It's time for the next step.

This step can be bigger. You've built some emotional momentum. Mike has already committed some of his time to your company. The steps progressively get bigger and all ultimately lead to the giant leap of making an offer.

Two good ways to do that would be to ask them to work with you:

- On a part-time basis
- Or as a three-month contractor or consultant

Here is your pitch:

"In all the meetings and calls we've had, it seems like this could be a really great fit for both sides. Why don't you just come in for a little while, work with us and in three months if it doesn't work out, you can stop at any point.

That way we are both getting a chance to evaluate if this might really be the right next step for you, and for us. There is no way to really know until we've worked with each other for at least a little while. What do you say?"

If they're truly a great fit for your startup, they won't be able to escape gradually falling in love with your company and your team.

If they do, you simply pitch them to take the final giant leap and do the unthinkable of joining your company now that they know they can't live without it anymore :)

What if it's a position they don't want ... like a "sales job"?

Sales hiring is particularly challenging because as a startup, you should not hire experienced sales professionals. You should hire talented people who understand business. And many of them don't find the prospect of being a "sales rep" very tempting.

Sales doesn't enjoy a particularly good reputation.

When you think of "sales" or "selling", what's the first word that comes to mind?

When Dan Pink, the author of *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*, surveyed people, he got replies like "pushy", "sleazy", "manipulative", "dishonest and annoying."

Make it clear that it's about your team and your vision, and not about "a sales job."

Always sell them on the idea of working with your team and being part of your company, not on the exact execution of things and their position as a sales rep.

Understand their big goals, and their motivation for wanting to be in business. Help them realize how their goals and your job offer align.

Be rigorous

Hiring great people is difficult. The easiest thing is to lower your standards, find someone who is subpar, talk yourself into believing that they "have it" and just give them the job.

Don't do that. Don't rush it just because you need to find someone quickly. In the end, hiring the wrong person will cost you more time than taking the time it takes to hire the right one.

Especially in the early days of a startup, you want to have a team of superstars. The process I shared with you now can help you hire the kind of talent that would usually decline the invitation to interview with you in the first place. And that's a massive competitive advantage.

DIG DEEPER: HOW TO INTERVIEW SALES REPS

The truth about job interview questions

If you're about to hire sales reps, how should you conduct a job interview to figure out whether a candidate is a great fit or not? What interview questions should you ask to determine if they're a great salesperson?

The real answer is interview questions are rarely reliable indicators of future sales performance. (Although sometimes, they make great stories.)*

How can you find out if someone is a great basketball player? Do you:

- Interview him and ask a lot of well thought out questions?
- Or watch him play?

Watching him perform is a much more reliable indicator of skill and talent.

Some people are great at interviews, and suck at sales

I learned this one day when interviewing a candidate for ElasticSales. This guy came highly recommended by one of our best-performing sales reps.

I like to think that my judgment of people is pretty good, especially when it comes to assessing their sales mojo.

When I interviewed this guy, I was sure he'd be a great salesperson! He was charismatic, sold himself well and just seemed to "have it."

And then we put him in front of a phone.

Meltdown.

He dialed the first number and when he started talking, it was as if he'd become a different person. He had a massive meltdown, started sweating, stuttering. It was horrible.

** Like when Dick Harrison interviewed Mark Cranney and asked him, "Do you think you could kick my ass?"*

He kept trying for a while, but he just disintegrated minute by minute in front of our eyes.

At the end of it, he looked at me and said, "All right, this is not for me."

He was great at presenting himself but when it came to performing, he fell short.

Doing cold calls and exposing yourself to potential rejection can create a lot of psychological pressure, and it just deflated that guy.

This was a guy who appeared to have the chops, but he didn't. He was the anti-Mark Cranney (bad at interviews, lacking a winning personality, but a top sales producer). Read Chapter 5 of Ben Horowitz' *The Hard Thing About Hard Things* if you haven't done so yet.

And then there's another kind of person ...

Some people could be great salespeople, but won't

We had other candidates who were great on their first call ... but ultimately didn't turn into great salespeople.

Why? They had the skills, they could handle the pressure... but they lacked consistency. They couldn't perform day in and day out.

How to find out if someone is a great salesperson?

Give people a chance to perform.

Reserve your judgment not for how great they are when you first meet them, or the first day, week or month. Judge them on how great and consistent their performance is day in and day out.

The top 10 interview questions in sales hiring

As I've said before, there's no such thing as a perfect interview question.

There's no single question you can ask to figure out whether someone is the right candidate and will be amazing at sales.

Questions won't give you all the answers. However, when you're asking questions, you're collecting data. And what you want to do is collect enough data so that you can make a judgment call: Will this person be worth investing in?

Giving people practical tests and throwing them into the fire and seeing how they react will normally give you more answers than your standard interview questions. But since practical tests aren't always possible, here's a set of 10 interview questions that'll help you find your next sales hire.

Remember, a lot of people will have weak answers to some of these questions. This doesn't mean they'll be bad at the job.

1. Why sales?

This is the most fundamental question when hiring salespeople. Ask the candidate why they've chosen sales as a career. Why have they been doing it and why do they keep doing it? What is it about selling that attracts them? What is it about selling that makes them want to be in this profession? How did they get into it? What's the reason? What motivates them?

In sales, motivation is crucial to performance. What drives a person, what's their purpose and what gets them going? What are they striving for? If you know these things, you'll be able to provide them with the support they need in their journey and help them get to that goal.

You can quickly explore if that goal aligns with the goals of your company and team. If it does, then chances are it's a good fit.

2. Why do you want to sell this product?

This may seem like an obvious question, but a lot of companies neglect to ask their candidates, "Why do you want to sell this particular product?"

This is a good question to ask because you'll find out if they're thoughtful. Is there a purpose behind them sitting here or did they just apply to a bunch of jobs to see what would happen?

If they have a reason or a pre-existing relationship with your company or product, it increases the chances of the candidate being good at the job.

3. What do you know about our customers?

This is another fundamental question to ask during the early interview stages that a lot of sales managers miss.

You want to figure out if the person did their homework. How well do they understand your customer? They might have been misinformed as to who your customer is. If that's the case, this is your opportunity to clarify that.

Next, it's time to figure out if this candidate will care about your customer. Why do they think they can communicate well with this person? Why do they think they can influence them? Can they relate to them?

4. What do you know about our competitors?

Do they know what the competitive landscape looks like? Do they know the companies you're up against?

Have they done their research to see who else is in this space? Do they know what sets your company and product apart? Why do they think they could win selling against these people?

If they don't know the answers, it's not the end of the world. Most candidates won't know your competitors very well; it doesn't necessarily make them a bad fit.

5. When was the last time you were really stressed out and how did you deal with it?

This is a powerful question because you want to know how people act under pressure. This is when you can uncover both the really good sides and really terrible sides to a person.

Potential sales hires most likely won't be prepared for this question. This means their answer might be complete BS and just something that they'll say to make them look good.

Whatever the reason, work-related or personal, how did this person deal with that situation? What was it that stressed them out? This is a simple question that can be really revealing.

Look at the situation they describe. Is it a situation you can relate to or does it seem really trivial?

By asking this, you'll get an idea of how this person might react in stressful situations, when being put under pressure, or faced with challenges.

Lastly, how do they handle that stress in the workplace?

6. When was the last time you took a big risk and it didn't pan out?

This is another question most sales hires are unlikely to be prepared for. It will reveal if they're comfortable and secure in themselves, two crucial ingredients for a good salesperson.

You want to know that these people are risk takers. Because they should be. If they struggle to come up with a risk they've taken in the last 10 years, well—that's not a good sign.

The risk itself doesn't have to be related to selling, it can be anything in life. You just want to know that when this person sees an opportunity, they'll go for it. Taking risks speaks to a killer instinct and a confidence that will translate really well in selling.

Don't forget to ask how they responded when that situation didn't pan out.

7. When was the last time you lost a deal?

"I've never lost a deal."

If someone says this, it's very likely not true. But it might also mean they're not taking enough risks with their prospects.

You want to know how often the potential sales hire loses deals, but you also want to know the reasons as to why this deal didn't work out. You want to hear them analyze themselves.

If they're good at analyzing what happened and why the deal didn't work out, it shows a certain level of maturity and indicates that they'll have a good understanding of a prospect's situation.

If they have that understanding, it also means they'll know what needs to happen in order to close that deal.

They'll know what they need to work on in order to improve at selling.

8. When was the last time you won a deal?

You don't just want to know how they cope in more sticky situations. You also want to know about their successes. You want to see if they get excited, passionate and motivated when they talk about the deals they've closed. How do they talk about their wins? How much energy do they bring? How much motivation and inspiration do they gain from these wins?

And the same questions goes, do they know *why* they won this deal?

9. What was the last sales tactic that you learned?

When was the last time this person learned something, either from a book, a course, a blog post, someone else, a workshop—anything. How did they apply what they learned to their job?

It doesn't matter if it worked or not. This question explores whether this person is a learner. Are they coachable and do they want to continuously grow and get better at what they do?

The best salespeople in the world are lifelong learners. They never stop trying to find new ways to get better at their jobs and close more deals.

10. How do you think this interview is going so far?

This is an opportunity for the person to be self-aware and self-reflective with you as a prospect.

The product they're selling is themselves, and you're the potential customer. Now is when you want to see what this person thinks it takes to close this deal and make you hire him or her.

How good are they at reading other people and can they make a good judgment based on the conversation you're having?

This will translate to their sensibilities when they talk to prospects and how much they can influence the process. Do they understand what's going on? Maybe they think they killed it at a question where you were underwhelmed. If the gap in your perceptions is too big, it's likely that this is not a very good salesperson.

Two questions for the interviewer

These questions will help you uncover the likelihood that this person will be amazing at selling your product to your potential customers.

Remember, no single question can point to if you should hire someone or not. But what you should ask yourself is:

1. Do I like this person?
2. Would I buy from this person?

If the answers to these two questions are "no," do not continue the process because they will not be a good cultural fit for you and your team.

If the answer is "yes," then move forward with them.

My startup hiring interview hack: Why? Why? Why?

Hiring people for your startup is hard. There's no way around that. Whether you're a little unknown startup nobody ever heard of, or a hotshot rocket ship making headlines in the tech press, figuring out which candidates to hire is really difficult.

How can you assess which applicants would add the most value to your startup? (And whom you should avoid like the plague?)

Conducting a hiring interview

I have an unorthodox opinion on the topic of job interviews. Interviewing people isn't my primary way of judging whether someone is a good fit for our company.

Beware of "job interview experts"

I've learned from experience that some of the best interviewees make the worst employees, and some of the best employees are the worst interviewees.

Making a good impression during a job interview is a skill that can be learned and some people invest a great amount of time and effort into developing their job interview skills. Time and effort they could have invested into developing the skills they're actually hired for.

You don't want to hire this kind of people, because they tend to be the ones who are also good at playing office politics and claiming credit for other people's achievements.

But even if you take these extreme cases aside ...

Every job applicant packages himself favorably

Many founders fail to look beyond the packaging. They see the big bold letters on the box, and the shiny colors and make a judgment call: "Oh, this candidate looks good!" Or "No way am I going to hire this person!"

If they think it's a good one, they'll remind themselves: "Do your due diligence. This is an important decision!"

So they turn the package around and carefully study the fine print on the side. "Well, this still looks good! I'll hire this person!"

The problem is they haven't actually opened up the box and looked at what's inside.

To get insights into what's in the box, you need to get through the superficial layer of bullshit and have a real interaction.

If that sounds like a lot of work, don't worry. You don't need a Ph.D. in psychology. There's a super simple hiring hack for this.

How to interview someone so they reveal their real self

Ask them whatever questions you need to ask them. There are no standard "great interview questions." It really depends on your startup's needs, and you must do your homework and figure out what the best questions to ask are.

So, come up with a list of questions you want to ask, and then follow up on each of the interviewee's answers by asking "why" three times in a row.

Interviewer: (Asks initial question.)

Interviewee: "That's a great question, and I'm happy to share with you that blah, blah, blah [insert a couple of bullshit phrases that make a great-sounding answer]."

Interviewer: "That's good! **Why?**"

Interviewee: "Because I really blah, blah, blah [insert more bullshit]."

Interviewer: "Oh, interesting. **Why do you think that is?**"

Interviewee: "Well, hm ..." [at this point you can often see the wheels inside their head turning, and the answers aren't as slick and polished anymore] "so blah, blah, blah [still contains a good percentage of bullshit]."

Interviewer: "Oh, this is good. **Why?**"

Interviewee: "Uh, oh, well ..." [Some serious mental processing is going on. They might be a little less articulate, and more introspective. That's a good sign!] "Ok, so I think this ... [Depending on where the conversation went, they demonstrate their level of expertise, or reveal how their thought process works, or what drives them, or they bring up formative experiences that made lasting impressions on them.]"

Getting real

Now, *these* are the insights you're looking for. You've opened the box and got a glimpse of what's inside.

These deeper insights provide a better foundation to build your judgment on than the slick answers you'll get with standard interview questions.

What if, after three why's, you're still not getting "real" answers?

Some smooth interviewees will try to circumvent the answer. They'll tell you something like, "Well, that's a really good question, let me think about it, I don't really know, but let me get back later to you on that."

Here's how you respond to those people: "Take a guess. If you had to guess an answer, what would be your first guess?"

Don't let them off the hook. Push until you move the conversation beyond the level of "things people say at job interviews."

When I interview someone for a job, I want to know a) what they want from life, and b) why they want it.

So, I ask the candidate the first question, and follow up with "why" until they get real.

How Zappos asks questions that get candidates off script

Another way to dig below the surface during an interview is to ask questions for which a candidate isn't prepared, rather than just the typical "job interview questions."

The Zappos hiring process includes a lot of these, for example:

- What is something weird that makes you happy?
- What's something you've always wanted to do but haven't? Why haven't you done it?
- If you could be a superhero, what would you be and why?
- Which one of our "core values" would be most difficult for you to uphold?
- What is your favorite curse word? Use it in a sentence about your last job.
- If you were given \$500 to plan a company event what would it be and why?
- If you were a dessert, what would you be?
- Describe a time when you had to break the rule to get the job done.
- What question were you expecting us to ask that we didn't?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how weird are you?

"It's not so much the number; it's more seeing how candidates react to a question", explains Tony Hsieh, Zappo's CEO. It brings out the personality of a job candidate.

Hsieh also used to ask the limo driver who brought a job applicant to the office how he was treated.

Now that I've shared all this advice on conducting hiring interviews with you, it's important that you ...

Don't weigh interviews too heavily!

The interview shouldn't be the deciding factor in your hiring decision.

In a startup, it's all about performance. What can each team member contribute to the company?

I like to bring up the example of a basketball team, because in sports, it's all about performing. A coach who wants to bring a new player into the team would first and foremost want to see how they perform on the field.

What they actually do matters more than what they say they do.

This is why you want to place them in a situation where they demonstrate their abilities as quickly as possible. If you're hiring a salesperson, make them pick up the phone and pitch!

If you think hiring is hard, try firing ...

Hiring is largely hard because mistakes are painful to fix. But mistakes will happen. It's unavoidable. The important thing is to fix your mistakes quickly.

When you've made a bad hire, fire them quickly. Don't give them the opportunity to drag the whole team's performance down.

Be respectful when firing someone, and try to help them transition into a position at another company that suits them better. After all, it was you who made the mistake of hiring them! But by all means, do not delay the decision because you feel bad about it.

"The way to be a great at hiring is to be unafraid of firing." — Gary Vaynerchuck

The real test: 3 sales homework assignments for candidates

In the last three chapters, I talked about the types of questions you can ask in interviews, how to get real answers from candidates, and why you shouldn't rely too much on interview questions.

In this chapter, we're going to look at three homework assignments you can give to potential sales hires to help you determine if they're a good fit for your business.

You can only get so much information out of questions. Putting potential sales hires in practical situations to see how they act—and not what they say—is when you'll learn the most about their talents and truly discover what they're capable of.

Here are three simple yet powerful and practical tests that you can give your potential sales hires to uncover whether they'll be a good addition to your sales team.

Let's take a look.

1. Ask them to sell you something

When people show up to interviews, they're dressed perfectly. They smile perfectly. Every strand of hair is perfectly in place. They walk and talk like a salesperson.

By the first look, you're probably impressed and you might think, "If I feel like this, then our prospects and customers will be impressed, too."

Often, this could not be further from the truth.

I've seen a lot of people who've sailed through the interview process. They've nailed every single question. Charmed the entire room. Said all the right things. But the moment you put them in a realistic sales situation? Complete meltdown.

That's why asking them to pitch you something will help you find out if they're more than just talk.

What should they pitch you?

- The previous product they were selling. See how they act selling something they're experienced in and have extensive knowledge about.
- Your product. They might not have a full understanding of your product, but you want to see how they navigate the conversation when they don't know everything about what they're selling.

Ask them to sell you something in a way that fits your sales process. This could be an in-person sales conversation or a mock call. You can do this one-on-one or raise the stakes and do it in front of the entire team.

Here at Close.io, we do mock calls right in the middle of the office, in front of the entire team. It adds to the existing pressure and you'll see how they handle the heat and the feeling of being judged.

This is a test to see what they're made of, right on the sales floor. Do they like the challenge and rise to the occasion? Or do they crash and burn?

Create a realistic sales scenario

You don't want to make it as difficult as possible; you just want to make it as realistic as possible. That means creating a scenario that fits your sales process and the way your sales team works and see how they do.

Things to take into consideration:

- What's their energy like?
- What's their body language like?
- How do they talk?
- How do they structure the conversation?
- What kind of questions do they ask?

At the end, give them one thing you want them to improve or change. Then do the whole thing again. Be the same person and say almost the same things. All you want to see is if they took your feedback and made those changes. You want to know if this person is coachable.

You can start off easy and increase the level of difficulty throughout the conversation to get a sense of how experienced this person is and how they deal under pressure. Be really tough just to see what their natural reaction is. Will they have a nervous breakdown or pass with flying colors?

At the end of the exercise, will they ask you for feedback? Did they see this as a learning experience or are they not happy with you? You can tell a lot about a person based on their energy and you'll get a good sense of their character once the exercise is over.

2. Write a cold email to a potential prospect

Even if cold emails are not a part of your sales process, it's a great exercise for potential sales hires.

Explain who your ideal customer is, explain your product, and then tell your candidate they've got 30 minutes to do the following:

- Research a company that fits the ideal customer profile
- Find a person within that company to contact
- Write an email to that person
- Provide an analysis of why they chose that company, that person and why they wrote the email the way they did
- Send the email to you as if you were the prospect

This is a great exercise to uncover a few things:

- Do they understand who your customer is?
- Do they understand your market?
- Are they strategic in the way they communicate?
- Are they able to analyze themselves?

This simple exercise will tell you a lot about what type of person they are, what kind of experience they have and what their ability and talent for this job is.

Even if you don't do cold emails, your salespeople will have to communicate with your prospects and customers in a written format. If they're really good at it, it will be a huge plus.

3. Call your competitors

Tell your potential sales hire to do a little bit of research to find out your competitors. Alternatively, give them a list of your top five competitors.

Tell them to look at their products, sign up for a trial, request a demo and get on a phone call with them.

Tell them to ask many questions to learn as much as possible about the product. What features do they offer? Who buys from them? Why does their pricing look the way it does? Then ask them to come back with a summary of what they learned.

This is an exercise that'll familiarize them with the competition, and help you see how good they are at asking questions and being a prospect.

If you don't know how to be a prospect, you don't know how to be a good salesperson.

For example, if one of the competitors says, "We're really excited about releasing a new feature in three months", your potential sales hire should ask:

- Why are you building this feature?
- Did your customers ask for it?
- Why are you launching it in three months?
- Why didn't you build this earlier?
- What's the purpose of this feature?
- Which pricing plan will this be on?
- What's the UX/UI like?

The information they bring back to you has to go beyond, "They're doing X."

If they're not in the habit of asking follow-up questions and going as far as they possibly can in their quest for information, they're not going to be great at sales.

When they present you with all this data, ask them, "How do you think we relate to all these companies?"

Because if they talk to a prospect and that prospect asks, "How do you compare to company X?" They need to be able to present this information to them in a way that puts you ahead of the competition. You want to see how they think about the entire market.

These are three exercises that'll help you uncover a ton of information about potential sales hires.

There are other things you can do that are less explicit, but still action-based tests that'll help you evaluate your sales candidates.

Here are a few things:

- Give them feedback throughout the day and see if they change and adjust based on your advice. Are they capable of learning and are they capable of learning fast?
- How much are they driving the interview process versus relying on you to drive it? Will they ask for next steps? Will they ask for feedback? Will they ask questions or just say thank you and be on their way? This is a great way to see if someone will proactively ask for the next step instead of waiting for you to tell them. If they're not going for the close for their own job, it's unlikely they will close deals for your business. The follow-up is the most important thing in sales. If they don't have the follow-up hustle, then things don't look good.

Try these three simple exercises during your sales hiring process and you'll have a better assessment of a sales candidate's skills than any interview could provide.

RISKS AND RED FLAGS: WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR AND AVOID WHEN HIRING

Why hiring salespeople won't fix your business

When we were running ElasticSales, we had a certain kind of prospect that scared the living hell out of us—just by wanting to work with us.

These were the customers who wanted us to fix their business with the magic of sales. Some of them were willing to throw a lot of money at us to make it happen for them. Most of the time, we were strong enough to say NO.

Often times, these are the entrepreneurs who build a beautiful product and are in love with their idea—and think the only thing missing is some marketing/sales/biz dev guy to come in and "do the business stuff." They usually misunderstand what the business side of business is about, and have very little appreciation for it.

Sales are either slow or non-existent. They're not generating enough revenue. They don't know how to make their business work ... and want "others" to figure it out for them.

Here's an ugly truth that outsourced sales companies don't want you to know:

If you can't sell your own product, no one else will be able to sell it for you either.

And that's a bitter pill to swallow, especially if you are an entrepreneur struggling to keep your business alive. You'll become so desperate that you clutch at any straw you can find. You'll think, "Hey, these guys know sales, I'll just bring them in and they'll do it for me."

But that's just wishful thinking, born from the seed of desperation.

The truth is, if you have zero (or next to zero) sales, then ...

It's not the sales part that's at fault. It's your product

If you truly have a great product, you will be able to close at least *some deals*.

Even if you're not a salesperson.

Even if you suck at sales.

Even if your pitch is flawed.

Even if your hustle is lame.

If your product is solid, you'll be able to close your uncle, or your ex-boss, or your buddy's dad, *someone* ...

Figure it out before you source it out

It's ok to outsource sales because others are better at doing it. But first, you yourself need to have figured out the basic sales model. Don't just outsource something to somebody else that you don't understand yourself.

Don't expect some professional sales team to bring you from 0 to 1.

That step from 0 to 1 is always the step *you* need to make.

Taking it from 1 to 5? From 5 to 12? From 12 to 23? From 23 to a 100? Yes, bring in outside experts. But 0 to 1? That's your job!

But what if you really do need help?

What if you really can't get from 0 to 1 by yourself? Well, it's ok if you are looking for help on how to figure it out. It's ok if you're willing to do what it takes, and need someone to coach you through the process.

But don't look for someone who will figure it out for you. If you're looking for somebody who will do all the steps for you that are necessary to figure it out, you're fucked.

Figuring out the basics is your job. You don't need to figure it out until the very last detail—but at least you should have mastered the **sales exploration** phase and be ready to transition into the **sales execution** phase.

I wrote about the four stages of startup sales in “The ultimate sales hiring guide for founders and managers” and the transition point between sales exploration to sales execution is between stage #2 to stage #3. You want to have something that the outsourced sales company can build upon and optimize.

If you have nothing, that's not enough.

The 5 biggest risks when hiring salespeople for your startup

When startup founders decide to hire their first salesperson, they try to assess the risks involved in changing their engineering-focused culture by bringing in someone for sales.

They know what the upside could be, but wonder what the downside of making their first sales hire might look like.

Before you do any sales recruiting, you need to make sure you understand the top risks involved in order to be able to proactively manage them and maximize your chances of successfully building your startup sales team.

Risk #1: Losing touch with your customers

If you put sales into a silo you're not involved in anymore, you miss out on a lot of market intel. Engaging with prospects and listening to their objections is indispensable for you.

That means talking to them one-on-one, observing their body language, and having real conversations. You, as a founder, need the first-hand experience.

It will help you to gain a much deeper understanding of your customers and with that achieve product/market fit faster.

Risk #2: Not being able to judge sales performance

If you don't have a robust sales model yet, the performance of your sales reps is most likely going to be hit-or-miss. You can't expect predictable sales when you haven't achieved product/market fit. It's going to be erratic and all over the place.

Trying to manage that kind of volatile sales machinery can be a huge (and expensive) waste of time. You need to make sure you have the right expectations and allow your salesperson to explore and experiment until you hit sales/market fit.

Risk #3: Hiring a salesperson can screw up your culture

Salespeople and engineers have different DNA. They communicate and think differently. Bringing salespeople on board can cause a lot of misunderstanding and office politics.

You want ambitious, unstoppable salespeople. But make sure they are compatible with your company culture. Be proactive about integrating them into the larger team and teach them how to communicate effectively with engineers and vice versa.

Risk #4: Hiring the wrong kind of sales personality

Wolves

Some people are great at closing deals but still bad for your business because they're too aggressive.

They'll try to close deals that shouldn't be closed, and they'll stretch the truth or lie to customers just to earn a commission. They don't care about long-term viability; they just care about bringing in cash today.

They can hurt your brand and reputation and destroy any trust you have in the marketplace.

Lambs

They're the opposite of mercenaries: too soft. They lack the ambition to succeed in sales.

They won't pursue prospects properly. They'll be too timid in everything they do and ultimately fail to bring in enough deals.

A great salesperson has to be both competitive and compassionate!

Risk #5: Hiring sales leadership too soon

When founders bring in seasoned sales veterans, it's usually because they think the five, 10, 15 or even more years of sales experience will help grow their startup faster.

But these people are often not good at *sales exploration*. They are good at selling something the market already knows and understands, not creating completely new sales models for a startup. But that's probably exactly what you need right now. Your sales activities will look something like this:

- Figuring out how to sell your product/crafting your first pitch
- Building a sales funnel from scratch
- Developing sales materials
- Creating a sales objection document
- Making referrals part of your lead generation process
- Writing and testing cold email templates to generate more leads

So when is the right time to bring in sales leadership?

When you've surpassed the phase of sales exploration and need to focus on sales execution, when you already have a proven sales model, sales scripts, product/market fit and sales materials—aka predictability in your sales model.

Spot bad fits early: 20 red flags for sales hiring

Hiring is a tough nut to crack. The amount of dilly-dalliers who hide behind good looks and quick wit is impressive.

So how do you weed out bad candidates?

It's not easy to uncover who'll be the right sales hire for your company, and the criteria that makes someone good or bad will differ for everyone. But I want to share what's worked well—consistently and historically—for us here at Close.io.

Here are 20 red flags to look out for in your sales hiring process.

1. They can't get the basics right

Spelling errors. Inappropriate photos on their LinkedIn. Tardiness. If your candidate can't get the basics right, how well will they do when it comes to their actual job responsibilities?

2. They haven't done their homework

If a potential sales hire doesn't do any research to figure out if they're the right fit for you, and if you're the right fit for them, they'll most likely do the same thing on the job. That means they won't do a great job prospecting or qualifying leads—which means no closed deals.

3. They can't pitch

If someone can't sell themselves, do you think they can pitch your product or business? Probably not.

A good elevator pitch goes a long way. It's not more difficult than answering these questions:

- Where are you coming from?
- Where are you right now?

- Where are you going?

If a candidate can provide you with a broader context of who they are, you'll be able to assess if they're a good fit for your company and your culture.

4. They've been switching jobs

If someone hasn't stayed with a company for more than 12 months, it raises questions. Are they bad at choosing a company that's a good fit for them? Are they difficult to work with? Could they not get the job done?

It might not be a bad thing necessarily, but pay attention to how they answer the questions about why they left their previous positions after a short amount of time.

5. They've held the same position for years

On the opposite end of the spectrum, if someone's held the same position at the same company for several years, it could mean they have no ambition. Is someone that's just happy to sit there and watch the days go by a person you want to be a part of your team? Unlikely.

6. They're bad mouthing ex-employers

This leads to instant disqualification. This person most likely feels insecure about their experience or performance at their last job, but it might also be a sign of poor integrity.

If you've had an issue with someone in the company, there's a respectful way of saying that. "It wasn't a good cultural fit so I decided to move on" would be the appropriate way to say, "My boss was an asshole."

Let's leave it at that.

7. They share sensitive information from past employers

If a potential sales hire starts sharing data and company secrets—they're out. This means they'll be doing it at your company, too.

8. They don't have any questions

If a potential sales hire doesn't have any questions during the interview process, chances are they won't be good at sales. Selling is about asking questions and figuring out if your product is the right solution for someone. Similar to that, the interviewee should be figuring out if you, as an employer, are a good fit for them.

9. They don't have a reason for applying for the job

Dear Sir/Madam, a sales candidate that shows up to an interview without a customized pitch, isn't looking for a job at your company; they're looking for any job—anywhere.

Some people just send off applications left and right. If a sales candidate has no real purpose behind their application, they likely won't feel like they have any purpose in their role either.

That's why boilerplate candidates are often a waste of your time.

10. They have weak references

This red flag comes in three parts:

- **Their references are from the same company.** If a potential sale hire has worked at five different companies over the years, but only provides references from one of them, it's likely that they didn't do that good of a job at the other ones.
- **They didn't think about what makes for a good reference.** If the office manager says someone can make a mean pasta

carbonara, it's not going to mean much. Doesn't matter if the person makes for a great lunch partner if they can't close a deal.

- **They didn't prepare their references.** When you call up a reference, they should expect your call and be prepared for it. If someone picks up the phone and has no idea who you are or why you're calling, that's just sloppy work.

11. They don't seem trustworthy

We all have a built in BS meter. Especially people that work in sales. This meter helps us decide whether someone is a) credible, and b) trustworthy. There might be conflicting information, statements that don't add up and so on, but more than anything—it's a feeling.

If you don't trust someone, you can't work with them. Period.

12. They are too aggressive

Being confident is good; being overly aggressive is bad. Some people are more aggressive by nature, but there's a way to navigate that quality and use it to your benefit. We all appreciate when someone walks into a room with a presence and a bit of bravado, but there's a difference between that and being in someone's face, constantly.

Think about how these people would come across when they talk to a prospect. No one enjoys getting ploughed down by an ignorant alpha, especially when they're looking for help.

At worst, this type of person could create a toxic culture in your sales team.

13. They are too nice

People that are too nice can potentially be pushovers. These people are often very likable, but they lack confidence. There's a strong likelihood that this will not translate well in their ability to influence prospects and turn them into customers.

14. They lack enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is contagious. While this isn't a deal breaker, if someone lacks enthusiasm or energy, if they don't get excited, then why should you get excited about them?

One of the things sales managers love about our inside sales CRM is the ability to automatically record all the calls their reps are making.

This allows them to listen in to the sales conversations their reps have when they're not in the room. As a sales manager, if you randomly listen in to archived call recordings, you can very quickly get a sense for how consistent your reps are.

15. They lack self-awareness

I often test people's level of self-awareness. If a person is very far removed from the reality of a situation, that's likely to be an issue. People need to be able to assess themselves in order to make progress and improve.

Often, I weigh the importance of this based on level of seniority. If a sales candidate is really junior, it's not as big of an issue. But if someone is really senior and doesn't have the level of self-awareness that one would expect at that stage, I'd be concerned.

16. They don't seem coachable

This relates back to the previous point. If a person isn't self-aware, they're not very likely to be coachable.

A good test is to give someone negative yet constructive feedback and see how quickly they apply that feedback. If someone can't take feedback on board, they won't be able to learn and improve in their role either.

17. They're defensive

Excuses, excuses, excuses. If a person responds to critique or negative feedback in the form of excuses, they don't know how to take responsibility for their actions.

18. They don't have any drive

What motivates them as a salesperson? Is it the money? The thrill of the close? The idea of bringing value to someone else's life? The chance of changing the world?

Whatever it may be, there's a reason why we all get out of bed in the morning. Having drive and motivation is key to doing anything well, let alone selling.

19. They've always been successful

If a potential sales hire shows up at an interview with a spotless track record and has never experienced failure, it's likely that they've been very cautious in the way they make decisions.

Perhaps they've only done things they know they'd be successful at.

The vast majority of us have experienced failure and misfortune in one way or another. If a person hasn't, it's likely they haven't taken any risks or truly challenged themselves.

20. They've only seen failure

On the other hand, if a person can only point to failure in their previous companies, that reveals that they're not learning fast enough. Because if you're learning, you wouldn't keep failing.

These red flags don't apply to every company and sales team. Choose the red flags that fit your culture and utilize them in your sales hiring process.

My rule? If I collect more than three red flags during an interview—you're out.

Are you guaranteed to make the right hiring decisions based on this? Of course not. But I hope they'll help you in the process of weeding out bad sales candidates.

The diamond in the rough: How to handle underdogs

Ten years ago, I hired a salesperson with incredible drive. He had recently lost everything—his job, his house, all his money. But he was hungry to get back in the game and work his ass off. He was underqualified, but what he lacked in experience, he made up for in energy. So I took a chance on him.

I spent an excessive amount of time trying to train him, because I desperately wanted to be right about him. I worked nights and weekends with him. I coached him to nail down his sales pitch and aggressively pursue leads. But a year later, we weren't seeing *any* improvement. He just didn't have hustle—that killer instinct you need in sales.

I ended up wasting my own time *and* my new employee's time, just trying to get him to be *good enough*. By the time I let him go, not only was he out of a job, but he had just wasted a year trying to fit a role that wasn't right for him.

He was one of many hiring mistakes I've made. And while I still believe in hiring based on attitude and not just experience, I've realized that risky hires need to be carefully managed to ensure they become successful.

Why underdogs make the best hires

While most managers run straight to the rock stars, the best hires usually end up being the underdogs. The underdogs are enthusiastic learners, eager to absorb the ins and outs of the business. Coming in as rookies, they often have the greatest growth potential because while anyone can learn sales skills, no one else can learn the underdog's hunger.

But underdogs present the toughest hiring decisions, because you have to bet on whether they have what it takes to catch up to the rest of the team. As a result, you need to walk a fine line between giving them a chance to meet their potential and knowing when it's time to cut your losses and part ways.

How to work with underdogs

Underdogs are such tempting hires because they are often greatly undervalued candidates. They're not applying for the job to work for a few years and then move on. They are looking for a growth opportunity to kick-start their career, so whoever offers them that opportunity will earn their allegiance and undivided attention.

They're also my personal kryptonite because I've been an underdog for most of my career.

But not every underdog is a success story. Sales requires a grit and hustle that they might not have. The trick in dealing with underdogs is knowing when to call it quits, since the more time and money you invest, the more emotionally invested you become, and the more difficult it will be for you to make a rational and objective decision when to call it quits.

By setting up a bulletproof system for evaluating the performance of a new hire, you'll accomplish three things:

1. Weed out underperformers by setting your expectations in stone.
2. Enable those who have what it takes to succeed by holding them to high standards.
3. Set the same expectations for all your sales reps.

Gauging your expectations will help your underdog achieve top results and succeed within your company. Here are four questions to ask yourself when preparing to hire them.

1. Does the underdog walk the walk?

Due to the psychological concept of illusory superiority, most people overestimate their capabilities. For example, in one survey of Stanford MBA students, 87% of the student body claimed that their academic performance was above average.

Likewise, people tend to exaggerate their work ethic. They think, "Well, I

could be hardworking if I wanted to be.” So some applicants will fool managers into thinking they’re underdogs when they’re actually just cleverly disguised misfits.

Since their performance won't be up to par yet, pay particular attention to how new hires spend their time to see if they’re as hungry as they claim:

- Check to see if they are eagerly taking notes and learning the processes
- Get feedback from their peers to see how well they’re absorbing new information
- Ask for concerns from the hires themselves to get a sense of how motivated they are to improve

You hired the underdog because you thought they’d dig deep and give you their all. If their work ethic is anything less than excellent during onboarding, think about how they’ll act in six months. Cut your losses quickly if you were duped in the interview process by an undercover misfit.

2. How long are you prepared to wait for them to catch up?

In just the US and UK, companies spend about \$37 billion dollars annually to keep on unproductive employees who do not understand their jobs. To stop yourself from falling into this trap, set a time limit before you hire the underdog in the first place.

You’ll need more time than you think. Sales managers drastically underestimate how long it should take someone to get the hang of the processes. Training a new sales rep typically takes 7 months, but over 27% of employers judge the success of an entry-level employee in just two weeks.

So I recommend that you decide how much time you think catch-up should take for someone with no sales background, and **double it**. Setting time expectations before hiring the candidate lets you know when to cut your losses should their passion and work ethic *not* make up for their lack of experience.

3. How will you onboard this hire?

Training a new sales rep is a time-consuming process, so it might be your first instinct to let the underdog have at it themselves. But studies have shown that 40% of employees who receive poor training leave their jobs within a year. You hired the underdog because you thought he had the right zeal for success. The last thing you want to do is set him up for failure.

Underdogs will require more attention than more qualified hires to succeed. That means that the training responsibility falls entirely on you, as the manager. Since underdogs have the greatest growth potential in the company, you want to make sure you equip them to meet their full potential, and be the stars of your workforce.

You can do this by having a metrics-based training program set in stone:

- **Measure** performance through things like time to close a sale, or amount of emails that resulted in a qualified lead.
- Use these metrics to **pinpoint** their strengths and weaknesses, and work with them on improving them.
- **Delegate** some training responsibilities to more experienced staff members to improve team dynamic.

To see whether your training program is working, have a weekly 1:1 with the new hire yourself. This way you can see first-hand whether any progress has been made.

4. How will you measure success?

Being data-driven is a surefire way to stop yourself from making excuses for the sympathetic underdogs. So make sure that your final evaluation of their performance is quantitative and not qualitative.

Too many managers set expectations either unreasonably high (equivalent to their top performers), or unreasonably low (because they're newbies). The ultimate benchmark should be equal to the average performance

among your sales reps.

This benchmark is the *minimum* performance expectation—anything below, will indicate that the employee wasn't worth the investment. You are not hiring an underdog because you want an employee with a free pass—you're hiring an underdog because their hunger and energy gave you the impression they were capable of not just catching up, but excelling.

So, if doubling the amount of time you anticipated isn't enough for the underdogs to meet your standards, then you'll know that it's time to let them go.

Turn your underdogs into rock stars

Keep in mind that every rock star employee once started out as an underdog. While an underdog requires more training and work than other applicants do, should they persevere, their allegiance and passion will make them some of the best employees you've ever worked with.

What sets underdogs apart from other hires is their contagious passion. They are so energized by their ambitions that they will stop at nothing until they've reached their goals. And while most sales skills can be taught, this superb attitude cannot.

If you catch these gems early, you'll find that the underdogs can have a spectacular, long-lasting impact, both on overall sales performance and on the team dynamic—making them well-worth the risk and the investment.

The senior sales hire that will destroy your startup

You'll believe this salesperson to be your startup's savior. He's got an incredible Rolodex and 30 years of relevant industry experience. Let's call him Charlie Charlatan.

Charlie knows how the game is played in the big league. Yet, he chose to play with you in little league. Why? Oh, he can explain sure! Reasons you'll enjoy listening to: He believes in your vision, he can see the potential in your idea. He thirsts for the speed and spirit of a new startup.

You'll meet Charlie when you need him the most: Early on when your startup is struggling to find product/market fit, struggling to grow consistent revenue and sign up new paying customers.

These are the kinds of thoughts you'll be pondering in your mind:

- Why is sales so difficult?
- Why don't we have more customers?
- We need someone who can close more and bigger deals.

There he is, Charlie, your knight in shining armor, ready to slay the monster that's holding you back from explosive growth.

If it sounds like a cheap fairy tale ... that's because it is!

Here's what will happen

Charlie will join your team, and he'll negotiate as much money and equity out of you as you're willing to give up. (But hey, that just shows what a great salesperson he is, right?)

Charlie will start calling, reaching out into his network, building a stellar pipeline. You'll hear him talk much about prospects, leads and opportunities.

All that's needed to turn these opportunities into customers is ...

- More and higher quality sales materials
- Expensive steak dinners
- A "slight" tweak to your product, an added feature, a different UX (Charlie knows what will make prospects buy because of all the conversations he's having, so of course you should listen to him.)
- A redesigned website
- A better drip campaign
- A new piece of sales or marketing software ("Yes, \$15,000 looks like a lot, but that's just the price of doing business, trust me on this.")
- Hiring an outsourced lead generation company
- Spending \$60,000 on AdWords
- Feeding a unicorn with magic barley on full moon nights

Charlie will initially make little asks, reasonable requests, but they'll increasingly turn into bigger and bolder demands. After everything you'll have invested already, you're not going to suddenly pull out. All of it would have been wasted.

All those hot deals he's working on take forever, and never materialize. "It takes time to close those massive deals," he'll tell you. Which isn't wrong, but you need to be involved, to have a read on the temperature of the deals yourself and not just trust someone else's judgment at the super early stage.

At one point, most likely when it's already too late, you'll realize it: Inside that shining armor is not a knight, but a black hole that devours all your startup's resources, until there's nothing left of it. Charlie will be on to the next startup, peddling his counterfeit sales expertise.

Why do so many smart founders fall for Charlie Charlatan?

For the same reason smart people have fallen for con men's schemes since hundreds of years: they want to believe them! The shysters' promises sound so good; we desperately want it to be true. That desire overrides all the sophisticated processing going on in our neocortex.

Even Charlie often believes his own bullshit. From his point of view, it's always forces outside of his control—the founders, the market, the VCs, the other reps, the incompetent VPs, the CEO—that prevent him from the breakthrough success he's chasing.

The simple truth is this: A truly great, successful senior salesperson won't join your scrambling little startup. That salesperson would earn hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of dollars a year, without the stress and uncertainty of startup struggle.

But shouldn't you hire people above your own weight class?

Common hiring advice: Recruit someone who's better than you are at _____ (sales/product/management/marketing/etc).

It's great advice, but there's an important clause that needs to be added: Recruit someone who is a little bit better than you are at _____.

Hiring people below your own skill level is fairly easy.

Hiring people in the same level as you is hard.

Hiring people who are a level above you, a bit more experienced, a bit more skillful, a bit better at what they do than the things that you are doing, that's crazy hard.

But hiring two or three classes above you? Impossible.

If you're a scrappy little startup with a handful of employees, you won't be able to recruit Tim Cook as CEO, and you won't be able to recruit a top VP of Sales.

The one exception

If that VP of Sales rock star is someone you've known all your life. Your brother, your mother, your cousin, your childhood friend from school? Different story.

But anything other than that? Almost certainly a pipedream. You've got better chances of success driving to Vegas and betting all that equity and money on red.

Reality check

If you ever find yourself in a situation like this and you're still tempted after reading this because you're too scared to lose the great opportunity to bring that sales rock star on board, put your Charlie to the test.

Don't hire nor reject him yet. Instead, say this: "Hey, Charlie, before you leave your amazing job and join our high-risk venture, let's make sure that this is really the right opportunity for both of us. I know you have this incredible Rolodex, deep industry knowledge and valuable experience. Let's close one deal together before we do this."

That's it. If they are really that excited about joining your startup, it's not too big an ask. In fact, it's in their own interest. Have them close a deal for you.

Not promises, not a pipeline, not a partnership proposal. Have them bring in real revenue from paying customers.

Can they do it? Great! Disregard everything I told you and hire them. (Also, send me an email to tell me about it. I want to hear THAT story!)

RAMPING UP: HOW TO ONBOARD, INCENTIVIZE, AND STRUCTURE YOUR SALES TEAM

Designing a winning sales commission structure

If you're faced with the challenge of developing a commission structure for your first sales hire as a startup, there are two very different ways you can go about it.

The collaborative way

You're looking for someone with whom you can collaboratively create a sales commission structure.

"I don't know the right way to do this, but I want to find out together with you.

I will pay you a base salary for the first couple of months while we develop the commission plan.

If you want maximum money, go to a more established company that has everything in place already. If you want maximum learning and growth, join us because you'll work directly with me (one of the founders or senior hires at the startup).

We'll have to create this sales commission plan not just for you, but for every future sales rep as well. So this won't be an easy job."

Find someone truly excited about tackling this challenge, and then get to work together. Or go in the opposite direction.

The fake it till you make it way

Pretend to know what you're doing. Present your first sales hires with a commission structure that's based on the results you want: wishful thinking.

What if they don't deliver these numbers?

You let them go, lower your expectations, adjust your commission structure and then hire new people.

Why can't you keep the same reps? Why do you have to fire them? Because they will be (rightfully) upset if you gave them a flawed commission structure.

They won't trust you and won't feel excited about working for you anymore. So bring in new people and start from scratch with them—this time with a more achievable commission structure

Don't wait

Which way should you choose? That depends on your personality and the kind of company you want to run. Both are viable, both work, and more importantly both will get you going *immediately*.

One of the biggest mistakes I've seen founders make is waiting way too long to figure out "the perfect commission structure" before hiring salespeople.

There is no such thing as getting the commission structure right the first time around. This, just like everything else in a startup, will be about trial and error. Success will be achieved by moving fast, learning fast, and course correcting rather than thinking your way to perfect solutions and getting it right with the first execution.

We know founders that have been waiting for over two years before hiring much-needed salespeople because they had analysis paralysis about the "right compensation structure." Don't be one of those startups!

Crunching the numbers

Once you have decided which way to go, you'll need to think about the actual numbers. How do you best incentivize sales reps? How do you align their interests with your business' interests?

There's a delicate balance to it: You want them to be aggressive enough to pursue deals with determination, but you don't want them to close bad deals.

Real-life case study

A friend of mine got hired as the head of sales and business development at a cool startup.

He was about to hire the first salesperson, and needed to come up with a commission structure.

Their product costs several hundred dollars a month. His idea was to pay out \$100 every month for the sales rep who brought in the deal for the first 12 months.

He asked, "What do you think? Is that a good idea?"

I told him to not spread things out so much. Instead, pay upfront, but pay a little less.

Rather than paying out \$1,200 over the course of 12 months, he could pay \$600 after three months.

What's the advantage in structuring things like this?

It will keep the sales rep motivated. If a sales rep knows he'll still get commissions for the deals closed six months ago, he might become complacent. You want your sales reps hungry.

Is this the perfect commission structure for his business? I doubt so. But it's a decent way to get started.

Compensation/sales fit

But what about churn? Expansion revenue? I know there are a lot of details that need to be fine-tuned to design a compensation plan that will fuel and scale your sales efforts. I don't want to suggest that it's easy at all.

Just like it's impossible to hit product/market fit without having your product hit the market, you won't get compensation/salesperson (and sales model) fit without having salespeople perform under your compensation plan highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of it.

For more advice on this topic, you can also read Aaron Ross's excellent book *Predictable Revenue* for some examples of how to develop your compensation structure with your sales team.

The 3 models of effective sales team organization

We like to paint a picture of salespeople as cowboys, who walk in with guns blazing. The best salespeople are go-getters, who seize initiative and take charge. You might think that it's best to just hire amazing sales talent, and let them hit the ground running.

You'd be wrong. A Harvard Business Review study shows that 50% of high-performing sales organizations have well-documented sales processes that are explicitly structured, compared to 28% of under-performing organizations. You can't just haphazardly start hiring sales reps, and expect your business to grow automatically.

As a founder or manager, it's your responsibility to choose the appropriate organizational structure that fits your business and your culture. In doing so, you'll cultivate a high-growth environment that will allow your sales force to truly shine.

Here are the three basic sales team structures that you can use to ramp up your sales game and start off on the right foot.

The island

The island model of sales organization leads to a more traditional, "sell-or-die" environment that people typically associate with sales reps. There's actually very little organizational structure that goes into it. You provide your team with some basic back-end services: some training, a range of products they can sell, a commission structure, maybe an office—and that's it.

In this model, every sales rep is essentially responsible for each step of the sales process on their own. They have to generate leads by themselves, qualify them, and close them. Reps within this framework tend to be more aggressive. They've got their elbows out in fierce competition—not just with the larger market, but their own teams as well.

Members of your sales team essentially become their own entrepreneur.

This model dominates traditional sales operations, like real estate or financial services. Think about your average real estate agent. She'll walk into her office each day, and nominally represent a larger real estate agency, like Coldwell Bankers, or the Corcoran Group. But she'll promote her listings mostly on her own, by posting them online, calling prospects on the phone, and running open houses—all in hopes of a close.

Pros:

- Very little managerial oversight required on a one-on-one basis
- Good for simple sales processes, like a one or two call-to-close product

Cons:

- Creates a very aggressive sales environment
- You have much less control over how your brand is represented in the market, because it's highly dependent upon each individual rep's style.
- Because everyone does everything, it's difficult to keep track of key sales metrics and benchmarks

Takeaway

The island model isn't great for most startups—it's too aggressive, and too competitive—but there's always exceptions. It typically suits companies that work in established markets, with high levels of competition. The island model works best for low complexity, high-transaction sales processes. Sometimes, simplest *is* best.

The assembly line

The assembly line drove the Industrial Revolution, and built Ford's famous Model T. It essentially specialized the labor force, and sequentially arranged production processes for max efficiency.

You can apply the assembly line to your sales team. Your raw materials are essentially your prospective customers, who are cultivated and refined

during the sales cycle. The assembly line typically breaks down a sales force by function into four different groups:

- **Lead generation team:** Responsible for developing leads, and gathering names, phone numbers, emails, and data.
- **Sales Development Representatives (SDRs):** Also commonly referred to as Qualifiers/Prospectors. SDRs reach out to prospects and qualify them by asking questions that focus on customer needs, and identify the decision-making process.
- **Account Executives (AEs):** Responsible for closing the deal. They call up qualified leads, give demos, manage objections, move the deal forward, and ultimately try to close the deal.
- **Customer Success team:** Once a deal is closed, new customers are passed on to this team. They're focused on account management and keeping customers happy, increasing lifetime value (LTV) for each customer. They also help upsell customers to higher plans.

The assembly line allows your sales team to specialize among different functions and roles. Each step of the sales cycle has a dedicated team. As customers walk through the funnel—from leads, to qualified opportunities, to new customers—they're passed on to the next team.

Because each unit of the assembly line is so specialized in function, you can hold each team accountable to the various sales metrics they're responsible for.

By specializing your team, it becomes much easier to isolate bottlenecks in your funnel, and fix them accordingly. For example, perhaps you set an overall sales goal of closing 12 deals out of every 100 leads sourced. If the results you're pulling are five deals out of every 100, you can look closer at each stage of the funnel to find the friction. You might look at your AEs and see that they're closing an acceptable 25% of qualified leads, but your SDRs are only managing to qualify 20% of raw leads.

You can dive right in, and see what's up with your SDR team—whether an individual member of the team simply isn't converting quality leads, or whether it's a more global problem. You could institute further training and

data-driven coaching, to boost SDRs up to 50% of leads qualified rate, and hit your broader sales goals. Looking at the segmentation of your funnel is one of the most powerful ways to fine-tune the engine of your sales machine.

Even with only two sales reps, you can still start specialization early. Have one focus on prospecting new clients, and the other on closing deals, based on their natural abilities and talents. Use the 80/20 rule to determine when to build new stations on the assembly line—when your reps spend 20% or more of their time on a secondary function, it might be appropriate to pass that role on to a specialist.

Pros:

- Creates predictability for your business
- Makes it easy to isolate sales problems in the funnel, and laser in on them
- More specialization = more efficiency

Cons:

- When you're starting out with two sales reps, it's difficult to split them into four different teams—you just won't have enough manpower for the job.
- By splitting up the funnel into different stages, there can be friction between the hand-off of customers as they travel through the funnel.
- Because teams are highly specialized, each team member becomes increasingly disconnected from the overall business goals of the company. They're focused on their own specific numbers and metrics instead.

Takeaway

Most startups will find that some form of the assembly line will work best for them. It's great for reducing the complexity of your sales cycle, increasing sales efficiency, and scaling your team. Your sales cycle is probably relatively complex. It will only grow more complex along with

your business. The higher your annual customer value (ACV), the more important it is to have specialized sales team members dedicated to each part of the customer journey.

The power of the assembly line sales model lies in creating a reliable and repeatable process for nurturing leads. In doing so, it takes your funnel and transforms it into a revenue powerhouse as you build your business to scale.

The pod

A pod works along similar lines to the assembly line model of sales, but instead creates focused tight-knit groups, or “pods” that are composed of team members that play different roles. A podular organization is **customer-centric**.

For example, a six-person sales pod would be composed of three SDRs, two AEs, and one Customer Success rep. Instead of having large teams, you create little pods of specialized roles, and each pod is responsible for the entire journey of specific customers.

You still utilize the specialist roles we outlined above, with SDRs, AEs, and Customer Success reps. But instead of having all of your SDRs or AEs compete against each other, with a podular organization of your sales team, pods compete with other pods. Each pod works together to win the customer, and keep them happy afterwards. They’re more fluid, and come up with ideas independently.

With the pod, you build a more modular and flexible structure than the traditional model. Since success is measured by pod, each member of the sales force has a larger, more holistic view of the entire company. Pods build more meaningful connections between teammates. You can specialize pods based on different industries, verticals, or countries.

Pros:

- Because pods work in close-knit teams, your sales team doesn’t just care about their own step in the process, but about the entire customer journey.
- High empathy and understanding within pods, less friction and better communication

- Pods are more flexible and agile

Cons:

- With the pod structure, there's less opportunity for your individual sales reps to compete and grow, and push each other to excel
- Less specialization with each role, as each member becomes more of a "jack-of-all-trades"

Takeaway

The pod structure of sales management is essentially a refined version of the assembly line. It's perfect for more mature startups trying to optimize existing sales resources to tap into new markets and verticals.

If you work in a competitive industry, with aggressive companies cranking well-run assembly lines, it can be hard to compete with a pod model—the pod trades efficiency for versatility. But if you've established your market, and have significant traction, organizing your teams into pods creates a highly flexible, agile sales force, ready to meet a variety of challenges, and pounce upon new opportunities.

Don't forget the culture

There's two simple goals you want to meet when it comes to organizing your sales team:

1. Drive maximum results.
2. Create the best cultural fit for your organization.

Take a look at the other competitors within your industry—how are their sales teams structured? You don't have to imitate what they're doing. But if everyone in your market is crushing it in a specific way, it's worth asking why—and finding out if there's a good, rational reason behind it.

As you structure your sales team, what's most important is finding the right fit that will drive the results you're looking for.

It's critical that you constantly ask yourself, "What kind of team are *we*? What kind of culture are *we* trying to create?" The team you build and the way you structure it in the early-stages of your startup will leave a huge

footprint on your sales process, as you further grow and scale your business.

Don't leave it up to chance. Choose the sales model and team that works for your business and you'll build a sales machine capable of sustaining long-term growth.

How to onboard a sales team in 4 weeks

Guest chapter by Nick Persico. You can follow him on Twitter @NickPersico and read his personal blog at <https://nickpersico.com>.

I was hired by Sysco, the largest foodservice distributor in North America, to be an outside sales rep at 21 years old. My first day was in the beginning of February, and they had me in a training program until the middle of May.

That's right; three months went by before I actually got to speak to my first prospect.

The beauty of being a startup is that you get to skip all of that nonsense. Forget long training sessions filled with hypothetical bullshit.

Let's turn people with little or no experience into selling machines in just four weeks.

Before their first day

The first step to onboarding a sales team in four weeks is preparation. You need to have every day of each week mapped out. Not only do you need a schedule, but you also need to have benchmarks at different points throughout the four weeks. To help you put this together, follow the directions at the back of this book to download the exact schedule we used when we onboarded our first sales hires at Smart Host.

At the end of two weeks, what milestones should each new hire have under their belt? Should they already have a pipeline? Closed a deal? That's up to you, but set a benchmark and make it clear that everyone should be on pace to hit the milestones.

Your sales team's first day should always be on a Saturday. I've written about this in the past, and I believe it's the most effective way to onboard anyone joining a company.

By coming in on Saturday, they get to meet the team without the distraction of the workday. They get a test run in finding your office. You can equip them with the tools they need and focus 100% of your attention on putting them in a position to be successful.

Most importantly, they know what's expected of them when they come in Monday morning.

Week 1: They are making calls to prospects by noon on their first day

If calls are happening before noon on the first day, you're off to a great start. The great thing about this goal is that it most likely requires them to have a script and access to all of the software your team uses internally. It also means they are learning how to do the job in a real way.

Stop fucking around with training sessions and put them in front of prospects as soon as possible. Let them learn the hard and fast way like you did.

Use the first week to let them learn the ropes on their own. Schedule a stand up at the end of each day where they can ask you questions. A daily stand up is very important for a number of reasons:

- The team asks questions about direct feedback they are hearing out in the market. You can help them get better at managing objections or improve their pitch.
- You'll be able to figure out if the leads they're calling are any good. Look at daily reach rates to see if you can add or improve on the lead list overnight.
- They are part of the improvement process. The discussion is there to help everyone improve, as well as improve the sales process.

You didn't learn how to ride a bike from your parents telling you about every aspect of how the bike worked. You just got on the bike, fell a bunch of times, and eventually figured it out. Treat new sales hires as if they are learning to ride a bike. They'll appreciate the process.

Week 2: Train them on the sales process as they move deals forward

The biggest mistake people make when training salespeople is overloading them with processes. You should not be spending time training the group on how to send a proposal or create a new user account.

No one sends a proposal or creates a user account until they earn it.

I always train new hires on the sales process as they are moving their deals forward. The most common and basic SaaS sales process is four weeks long. If they start their first week calling people trying to schedule product demos, they may be conducting those demos and creating opportunities in the second week. Tell them what they need to know as they move the deal forward.

New hires will reach certain parts of the sales process at different times. Train each person individually on each part of the process as they move forward. It will give you the opportunity to work with them 1-on-1 and continue to evaluate if they are a good fit.

Week 3: Focus on small individual improvements

By the third week, the good salespeople will start to separate themselves from the pack. They're hustling every day, and getting better at pitching your product. Now it's time to help each person work on their weaknesses.

One person may be weak at organizing their day. Another may be using the wrong terminology to describe something. Identify those weaknesses and communicate them, and have each person focus on improving on that single aspect of their sales game.

Use the single focus to see if they are capable of prioritizing things. Did they improve on that metric or trait? Did they take the feedback?

If so, you're starting to build a great sales team.

Week 4: They can manage themselves

The fourth week is all about taking off the training wheels. Ask yourself, "Are they realizing their mistakes and self-correcting? Are they working

together to improve by sharing feedback? Are they following the schedule laid out in the first three weeks?"

By the fourth week, your team should have a clear understanding of what's expected of them, from their quota to their goals. Even if the goal is team-oriented for now, they should be aware and focused on making it happen.

The one-day sales rep onboarding hack

What if you have to onboard your sales team even faster?

Instead of weeks or months of training before your reps are allowed to talk to prospects, I'm going to show you **how to train sales reps to make sales calls from day one**. Turn new hires into product experts at the speed of startup, so they'll be able to answer any question right away.

It's a scalable strategy for training and onboarding new sales hires a lot faster.

Practice trumps theory

Don't just shove training materials down their throats, but expose them to real-world scenarios.

It's like learning to swim - you can't learn it by reading about swimming. You need to actually get in the water.

The documentation you give them is just a life jacket to keep them afloat, not a boat that prepares them for getting in the water.

Create a new sales rep training manual

What are the 20% of questions that prospects ask 80% of the time? What are the 10 to 20 most common things they want to know?

Write down these questions.

Then write down the short and concise answers.

(Involve the most successful members of your sales team in creating this training guide for new sales hires.) You're basically creating an objection management document.

Have your new sales hires study this document, so that they can confidently answer the majority of questions prospects ask.

Don't know the answer?

What if a prospect asks the new sales rep a question they haven't been trained on?

Train your new sales reps to say this:

1. That's a great question.
2. I don't know the answer for this.
3. But I will find it out for you. I will go to a person in the company that's the best person to answer this and I will make sure to come back to you with an honest and accurate answer today. Is that ok with you?"

This accomplishes two important things:

- It enables your sale reps to get the right answer to the prospect, and learn more about your product.
- It creates trust, because it's authentic and truthful.

We called hundreds of thousands of people when we were still running our outsourced sales force, and nobody ever was upset about this. People often appreciate getting such an unexpectedly candid answer from a salesperson. They'd rather have honest answers later over bullshit answers now.

But what if it's a super simple question?

Some questions are so basic that it can be almost embarrassing if a sales rep doesn't know the answer. Things like, "How long has your company been in business?"

How should a new sales rep respond if they can't answer such a simple question?

Same formula, just add these words after "I don't know the answer":
"Because this is my first week. I just got started here."

Nobody is mad at people who are new at a business. Everybody has been in that position and knows what it's like.

What's your company culture?

Don't expect your salespeople to be perfect and know all the answers. It's going to create pressure for them to bullshit when they don't know the answer.

They will just say things like, "Oh we have been around for three years." - "Why did you say that?" - "Well, I didn't want them to know that I don't know and embarrass us."

You know what's embarrassing? Having to make up lies instead of giving forthright replies.

Just be honest. It's an opportunity to stand out from the crowd, and it starts with the way you onboard new sales reps.

Don't require them to have all the right answers— require them to have the right attitude.

Flip it, and reverse it

Here's how you take this to the next level. Have your sales reps respond to questions they can't answer as follows:

1. Great question.
2. I don't know the answer (because I'm new here).
3. But I'll find it out for you.
4. In the meanwhile, let me ask you, "What would you want the answer to be in a perfect scenario?"
5. Why?

That fourth and fifth step is where the magic happens.

Prospects have a chance to say what they want and then explain why they want it.

Your sales reps can flip the question around, and turn it into an opportunity to learn more about the prospects, to understand them better, to qualify them.

Here are some questions that will be helpful for this step:

- What would be your ideal answer?
- How are you going to use this? / What's the use case?
- What is the workflow when this is relevant and important?
- What do you want the answer to be and why is that important to you?
- Tell me a little bit more about your company/team, and by the end of the conversation I will make sure to come back with any missing information.
- Why do you want that to be that way? Why is this important to you?

Typically, what happens with new sales hires who don't ask these questions is that they don't provide enough context.

They'll go to the engineer and say, "Somebody asked me, how do you configure this on the API level?"

Engineer: "What's the use case for this question? Why is this relevant?"

New sales rep: "I don't know, I just put down the question. I didn't ask them anything about it."

And then an engineer can't provide them with a good answer, because they lack context.

Most sales leaders teach new reps to give the right answers. Great sales leaders teach new reps to ask the right questions.

BONUS: THE QUICK START GUIDE TO HIRING

You're ready to start hiring.

I covered everything from when you should start hiring sales reps to how to quickly yet efficiently onboard them, as well as my unconventional interviewing hacks.

And if I've did my job right, you should be feeling more knowledgeable and motivated to hire some great sales reps.

There's only want thing possibly holding you back from jumpstarting your own sales hiring process: you.

Too many people put off doing what could be done today for tomorrow.

While you may be feeling pumped now, if you don't immediately get the ball rolling on sales hiring, you're going to keep putting it off until the lack of salespeople goes from being an inconvenience to a full-blown pain.

That's why I want to show you the power of right the fuck now and challenge you to apply it to your own sales hiring process.

How I got Paul Graham from Y Combinator to introduce me ... *right then and there*

Years ago, we had a meeting with Paul Graham and I asked him if he'd email an investor. "Sure", said Paul.

When you ask for something, always be prepared for a yes!

I already had my laptop open, with an incognito browser window on the Gmail login screen. I turned my laptop towards him and said, "Can you do it right now?"

PG laughed, logged in and sent the email right then and there.

Could I have emailed him about it later? Yup. Would he still have done it? Probably. But this was important for us and "probably" wasn't good enough.

"Probably" shouldn't be good enough for you either, otherwise whatever it is probably isn't worth doing in the first place.

The power of right the fuck now challenge

At this point, you should know if you're ready to hire sales reps and what type of traits to look for.

Now, it's time to take that knowledge and start searching for those great sales reps.

That's why I want you to take the right the fuck now challenge.

It's only three steps, the exact steps you need to take to start finding sales reps.

1. Make a list of 10 people who you think are great and killing it.
2. Write them an email asking if they know anyone else who is killing it.
3. Contact the people they refer and start recruiting them, using the advice from the chapter "Hire above your talent class: How to recruit the un-recruitable."

To make it a little easier, I'm going to give you an email template to use when asking for referrals.

At the back of this book is a special link to a collection of sales hiring tools. Not only will you get the email template but you'll also receive other great free tools such as a sales hiring checklist and the 4-week sales onboarding schedule. Each tool is designed to be easy-to-use and actionable for maximum impact.

Finding great sales reps won't be easy—that's why you have to start now, instead of tomorrow.

What are you waiting for?

GET THE BONUS MATERIALS!

Make hiring even easier with the right shortcuts:

- The sales hiring checklist
- The 4-week sales onboarding schedule
- An email template for getting referrals for sales candidates
- ... and more!

Visit resources.close.io/saleshiringbook

WANT MORE GREAT STARTUP ADVICE?

Visit the Close.io blog at blog.close.io



Questions, comments? Just contact me at steli@close.io. I would love to hear from you.

