

# Follow established guidelines to interview sales associates

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**INTERVIEWING IS NOT** something that comes naturally to most owner-operated retailers. If you have not done it before, you will first need to understand the process and then work hard at improving your skills. The following guidelines will help you avoid the most common mistakes that interviewers make:

(a) Interview three candidates for each position. From all of the many job applications you collect for each position in your store, you should select the three candidates that best match the characteristics and qualifications you established in writing the job description. We believe that these three candidates are the only ones you should invest time in meeting.

(b) Schedule enough time. The sales associates you are hiring could each bring a million dollars in business to your store over the next five years, so you should be willing to set aside at least an hour to interview each candidate properly.

(c) Meet in a suitable location. Given the importance of the decisions you are making, you will need to give each discussion your full, undivided attention. This implies that you will need to meet in a quiet place where there will be no interruptions.

(d) Put the candidate at ease. For many people, interviews are a frightening experience. This could be for various reasons. As the person conducting the interview, you will need to help the candidate relax so you can get a balanced picture of his or her abilities as a potential sales associate.

(e) Ask productive questions. One-hour interviews go by very quickly, so you should stick to questions that will bring out the information you need to make a good decision. The whole point of holding an interview is to gain employment-related information. If you talk about anything else – the weather, for example – you are just wasting time.

(f) Ask behavioral questions. These deal with things that the candidates have actually done in real-life situations. All too often, interviewers waste time asking hypothetical questions that deal with imaginary situations – ones where the candidates can easily make up what they think are the right answers.

(g) Hide your own bias. As an interviewer, it is all too easy to telegraph desirable responses to your questions.

For example, if a candidate starts telling you about something that happened in his or her last job and you start to frown, the candidate will know immediately that he or she should switch to a different version of the story.

(h) Focus on listening. We know from research that the person who does most of the talking in an interview will view the conversation favorably. In other words, if you do most of the talking, you will think that you had a wonderful interview, but you will know very little about the candidate you were supposedly judging. You should probably talk for no more than 20 percent of the total time.

(i) Promise an answer in reasonable time. At the end of each interview, you need to establish what will happen next. Because you are meeting only three candidates for each position, you should promise each of them a telephone call within the next few days. This is both polite and professional.

(j) Allow time between interviews. You will need time after each interview to make notes while the discussion is fresh in your mind – and then to let your head clear. When conducting several interviews, it is easy to mix up the candidates in your mind.

**EACH HIRING INTERVIEW** you conduct should last about an hour. In that time, you should move the conversation through five distinct steps. Because each step serves a different purpose, you should not skip any of them or do things in a different order. The one exception to this rule is if you find yourself meeting with someone who has no real chance of working for you, in which case you should end the interview quickly and politely.

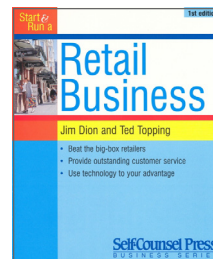
These five steps are explained briefly here – space does not allow a full discussion. You may want to attend a full-day workshop on interviewing or do some further reading before you actually attempt it. Finding good sales associates for your business is well worth the effort.

## Step one: Establish rapport (5 minutes)

In the first five minutes, you should greet the candidate, introduce yourself, shake hands, and invite the candidate to sit down.

Remember that most candidates are a little apprehensive about being interviewed and concerned with making a favorable impression, so engage in a small amount of social conversation to help put the person at ease. You can start with some chat about something you noticed on the candidate's job application form – perhaps the school he or she attended or a hobby he or she lists. This is to make some connection and establish a good climate for conversation.

Outline the basic structure you intend to follow so the candidate understands that he or she will speak first, then



you will speak, and that there will be plenty of time for questions at the end.

#### **Step two: Transition to business issues (5 minutes)**

In the next five minutes, ask an easy first question. You should ask the same first question of each candidate you interview. The purpose is to get down to business, get the candidate talking, and get both of you past the butterflies. Your question might be something like: “What led to your interest in retail?”

After you listen to the answer, you should be able to follow up on one specific point, which helps develop the interview into a two-way conversation. The follow up might be something like: “You mentioned that you think you would be successful in selling. What experience leads you to this conclusion?”

#### **Step three: Probe behavioral dimensions (40 minutes)**

Step three takes up the bulk of the interview time, about 40 minutes. Here you want to focus on the candidate’s work experience and on the characteristics and qualifications that you know you are looking for.

A good way to start for someone who has retail experience is with: “Tell me about the most difficult customer you faced in that job and how you handled that situation.” For someone who does not have retail experience, you might say: “Tell me about the worst argument you ever had with your best friend and how you handled that situation.” Both suggestions work because people tend to handle conflict in a set way.

In this time you should also explore the candidate’s educational background and personal interests. Try questions such as:

- “What subject did you enjoy the most at school? Why do you think you enjoyed that subject?”
- “What special interests do you have? How might these be useful to you in this job?”

#### **Step four: Provide information (5 minutes)**

After you have thoroughly explored the candidate’s suitability, spend five minutes outlining the job using the written job description you have developed. If you make the mistake of doing this earlier in the interview, you allow the candidate to tailor his or her answers to your needs, which means you will get less-useful information. This is not a trick. You have rightly kept the focus of the interview on the candidate until now.

Take a couple of minutes to also tell something about your business. This should not be the complete saga, just a thumbnail sketch of the past, present, and future so that the candidate can start to understand what he or she might be getting into.

Be sure to discuss the opportunity for advancement, if any. We said earlier that an employment relationship lasts only if it is a true win-win situation between the employer and the employee. You should never promise or imply

anything that you know you cannot deliver.

Finally, explain what will happen next in the selection process. If you have other people to interview, say so. Explain that you will make a decision in a certain number of days, and promise to telephone once you do.

#### **Step five: End the interview (5 minutes)**

The final five minutes should be devoted to directing the interview to its end. Offer to answer any questions the candidate may have. (A good candidate may have several.) You should be careful not to build the candidate’s expectations of being hired.

Be sure to thank the candidate for meeting with you. This is more than just being polite; you want to leave the candidate with a positive impression of your store so that he or she can look back on a pleasant discussion regardless of your decision.

**A S SOON AS A** candidate has left the interview, you need to spend some time making notes and thinking through his or her strengths and weaknesses for the position of sales associate. This is the time when the duties, characteristics, and qualifications you spent so much time developing earlier on the job description will make your decision easier.

For each duty, you need to decide if the candidate demonstrated an ability to handle it or not. This may be either yes or no, although you may prefer to use a five-point scale if you are interviewing experienced sales associates.

Next, you should go through your list of necessary characteristics, putting a check mark beside each one that the candidate has demonstrated. You cannot train a person to have these characteristics – the candidate either has them or does not have them.

Then you need to work through the necessary qualifications. This will take a little longer because you need to consider each one separately and decide whether the candidate could be satisfactory with some training.

Next, you should make some general notes about the candidate that might be worth remembering if you later find yourself with two approximately equal candidates. Quite often, it is the things that you remember at this point – but may not remember later – that will tip the balance in favor of one candidate.

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