

# First step to finding good employees is a written job description

*Excerpt from Chapter 4 of "Start and Run a Retail Business" by Jim Dion and Ted Topping, published in Canada and the U.S. by Self-Counsel Press. Available through amazon.com and in stores.*

**THE JOB DESCRIPTION** will define the perfect sales associate for your store. It needs to be written down because you need a document that you can refer to, pass around, and measure potential and existing employees against. The sales associate job description cannot be a vague idea floating around in your head.

As your business evolves, you will no doubt revise this job description to keep it current. However, you should not use this as an excuse to avoid putting pencil to paper now, even if you just come up with a preliminary sketch.

Sample 10 is a sample job description for a sales associate and outlines the most important elements of the job. You may want to expand on this sample, or you may want to create a job description entirely of your own.

Section 1 of the job description form is the job title. People like having a job title that explains what they do. They find it much easier both in the store and when out with friends if they can tell others that they are a "something." As a job title, "sales associate" has been around for at least 100 years. When it denotes a true professional, as it always should, this title is one that people can be proud to have.

Section 2 provides space for a summary of the sales associate's duties and responsibilities. This will be a thumbnail sketch that you can use when discussing the job with other people, but you will have to work through the next section of the form before you can come back to complete this section.

If you want to avoid needless communication problems, ensure that the people who work for you have a clear understanding of the reporting relationships in your business (section 3). You must make it clear at the outset that the sales associates report either directly to you or to the store manager if you employ one. In the latter case, the sales associates might report indirectly to you.

**THE CORE** of the sales associate's job description is a list of the duties in order of priority and the relative importance of each duty to the total job (section 4). This is the section of the document that you really need to get right, but it is the toughest one to think through.

You should not list a duty that says a sales associate must, for example, be nice to customers. This is not specific enough for everyone to be able to follow. You

could waste time in endless debates about exactly what behavior qualifies as nice, and the whole point of having a job description would be lost.

Instead, you should list a duty indicating that a sales associate must do something that is observable and measurable in language specific enough for anyone to know what it means. This could be something like: Make customers feel welcome in the store by giving them a warm and friendly smile and saying, "Good morning" (or "Good afternoon") within 20 seconds of their arrival in the store.

There could be no confusion about what a sales associate is supposed to do with those words in his or her job description. As important, you will be able to tell in a moment if the sales associate is fulfilling this duty, just by watching and listening.

In our sample job description, we have allotted just eight lines for the sales associate's duties, but as you start to think through this job, you will quickly see that the sales associate will be doing hundreds of things every day.

We do not provide hundreds of lines to list these duties because you cannot expect a sales associate to arrive in the morning and start to juggle hundreds of duties in his or her head.

Instead, a sales associate needs to understand clearly what his or her priorities are and what good performance looks like. Even eight

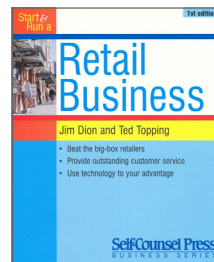
duties may be a lot for a sales associate to juggle, but listing duties in order of priority and giving the relative importance of each should help make things clear.

You need to decide what you are trying to achieve in your business before you prioritize the sales associate's duties. If you place great importance on housekeeping, you will have a clean and neat store. If you put great stock in the importance of greeting customers, you will have customers who feel welcome.

We do not doubt that you want to have a clean and neat store. The question is, do you want to have this as much as, more than, or less than you want to have your customers feel welcome? And do you want to have these two things as much as, more than, or less than you want to have customers who buy more than one item because your sales associates routinely suggestion sell?

Once you have established the duties, you should return to section 2 and write a narrative summary of the sales associate's duties and responsibilities.

**IN SECTION 5**, "Necessary characteristics," you should list the characteristics that a person must have to do the job. In other words, you will not hire anyone who does not have the characteristics on this list. You need to proceed carefully here because under the law in most jurisdictions, you cannot consider age, sex, religion, ethnic background, or sexual orientation when you are hiring. The law recog-



nizes that these do not relate to a person's ability to do the job.

At the top of your list of characteristics should be a positive attitude. It is tough to measure this scientifically, but you will know one when you see it. People with a positive attitude tend to approach things with a "can-do" mentality and usually see life as a glass that is half full instead of half empty. People with a positive attitude make significantly better sales associates than people with a negative attitude.

Next, candidates should have a degree of extroversion – outgoing but not overbearing. Shy people just do not make good sales associates. The job entails meeting new people and building long-term relationships with them. Candidates who have trouble looking someone in the eye will be hopelessly lost when it comes to having the extended conversation that is crucial to understanding a customer's needs.

Third on the list is a healthy ego. The day-to-day life of sales associates involves a certain amount of skepticism and rejection. Customers tend to doubt what they hear and they often say no. If your sales associates feel okay about who they are and have high levels of self-confidence, they will understand that this rejection is not directed at them personally and they will not get discouraged.

Finally, successful sales associates have empathy – the ability to identify with another person's situation, feelings, and motives. Selling professionally involves asking a series of good open-ended questions, listening to the answers, and responding with an appropriate merchandise presentation. Empathetic listening helps sales associates choose and present merchandise that meets customers' needs.

Other necessary characteristics could be qualities such as friendliness, being goal oriented, neatness (in appearance), and willingness to learn. These are not as crucial as a positive attitude, extroversion, a healthy ego, and having empathy, but they are useful characteristics for sales associates.

In section 6, you need to list the qualifications that a person must have in order to do the job. For example, a person cannot be a lifeguard unless he or she has a certain level of training and proficiency that has been tested and certified by the appropriate authority. Again, you need to be careful about the legality of those levels of skill or achievement that you define as necessary qualifications.

Unfortunately, the retail industry does not have an appropriate authority that tests and certifies sales associates. The skills that a person needs to work in your store could be very different from those needed to work in another retail store. This leaves you – and hundreds of thousands of other owner-operated retailers – on your own to set qualifications.

If you operate a store that sells only high-performance racing bikes, it would be considered fair in most jurisdictions to require that your sales associates have a high level of experience with those specialized machines. A weekend

athlete could not answer the technical and performance questions posed by your knowledgeable customers.

It would also be considered fair in most jurisdictions to require proficiency with math, since your sales associates will be dealing with cash, checks, and credit card transactions. Have you ever shopped at a store where the sales associates got confused while recording multi-item transactions or could not count the correct change even when the cash register indicated what that change should be? Do you really want to put your customers through that kind of frustration?

Legal issues aside, you need to be careful not to set qualifications that screen out potential superstars. Do people really need a college education to work in your store? If so, you can list it as a necessary qualification, but spend a lot of time asking yourself why before you do.

**WHEN YOU COMMIT** the objectives for your sales associates to paper (sections 7 to 9), you lay the foundation for much of the coaching work you will do during the first three months of their employment.

The objectives that you list in this section will be the yardsticks by which you ultimately measure your new sales associates' success or failure. You should clearly spell out objectives for the first three months because that is the standard probationary period in most jurisdictions.

Each sales associate's primary objective should be his or her sales (section 7). You are hiring a person who has the job of selling to customers. While you may want to allow for some kind of a learning curve, a new sales associate must get up to speed quickly to become a productive member of the team.

You should express an employee's sales objective in dollars per hour, since you cannot know for certain how many hours per week he or she will be working three months after starting.

Your sales associate's other key objective is his or her average transaction (section 8). This is the amount, on average, that the sales associate sells to each customer. Fifteen percent of your sales associate's job should be suggesting to customers to consider the most logical additional items that could complete their original purchases. A sales associate's average transaction is the best indication of his or her selling ability – and this ability might not be accurately reflected in his or her sales per hour.

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