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There is an interesting question being asked in franchise development circles today. Is franchise selling really selling at all? Many professionals are taking the approach that franchise sales is not so much a matter of traditional selling, as it is awarding opportunities to those who are qualified to participate in the systems. Or another way to look at it, gently turning down those who are not the right fit.

If this is so, how does that affect selecting and developing franchise salespeople with the greatest potential to bring only the most promising franchisees on board? Is this a standard selling job? A role for a consultant? A unique consultative sales challenge that calls for a combination of both approaches?

To get some answers, it is crucial to find out how top producers in this field see themselves, how they feel about the expectations prospective franchisees have of them and how they explain their own outstanding performances.

Caliper, a human resources consulting firm in Princeton N.J., conducted a study to find out what it takes to be a top-level franchise sales professional. To ensure a thorough understanding of what it takes to succeed in franchise sales, a detailed job analysis was conducted to define the core competencies required and identify the attributes needed to proceed in this challenging pursuit.

More than 13 hours of in-depth interviews were conducted with a number of top achievers with outstanding records in selling franchises in a variety of industries. These included Flo Schell, former vice president of development for Sylvan Learning Centers; Gary Williams, vice president of development for Management Recruiters International; and Marc Kiekenapp, managing partner of Franchise Outsource. This amounted to a virtual focus group convened to determine contributors' role requirements, the activities involved and the results achieved.

Other participants for this focus group included Paul Crump, director of new store development for Radio Shack and president and CEO of the Franchise Development Center's Floor Coverings International Tom Wood. Almost all of these professionals have at least a decade of experience, having personally sold hundreds of units, while also hiring and managing others to do the same. This allowed their franchises to grow both quickly and smartly, exceeding all expectations.

Then a personality assessment was administered to these top performers. This personality assessment identified each individual's major motivators and key strengths. From there, an overall group profile was configured. Not surprisingly, this composite profile indicates that these top performers have many traits in common.

First of all, these top performers showed a very strong sense of urgency, which makes them action-oriented, constantly looking for opportunities to seize, and enjoying activities that are goal-specific within set time frames. So when a person expresses interest in a

franchise, these top performers tend to respond quickly while interest is still high. Moreover, this action-oriented style makes prospective franchisees feel valued, as they were not left “hanging” or waiting for a call back. In addition, top performers exhibit high levels of assertiveness, determination and self-confidence. They are likely to be most comfortable in situations where their achievements are rewarded and they can run their own show. As such, they need the freedom to make decisions, including telling prospective franchisees “no” when the fit is simply not there.

Another trait these top performers have in common is an above-average degree of reinforcing aggressiveness, which suggests a competitive spirit and a need to prove themselves. They may want to be acknowledged as better as or more capable than others, and are apt to be forceful, focused on winning and persistent in pursuing goals. These professionals are not afraid to dig their heels in and fight to the finish.

Another key motivator that distinguishes the most successful producers from others is ego-drive, the inner need to persuade people for the sense of personal satisfaction that such victories provide. In addition, successful salespeople need assertiveness to make compelling presentations, underlying aggressiveness to overcome resistance and resilience to surmount rejection.

In short, the top performers represented by this composite profile clearly have classic “hunter” sales dynamics, in that they tend to take charge of the sales process, negotiate for the upper hand, and feel a sense of ego-gratification when they get a commitment to buy. Especially in franchise sales, however, there is also a collaborative aspect that is at least equally important. In addition to meeting or surpassing sales quotas, franchise sales representatives must also evaluate a prospective franchisee’s suitability for undertaking such an enterprise and, once that determination is made, engage in mutually-beneficial interactions that lead to a sale—to those who are qualified.

In conducting interviews with these top performers, it became clear that classic “hunter” sales dynamics alone are not enough to succeed in franchise sales. In these individuals, it seems that hunter qualities benefit from being balanced with a consultative approach to franchise sales. Therefore, it is important to examine this group’s interpersonal and problem-solving abilities. As expected, the group shared several prominent characteristics.

Strong Relationship Building

The top performers in the study appear to be genuinely sociable by nature, suggesting a friendly manner that puts people at ease and allows them to develop good working relationships. As opposed to “surface friendliness,” these people truly enjoy meeting new people, talking with them one-on-one and getting to know them better.

“It’s all about the relationship, and understanding the prospect’s situation,” says Marc Kiekenapp, who has personally sold more than 1,000 units in his career.

Flo Schell adds, “Either I was having a challenge, or I was having fun.” At the same time, when asked how her prospects would describe her, one word came to mind: relentless. An upbeat style does not seem to keep these top performers from still getting the job done.

“However,” Kiekenapp cautioned, “you sometimes need to guard against becoming involved in matters that are beside the point. To do this job well, you have to make friends, not relatives.”

So, while these top performers know how to develop relationships, they also know where to draw the line of involvement and stay focused on business.

Understanding Others

Top performers also appear to have strong empathy and listen attentively enough to sense a prospect’s buying requirements and possible areas of concern.

In addition, a healthy sense of skepticism can help top performers maintain objectivity and avoid becoming overly involved in other people’s problems. In general, these performers are likely to be helpful enough to furnish useful information and provide appropriate service, but not at the expense of pursuing personal or the company’s goals.

Smart Problem Solving

The top performers interviewed definitely see themselves as problem solvers, and their profile indicates a strong sense of urgency to deal with situations as soon as they arise. Their flexibility also helps them adapt to change and solve a variety of problems for different people. They also appear willing to take risks in order to achieve a desired result. These expeditious and versatile troubleshooters, who enjoy devising creative strategies and developing situation-specific solutions for each prospect, define the phrase “think on their feet.”

Stick with the Program

On the other hand, the need to be consistent in qualifying prospects motivated Tom Wood to develop methods that are also systematic and efficient. He advises, “Identify the prospect’s requirements, determine the suitability of a particular opportunity, consider the timeframes involved, and then focus on the issue of financial feasibility.”

Furthermore, depth of experience seems only to confirm the observations of the above-noted achievers. After more than 20 years of success in franchise sales, Gary Williams can say, “I have distilled my methods and techniques down to a system that is as simple as A-B-C: A. Learn all you can about your top producers. Know why the best are the best. B. Compare all aspects of their personality dynamics to those prospects being considered, to determine their potential suitability for franchise sales. C. Never compromise your standards or expectations.”

What to Look for When Hiring Franchise Sales

Ensuring that a system’s sales professionals have that special combination— hunter sales

dynamics with equally strong consultative qualities—can only enhance a franchise’s ability to bring about more opportunities from which everyone involved will profit. This study of top performers helps to define what is needed to look for during the hiring process.

The first step is attracting and then pursuing only the most promising candidates. Keep in mind that a classic sales hunter’s qualities alone are not enough. To enjoy long-term success, a salesperson must possess equally strong consultative qualities. While the drive to persuade and tough negotiation skills are necessary, so are strong relationship building and problem-solving skills. Moreover, giving salespeople “veto power” when a potential franchisee is not the right fit is crucial to maintaining the brand’s image and ensuring continued success. Therefore—and this can not be overstated—it is up to the franchise organization to make every effort to ensure its franchise sales professionals have all the inner dynamics required to truly expand the franchise company, not just sell franchised businesses to prospects.

While the participants in the virtual focus group are a rare breed, they possess many of the same qualities, which enable them to balance the sales with the consultative aspects of the profession. They are empathic, driven to persuade, sociable, flexible, risk takers and problem solvers. Identifying those qualities in each new hire will go a long way in allowing the organization to really succeed in franchise sales.