



BECAUSE THE FUNDAMENTALS ARE NOT OPTIONAL.

JV/M, Inc.
Need Sales?

How to Find Qualified B2B Telemarketers: Pre-Screening for Sales Skills (Part 3 of 4)

Introduction

One of the major challenges for companies that want to generate new sales in the business-to-business (B2B) market is finding salespeople who are willing and able to make cold calls. But because most field salespeople don't like making cold calls, many salespeople are ineffective at it, and good cold-calling behaviors often contradict good field-selling behaviors, many companies have come to the conclusion that segregating the cold-calling function from the other sales functions (such as covering your bases and closing,) is a cost-effective solution. It frees up experienced salespeople to focus on making presentations and closing business, while it theoretically cost-reduces the lead generation function by using less expensive telemarketers.

Once the decision is made to segregate the functions, however, the challenge then becomes one of finding telemarketers who are truly qualified to make cold-calls to business executives and other decision makers, which always includes getting past gatekeepers and voice mail, and often includes uncovering needs. But while there are over 2.5 million telemarketers in the US according to the US Department of Labor, in attempting to recruit qualified "bird dogs," JV/M has found that over 95% of applicants are *unqualified* for the job. This is because of a lack of business knowledge, a lack of appropriate sales skills, and the presence of an inappropriate perspective or motivation, among other issues. The impact of the scarcity of qualified B2B telemarketers on recruiting costs, training and development costs, and sales results, however, can be catastrophic – going far beyond high failure rates and an excessive cost-per-lead. A poorly performing telemarketing staff can demotivate their outside sales representatives by sending them out on bad appointments, generate excessive field sales costs, and even deposition the company and its products in entire market segments.

JV/M regularly recruits professional B2B telemarketers for its outsourced B2B telemarketing, lead generation and executive appointment-setting services. Because of the high number of applicants and the low percentage of qualified applicants in the applicant pool, JV/M had to develop an online test to screen out unqualified applicants before the résumé review and interview in order to reduce the cost of recruiting, interviewing and selection, as well as to reduce the failure rate of new hires. The test has been validated over the years as being able to predict success on the job in excess of 80% of the time, while providing excellent insight into the attributes of the candidate population.

Three of the nine areas tested by JV/M's Telemarketing Skills Assessment are business knowledge, sales skills and sales perspective. This series presents an analysis of the prevalence of appropriate and inappropriate attributes in these areas in the population of over 800 applicants over the course of two years in order to show how an online test can reduce recruiting costs when there is a predominance of unqualified candidates.

Methodology

The Telemarketing Skills Assessment is a test consisting of 45 multiple-choice questions that is given to prospective Lead Generations Specialists applying for a professional B2B telemarketing position at JV/M. The test has been validated as being able to predict that a candidate will be successful on the job over 80% of the time. Combined with a subsequent interview and reference checks, the success rate for new hires exceeds 80% at JV/M, while using the test has reduced interviewing costs by over 90%, and reduced recruiting costs by over 70%.

JV/M has found that there are nine attributes that can and should be screened using an online test, and presents in this series of articles the results for three of them to illustrate the methodology. The attributes covered in this series are:

- Business knowledge
- Sales perspective
- Sales skills

Results for Sales Skills

Several questions on the test attempt to identify gaps in the applicant’s sales skills that can be used to predict failure on the phones. Sales skills are necessary for the B2B telemarketing job because reading from a script is ineffective when talking to a business decision maker. And while it is important to provide the telemarketer with good script elements (e.g. and Initial Benefit Statement, good questions and objections handles, etc.,) we must ultimately rely on their professional sales skills to carry the day. To be sure, it is possible to train pre-qualified and motivated candidates in good sales skills, but recruiting candidates who already possess such skills can be more cost effective. Either way, at some point it is necessary to know what sales skills are required by the job, and what skills are possessed by the telemarketer.

Telling Isn’t Selling

Frequently, we encounter candidates who have actually had sales training, however, there is *good* sales training and there is *bad* sales training. In professional sales, the ability to ask good questions that are designed to uncover needs and build value has been proven to be the most effective sales technique. However, the overwhelming majority of telemarketers (like the overwhelming majority of salespeople,) haven’t had such training, and have instead either been trained on product features and benefits, or been the victims of bad sales training. This type of training leads to telemarketers who operate in “tell mode,” rather than the more effective “question asking mode”; but it invariably leads to high failure rates.

Several of the questions on the Telemarketing Skills Assessment attempt to understand the techniques that the telemarketer uses. For example:

1. You've just given your opening pitch to the prospect (on a telephone cold-call,) who responds by saying “Thank you. But I'm not interested.” What do you do?

Response	Count	Percent
a. Offer him at least two additional advantages of your product that are designed to stimulate his interest before he hangs up.	278	34.19%
b. Thank him for his time, and end the call politely.	59	7.26%
c. Ask him a question.	231	28.41%
d. Go into the "objections handling" portion of your script.	245	30.14%
Total	813	100.00%

In professional sales, there is only one correct answer: “(c) Ask him a question.” Even if the question you ask is “Before we go, would it be okay if I asked you just one question?” the only right thing to do is to ask a question – in order to gain control of the call, uncover needs, and have a chance at success. As a rule, only salespeople with proper sales training will know this (although one can learn it from experience and coaching), but it is very effective way to weed out candidates who really don’t know what they’re doing.

To be sure, many sales training programs – particularly ones that are really product training, but are called sales training – will teach the “Yeah, but…” method of responding to a shutdown, which is what option (a) is; and which is what almost 35% of candidates believe they should do. But one simply can’t stimulate initial interest by piling on features and advantages. More importantly, it has been shown in many studies and over thousands of calls that if your opening is too weak to stimulate initial interest, offering additional advantages will only sound to the prospect as though you’re not listening. And he will therefore not respond, and you will not get a lead.

Obviously, terminating the call is a failure path, and yet, remarkably, 7% of the candidates thought it was the right thing to do. One certainly has to wonder who would hire them, however.

The final choice, going into “objections-handling mode,” could be an acceptable answer; and so it is heartening that 30.14% of the candidates weren’t completely disqualified. It is good, for example, that some people know what “objections handling” is. But this is clearly a trick question, as only a B2B neophyte would think that an initial response of “not interested” to an opening, followed by an objections handle, would be anything but argumentative. One might want to look again at these candidates, but they are likely to be script readers, and ineffective at high-level lead generation.

Getting Past Gatekeepers

One of the most important skills needed for generating leads is the ability to get past gatekeepers. So we ask candidates how they do it:

2. What is the best way to get past a gatekeeper?

Response	Count	Percent
a. Call when she’s not there.	89	10.95%
b. Tell her that her boss is expecting your call.	156	19.19%
c. Sell her on the benefits of your offering.	357	43.91%
d. Send information directly to the decision maker.	163	20.05%
e. Move on to the next prospect.	19	2.34%
Total	813	100.00%

While it is heartening that almost 44% of the candidates know that they should try to sell the gatekeeper on the benefits of the offering, it is discouraging that over 30% (10.95% + 20.05%,) would prefer to sneak around her, almost 20% would lie to her, and 2.34% would give up!

Hiring telemarketers for executive appointment-setting who are dishonest, or who disrespect a significant decision influencer, is a patently bad idea.

Objections Handling

At some point in a call, one may have to handle objections, and so we try to get a sense of what the candidate’s innate response would be to an objection. Asking them in an online test is not only more effective than listening in on their calls (because it displays their conscious competence,) but it enables us to eliminate unqualified candidates with far less cost and effort.

One of the questions that seeks to understand the way the candidate handles objections is the following:

3. The best way to handle an objection is:

Response	Count	Percent
a. The "3F Method" (i.e. "I understand how you feel. Many people have felt that way. But what they found was...")	366	45.02%
b. Suggest several advantages that overcome the objection	164	20.17%
c. Don't respond until the prospect has raised the objection three times	12	1.48%
d. Ask a qualifying question	138	16.97%
e. Do a reverse	17	2.09%
f. Provide information that contradicts the objection	87	10.70%
g. Total	813	100.00%

The responses that were offered deliberately reflect what is taught in different sales training programs, since one goal of the test is to try to identify exactly which kind of training, if any, the candidate has had. Since we know from experience which kind of sales training works best in the B2B telemarketing environment, we can eliminate entire classes of doomed candidates on this basis alone.

The correct way to handle any objection is to first qualify it, i.e. make sure that you understand it by playing it back to the prospect. And 16.97% of candidates knew this – a small, but important group. The majority of the candidates said that they would use the “3F Method,” a technique that is widely taught, but is useful only when you are dealing with unintelligent decision makers. And most business decision makers, who are generally highly intelligent, will take umbrage at its use.

Another technique that is widely taught is to ignore the objection until it has been repeated, which like the “3F Method,” also only works if the person you’re talking to is unintelligent. But since most telemarketers are used to calling consumers, evidently the method is widely taught and practiced.

A reverse is like a “take it away” close, where the salesperson responds to an objection with something along the lines of “Well, it sounds like you aren’t interested in moving forward with me...” This can force the prospect to backtrack, and tone down the objection, or even try to sell the salesperson on selling him. It is a modestly ineffective technique in a face-to-face meeting, but a spectacularly ineffective technique on the phones. Fortunately, very few candidates know what a reverse is, and advocate its use.

Providing information that contradicts the objection is generally perceived as argumentative, but is intuitive to candidates with no formal sales training.

Analysis

Of the 813 candidates who took the Telemarketing Skills Assessment, only 49, or 6%, answered the three questions discussed above “correctly.” And while the test is scored on a weighted basis, and one should take other factors into account, it is clear that a significant majority of applicants lack the basic sales skills necessary to do the job correctly. One could provide training to correct the problem in the other candidates, but that could be far more expensive than finding truly qualified candidates, and it assumes that proper training is available.

Conclusions

Having the proper sales skills can be a critical factor in success on the job. B2B telemarketing requires the use of specific techniques in order to get past gatekeepers, stimulate interest, uncover needs and set a qualified appointment with a decision maker who has a need, and wants to talk with you about how you can help. Scripting does not work, as there is no way to write a script that can do these things. The only way to do it is to arm the telemarketer with the information he or she needs to sell the appointment, using specific skills that can be learned.

The vast majority of candidates, however, do not have the sales skills needed to be successful. And while one can, and should customize a skills test to reflect the specific skills needed for a particular campaign, testing is an ideal way to identify candidates who have the skills, and eliminate the candidates who do not.

Recommendations

In recruiting telemarketers for business-to-business applications, it is recommended that candidates be questioned about their sales responses being interviewed as a means of eliminating unqualified candidates at the lowest possible cost. While the specific questions asked in the Telemarketing Skills Assessment may not be appropriate for other firms or programs, avoiding interviewing or hiring candidates who do not have the proper training and skills can prevent high failure rates of both the candidates and the programs.