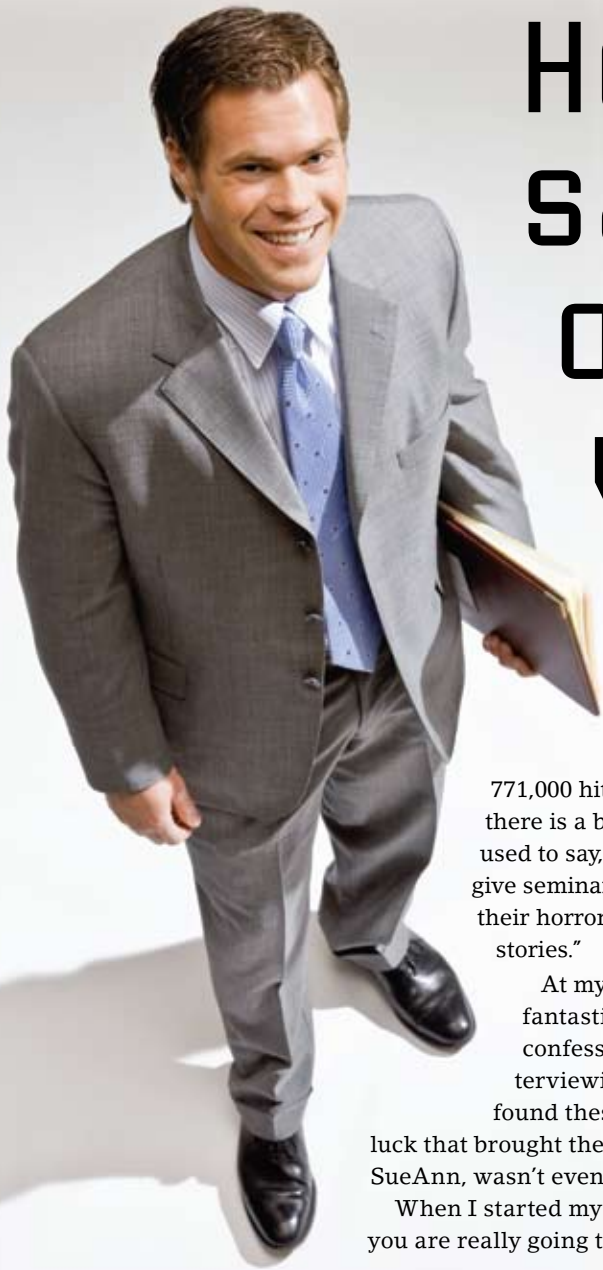




By Rick Hill

Sales & Marketing

How to hire a salesperson, or don't do what I did.



The columns are filled with advice on the right way to screen, interview and hire new employees. Google "how to hire salespeople" and you end up with

771,000 hits. The advice is overwhelming. But there is a better way. As one of my mentors used to say, "It is a shame that failures don't give seminars, we could learn a lot more from their horror stories, than from the success stories."

At my company, OnPoint, we have two fantastic people that work with me. My confession is that it was not my great interviewing skills or screening methods that found these two employees; it was mostly luck that brought them to my door. In fact, my first hire, SueAnn, wasn't even my doing or choice.

When I started my own rep agency, my wife said, "If you are really going to do this, you need someone who

you can trust; you need SueAnn." And she was right.

My other great hire, Brian, was almost as fortuitous. SueAnn said, "If you are going to build this business, you need someone a lot smarter and more technical than you are. You need Brian." And SueAnn was also right.

Bad example #1

My first bad hire was a woman who did not like getting dirty. Years ago, I worked for a firm that imported laminate. We called on a lot of designers, architects and woodworkers. I thought that in "Glenda" I had found the perfect sales person. She had that polished look and a bit of the artistic attitude and dress needed to call on the higher-end design firms. Glenda dressed immaculately and made a great first impression.

My first hint of trouble was at IWF. We were working the trade show booth and Glenda wouldn't wear her name badge. When I asked her to put on the badge so customers would know she worked with us, she refused. It seems that the beautiful blouse she was wearing was some top designer and she would not pin a company badge to it.

Later I learned that she wouldn't leave her car if it was raining for fear of ruining her shoes; she wouldn't go into a woodworking shop because they all were "messy, with all that glue and stuff," and she couldn't travel overnight without carrying several cases — not sample cases, but suitcases. Obviously, her sales numbers were horrible. Glenda didn't last. She eventually moved on to an inside sales job at a cabinet showroom, where she did very well.

The moral: First impressions mean little when hiring long-term salespeople.

When hunting for good employees, look outside your own mental picture of how they should appear. A plant manager for a Wisconsin cabinet company once told me that he always hired his best people in restaurants. I asked, "You have lunch with them? And he said no, that he hires the waitresses.

Waitresses were his target employees for both

the shop floor and the sales floor. He knew that waitresses could handle tough customers without taking it personally, understood that smiles and service brought in more money and most of all weren't afraid of a little hard work. His shop offered something that waitressing never could: good pay, a chance for advancement, benefits and, most of all, every evening and weekend off.

Bad example #2

I hired a friend from my competitor. I had met this man when he was a past sales manager for a company we represented. Later he worked for my competitor. I thought I knew him, so I hired him without checking his history and résumé. Amazingly, my competitor spoke very highly of his efforts, and since he was located in the center of a new territory for OnPoint, I jumped at the chance to pick him up. One year, one car and \$90,000 worth of salary and expenses later, he

had one sale to his record.

It was my fault. I put him in the field with very little training and very little support. I also didn't spend the time before I hired him to learn that his expertise was supportive sales, not new sales. He was a Farmer, and we needed a Hunter.

The moral: Never take the easy choice; expend the effort to do a thorough check.

It is essential to know what type of salesperson you need before you start looking. Do you want someone that can call on your current customer base, build long-term relationships, and grow your business with them? Then you want a Farmer. Farmers can plant seeds and have the patience to watch them grow. Farmers are very good at establishing themselves within your customer's company and becoming the person they count on.

Hunters are the opposite. Hunters are excellent at getting in the door at new accounts. They turn over

every rock and kick every brush pile looking for new business. For example, if your company is expanding from its established market of kitchen cabinets into the new market of closet systems, then you need the type of salesperson who is willing to brush off rejection and continue to push for new opportunities. Hunters do not have the patience of Farmers and will often push on your company to change as well as in the market.

New ideas in hiring

The wrong hire will kill your business faster than a Brett Favre retirement package. But there are some new ideas. OnPoint used to share office space with a lumber broker. We watched as our office mate, Donny, tried to expand his sales team at his lumber business. Donny ran a company that was built on his reputation and knowledge of the lumber industry. As he

grew, he went through several bad hires trying to find the right person to add to his sales efforts.

Two years ago, in frustration, he created a unique hiring program that has paid off. Donny ran a good advertisement in the local newspaper offering a great job, great people and chance to make serious money selling without traveling. He asked that people call him for an interview. As

people called in, Donny set up an appointment for them to visit his company during their open house reception at 1 p.m. two weeks from the ad date.

As the two weeks went on, some of the more aggressive people "stopped in" to drop off their résumés. Those résumés were remembered. Others mailed in their résumés after talking on the phone. They did not get as high a mark with Donny.

On the date of the open house, about 30 potential hires showed up. They were treated to hors d'oeuvres and punch. Donny let them know that he was waiting for a few others to show up and let the crowd mingle. He and his entire staff kept track of who was the most outgoing, and who made it a point to meet everyone at the company, not just Donny. After enough time had passed, Donny stood in front of the crowd and explained the difficulties, needs and opportunities of the company. He was upfront about the challenges and let everyone know that the whole company team would decide on the next hire, not just him. He then thanked everyone and said they were free to hang around and eat and talk until 3 p.m.

The staff took note again of who left, who used this time to ask questions, and who tried to understand the whole company, not just the boss.

During the next two weeks, Donny and his team waited. They wanted to know who came in to check on the interview process and who just called. They also discussed their views of whom they liked from the open house. Later when interviews to the select few were granted, the whole team of sales, shipping, accounting and Donny interviewed them. Finally, decisions were made based on the team's input, not Donny's. The final decision was to hire

two new salespeople instead of one. They are both still working with Donny.

This may seem like more than most of us can handle, but look back at my mistake. If I had followed Donny's lead, OnPoint would have saved one year, one car and \$90,000.

The wrong hire is much worse than the time investment to get the right hire. The challenge that Donny had was that all good salespeople usually interview well. Talking to people is what salespeople do, and it is hard to determine the best candidate from just an interview. Donny's approach put the challenge on the applicant to stand out from the crowd, follow up on the opportunity, sell themselves to multiple people on his team, and get along with all of them. Just like they would have to do as a lumber broker for his company.

Great salespeople know how to focus the attention of the customer on their company. They readily admit what they do not know and are good at getting your other company people (carpenters, installers, designers, the owner) to help them make the sale. Donny knew that the applicants would need these skills to succeed in his environment. By forcing them to mingle and interview with the whole team, he got past the first impressions into the true sales ability of each applicant. When the final selections were made, the whole team was onboard with the selection and instantly supportive of the new hires.

She could sell anything to anyone

The great salesman and motivator, Zig Ziglar, once said that he was insulted whenever someone said "Zig could sell anything to anyone." Zig believed that common phrase was the description of a "con artist," not a great salesperson. We have all met the con artist salesperson. They are focused on one-time sales that benefit only their pocketbook. Cars, cell phones, even homes are often sold with high-pressure sales tactics that force the consumer into quick and often wrong decisions. This style of selling can work for these low-end sellers, but is the death-knell in our industry.

The woodworking market is based on repeat sales and long-term relationships. It is small enough that a bad or good reputation is established quickly. Word-of-mouth still is the key to building a long-standing business. We have all seen the quick failure of companies and products that do not stand up to the woodworking industries' long-term needs.

When you are searching for your next salesperson, look outside the normal attitudes and methods you have used in the past.

Remember, a great salesperson makes sure the customer wins and that the sale benefits everyone — the customer, the company and the salesperson — not just his wallet. **W**

Ed. note: Rick Hill helps woodworking companies analyze their sales process. He is also the founder of WoodReps.com and president of OnPoint Sales, a Midwest Independent Rep firm. He can be contacted at www.onpointsales.com.