Finding the Right Person for the Right Job: Exploring the Links between Personality and Sales

THE PROBLEM

Salespeople focus the majority of their efforts on one of two tasks: (1) attracting new customers or (2) increasing sales to existing customers. Researchers at the Georgetown Institute for Consumer Research (GICR) wondered if different people would find these activities to be differentially appealing. If so, knowing which types of people prefer which of these tasks would help managers identify the right person for the right sales job. This should lead to salesforces that are more intrinsically motivated and more productive.

GICR researchers defined two types of salespeople based on the activities they usually perform:

- **Prospectors** are tasked with converting consumers into customers. They make countless cold and warm calls, with the goal establishing new relationships and closing initial sales.

- **Cultivators** are tasked with growing the profitability of the existing customer base. They embrace selling as less of a numbers game and more of an exercise in engagement.

It’s clear that Prospectors and Cultivators differ in terms of what they’re expected to do, but do these two roles appeal to different types of people?

To answer this question, Banerji and Carlson ran an experiment in which close to 1000 adults imagined working in business development. Some of the adults learned that their job would require them to attract revenue from new prospects (i.e., acting as a Prospector), while the remaining learned that they would be tasked with maintaining and strengthening existing relationships to increase revenues (i.e., acting as a Cultivator). All participants were told they would be paid the same, ensuring that differences in expected extrinsic reward would not be the cause of any difference in appeal between the two types of sales roles.

After ruminating on the activities required of the position, everyone answered two sets of questions. The first set measured the intrinsic appeal of the job role to which the individual had been assigned (hereafter appeal). This set included questions such as “How enjoyable would you find such a role?” The other set of questions required participants to rate themselves on several personality traits: gregariousness (e.g., “I am comfortable starting conversations with strangers”), influence (e.g. “I am able to convince people easily”), and relationship-valuation (e.g., “I value interpersonal relationships a great deal”).
FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

To understand what type of person is most likely to enjoy being a Prospector versus a Cultivator, Banerji and Carlson compared responses on the personality traits to appeal ratings for each sales role. The most striking differences between the two sales roles were on the personality traits describing how people like to relate to others. For example, people who enjoy solving other people’s problems were more likely to enjoy Cultivator activities than Prospector activities. Likewise, those who get distressed by the ending of a relationship were more likely to find cultivation activities appealing. These differences are shown in the chart below.

Not surprisingly, the researchers also found some personality traits that were shared by those who like both types of sales roles. The two most pronounced personality traits of this sort were gregariousness and the belief that one can influence others.

CONCLUSIONS

This research has at least two implications for salesforce design. First, the overall composition of a sales force should reflect the organization’s strategic goals. For example, if the growth strategy of the firm is tilted toward new customer acquisition, the salesforce should consist of more Prospectors than Cultivators. Second, the personality traits a manager seeks in a salesperson should depend on whether the salesperson is being hired to perform as a Prospector or a Cultivator. For example, when looking for a Prospector, the manager should seek a gregarious person, who enjoys having influence, but who is relatively unaffected by the end of relationships and who is not necessarily interested in solving the problems of others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Trait</th>
<th>Prospector</th>
<th>Cultivator</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is generally very gregarious.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys having influence over others?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affected by relationships that end?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys problem solving for others?</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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