

Stephen Says: “Dealer Hiring: Try Training for a Change”

Dear Stephen:

I run a medium-sized Haworth dealer. I am the sales manager, not the owner. I am under constant pressure from my boss to hire new sales people. But every sales manager from a dealer I speak to seems to have the same hiring issues. First, no one wants to work in dealer sales unless they are already stuck in it. Second, in each area of the country these major manufacturers have dealers with very different geographic reputations.

In many cities it is very desirable to work for a Haworth dealer. In NYC (where I am), well, let's just say we are not at the top of the pecking order when it comes to where salespeople choose to build a career. In my locale, everyone wants to work for the Knoll dealers. The Steelcase dealers are second, and Teknion is a close third. I think even the major HNI dealer ranks above my dealership in most people's eyes.

The problem is my boss only likes to hire people who are going to bring business with them. That limits the pool of candidates, and those precious few have a ton of power. They don't really want or need to join our team unless we give them a bigger slice of the profit pie, or they hate their current boss. I don't know for sure this is the issue, but I have a pretty good sense from the scuttlebutt in the marketplace and what the A&D community and our customers tell us. Yet, I still have to hire people.

I can't even get a headhunter to work with us, and when they do, even they cannot find employed people worth the fee. There has to be a way to get good new hires. The less people I have on the street, the less revenue we make, and sooner or later I will lose my own job. Any suggestions?

Desperate Dealer



You can send your workplace questions to Stephen at: StephenSays@bellow.press.

Questions selected to be answered, will appear in this column. Please use the Subject: Stephen Says for all emails. Stephen Viscusi is a bestselling author, television personality, and CEO of The Viscusi Group, global executive recruiters located in New York. Follow Stephen on Twitter @WorkplaceGuru, Like Stephen on Facebook; and follow him on LinkedIn.

Dear Desperate Dealer,

Yours is a very common problem. However, do not sound like you have disdain for working at a dealer or you have no business managing one. I started my career at a dealer, then Haworth, and I just do not share your view of their reputation in the NYC marketplace, but what do I know.

I trust what you are hearing from specifiers. I have several bones to pick with your letter, but in general it is true. Dealers are the hardest companies to recruit for. Most headhunters charge double to a dealer because it is twice as much work, and the searches take about a year. It's just a fact of the industry. You really should

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not blame it on the local manufacturers' offices, though. Everyone has turnover; these sales jobs aren't like Supreme Court appointments.

Hiring at dealers requires finesse. The sales rep who calls one dealer is a factor in what makes a dealer salesperson take a job. The dealer needs to be able to explain they have a strong, consistent representative partnering to develop business. If you can't do this, the game is over before the candidate even steps foot on the court.

The deeper problems have been the same for years, though. Dealership owners, despite their wealth, are loathe to pay large salaries to people without a client base and these people aren't often on the market. Smart dealers take people with strong basic sales skills and train them on the details of the dealer business. It really can be as simple as that. Do not be so lazy. Do not expect someone to leave one dealer with a lot of business and bring it to

yours. Why would they? And the few that would be willing to jump ship need to bring their oxygen tanks with them. My advice is straightforward: Start from scratch and build your own team. Train people. Dealers seem to be allergic to that word, but it is the golden ticket. Yes, it takes longer to generate the revenue you're looking for, but not as long as having an opening forever would take.

Whether you go this route or not, you will need to be willing to pay higher base salaries. These principals all drive fancy cars, have three homes and two boats and spend a sales rep's salary at the casino. Hey, big shot, re-allocate the money you are taking out of your business, and put it into salaries. Use some of that money to hire and train people well. It's called running a business, and it's a smart financial decision.

As a manager, you will have to work to convince the principal you're onto something.

Grab lunch at least once a week with a sales rep from a competitive dealer or a manufacturers rep, and use that time to hear what people think of your company. Network at CoreNet and IIDA events, and treat those events as a dealer job fair. Poach away! Why do you need that expensive table at Hall of Fame? Put that money into someone's salary, and train them like every other business does. When you do interview people, stay off your phone, concentrate on the interview, and be accommodating.

This is not brain surgery, but it requires some novel thinking — at least for this industry. Stop hiring based on what business the candidate will bring to you, and start selling the role by detailing what you can offer the candidate in terms of trading and even house accounts. Yes, it can take some time — three years to grow out a full sales team, in my experience — so start planting those seeds!

Stephen