

There are no right or wrong answers  
in a personnel interview, but there  
sure are revealing answers once you  
know how to smoke them out

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22 QUESTIONS IN 22 MINUTES:

## How to get revealing answers from sales candidates

By DONALD A. LEVENSON

**I**f only we had sure-fire ways to interview salespeople Unfortunately, we don't. But there are techniques to improve your batting average.

To start with, stay in control. Listen and learn. If you do all the talking, you'll hypnotize yourself with the beauty of your presentation and hire the wrong person! To control the interview, read your questions from a written outline. Make sure the applicant talks about what you want to talk about. If the candidate asks a question, restate your question or tell him you'll answer his questions later.

At any point, if you want further information, simply say: "Please tell me more about that." If the candidate is too long winded, stop him.

First, the prelims: write down candidate's name, address, age, marital status,

where presently or previously employed.

Now the questions:

(1) When you worked at the X company, what did you actually do there? Tell me in detail.

If the answer is to the point, the person is responsive (Good!). If vague and evasive: not a good trait for salesperson.

(2) On that job, what did you like to do best? Least? If you could find any job you wanted, what would you really like to do the most? Ask this in a friendly manner. You'll be surprised at the answers. Compare applicant's real desires and attitudes to the kind of work you expect. If you don't get detailed answers, applicant may be a dreamer.

(3) Do you think the salespeople at X company had enough chance for advancement? Bitterness may indicate candidate will become negative about your company as well.

(4). Any idea of the work you might be expected to do if you come with us? Comments of thoughtful candidates should tell you if he is prepared, mentally and physically, to do the job. (By this time, you're getting a better picture as to candidate's worthiness.) Next read a brief prepared statement describing the job, the products he'd sell, to what markets, to what kind of people, and where. Then ask:

(5) If you have done work along these lines, please tell what experience would fit you for this job. Candidate should (a) sum up his background as it applies to your requirements (b) take this opportunity to sell himself.

(6) Are you generally lucky? A super question. The candidate doesn't expect it. Sometimes the answers are

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surprising. If he simply says “Yes,” ask for more. If he asks “lucky at what?” say, “just generally lucky.” Beware the loser or complainer who generally feels frustrated. You’re seeking a positive person who makes his or her own luck.

(7) What is the most monotonous work you ever did? A clue about attitudes. You’ll learn more than the specific response. Weight the answer against the job you want done.

(8) How did your family feel about your previous job? You don’t hire a person, you hire a family. Dissatisfactions are warnings.

(9) Describe the people you called upon your previous jobs? You’ll learn if the candidate is accustomed to working with types of people you expect him to contact.

(10) Tell me about the best boss you ever had. The answer will tell you the kind of supervision candidate likes. How does this fit in with the supervision he’ll get with your company?

(11) What does your father do? These tests to see if candidate would consider your job a comedown.

(12) Which type selling gives greater satisfaction:

frequent small success, or many turn-downs followed by one big success? The best answer: a discussion of advantages and disadvantages of each. Since you know your sales pattern, the answer should indicate if you’re talking to the type person you seek.

(13) What other jobs have you considered recently? The best answer: other jobs in sales. If not, candidate’s heart is not entirely in selling.

(14) How did you spend your time the past weekend? You may be surprised at the answers. Solid hobbies and family activities are certainly favorable. Personal development is even better (in balance).

(15). Have you ever seen another salesperson show especially poor judgment? Tell me about it. To help you decide if you’re talking to a real salesperson. A candidate genuinely interested in selling should answer this.

(16) How would you go about selling our product to a typical customer? Indicative of sales aptitude. The more he or she talks, the better you can evaluate the fit to your company.

(17) What are the advantages in representing our company? Tells you how the

person feels about your company.

(18) Would you care to mention any long-range plans you have for yourself or your family? A key to aspirations and whether your company can satisfy them.

(19) Do you think selling requires better health than inside work? Indicates what candidate thinks about health.

(20) Give me an account of the ups and downs of your own health in the last few years. You’re seeking few or no problems. Otherwise, beware.

(21) Do you think salespeople are fairly loyal to companies they presently work for? A negative answer suggests applicant lacks loyalty.

(22) Nobody is perfect, and we all know families tend to be critical. What happens to be the criticism of you at your house?

A super question! Ask it casually with a smile. You may be surprised. A candidate who hesitates too long is probably thinking about how much to reveal. And you may want to explore it more later.

If the answer is “No criticism, we get along fine” move on. That’s the screening interview. You’ll never know how effective it is until you try. You’ll hear things you never

heard before. Don't tamper with the questions, or skip any. Follow the outline. There is a psychological basis for wording and sequence. Do not discuss job details until the second

interview. During this phase you're buying—not selling. Don't look for right or wrong answers. There aren't any. You are building a picture during the interview.

Don't compare one person to another. Compare each person to the job. Keep looking until you find the candidate that fits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Donald A. Levenson, partner at St. Clair Associates, is also a management consultant with Robert J. Bushee & Associates, Pittsburg-based recruiting firm . He is a former vice president of L.B. Foster Company, international supplier of steel products. Levenson has served as management consultant, search specialist and instructor at graduate school of business administration, University of Pittsburgh. He is an M.S. graduate of MIT.