



Growth drivers

Finding the right salesperson at the right time

What does it take to build an elite, high-performance sales force? How do we develop a team of highly motivated, client-service oriented, quota crushing machines? Like explorers searching for the city of gold, business leaders are on the lookout for secrets to building an effective sales force.

I do not have a secret map, but I do have a process focusing on sales behaviors matching the stage of your business or product. Here we will outline business/product lifecycle stages, identify sales behaviors for each stage, and share a tactic for interviewing.

The Stages

Every business or product follows a similar lifecycle, going through predictable stages. At the beginning it is all about "Survival." New products are in a fight for their existence. Just as we entered this world with different talents and treasures, some products are better funded than others, some have access to more talent, but all start life fighting for existence.

Consider Starbucks launching a new combo coffee-soda product. Starbucks as a business may be beyond the survival stage, but the new product is in survival mode.

The next stage is "Viable," which we will define as a product or service that has made it and is now focused on growth. In general, products or services in this stage make money, customers are ordering and re-ordering, and there is a track record of success to point to. Going back to Starbucks, once the idea of pre-made muffins and scones made it through survival mode and they knew the food items sold, the menus added food.

From there, a business or product moves into "Scale." Not all businesses or products make it to this stage because it requires capital and patience, but once your business or product is viable, scaling is next. Again, back to Starbucks and the food products. Once food became viable, each store scaled to add multiple ovens and move beyond breakfast.

The final stage for products is "Thriving." Products in this stage generate their own gravitational force and attract customers through reputation alone.

When traveling to China and looking for food, seeing a familiar green Starbucks sign brought our group comfort and eased anxiety. It did not matter that we may have been right next to the most amazing culinary experience known to man, it was day one and everyone headed to what was familiar. Starbucks is thriving.

So what?

What does this have to do with building an elite, high-performance sales force? A lot, it turns out. For starters, consider the kind of sales rep you need to succeed in a scaling/thriving business compared to a survival/arrival business. Consider these contrasts:

The first action to build a high-performing sales team is matching your sales team's strengths to the stage your business or product is in.

Survival/Arrival Stage Salespeople

Focuses externally on understanding the market

- 1. Searches and listens for a model
- 2. Entrepreneurial and resourceful
- 3. Looks for prospects on the front edge of the demand curve
- 4. Deals well with ambiguity, eager for action
- 5. More curious as to why a prospect says yes than no

Scaling/Thriving Stage Salespeople

- 1. Focuses internally on understanding the company
- 2. Executes and manages a model
- 3. Savvy intrapreneurial executives
- 4. Looks for prospects in the fullest chunk of the demand curve
- 5. Deals well with bureaucracy, has patience
- 6. More curious as to why any prospect would ever say no

The process

The first action to build a high-performing sales team is matching your sales team's strengths to the stage your business or product is in. Think of a new software company in survival mode. While recruiting, they bump into a sales professional from a large



software vendor. This salesperson has all of the right tools, industry experience, the right contacts, and they have a track record of beating quota.

When this new, exciting software company hires them, the rep is now in a constantly changing environment. Three months in, the new rep is suffering, and their manager is wondering what's wrong. It is not a good fit. The yellow flag was this salesperson was not used to survival/arrival stage selling.

Conversely, at one point I went to work for a large, Midwestern bank. They were taking a product out to the west coast and needed someone to drive growth. My strengths at that time were in building new businesses, not scaling them. I went in brimming with energy and ideas and suggested changes on day one, only to be shut down. Their model was in place, the growth was planned over several years and they needed someone to execute. Later, I realized we were using the same word, "growth," but we had different definitions.

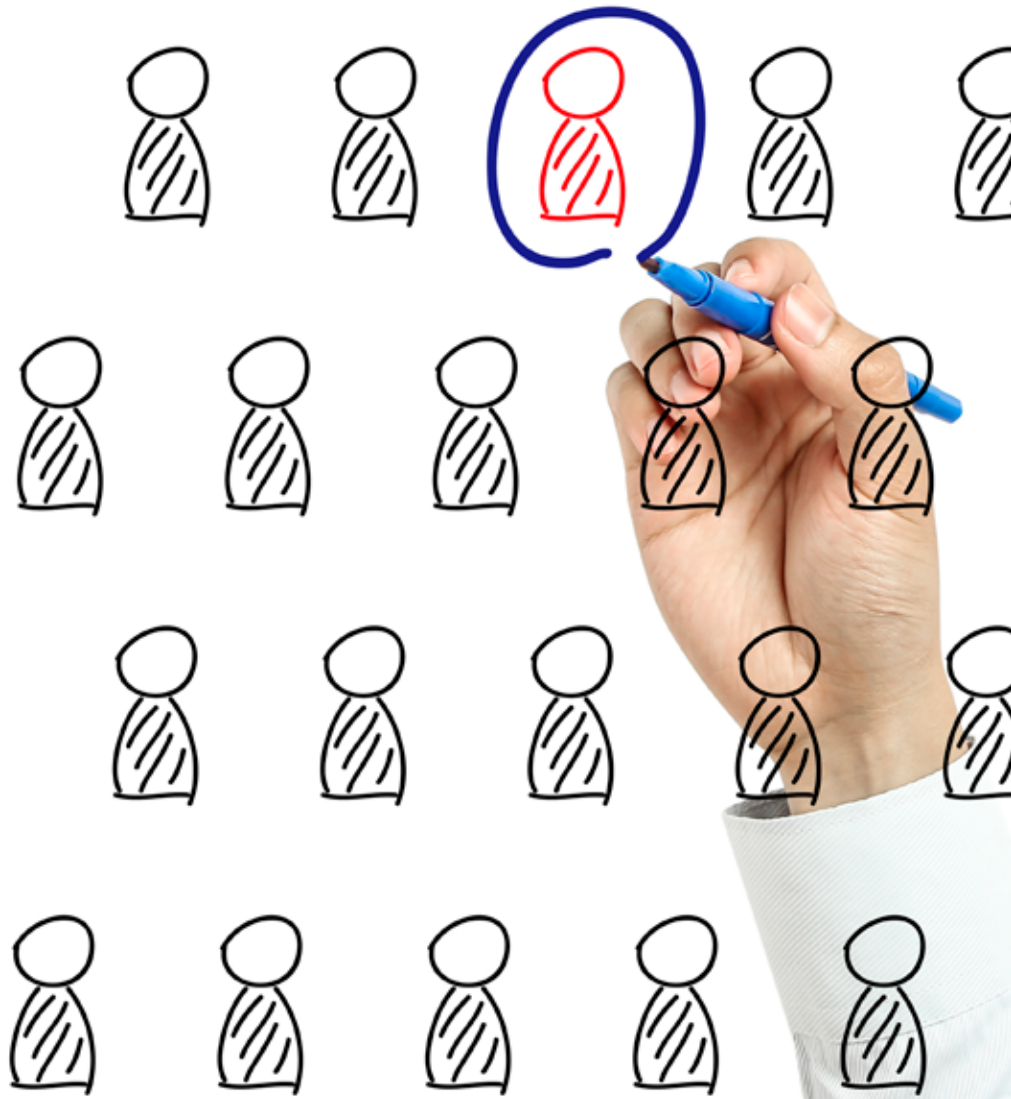
Finding the match

At this point, you are thinking, "Got it. But how do we do it?" I do not have the space to walk you through my entire flow chart, but I will tell you where to start, which is in the interviewing process. Start by taking your existing interview process and adding in a set of "behavior scenarios" to get insight into how the interviewees might behave in your stage of business.

Say your company is that exciting new software startup and you're interviewing the candidate I described earlier. Since you need strengths aligned with the "searching for a model" nature of your business, describe scenarios that will frustrate someone great at executing scale.

For example: "Miss Interviewee, describe how you would handle this situation. A prospect has told you they are interested in your solution, but they have some caveats. To meet their demands, you know it is going to require our company to find outside resources, which will add time, expense, and be a challenge to deliver –let alone meet the client's expected outcomes. Describe how you will work through this scenario."

Their answers to these scenarios will help you identify someone who excels at survival versus someone who executes at scale. I recommend inventing five scenarios and running each candidate through all five. When coupled with your regular interview process, these scenarios will serve as a basic algorithm to help you identify which hires are more likely to thrive in the stage your business is in.



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Building an elite high-performance sales force starts with finding people that will be a fit for where your business is at when you bring them in. The best reps for scale are rarely the best reps for launch and vice versa. This also means your best reps for launching a new product will probably not be the best for taking it to scale. Awareness gives you choice, and now that you are aware of fitting strengths to stage, you can decide what to do next.

Being something it is not

I will leave you with one more story. Years ago, I went looking for a new tree. We wanted something called a serviceberry tree. At the nursery, all the serviceberry trees were multi-trunk

and looked like bushes to me. I thought "tree = single trunk" and looked for it. The owner ambled by and when I described what I was looking for, he took me straight to a tree meeting my description.

He said, "You know Greg, the thing is, serviceberries are meant to be multi-trunk trees. It is what they are. I forced this one to be single-trunk because people ask for it, but it won't thrive. You are asking it to be something it is not."

Great wisdom. The first step in building an elite, high-performance sales force is not to ask your salespeople to be something they are not. Start with the right people for where your business or product is right now. It is the fastest way to growth. ■

Greg Chambers is a consultant and businesses hire him to help build sales and marketing practices that are an exact fit for their resources, talent levels and demeanor. You can find him at <https://chamberspivot.com>.