

Job Title: Sales representative

Ability to learn new skills

Q: In which type of working environment do you learn best?

A: This question will help you learn which type of atmosphere the candidate thrives in. Compare his or her response to your company's environment. Will the candidate be comfortable and able to learn new skills in the job he or she is applying for? Take note of how much the candidate's previous learning took place in structured environments versus how much took place in more informal environments.

Q: What skill areas do you think you need to improve on?

A: Use this question to find out how aware the candidate is of his or her own abilities. A good response will show that the candidate has identified specific areas where he or she would like to improve his or her performance. Follow up by asking the candidate what he or she thinks would be the best way to improve those skills.

Ability to meet responsibilities independently

Q: Describe a time when you had to figure out a difficult problem on your own. How did you go about it?

A: This question will help you assess the candidate's ability to work independently on unfamiliar projects. A good response will show that the candidate used available resources to deliver the best solution possible. Focus on the end result. Ask the candidate how happy he or she was with it. Top candidates will show that they are able to create something out of nothing and are good at keeping a project moving forward even when supervision is lacking.

Q: Tell me about a time when you felt you didn't meet your responsibilities.

A: Most candidates will be taken aback by this question. Press the candidate to describe an experience, at work or elsewhere, when he or she didn't meet his or her end of the bargain. Ask the candidate what he or she learned from the experience. A good response will show that the candidate takes responsibilities seriously and is upset when he or she fails to deliver what was promised.

Attention to detail

Q: Describe a project you worked on that required very close attention to detail.

A: Look for hard evidence of the candidate's ability to keep track of details. A good response will detail the different information that the candidate was required to stay on top of and will show how he or she managed to keep track of it all.

Q: How do you stay organized?

A: Someone who pays attention to details generally has an established way of keeping track of things. A good response will show that the candidate has a system for staying on top of things and makes staying organized a major part of his or her work.

Q: Can you provide some examples of instances when you've discovered errors in your work or someone else's?

A: Look for concrete examples of the candidate noticing things that slipped by others. A good response will show that the candidate has a tendency to check and double-check things.

Creativity

Q: What type of working environment makes you creative?

A: Use this question to find out if the candidate will be comfortable working in a creative position in your company. Does the environment he or she describes match your own company's environment? Get a feel for the type of people that bring out creativity in the candidate. Compare those people to your present team.

Q: What types of changes did you implement at your last job?

A: This question lets you assess how much of an impact the candidate had on the last department he or she worked in. Note the kinds of changes the applicant implemented. How would such changes go over in the department the candidate is applying to?

Customer-Service Orientation

Decision-making ability

Q: Tell me about a good and a bad decision you've made in the last year.

A: Look closely at the circumstances under which the candidate's good and bad decisions were made and what the end results of each decision were. Good responses will show that the candidate has learned from his or her good and bad decisions, and that those lessons affect the way he or she approaches decisions today.

Q: Describe a situation in which you had to get information from a number of different sources before making a decision. How did you go about it?

A: This question will help you assess the candidate's ability to gather information from multiple sources and combine it to make an intelligent decision. A good response will detail how the candidate went about gathering information and how he or she justified a decision based on the available information.

Flexibility

Q: Do you prefer stability and continuity or frequent change in your daily work environment?

A: Use this question to learn what the candidate is used to in terms of a daily routine, and to find out if he or she likes to have projects clearly laid out or likes to be challenged to define projects himself or herself. Follow up by asking what the candidate would do if given incomplete instructions for a project.

Q: How do you determine priorities in scheduling your time? Can you give examples of times when you were assigned a number of tasks and had to prioritize what needed to be done?

A: Assess the candidate's ability to multitask and handle a heavy workload. Good responses will detail the method they use to figure out how to prioritize tasks. You should press the candidate on how comfortable he or she is working on multiple assignments at once.

Initiative

Q: Have you ever come up with ways to make a job you were doing or a project you were working on easier or more enjoyable?

A: Use this question to judge the candidate's ability to innovate and come up with creative solutions to difficult problems. Good candidates will be able to single out concrete examples of instances when their work made a difference through creating revenue, saving money, or saving time.

Q: What skills would you like to learn or improve on in the next year?

A: Use this question to gauge candidates' ambition and interests. Top-performing candidates will have a general idea of what their short-term goals are. These might include learning specific technical skills or gaining exposure to a specific aspect of your business. The candidate's response can give you an idea of his or her possible long-term impact on your company, and whether your company will hold his or her interest.

Negotiation Skills

Q: Describe a negotiating experience that you are particularly proud of.

A: A good response will reveal some of the negotiating strengths and tactics that the candidate uses. It will also show that the candidate enjoys the negotiation process and is excited by the challenges of negotiation.

Q: Describe a project that you had to sell to your superiors. How did you go about it?

A: Assess the candidate's persuasiveness in dealing with fellow workers. How did he or she go about justifying the project? Did he or she face initial resistance to the project? If so, how did he or she overcome it? A good response will show the candidate did solid research and developed a quantifiable argument about why the project should be undertaken.

Oral/Written communication skills

Q: What different approaches do you take in talking to different people?

A: This question gets at how observant and flexible the person is about communicating with different types of people. Ask the candidate to explain how he or she might approach people differently depending on different people's personalities.

Q: What are some of the most difficult writing assignments you have been given or have taken on yourself?

A: Use this question to discover the types of writing the candidate has had difficulty with in the past. A good response should detail how the candidate worked through difficult assignments and what he or she learned from the experience. Ask if the candidate was satisfied with the end results.

Problem-Solving Ability

Q: Give me three examples of the types of problems you like to solve.

A: Compare the candidate's answers to the type of problems he or she will face in the position for which he or she is applying. Then present a sample problem that the candidate likely would face on the job. Ask how he or she would approach it, and gauge whether the candidate's approach would make sense in the position for which he or she is applying.

Q: How do you approach solving a problem?

A: Use this question to get an understanding of the candidate's thought processes. How does he or she like to attack problems? Take note of the resources and time involved in the candidate's approach. Does his or her problem-solving method make a good fit with your company's culture and resources?

Results Orientation

Q: Do you set performance standards for yourself, and, if so, how?

A: This question will help you assess the candidate's personal standards. Good responses will detail how the candidate measures success for himself or herself. Ask for an instance when the candidate put a lot of effort into completing a project that he or she was satisfied with. Listen to gauge the candidate's sense of ownership and pride in his or her work.

Q: Tell me about a time when you weren't pleased with your performance. What did you do about it?

A: This question helps you assess how well the candidate deals with failure or disappointment, and how he or she measures workplace success. Press the candidate to learn about lessons he or she has learned from times when the candidate feels he or she didn't perform well, and about any changes the candidate has made in the way he or she does things to make sure the candidate doesn't make the same mistakes moving forward.

Q: Describe a new skill you learned recently.

A: Top performers will take the initiative to learn new skills on an ongoing basis. Have the candidate explain the circumstances under which he or she learned a new skill. A good response will detail the skill learned and how it impacted his or her job performance. This question can also give insight into how quickly the candidate learns and under what circumstances he or she learns best.

Strategic Thinking

Q: Describe a time when you helped your company identify a new revenue opportunity.

A: Look for hard evidence of the candidate's strategic-thinking abilities producing results. Press the candidate on how he or she came to identify the opportunity he or she describes, and how successful his or her efforts ended up being.

Q: How would you describe this company's strategic position in the industry?

A: This question will help you assess how much the candidate knows about your company's strategy in relation to your industry as a whole. How accurate is his or her assessment? A good response will show the candidate understands the strategic maneuvering presently occurring in the industry, and that he or she has some intelligent opinions about which strategy is likely to be most successful.

Q: How do you keep up to date on the latest happenings in the industry?

A: Top candidates will be well informed about what is happening in the business world. Find out how the candidate keeps current. Ask which magazines, websites, electronic newsletters, or other sources the candidate reads regularly. How do the candidate's sources compare to the sources your company uses to stay on top of industry news?

Teamwork/Interpersonal Skills

Q: Give an example of an instance when you worked with someone who you found difficult to get along with. How did you handle the situation?

A: This question will help you assess how the candidate has handled difficult interpersonal relationships in the past. Good responses will show that the candidate has had experience dealing with various personality types and is comfortable with his or her ability to handle such situations. Pay close attention to the candidate's attitudes toward dealing with difficult people. Is he or she open and understanding, or easily annoyed? Looking back, how does the candidate feel today about "difficult" people from his or her past?

Q: Describe a favorite work experience and tell me why it was satisfying.

A: Compare the experience the candidate describes to your company's own working environment. Pay close attention to how the candidate interacted with his or her coworkers in the example provided. Would the candidate have similar interactions within your company?