

## Selling Skills to Keep Physician Recruiters at the Top of Their Game

Picture this: A physician recruiter calls back the prospective cardiologist to confirm times for the site visit. The scenario then plays out something like this:

*“Thanks for the call, but we talked it over and I just don’t think the practice is the right choice for us....”*

As a recruiter, your first thought may be, “You’re kidding, right?!” That’s probably quickly followed by a host of questions you want to ask to clearly understand why this isn’t the right choice for the physician. One of the most challenging emotions to overcome is a feeling that there was something else you could have or should have said to make the difference.

The ability to clearly understand the needs of the prospective physician and to match them to the benefits of your practice is critical. Good selling skills provide a process for advancing the relationship. The skill set also frames a professional dialogue so you clearly comprehend the candidate’s expectations, their needs and the needs of the practice. Together, these skills position you to ask the tough questions.

### Understand the Process

Evaluate the physician recruiters you know. What innate abilities do they bring to the role? What skills have they honed to get them to the top of their game?

Many recruiters were initially hired because they’re great talkers. They have the right dose of passion and enthusiasm and often have solid background about the place. These are all good traits, but the ability to find candidates and progress them to the point of signing requires more. The most effective recruiters:

- Have a process in place; they recognize it’s less about telling and more about guiding the process and listening.
- Know that the recruiter’s role is to make it easy for the candidate to talk with you.
- Create an environment where there are small steps that “feel safe” for the candidate.
- Learn about the elements important to the physician as they consider a new practice.
- Ask focused clinical questions to gain insight into the fit with the prospective partners.
- Know when it’s time to ask for a commitment.

There’s a logical process to selling: Successful recruiters move smoothly through the stages to ensure the candidate is getting the right type of communication for their interest. Before the physician will offer much detail, you need to cultivate trust, buy-in and effective dialogue.

## Have a Plan

You may be saying, “I *do* have a plan and it’s to fill this position in three months or less.” Yes, you absolutely should have a need to know what type of specialist you need, how you will find the candidates and when you need the position filled. Those are all parts of the plan—but a sales plan for physician recruitment requires more.

As you begin the sourcing process to find qualified leads, create a methodical approach for advancing the relationship. Based on your insights about the current need, craft the approach you’ll use. Create a sales funnel, which defines the likely steps in the process of advancing the relationship. This might include:

- Phone calls to known candidates ( from past sourcing, physician suggestion or personal contacts)
- Phone calls to a targeted candidate list
- Packets in the mail to the interested contact with an envelope for their CV
- A follow-up call to evaluate the candidate’s interest and answer their questions
- A telephone interview/discussion with Dr. Doe from your practice
- A follow-up call with a site visit offer

This type of planning gives you direction for each interaction. Stay flexible with it; know the least you’d like to gain from the connection, as well as the most. Then, with your plan defined, align the corresponding elements from the sales process.

For each component in the funnel, make a list of your key questions you’ll ask and key information to glean. Know where you want the discussion to go. When you parcel out the telling and the learning, you create connections. In turn, the candidate gains confidence in you and the practice opportunity.

## Script, Practice and Adapt Your Skills

While there are some people who have wonderful intuitive skills for selling, the majority of us need to work to change the patterns of communication. This requires that we step back and think about how we ask information and how we provide the benefits of the practice.

### *Gain Credibility*

Effective recruiters set the stage by letting the candidate know the reason for the call and by working to create a dialogue-based approach. Rather than dumping the bucket of features about the practice, they begin by using the 3 P’s (purpose, process and payoff for the call) or another credibility technique that establishes rapport and creates a platform for communication.

This ability to state why you’re calling, connect with the prospect and engage them in a dialogue is a difference maker for good recruiters. Most will tell you they’ve practiced their opening by writing it down and adapting what they say. The fine-tuning is an ongoing process.

### *Ask Good Questions*

Good questions are also invaluable tools for the best recruiters. They craft questions specific to the practice opportunity and use a variety of types of questions to learn the priorities for the prospective physician.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*<b>Prospect to find the candidate</b></li><li>*<b>Gain trust</b></li><li>*<b>Learn their needs</b></li><li>*<b>Position benefits and offer your solution</b></li><li>*<b>Measure buy-in</b></li><li>*<b>Gain commitment</b></li></ul>
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Other questions help the recruiter explore who else is involved in the decision-making process, what type of practice environment the physician sees as ideal, when they would consider making a move, and how they would like to be receiving information related to this search moving forward.

Questions should be a mix of those that confirm factual information, those that gain personal insights about their practice needs and those that provide good understanding of the who, what, when, where and why of making a practice decision.

### ***Listen for Their Needs***

During the questioning process, the recruiter will pick up good clues about the candidate. You can begin to assess what would motivate them, and how they choose to make decisions. An essential selling skill is the ability to discern their real needs—those attributes they describe as the must-haves in a practice opportunity.

The effective recruiter works the questioning process to uncover needs that match the benefits of the practice opening. There's a great opportunity here to validate and repeat the needs that you are hearing as a part of the conversation.

### ***Describe Benefits***

The prospective physician's needs become the basis for discussion about what the practice has to offer. Most practices have lots of "selling features." Set yours apart by starting with a discussion of those practice aspects that match specific needs they identify.

Provide the information in benefit-oriented language: "You need" instead of "We have" conversation. Talk a bit, then ask some questions to see if the information you've shared is consistent with what they desire.

For many seasoned recruiters, describing benefits is a challenge. Because you talk with so many doctors, you may have a tendency to talk about features, and often the ones you think are most interesting. The script can quickly mirror the last appliance purchase—a litany of innovations and gadgets that may or may not matter to the prospect.

Assuming you've taken the time to ask the right questions, focus on the need they have. Once you respond to that, test to see if the information was helpful and if they have additional questions. This process repeats itself with the recruiter asking questions, learning needs and providing the benefit to meet these needs throughout the selling cycle.

### ***Close It***

When the word "closing" is mentioned, anxiety goes up and all thoughts turn to finalizing the deal—getting the contract signed and making the BIG close. However, that's not the only time to use a closing technique in this process. Effective recruiters:

- Work to gain commitment and consensus at each step along the way.
- Use closing language that asks for the physician to commit to each stage in their funnel.
- Listen carefully to the word choice the candidate uses and give that language back in phrases that connote interest in moving the relationship forward.

While the emphasis is always on getting them signed, if the recruiter has gained commitment at each step, the final signature should be a natural part of the process.

There are a multitude of books written about how to close, but realistically the decision to join a practice is at a very different level than the decision to purchase a new rug. It's a huge decision and it requires careful examination by the prospective physician.

When recruiting, use mini-closes at the end of each phone call, meeting and connection. For example, after the initial call the recruiter might say,

*"We're certainly interested in continuing to learn about your interest in our practice. As we discussed, the group has the right size and our location seems like a good fit for your family. I'd like to send a packet of information. Can I include an envelope for your CV? I'd like to share it with Dr. Doe the senior partner in the practice."*

The close includes affirmation of the value of the dialogue, a summary of the benefits discussed, an offer and a commitment from them. The best approach to use is to always assume they will agree with your plan. If they like more detail, they'll ask. If they're uncertain whether they're ready for this, they'll likely say so. Gaining verbal commitment to take the next step in the sales cycle is the recruiter's job. Ask the question so you know where you stand.

Closing is never a time to introduce new information. Ask for the close based on the information previously accepted. Consider having an action or next step for implementation. This formalizes the process and you are able to transition into a discussion of the "how."

### **Your Skills are Your Best Attribute**

When you look at the work it takes to bring a new physician into your practice, it's worth the time, effort and attention to make certain your skills position you at the top. For new recruiters, it requires lots of reading, scripting, listening and adapting. For seasoned recruiters, it takes a desire to stay fresh and not get complacent. At the end of the day, each recruiter just wants to know that they did everything they could to position the practice in the optimal way.



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