

The Characteristics of a Purchasing Agent A Drive to Win and a Need to Persuade

If the job of a purchasing agent is simply to maintain inventory, then “stocking part X and buying part Y only when needed” can be taught. However there is much more to being a top performing purchasing agent than only that which can be taught. A top purchasing agent has to have certain inherent characteristics that substantially increases his or her value to the company. Some of those characteristics are the same as in top salespeople. That should come as no surprise since the salesperson is selling a product or service and the purchasing agent is selling his idea of the value of that product or service. Both, of course, must have negotiating skills. However, it goes deeper than skills. It is really about what drives and motivates a person. The root of motivation in this context is “need”. Skills can be learned, but some types of skills are learned and applied more effectively by some than by others. For example, the skill of negotiating is applied with much greater zeal, conviction, and determination when the individual negotiating has a fundamental need to persuade another person from one position to another or if he has a need to dominate the situation and win. This strong need to win is more often in the psyche of a good purchasing agent than in good salespeople who in many sales jobs actually do well with only a modest need to dominate, especially if their job includes long term relationship building.

Win Cramer, the purchasing agent for Peripheral Enhancements, a computer memory chip distribution company in Dallas, says “If a person is not competitive or doesn’t want to dominate, then he will not succeed as a buyer. He is going head to head with the most skilled and trained employees in the marketplace; salespeople. There is not a single position within any company that receives more training, education, and techniques than a good sales person or sales team.” Win goes on to say, “Everyone assumes purchasing agents are aware. That could not be further from the truth. In-depth training about the products he or she is buying is a necessity as well as training in financials. Purchasers must see that every penny saved via a negotiation will go directly to the bottom line.” The founder and president of Peripheral Enhancements, Jeff Thompson, echoes that position. “We get caught up in sales numbers but it’s the same effect on the company in dollars if the purchaser paid \$86 for an item and should have paid \$84. Why, then, don’t we focus on the importance of purchasing, including his training and compensation? A lot of companies don’t.” He goes on to say, “Many companies have five, ten or twenty times as many salespeople as purchasers. One or two salespeople won’t kill you. But a poor purchaser can kill a company our size.”

When interviewing a person for the position of purchasing agent, remember that your goal is not to hire him or her but to make sure there is a job match. A job match consists of work experience, education, good references, a good match with his or her direct supervisor and the best personal traits for the position. Those traits include a drive to win and a need to persuade.

Some people who have the same temperament makeup as top purchasing agents end up in other careers. However, I have noticed that when it comes to negotiating, they deal with people in very much the same way. Recently I was giving a Human Resources Director our pricing schedule on our pre-employment assessments and, knowing that her profile was that of a purchasing agent, I was not surprised when she began asking “Is that price the best you can do?” “Sharpen your pencil and get back with me. I don’t know if I can get it by the big guys or not.” She does not match the typical Human Resources person’s profile. The typical HR profile shows less dominance (or need to win) and not so much a need to persuade as a need to create an employee friendly atmosphere. That temperament would never do as a purchasing agent.

Having worked in the assessment field for twenty years, people I have worked with like Jeff Thompson tell me that the best way to identify whether a person has the right personal traits is through the use of a

ten-minute self assessment tool called the *Personal Profile System* or *DISC*, as it is commonly called. Then, once you have established the job candidate's temperament blend or 'core' of his personality, you can use other assessments that measure other job-related characteristics. These are also important to measure, depending on whether a purchaser's compensation is a salary or over fifty percent of his income comes from commissions.

Purchasing agents, as with anyone, work hard at what they enjoy. So, the real key to hiring a successful purchasing agent is finding out the basic needs and motivations of the job candidate. Then, you will increase your odds in hiring the right person who will be most effective in that position. Gather your facts, match them to your criteria for a top-notch purchasing agent, and you will save yourself a lot of time and money. In fact, a good purchasing agent will not only save you money, but like a good salesperson, will make you money.

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