

Paid to persuade: Careers in sales



Here's an offer you might not want to miss: The chance to learn more about a career in sales.

Workers who make a living in sales are paid to persuade others to buy goods and services. Just about anything, from apricots to zip-line tours, needs an intermediary to move from producer to buyer. That go-between person is the sales worker.

Sales jobs are numerous. In May 2010, there were over 13 million wage and salary sales workers in the United States, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Not all sales occupations are high paying. But for some of these workers, sales is a lucrative, lifelong career.

This article describes seven sales occupations with annual wages that were higher than the May 2010 national median of \$33,840. And BLS expects job growth to be average or faster than average in each of the occupations through 2018, resulting in many jobs.

Keep reading to learn more about sales careers, including how to start one of your own. The next few pages describe the occupations. The section that follows discusses pros and cons of sales work and the skills needed for success in it. A final section provides advice on how to begin a sales career. Sources for more information are listed at the end. (And for information about sales career scams, see the box on page 32.)

Career options in persuasion

Sales careers provide options for people with diverse interests, strengths, and experience. If science is your passion, for example, then working as a sales representative for technical and scientific products could be a good match. If you have strong skills in math, you might have an aptitude for selling financial services. And if you have work experience in construction, you might do well selling building materials and supplies.

Whatever you sell, you'll likely identify new sources of business and develop customer



relationships. Specific tasks vary by position but might include making cold calls, researching potential clients, attending trade shows, giving sales presentations, negotiating contracts, and preparing sales reports.

Table 1 on the next page gives the May 2010 employment and wage data for selected sales occupations from the BLS Occupational Employment Statistics program. In addition to median annual wages—the point at which half of all workers earn more and half earn less—the table has wages for low-earning (10th percentile) and high-earning (90th percentile) workers in each occupation. The wage data include sales commissions, which are often a major part of sales workers' pay.

As the data show, median annual wages of these sales workers varied considerably, from \$40,030 for real estate sales agents to \$87,390 for sales engineers. Wages within an occupation differ, too, depending on workers' skills and experience levels, as well as on the specific products or services that they sell.

Data for self-employed workers, mentioned throughout the text that follows, are from the BLS Current Population Survey.

Elka Maria Torpey

Elka Maria Torpey is an economist in the Office of Occupational Statistics and Employment Projections, BLS. She can be reached at (202) 691-5719 or torpey.elka@bls.gov.

Table 1: Employment and wages of selected sales occupations, May 2010

| Occupation | Employment | Annual wage | | |
|--|------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|
| | | 10th percentile | Median | 90th percentile |
| Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing, except technical and scientific products | 1,367,210 | \$26,970 | \$52,440 | \$108,750 |
| Sales representatives, services, all other | 531,410 | 25,690 | 50,620 | 106,460 |
| Sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing, technical and scientific products | 381,080 | 36,740 | 73,710 | 144,420 |
| Insurance sales agents | 318,800 | 25,940 | 46,770 | 115,340 |
| Securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents | 276,290 | 31,330 | 70,190 | ≥166,400 |
| Real estate sales agents | 153,740 | 20,460 | 40,030 | 95,220 |
| Advertising sales agents | 145,160 | 22,780 | 45,350 | 96,040 |
| Sales engineers | 66,060 | 51,940 | 87,390 | 146,580 |
| Real estate brokers | 41,210 | 25,550 | 54,910 | 161,820 |

NOTE: The percentile wage estimate is the value of a wage below which a certain percent of workers fall. The median wage is the 50th percentile wage estimate: 50 percent of workers earn less than the median, and 50 percent of workers earn more than the median.

Technical and scientific product sales representatives visit doctors' offices and other businesses to promote products.



Product sales representatives

Product sales representatives sell goods for wholesalers and manufacturers. They usually sell to businesses, not to individual consumers. Some product sales representatives sell goods for more than one company or product line; others work for only one company or specialize in selling a particular type of good. About 5 percent were self-employed in 2010.

These workers sell a variety of products, from raw materials to finished goods, and work in many different industries. There are two separate categories of product sales representatives: those who sell technical and scientific products and those who sell all other types of products.

Sales representatives for technical and scientific products. These sales workers sell or promote prescription drugs, medical devices, computer equipment, and other technical or scientific products.

A technical or scientific background is often necessary for these workers to

understand customers' needs and to explain how a product works. As a result, many wholesale and manufacturing technical and scientific product sales representatives must have expertise about the products they sell. This usually means they need a bachelor's degree in a related subject, such as biology, chemistry, computer science, or engineering.

Product sales representatives, all other.

With more than 1.3 million workers in May 2010, all other product sales representatives—known officially as sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing, except technical and scientific products—is the largest of the occupations discussed in this article. These workers sell many different products, including groceries, home furnishings, and motor vehicle parts.

Table 2 shows which industries are the largest employers of workers in this occupation. In addition to jobs in these industries, however, more than 600,000 jobs are spread across other diverse industries.

Educational backgrounds for workers can be as varied as the products that they sell. Some have a high school diploma; others have a bachelor's or higher degree. Like technical

and scientific product sales representatives, these workers must know a lot about their products and about the needs of their customers.

Services sales representatives

Sales workers who sell services to businesses and individuals are known as services sales representatives. Three types of services sales representatives are described below: advertising sales agents; insurance sales agents; and securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents. Other examples include workers who sell travel, telecommunications, and consulting services.

Advertising sales agents. Also called advertising sales representatives, advertising sales agents sell or solicit advertising on television and radio stations, in newspapers and magazines, and on websites. They also help to place advertising on billboards, in direct mail materials, on social media sites, and in other advertising venues.

These workers explain to customers which types of advertising are best for promoting a particular business, product, or service. Some sales agents work for media representative

Table 2: Employment and wages of sales representatives, wholesale and manufacturing, except technical and scientific products, by industry, May 2010

| Industry | Employment | Median annual wage |
|---|------------|--------------------|
| Wholesale electronic markets and agents and brokers | 223,510 | \$58,810 |
| Machinery equipment and supplies merchant wholesalers | 101,570 | 50,760 |
| Grocery and related product merchant wholesalers | 92,010 | 49,660 |
| Professional and commercial equipment and supplies merchant wholesalers | 57,010 | 52,380 |
| Hardware and plumbing and heating equipment and supplies merchant wholesalers | 46,890 | 47,930 |
| Electrical and electronic goods merchant wholesalers | 44,680 | 51,440 |
| Beer, wine, and distilled alcoholic beverage merchant wholesalers | 43,390 | 47,200 |
| Motor vehicle and motor vehicle parts and supplies merchant wholesalers | 35,930 | 46,480 |
| Lumber and other construction materials merchant wholesalers | 35,780 | 49,730 |
| Management of companies and enterprises | 26,570 | 57,310 |

firms, which sell advertising slots for media companies; others are employed directly by media outlets, such as newspapers, magazines, and radio stations. About 5 percent of these workers were self-employed in 2010.

A high school diploma may be enough to gain an entry-level position as an advertising sales agent, but some employers prefer to hire workers who have a bachelor's degree. About half of all advertising sales agents—including both experienced workers and new hires—have a college degree.

Insurance sales agents. Insurance sales agents sell insurance policies and other financial services to businesses and individuals.

Some of these agents specialize in a particular type of insurance, such as life or health insurance, although many sell a variety of policy types. Agents might represent one insurance company or multiple companies. Qualified agents may also sell other financial services. About 15 percent of workers were self-employed in 2010.

Insurance sales agents may qualify for entry-level positions with a high school diploma and sales or other work experience.

However, many companies prefer that their sales agents have a bachelor's degree, especially in business or a related field. In addition to a college degree, work experience can also be important. Some agents, for example, start out as customer service representatives or in other positions at an insurance company.

Insurance sales agents need a license from the state in which they work. Licensure requirements vary by state. Workers who offer other financial services must meet the licensure requirements of securities, commodities, and financial services sales representatives.

Securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents. These agents sell securities—such as stocks, bonds, and mutual funds—and commodities to individuals or businesses. They also sell financial services, such as portfolio management, and advise customers about these products and general financial market conditions. Others trade securities or commodities in investment and trading firms. Specific job titles vary and include stock broker, investment banker, and financial representative. Nearly 10 percent of these workers were self-employed in 2010.

Part of an insurance sales agent's job is explaining policy options to clients.



Most positions require that entry-level workers have a bachelor's degree, often in business or a related field. Some workers have a master's degree in business administration. Securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents must be licensed. In most states, workers must have been an employee of a registered securities firm for at least 4 months and must pass written exams to become licensed. On-the-job training, including preparation for these exams, is often provided by employers. Specialty licenses may be required for some positions.

Other salespeople

Some sales workers don't fit into either of the above categories. Among them are real estate brokers and sales agents and sales engineers.

Real estate brokers and sales agents.

Real estate brokers and sales agents help clients sell, buy, or rent property. Both are experts on local real estate markets. They research and show properties that will best fit prospective buyers' or renters' needs. They also meet with property owners to obtain listings of properties to put on the market. In addition, they assist buyers or sellers with tasks such as running title searches, negotiating prices, and scheduling property inspections. Workers might specialize in a particular type of property, such as residential or commercial real estate.

Although similar, real estate brokers and sales agents are slightly different. Real estate brokers are licensed to operate their own real estate firm. Real estate sales agents, on the other hand, often work as independent contractors for brokers, receiving a portion of the commission earned on each sale. More than one-fourth of all brokers and agents were self-employed in 2010.

Real estate brokers and agents must be at least 18 years old and have a high school diploma. Some firms prefer to hire workers who have a college degree. Many real estate agents start as sales trainees in a brokerage firm, learning on the job from more experienced agents.



Real estate agents show properties to prospective buyers.

Both real estate brokers and sales agents need a state license: either a broker's license or an agent's license. Licensure requirements vary by state but often include a pre-licensure education course and passage of a written exam. To qualify for licensure, brokers must have previously worked as real estate agents.

Sales engineers. Sales engineers provide technical expertise and support for the installation and use of industrial equipment. Sales engineers might sell highly technical goods or services and install, configure, or help to customize products to fit customers' needs. Because of the small number of workers in this occupation, self-employment data are not available from BLS.

These workers usually need a bachelor's degree in engineering or a related field. Many work as engineers before beginning a sales career, an experience that gives them a better understanding of the products and services they later sell.

Selling points for a career in sales

In many ways, sales work is about building relationships. Sales workers must be excellent

communicators with an ability to develop a strong rapport with customers. They become experts on the product or service they promote so they can explain its benefits to potential buyers. Sales workers are also skilled listeners who ask questions to better understand their customers' needs and preferences.

The best salespeople are good at networking, which helps them develop new customer leads. Persuasiveness and negotiation skills are also essential in sales work.

Self-motivation, persistence, and self-confidence are key to a sales worker's success. Rejection is a reality of sales jobs, so sales workers should have enough confidence that they become comfortable dealing with it.

Sales work can be competitive—and stressful. Some workers must meet sales quotas to keep their jobs. And because many work on commission, usually earning a base salary and a percentage of total sales, limited selling means limited income.

Work schedules are irregular in many sales jobs, often requiring nonstandard hours or work on weekends. Some jobs, especially those with sales territories covering a broad geographic region, include significant travel.

But sales workers often have flexibility in their jobs that other workers do not. Some sales workers are self-employed or work as independent contractors, which allows them a certain amount of freedom to determine when and how they do their jobs. Even those who work for a company usually are free to schedule their own sales calls and appointments, leave the office as necessary, or perform some duties from home.

In addition, wages of the sales occupations described in this article are often much higher than the median for all occupations. And top performers sometimes make more than \$100,000 per year. Wages generally increase with experience, as is true in any occupation. But sales workers' pay is typically based on how much they sell, so high performance leads to high earnings in sales more quickly than in many other occupations.

Sales workers might also receive incentives, such as bonuses or company-paid trips,

for meeting or exceeding target sales levels. Other perks can include a company car, cell phone, and expense account. And positions in sales provide good experience for workers hoping to move into management.

Close the deal: Setting up a sales career

Many of the sales jobs discussed in this article are not entry-level positions, and workers often need sales experience before being hired. But gaining experience and getting a job are both matters of planning and persuasion, skills that all good sales workers need.

Gaining experience

One of the best ways to start a sales career is to work with a company that offers training for new sales representatives or agents. You



Internships are an excellent way to gain sales experience.

can research companies to find out which ones offer the best opportunities for new workers.

Students can start preparing for a sales career in high school or college. Many schools offer courses in sales-related subjects, such as business and marketing. And some student organizations focus on helping members learn about sales, selling techniques, and building a network.

Getting an internship or entry-level job with a company of interest while still in school is a great way to make contacts and gain experience—and could lead to a job after graduation. Product sales representatives, for example, might test their selling skills and learn more about a company's products by first working in telemarketing or customer service. Securities and commodities sales agents frequently intern with a company during college. Career placement offices or academic departments often keep internship listings; other resources, such as organizations' websites, also describe opportunities.

There are other ways to gain sales experience. Some companies provide training to people who demonstrate certain aptitudes or skills. A prospective employer might look for candidates who have ambition, for example, or whose backgrounds relate to the products or services they will sell.

Many employers want workers who can sell to other businesses. For these sales positions, workers might start in inside sales—jobs that do not involve leaving the office—perhaps by helping to develop leads for the sales representatives who meet with prospective customers offsite.

Not every entry-level sales position is the same. Certain industries and employers may have fewer requirements than others and are, therefore, easier for launching a career. These jobs, which are usually lower paying or less prestigious, may provide good training and might lead to better opportunities in the future.

Getting a job

Think of your sales-job search as a sales campaign, with the companies who will pay



for your services as potential buyers. Your best chances for success will require you to test your sales skills: Research opportunities, network, and sell your services as a future sales worker.

Research. Many sales jobs, especially in business-to-business sales, are with companies that most people don't think about or encounter on a regular basis. You can learn about some of these lesser known companies by looking through industry or business-to-business directories, available in many public libraries. Local yellow pages can also help you identify companies that might need sales representatives. And rankings, such as the best companies to sell for, work for, or launch a career with, might give you additional ideas for leads.

Check out company websites, help-wanted advertisements, and online job boards to learn about specific openings. Some sites specialize in sales careers or in a particular industry sector. But often, the most successful approach to getting a job is to tap a network of personal contacts.

*Networking is essential
for success in sales.*

Warning: Sales job scams

When you're looking for a sales job, beware of scams: jobs that promise to help you get rich quick. Remember, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Most sales workers put in considerable time and effort, gaining years of experience before they reach a high-level income.

Before applying for a sweet-sounding position, check out the legitimacy of the company offering the job. If you have concerns, contact or visit the websites of your local Better Business Bureau, consumer protection agency, and state attorney general's office to see if complaints have been made against the company.

And be cautious about paying someone

for a job or for information about a job.

Legitimate employment agencies may charge for placement services, but some scammers charge fees to place jobseekers with a company in which no job exists. Others sell information about jobs that is available elsewhere for free.

Some sales-related job scams require you to pay a fee and then recruit others to pay similar fees (pyramid schemes); others dupe jobseekers into working for free or for very little money (cattle-call scams or some commission-only jobs).

Always verify that a company is legitimate before revealing personal information, such as your Social Security number.

Network. As a future sales worker, you could have a distinct advantage in the job hunt: Networking, a skill you will use in your job, is also essential for landing a position.

Networking happens in many ways, whether through in-person contact, social media, professional associations, or other means. Talk to people you know who already work in sales and ask them for advice on starting a sales career. Set up informational interviews with people who work in an occupation or industry that interests you to ask them about the work, job requirements, and other aspects of a sales career.

Online discussion boards also offer a chance to interact with sales professionals and others interested in the field. And job or career fairs are a good place to connect with prospective employers.

Sell. Every time you communicate with someone in the business world, you have an opportunity to showcase the communication skills that will help make you a good sales worker. Use your resume, cover letter, interview, and thank-you letter to show prospective employers that you can sell a product or service—which, in this case, is you.

Study sales techniques and common interview questions for sales jobs. For example, some employers might assess your sales ability by saying during the interview, "Sell me this pen." Go into an interview prepared with extensive information about the company, its products and services, the names of key decision makers, and recent industry trends. Hone your presentation skills and prove your sales acumen to future employers, and you might buy into a rewarding career.

For more information

This article gives an overview of selected high-wage sales occupations. Other sales occupations—such as counter and rental clerks, parts salespersons, and retail sales workers—may provide opportunities to develop people skills and an understanding of business that are required of more skilled sales workers.

All these and hundreds of other occupations are described in detail in the *Occupational Outlook Handbook*. The *Handbook* is available online at www.bls.gov/ooH and in print in many public libraries, high school

and college career counseling offices, and job centers.

For job postings and a list of member associations related to product sales representatives, contact:

Manufacturers' Representatives
Educational Research Foundation
8329 Cole St.
Arvada, CO 80005
(303) 463-1801
certify@mrerf.org

www.mrerf.org

For a list of state departments of insurance, which provide licensing information for insurance sales agents, contact:

National Association of Insurance
Commissioners
444 N. Capitol St., NW
Suite 701
Washington, DC 20001
(202) 471-3990
reslib@naic.org

www.naic.org/state_web_map.htm

For licensing requirements and other career information about securities, commodities, and financial services sales agents, contact:

Financial Industry Regulatory Authority
1735 K St.

Washington, DC 20006

(301) 590-6500

www.finra.org

For career information on real estate sales agents and brokers, including licensing requirements and lists of approved education providers, contact your state real estate commission or other regulatory body, a list of which is available from:

The Association of Real Estate License
Law Officials

8361 S. Sangre de Cristo Rd.

Suite 250

Littleton, CO 80127

(334) 260-2928

mailbox@arello.org

www.arello.org/resources/regulators.

cfm

Finally, to learn more about how to conduct a targeted job search, see "Focused jobseeking: A measured approach to looking for work" in the Spring 2011 issue of the *Quarterly*, online at **www.bls.gov/ooq/2011/spring/art01.htm**.

