



Sales and Marketing

A Portrait of the Overperforming Salesperson

New research identifies their traits and behaviors. **by Steve W. Martin**

A Portrait of the Overperforming Salesperson

New research identifies their traits and behaviors. **by Steve W. Martin**

Published on HBR.org / June 20, 2016 / Reprint [H02YLM](#)

What are the personal attributes, attitudes, and actions that influence personal sales productivity? I recently conducted an extensive study of more than 1,000 salespeople and sales management leaders to determine the attributes of top sales professionals—those who achieved more than 125% of their assigned quota last year. This is a very select group as only 15% of the study participants met the criterion.

About one-third were field salespeople, one-third were inside salespeople, and the remainder were mid-level sales managers and top-level vice presidents of sales. They've been in sales an average of 16 years and have achieved the annual quota that was assigned to them 88% of the time over the course of their careers. This is 22% higher than the average of study participants who achieved less than 75% of their quota last year. Moreover, the study results help us understand the attributes in six key areas that influence their success.

Focus. It's not surprising to find that top sales professionals are motivated by money. Sixty-six percent agreed with the statement "Money is extremely important to me and how I measure my personal success," while only 10% disagreed. But they are also motivated by status and recognition. A staggering 84% of top sales professionals indicated that being respected and recognized as one of the best by peers at their company is very important to them.

When asked to select how they describe their personal focus, 42% believe they are a likable person who makes customers feel comfortable, and 32% consider themselves very dependable and good at prioritizing their time. Twenty-six percent believe that their knowledge is their most powerful attribute, and this group had the highest average quota attainment last year at 170%.

Career orientation. Top sales professionals think about work a lot. In fact, they find themselves thinking about their job over half of their free time on weeknights and weekends. In addition, they're goal and outcome focused. Fifty percent said they were the type of person who keeps a written or mental list of goals they want to accomplish and 36% indicated they're frequently thinking about what the future will be like in five, ten, or more years. Only 13% described themselves as the type of person who lives life one day at a time.

Their responses to the fundamental reason as to why they went into sales were fairly evenly split. Twenty-seven percent wanted to control their own destiny, and 27% indicated the harder they worked, the more money they could make. Twenty-six percent said sales suited their personality, and for 19%, a career in sales just happened naturally.

Personal attributes. Do childhood experiences influence sales success? The results indicate they do as 72% of top sales professionals remember their childhood fondly as a generally happy time while only 9% disagreed with that statement. When asked which school subject was their favorite, 29% selected history, 23% selected science, 23% selected math, 13% selected physical education, 9% selected language or composition, and only 3% selected art.

When asked how they make important decisions that impact their lives, 40% said their decisions are based on more logic than instinct, 30% use

equal parts logic and instinct, and 30% use more instinct than logic. The average annual quota attainment for those who use more logic than instinct and those who use more instinct than logic was exactly the same, while quota attainment for those who use equal parts logic and instinct was 7% higher.

Seventy-two percent of top sales professionals prefer a wide variety of activities as opposed to daily routines. Only 8% prefer a daily routine, while 20% had no preference.

Customer interaction strategy. The top sales professionals ranked five different sales strategies based on their effectiveness. The top-ranked strategies were “Getting customers to emotionally connect with you” followed by “Tailoring your sales pitch to the customer’s needs” and then “Asking questions that show your expertise.” The two lowest ranked strategies were “Showing the value of your solution” and “Driving the topics of conversation.”

When surveyed about which customer interaction statement they agreed with most, 49% indicated that likability was an important differentiator between themselves and their competitors. Conversely, 45% agreed with the statement “Sometimes you have to point out that what customers are doing is wrong and proverbially tell them their baby is ugly.” In other words, sometimes you have to be provocative and confront the customer’s belief system. Only 6% concurred with the statement that challenging the customer’s point of view will make the customer feel too uncomfortable.

What type of relationship do they have with customers after the sale? Thirty-six percent responded they feel personally responsible and dedicate themselves to ensuring the client’s success, while 26% have less-personal but cordial relationships with their clients because they

are both very busy. Twenty-two percent keep a general pulse on what's happening with the customer after the sale. Contrary to what many people think of as a requirement for sales success, only 17% develop very close personal friendships with their clients.

Attitude. The study participants were also asked to complete word associations to allow a better understanding of their workplace attitudes. The written answers were then categorized as having a positive connotation, a negative connotation, or a neutral connotation, which was neither bad nor good. For example, 53% of the associations to the term “sales manager” were positive, and the top three answers were “coach,” “leader,” and “mentor.” Twenty-seven percent of the answers were negative, and the two most frequently mentioned were “pain” and “overhead.” Twenty-eight percent were neutral, and the most frequently cited words were “management” and “forecast.”

Forty-two percent of the answers for “sales process” were positive associations, with the most frequently mentioned term being “important.” Thirty-seven percent were neutral words, and the top answer was “methodology,” while 21% were negative, with the top-mentioned word being “long.”

Self-perception. When they selected from a list of qualities they thought prospective customers admired most about them, the top responses were trustworthiness, professionalism, follow-through, product knowledge, and enthusiasm. However, the definition of *trustworthiness* seems to be individually determined. For example, 7% agreed with the statement “If the customer’s best interest is served by slightly obscuring the facts that’s OK.” Twenty-one percent agreed with “Subtle manipulation is reasonable, so long as the truth is served.” Thirty-four percent agreed with “You don’t have to point out every

blemish of your product” and 36% with “Nothing but the whole truth is acceptable.”

Perhaps the most interesting part of the study is the verbal perception of top sales professionals and how they described themselves when compared with those who achieved less than 75% of their quota. When presented with the same list of twenty choices, the most frequently selected answers for those under 75% of their quota were responsible, likable, confident, empathetic, smart, and humble. The answers for top sales professionals over 125% of their quota were confident, X-factor (a combination of all the traits listed), quick-witted, likable, responsible, and productive. Clearly, this shows that top sales professionals have a different level of self-confidence, personal certainty, and pride.

This article was originally published online on June 20, 2016.



Steve W. Martin teaches sales strategy at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business. His new book is titled *Heavy Hitter I.T. Sales Strategy: Competitive Insights from Interviews with 1,000+ Key Information Technology Decision Makers*.