

Not all salespeople are successful.

Given the same sales tools, level of education, and propensity to work, why do some salespeople succeed where others fail?

Is one better suited to sell the product because of his or her background? Is one more charming or just luckier?

In a research article in the Harvard Business Review, Steve W Martin discussed his study into these exact questions.

Steve W Martin is a former Sales Leaders and SVP of Sales for one of the fastest growing tech companies in North America, with experience of working with 300+ companies, such as Google, PayPal and IBM. He is a noted sales researcher, keynote speaker and strategist, alongside writing numerous books and guides on sales challenges.

Martin recognised that simply asking a successful salesperson what they thought made them successful would not give an accurate answer – ultimately these reps are doing what comes naturally to them and what feels like ‘common sense’, meaning it could be hard for them to answer this question accurately.

Instead, he set about trying to make the answer to this question more scientific – completing personality tests with some of the top B2B salespeople for some of the world’s leading companies.

In total, he tested 1,000 of these reps, categorising results by percentage of annual quota attainment and classifying them into top performers, average performers, and below average performers categories. The test results from top performers were then compared against those average and below average performers.

His goal was to measure five main personality traits:

Openness
Conscientiousness
Extraversion
Agreeableness
Negative emotionality

The findings showed that key personality traits **directly** influence a top performer’s selling style and ultimately their success.

Below, you will find the original Harvard Business Review Article, which details the main key personality attributes of top salespeople and the impact of the trait on their selling style.



1. Modesty.

Contrary to conventional stereotypes that successful salespeople are pushy and egotistical, **91%** of top salespeople had medium to high scores of modesty and humility. Furthermore, the results suggest that ostentatious salespeople who are full of bravado alienate far more customers than they win over.

Selling Style Impact: Team Orientation - As opposed to establishing themselves as the focal point of the purchase decision, top salespeople position the team (Presales technical engineers, Consulting, and Management) that will help them win the account as the centrepiece.

2. Conscientiousness.

85% of top salespeople had high levels of conscientiousness, whereby they could be described as having a strong sense of duty and being responsible and reliable. These salespeople take their jobs very seriously and feel deeply responsible for the results.

Selling Style Impact: Account Control - The worst position for salespeople to be in is to have relinquished account control and to be operating at the direction of the customer, or worse yet, a competitor. Conversely, top salespeople take command of the sales cycle process in order to control their own destiny.

3. Achievement Orientation.

84% of the top performers tested scored very high in achievement orientation. They are fixated on achieving goals and continuously measure their performance in comparison to their goals.

Selling Style Impact: Political Orientation - During sales cycles, top sales performers seek to understand the politics of customer decision-making. Their goal orientation instinctively drives them to meet with key decision-makers. Therefore, they strategize about the people they are selling to and how the products they're selling fit into the organization instead of focusing on the functionality of the products themselves.

4. Curiosity.

Curiosity can be described as a person's hunger for knowledge and information. **82%** of top salespeople scored extremely high curiosity levels. Top salespeople are naturally more curious than their lesser performing counterparts.

Selling Style Impact: Inquisitiveness - A high level of inquisitiveness correlates to an active presence during sales calls. An active presence drives the salesperson to ask customers difficult and uncomfortable questions in order to close gaps in information. Top salespeople want to know if they can win the business, and they want to know the truth as soon as possible.





5. Lack of Gregariousness.

One of the most surprising differences between top salespeople and those ranking in the bottom one-third of performance is their level of gregariousness (preference for being with people and friendliness). Overall, top performers averaged 30% lower gregariousness than below average performers.

Selling Style Impact: Dominance - Dominance is the ability to gain the willing obedience of customers such that the salesperson's recommendations and advice are followed. The results indicate that overly friendly salespeople are too close to their customers and have difficulty establishing dominance.

6. Lack of Discouragement.

Less than 10% of top salespeople were classified as having high levels of discouragement and being frequently overwhelmed with sadness. Conversely, 90% were categorised as experiencing infrequent or only occasional sadness.

Selling Style Impact: Competitiveness - In casual surveys I have conducted throughout the years, I have found that a very high percentage of top performers played organized sports in high school. There seems to be a correlation between sports and sales success as top performers are able to handle emotional disappointments, bounce back from losses, and mentally prepare themselves for the next opportunity to compete.

7. Lack of Self-Consciousness.

Self-consciousness is the measurement of how easily someone is embarrassed. The by-product of a high level of self-consciousness is bashfulness and inhibition. Less than 5% of top performers had high levels of self-consciousness.

Selling Style Impact: Aggressiveness - Top salespeople are comfortable fighting for their cause and are not afraid of rankling customers in the process. They are action-oriented and unafraid to call high in their accounts or courageously cold call new prospects."

