

Seven Personality Traits of Top Salespeople

By Steve W Martin

If you ask an extremely successful salesperson, "What makes you different from the average sales rep?" you will most likely get a less-than-accurate answer, if any answer at all. Frankly, the person may not even know the real answer because most successful salespeople are simply doing what comes naturally.

Over the past decade, I have had the **privilege of interviewing thousands** of top business-to-business salespeople who sell for some of the world's leading companies. I've also administered personality tests to 1,000 of them. My goal was to measure their five main personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and negative emotionality) to better understand the characteristics that separate them their peers.

The personality tests were given to high technology and business services salespeople as part of sales strategy workshops I was conducting. In addition, tests were administered at Presidents Club meetings (the incentive trip that top salespeople are awarded by their company for their outstanding performance). The responses were then categorized by percentage of annual quota attainment and classified into top performers, average performers, and below average performers categories.

The test results from top performers were then compared against average and below average performers. The findings indicate that key personality traits directly influence top performers' selling style and ultimately their success. Below, you will find 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 percent 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 centerpiece.

2. Conscientiousness. Eighty-five percent 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. Eighty-four percent 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. Eighty-two percent 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 percent 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 percent of top salespeople were classified as having high levels of discouragement and being frequently overwhelmed with sadness. Conversely, 90 percent were categorized 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 byproduct of a high level of self-consciousness is bashfulness and inhibition. Less than five percent 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.

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? The evidence suggests that the personalities of these truly great salespeople play a critical role in determining their success.