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Who Are Your Successful Salespeople?

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INTRODUCTION

The question of how to select the best salespeople is of crucial importance for most organizations which rely wholly or in part upon a sales organization both for communicating with customers and obtaining market information from them. As Stanton and Buskirk (1978) put it: "...the proper selection of salespeople is the key activity in the management of a sales force. . . . A well selected sales force should be more productive than a poorly chosen one."¹ Benefits can include lower recruiting costs, reduced training and supervision costs, lower turnover, better sales performance, better customer relations and customer and community goodwill, and the provision of better market information for managerial decision making.

For most organizations the selection process has taken on added importance as it has become subject to legal scrutiny as a result of laws prohibiting age, race, sex, religion, and nationality discrimination in employment at the local, state, and federal levels. Although use of psychological testing for selection purposes is legal under

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Title VII of the Civil Rights Act as long as the test is not specifically designed, intended or used to discriminate, such testing also is the employment practice which has been most criticized.

While predictors of sales success long have been subjects of interest and much debate among business managers, researchers have met with varying degrees of success as they have attempted to determine empirically what one or several key characteristics might tell a sales manager in advance whether or not a particular salesperson is destined to become a highly productive member of the sales force several years hence.

Some previous attempts at finding predictors of selling success or failure no doubt have focused upon the specific needs of a particular firm—useful results, if any, have not been made generally available. Other attempts which have been published have not succeeded very well in identifying general characteristics in new recruits which sales executives might look for to improve their selection process.

This study began by identifying the salesperson characteristics most often proposed by other investigators as predictors of future sales success or failure in order to see if a general profile of what might be called "successful salespersons" and another of what might be called "unsuccessful salespersons" could be constructed. Some of the predictors of sales success proposed by other investigators and their measures of success or failure are briefly discussed below. Then we present the methodology and the results of our own empirical investigation which successfully found certain predictors of selling success based on sales managers' evaluations of the overall performance of each of their own salespeople as well as the sales managers' ratings of each of their salespeople on twenty-four different personal attributes.

PREDICTORS OF SALES SUCCESS

What predictors of sales success have been found by previous researchers? Stanton and Buskirk (1978) asked whether there are some basic characteristics which are generally desirable for salespeople and answered the question with: "A qualified yes—a 'yes, but' sort of reply."² They cited six such attributes identified by McMurry (1968): (1) a high level of energy, (2) abounding self-confidence, (3) a value system marked by a chronic hunger for money, an improved standard of living, and more status and pres-

tige, (4) an established habit of working hard and without close supervision, (5) a habit of perseverance, and (6) a natural tendency to be competitive.

Mayer and Greenberg (1964) are mentioned by Stanton and Buskirk (1978) as suggesting two basic personality qualities which are desirable in salespeople: (1) *empathy*, or the ability to identify with another person's wants, problem situation, and so on, and (2) *ego drive*, the desire to compete, to persuade, to convince, and to win in face-to-face sales situations.³

Using secondary sources and pulling together the work of other researchers, Frederick Webster (1968) reviewed a number of attempts to answer the historical question "What makes a successful salesperson?" He found some historical explanations of salesperson effectiveness in the form of such personal characteristics and traits of the salesperson as age, height, appearance, education, previous business experience, etc. Other lists included such psychological characteristics as: aggressiveness, dominance, extroversion, optimism and competitive spirit. Webster (1968) noted that more recent and more sophisticated and complex traits like "empathy" and "ego drive" also have been suggested.⁴

Drawing upon some of the findings of communications research, Webster (1968) concluded by suggesting an expanded view of the determinants of salesperson effectiveness whereby selling is viewed as a communication process with the source (company), the communicator (salesperson), the message (presentation), and the receiver (prospect) all having an important influence upon the success of the sales interaction dyad between the salesperson and the customer.

In commenting on some of the disadvantages of using the standard "objective form" psychological test to measure and score isolated personality traits such as empathy, ego drive, and others, Greenberg and Greenberg (1976) note that

"Even if the individual answers honestly, the scores do not reveal what the on-going personality dynamics are that underlie the isolated traits."

Their results showed that "Youth, education, previous experience, maleness, and whiteness simply are not real criteria to predict success"⁵ and they concluded that "These external qualities, so long used as 'knock-out' or selection factors by industry, do not hold

up."⁶ What counts, they say, are the personality dynamics within a human being and matching people to jobs on that basis.

Cotham (1970), reviewing a number of studies which investigated salesmen's characteristics as behavioral determinants of personal selling performance, categorized these variables into three groups. The first deals with salesmen's cognitive factors, including intelligence and sales aptitude. A second group of variables considered by Cotham (1970) concerns the salesperson's personal and occupational life experiences obtained from application banks. Cotham's (1970) third group of variables consisting of measures of personality, social intelligence and empathy, which he saw as foundations for salespeople's interpersonal responses, appeared to be somewhat more promising.

Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) divided determinants of sales performance found in the literature into four groups. They indicated that both tests of intellectual abilities and tests of personality traits showed relatively high average validity coefficients with sales performance criteria. Regarding financial incentives, the authors found very little empirical support for the assumption that monetary rewards are the primary motivator of sales effort. About psychological incentives they said that "...no empirical studies investigating the relative importance of psychological incentives to salesmen and their impact on sales performance have been published."⁷ Finally, they found that while organizations and interpersonal factors may affect the level of conflict and uncertainty salesmen experience as well as their feelings of job satisfaction, there is little theoretical connection between these variables and sales performance.

Finding that "Little attention has been given to (1) the identification of a reasonably exhaustive set of factors affecting sales performance, (2) the interactions among those factors, or (3) the mental processes through which these variables act to initiate, direct, and change the behavior of individual salesmen,"⁸ the authors propose a multivariate model of sales motivation and performance which attempts to integrate present theories with empirical evidence.

In an empirical study of industrial salespeople, Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) reported finding a set of personality variables and personal characteristics which appeared to be useful in the selection of salespeople who would most likely succeed in an industrial selling situation. Managerial ratings from a sixty-three-item apprai-

sal form were summed to obtain a numerical measure of performance used in conjunction with sales data and sales activity information to evaluate selling performance. Personality variables of dominance, endurance, social recognition, empathy, and ego strength were measured by means of a number of personality scales to quantify the traits believed to be related to sales performance, while data on the personal characteristics of age, height, weight, formal education, and activities from salespeople by self-administered questionnaires. Using stepwise multiple regressions it was found that the personality ratings better predicted the managerial ratings, while the personal characteristics better explained performance on the objective performance measures. Thus the characteristics of the "successful salesperson" appeared to depend upon the kind of measures of sales success employed.

From the preceding review of the work of other selected investigators, it is clear that there is little agreement—except on a few characteristics like "empathy" and "ego strength"—as to what really are the best predictors of sales success generally, across a variety of selling situations. Moreover, those things which best predict sales success seem to vary according to how "sales success" is measured by the various investigators.

THE CRITERION VARIABLE—MEASURES OF SALES SUCCESS

If, as Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) point out, the characteristics of the successful salesperson appear to depend upon the kind of measures of sales success employed, then before proceeding further it seemed appropriate that we ask what measures of sales success have been used by previous researchers. In the Lamont and Lundstrom study (1977), behaviorally-based managerial ratings for a two-year period from a sixty-three-item appraisal form were summed to obtain a numerical measure of selling performance used in conjunction with more objective sales volume, quota, and compensation data provided by sales management, as well as sales activity information from management and salesmen questionnaires. The latter included such things as sales quota, number of sales calls made, the proportion of calls on prospective and current accounts, and new accounts sold over the period of a year. Results showed

that successful salesmen as rated by their district managers (managerial ratings as opposed to objective ratings of success) were high scorers on the endurance scale, low scorers on the empathy and ego-strength scales, and did not have extensive involvement in civic and professional organizations. The authors called for multiple measures of sales performance in future research (based on their results being somewhat criterion dependent) but also suggested the need for further refinement of the performance measures used by them to obtain a more compact set.

In their conceptual model which identifies a set of individual, interpersonal, organizational, and environmental variables that may influence a salesman's motivation and job performance, Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) note that several different dimensions of sales performance exist which a firm may or may not choose to evaluate and reward.

Cravens and Woodruff (1973) suggested that one reason previous research has not been particularly successful in identifying predictors of salesman performance may be due to the use of insensitive measures and they designed and tested a methodology for analytically determining standards of sales performance. They reported that salesman performance as assessed by the firm's management appeared to be consistent with the analytically determined performance standards.

METHODOLOGY

In the present study an attempt was made to utilize the composite sort of measure of the criterion variable (sales performance), not as measured by a number of objective criteria all added together into a summary score, or individually either, but rather, overall, as perceived by each salesperson's sales manager.

As he performs his work first as a salesperson and then later on as a sales manager, each sales executive works out his or her own idea about what constitutes "good" sales performance or "average" sales performance or "poor" performance, given his own firm's objectives, products, customers, competition and so forth—in short, given his or her perception of the total job that needs to be done.

This study was an attempt to utilize the sales executives' perceptions of how well the total job was being performed by each of their salespeople as they selected for us their best, worst and average people according to their own perceptions of what constituted the overall sales job in each situation. By utilizing this approach, measures of sales performance were adjusted automatically by each sales manager responding to the firm's or territory's own set of circumstances largely beyond the control of the salespeople and, consequently, circumstances which in each selling situation they must take largely or entirely as "given."

To determine if a general profile of what may be called "successful salespersons" and another profile of "unsuccessful salespersons" could be constructed, this study collected a listing of salesperson attributes or characteristics proposed by a large number of investigators. A seven-point semantic differential scale was used to obtain ratings of salespeople on each of twenty-four personal attributes. In addition, information on a few classification variables also was collected from respondent sales managers in the different corporations included in our study.

These respondents were sales managers of manufacturing and wholesaling firms listed in the Dun and Bradstreet *Million-Dollar Directory*. Retailers were eliminated since most salespeople in these institutions perform routine clerical activities. Organizations with annual sales of less than a million dollars also were eliminated so that each firm selected for this survey would have a large enough number of salespeople to permit its sales manager to differentiate among "successful," "average," and "unsuccessful" salespeople.

After establishing these criteria for the organizations to be studied, a systematic (probability) sample of 200 organizations was selected, and the questionnaire was sent to them. A letter explaining the purpose of the survey accompanied the questionnaire along with a self-addressed and stamped envelope. Seventy-one questionnaires were returned but four of them were unusable, leaving sixty-seven; a rate of 34% usable returns. Although the return rate is not high, it is considered adequate for mailed surveys; however, results and conclusions of this survey should be treated with a degree of caution. In addition to personal and performance characteristics of salespeople, information was gathered on size of sales force, type of products sold, annual sales of the organization, and age of the respondent sales manager.

TABLE 1
Mean Ratings for Each Type of Salesperson
on the Twenty-four Salesperson Attributes

	Successful	Average	Unsuccessful	
1. listener	3.31	4.79	5.40	talker
2. relies on instincts	5.37	4.33	2.94	plans moves
3. feels loved	3.20	3.85	5.22	feels unloved
4. good dresser	2.43	3.29	4.88	bad dresser
5. loner	4.96	4.83	3.60	likes crowds
6. participates in sports	3.74	4.19	4.90	watches sports
7. feels superior	2.41	3.75	5.38	feels inferior
8. reader	3.37	4.29	5.04	team man
9. managerial talent	2.96	4.33	5.30	no managerial talent
10. follows company policies	4.00	3.77	4.10	modifies them to suit situation
11. deliberate	3.04	3.92	4.86	impulsive
12. high school education	5.65	5.25	4.40	college education
13. enjoys company social events	2.69	3.48	4.54	not interested
14. unorthodox	4.67	4.67	4.72	methodical
15. interested in others	2.93	3.52	4.66	interested in self
16. likes intrinsic job appeal	4.15	4.48	4.53	chronic hunger for money
17. uses aggressive approaches	3.93	4.29	5.16	uses soft sell approach
18. feels socially deprived	6.19	5.18	3.96	feels socially satisfied
19. emphasizes new accounts	4.00	4.54	5.36	emphasizes established accounts
20. desires high job security	4.93	4.23	3.28	little concern for job security
21. individualistic	2.63	4.00	5.20	conformist
22. prefers commission	2.54	3.79	5.56	prefers salary
23. boastful	4.13	4.27	4.66	quiet
24. happy go lucky	4.11	4.25	4.30	serious

∩ These differences were not found to be statistically significant at the .05 level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Mean ratings on each of the twenty-four personal attributes were calculated for each of the three sales performance groups of salespeople based on the evaluations by sales managers, as is shown in Table 1.

To properly test for differences between the successful and unsuccessful salespeople on the list of twenty-four personal attributes, one should take the differences in the ratings by each respondent, calculate the mean of these differences, and test to determine if it is significantly different from zero. When this was done, it was found that the two extreme groups of salespeople in terms of sales performance, i.e., the successful and the unsuccessful, were different on about 80% of the twenty-four personal attributes included in this survey.

Some of the results are interesting. The sales managers responding seemed to think that individualistic salespeople or those who are more self-reliant are more successful. Although doubts have been raised about the rationale of promoting successful salespeople to become sales managers, the respondents seem strongly convinced that this type of salesperson does possess managerial talent. There appears to be some evidence in the literature that even successful salespeople do not "feel loved," but the respondents in this study were of the opinion that successful salespeople *do* feel loved. Respondents came out strongly for "empathy" (the ability to identify with others) as a criterion for success; they are in agreement with authorities in the field who suggest that this attribute is the most critical. The respondents are still convinced that the successful salesperson uses an aggressive approach rather than the soft sell approach which would appear to be better aligned with the "Marketing Concept." Figure 1 shows the profiles of the "successful" versus the "unsuccessful" salespeople on the twenty-four personal attributes included in this study.

Results in Table 2 reveal a variety of areas of disagreement among respondents. Each group of salespeople (successful and unsuccessful) was separately cross-classified using each salesperson's attribute and cross-classifying it by the four classification characteristics which were simultaneously gathered in the survey. For example, ratings of the successful group on the twenty-four attributes were

FIGURE 1
Successful and Unsuccessful Salespeople Profiles
on the Twenty-Four Salesperson Attributes

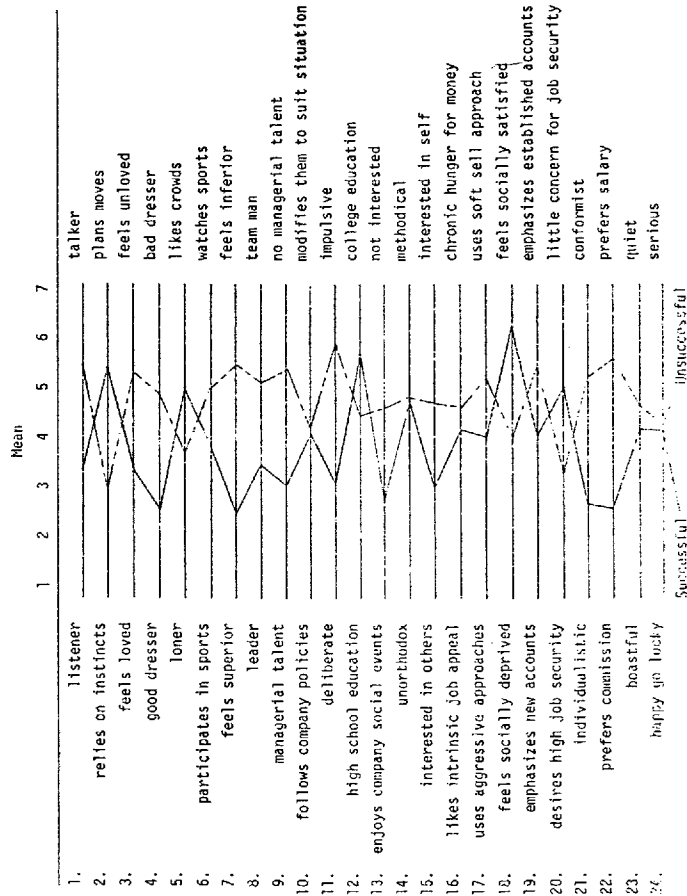


TABLE 2
Cross-Classification Results
of Salesperson Attributes and the Classification Characteristics

Salesperson Attributes	Size of Sales Force ^{1/}		Type of Products Sold ^{2/}		Annual Salary ^{3/}		Age of Respondent ^{4/}	
	Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful	Successful	Unsuccessful
1. listener/talker	*							
2. relies on instincts/plans moves		*						
3. feels loved/feels unloved		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
4. good dresser/bad dresser								
5. loner/likes crowds								
6. participates in sports/matches sports								
7. feels superior/feels inferior			*	*	*	*	*	*
8. leader/team man		*				*		*
9. managerial talent/no managerial talent		*						*
10. follows company policies/modifies them to suit situation			*	*	*	*	*	*
11. deliberate/impulsive			*	*	*	*	*	*
12. high school education/college education			*	*	*	*	*	*
13. enjoys company social events/not interested			*	*	*	*	*	*
14. unorthodox/methodical								
15. interested in others/interested in self								
16. likes intrinsic job appeal/chronic hunger for money		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
17. uses aggressive approaches/uses soft sell approach								
18. feels socially deprived/feels socially satisfied								
19. emphasizes new accounts/emphasizes established accounts		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
20. desires high job security/little concern for job security		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
21. individualistic/conformist		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
22. prefers commission/prefers salary								
23. boastful/quiet								*
24. happy go lucky/serious								*

* Results significant at the .05 level or higher based on the chi-square test.

^{1/}The three categories used to indicate the size of the sales force were: 10 salesmen or less, 11 to 30, and over 30.

^{2/}The categories used to designate the type of products sold were: industrial, consumer, and both.

^{3/}The categories used to designate the annual sales of the organization were: \$10 million or less, \$11 - \$20 million, and over \$20 million.

^{4/}The categories used to indicate the age of the respondent sales manager were: 40 years or less, 41-50, and over 50.

cross-classified by size of the sales force of the answering firms, using three categories: ten or less salespeople, eleven to thirty, or over thirty. The asterisks in Table 2 indicate that based on firm size, there was significant disagreement in evaluating the successful salespeople on the following attributes: feels loved—feels unloved, leader—team man, managerial talent—no managerial talent, and high school education—college education. The remaining significant differences in Table 2 have a similar interpretation. By arbitrarily selecting a total of at least four significant differences for a particular salesperson attribute, it would seem that the salesperson attributes on which respondents, because of classification variables, most disagreed were: manner of dress, education, and intrinsic job appeal.

To put this in a positive perspective, for each group of salespeople there was a large number of attributes on which agreement was demonstrated when these were cross-classified with the classification variables. In pursuing this line of thinking, we were interested in determining if one can develop a profile from these areas of agreement to briefly describe what may be considered a "successful" or an "unsuccessful" salesperson. This is not a unique new profile but simply a brief, clear profile of characteristics from the large number of personal attributes used in the study. This "reduced" profile was obtained by performing a separate factor analysis on the ratings given to the "successful" group and the "unsuccessful" group. In choosing characteristics to include in the two profiles, the highest factor loadings were used. Whenever more than one personal attribute had a high loading on the same factor, the authors attempted to identify a personal characteristic that would describe the two or more combined attributes. The factors or personal characteristics resulting from this process are shown in Table 3.

In examining Table 3, the reader should keep in mind that the two personal characteristic profiles are not polar extremes because each was obtained from analysis of the two groups separately, even though common attributes were used. Furthermore, "naming of the factors" is a subjective process upon which universal agreement may not exist. Therefore the personal attributes and their factor loadings which were used to develop each profile are shown for reader information.

TABLE 3
A Reduced Profile of Personal Characteristics of Both
the Successful and the Unsuccessful Salespersons

Personal Characteristics Profile	Successful			Unsuccessful		
	Number of the Personal Attribute	Factor Loading	% Variance Explained	Number of the Personal Attribute	Factor Loading	% Variance Explained
Interactive	15	.82	17.4	4	.76	21.3
Self-confidence	16	.67		22	.65	
	3	.40	10.5	16	.59	14.7
Calculating	20	.83				
	1	.58	8.3	2	.69	9.9
Inspiring	11	.69		18	.74	
	4	.88	7.7	20	.66	
	7	.32		7	.45	7.0
	8	.35		8	.43	
Individualistic	19	.34	6.6	5	.83	
	21	.77				
	23	.44				
Sociable	5	.52	6.2	17	.61	4.7
	13	.64		23	.66	
Socially Fulfilled	18	.61	5.8	24	.68	
Prefers Commission	22	.50	4.5	9	.45	4.2
				19	.62	
			<u>67.0%</u>			<u>67.6%</u>

17 See Table 1 for the attribute to which each # refers.

Similarly, the cutoff point for factor loadings also is a subjective decision. The last column of Table 3 for each of the two groups of salespeople shows the contribution of each personal characteristic in explaining the variances. Naturally the first characteristic in each profile explains the highest percent of the variances. Here again, the number of characteristics included is arbitrary, although the rule of thumb is to make the cutoff point where the *given* value (eigenvalue) of a factor drops below unity. The issue is one of tradeoffs—the larger the number of personal characteristics included, the higher the percent variation explained, but the less useful a profile becomes since the basic purpose of factor analysis in the first place is to reduce the large number of existing attributes to a manageable number of personal characteristics. In this instance about 67% of the variation was explained by the personal characteristics shown.

CONCLUSION

Although the response rate in this survey was not high, it was fairly typical for mail surveys and the results should be fairly representative of the population surveyed since a systematic probability sample was used. In the course of the analysis, profiles of “successful” and “unsuccessful” salespersons were developed which showed large differences in their ratings on a variety of personal attributes. Since the profile included an unmanageably large number of salesperson attributes, a reduced set of personal characteristics was determined using factor analysis.

Finally, a number of relationships were discovered when the personal attribute variables were cross-classified by four classification variables showing some disagreement due to size of the firm’s sales force, type of product, annual sales, and age of the respondent sales managers.

For future research, instead of the large number of attributes originally used in this survey, it appears that a researcher can instead use the smaller number of personal characteristics obtained from the factor analysis procedure to evaluate salespeople.

FOOTNOTES

¹William J. Stanton and Richard H. Buskirk, *Management of the Sales Force*, (Homewood, Ill.: Richard D. Irwin, Inc., 1978), p. 93

²*Ibid.*, p. 110.

³*Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴Frederick E. Webster, Jr., "Interpersonal Communication and Salesman Effectiveness," *Journal of Marketing*, July 1968, p. 7.

⁵Jeanne Greenberg and Herbert Greenberg, "Predicting Sales Success—Myths and Reality," *Personnel Journal*, December 1976, p. 627.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 627.

⁷O. C. Walker, Jr., G. A. Churchill, and N. M. Ford, "Motivation and Performance in Industrial Selling: Present Knowledge and Needed Research," *Journal of Marketing Research*, May 1977, p. 157.

⁸*Ibid.*

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