An Analysis of Salespeople Characteristics

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Todd A. Paddock

Thesis Advisor

Joseph D. Chapman

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May, 1994

Graduate May 7, 1994
Purpose of Thesis

This paper examines the results of previous studies which have dealt with the topic of characteristics of successful salespeople. A list of characteristics was created, and the characteristics were divided into appropriate categories. Each category is then analyzed, and conclusions for each section are drawn. Implications on how this affects businesses and suggested actions to take are then given.
Introduction

Ever since companies began producing goods, there has been a need for salespeople. In the beginning of the era of mass production, consumers would buy whatever was made since goods were in short supply, however, as time went by, production techniques improved, more companies entered the marketplace, and the market for many goods became a mature one. As the competition became more intense, the company with the best salesforce had the advantage.

Companies began to spend more money in the search for the perfect salesperson, and opinions were formed concerning what type of personality works best in sales. Some of the opinions were correct and could be supported with research, while others were based more on personal prejudices. Today, with the high costs of hiring employees and the high cost of a sales call, it is more important than ever to be able to select an effective salesforce.

This paper examines the results of previous studies which have dealt with the topic of characteristics of successful salespeople. Table 1 shows the list of characteristics pertaining to salespeople which were uncovered during the literature review. A discussion of these characteristics follows.

Job Attitude

Job attitude is the overall state of mind that a person has
towards the job. It is a summation of traits which reflect the work ethic and how work is approached. Job attitude characteristics are as follows: proper job attitude, positive attitude, endurance, willingness to change work habits, having growth potential, realistic job expectations, commitment, and dependability.

A proper job attitude is related to successful sales performance, according to a factor analysis by Denton (1964). This can be directly related to the trait of having a positive attitude. In one study, sales managers who were surveyed said that one of the important characteristics they look for in college graduates is a positive attitude (Johnson 1990). Matt Walton, a sales compensation consultant with Sibson & Company also feels strongly about the value of a positive attitude. In fact, he says a positive attitude is the one thing that makes a sales representative great (Capell 1993).

Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) explain their findings on the traits of endurance and the willingness to change work habits. Endurance shows how willing a salesperson is to make an effort to sharpen selling skills, develop the self, and spend the needed time and effort to building relationships between the customers and the company. Since many of these activities have long-range overtones, salespeople with high endurance levels are likely to view selling as a professional career. Endurance was found to be positively related to sales performance. As for the trait of willingness to change work habits, it appears to be a
characteristic of salespeople with an effective management style (Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). This means that they are willing to change the way things are done if there is a better way.

Another desirable trait of salespeople that can affect job attitude is having growth potential. It is much broader than the ability to improve job performance by selling more products. Greenberg and Greenberg (1976) define it as being able to combine intelligence with the openness and flexibility to find new ideas and use them.

Some other traits related to job attitude were found to be desirable in job applicants. In a survey done by Gaedeke and Tootelian (1989), sales managers were asked what characteristics they look for in college graduates for entry level positions. They were also asked what major weaknesses they found in college graduates. The first weakness is unrealistic job expectations. Many graduates expect to start in management level positions without having to start at the bottom in a company. Another weakness cited was lack of commitment.

Dependability is one of the important traits that a job applicant should have when applying for a sales position (Schuh 1976). Since many sales jobs require that people work independently and without close supervision, it is important for them to be able to supervise themselves. A dependable person will feel obligated to carry out the duties of their job whether or not anybody is watching them.
Feminine Traits

Feminine traits of a salesperson are those that came from a shortened form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem 1974). Jolson and Comer (1992) did a study to determine where feminine traits are most useful in sales. The feminine items that were used are as follows: affectionate, sympathetic, sensitive to the needs of others (empathetic), understanding, compassionate, eager to soothe hurt feelings, warm, tender, loves children, and gentle.

These qualities are useful when trying to establish rapport with customers, when listening to customers, and for maintaining good long-term relationships. Sales managers in the Jolson and Comer (1992) study felt that these feminine traits aided in the ability to retain customers and to encourage sales representatives to perform nonselling activities associated with sales. In today's competitive business environment, companies are discovering that it is easier and less expensive to keep a customer than to find a new one. Therefore, feminine traits would be useful to a company interested in forming long-term relationships with its customers.

Overall, there has not been much interest in the study of feminine traits in salespeople. These traits may be possessed by either women or men since they are not gender specific. However, there has been a great deal of interest in the characteristic of empathy.

Common sense would indicate that empathy, or the ability to be sensitive to the needs of the customer, is necessary for any
successful salesperson. Personnel Survey and Research Group's research has shown that one of the essential traits of successful salespeople is empathy (Friedman 1989). This view is also shared by Greenberg and Greenberg (1976, 1980, 1983). Through their years of study, they have determined that empathy is one of the basic personality qualities a salesperson must have, regardless of the industry. They also make the point that empathy is not sympathy, which involves over-identifying with another person, and thus losing sight of one's own objectives. They go so far as to say that the lack of empathy can guarantee sales failure, although having empathy by itself cannot guarantee sales success.

The connection between sales success and empathy may be more complex than what it appears to be. One study showed that the relationship between salespeople's empathy levels and sales performance is not related in a simple linear manner. The differences in performance were insignificant and those with medium levels of empathy did best. High and low empathizers performed worst (Dawson et al. 1992). Those results seem to agree with an earlier study done by Lamont and Lundstrom (1977). They determined that for industrial salespeople, those with high levels of empathy did worse in nearly every measure of sales performance. Two reasons were given for this apparent contradiction to common sense: 1) this particular sales job was highly technical with a demanding number of sales calls, or 2) it may be a reflection of the salesperson's personality interacting with the rater's personality.
As for the rest of the feminine traits, the only other one mentioned in the literature is warmth. A study of pharmaceutical salespeople found that high performers tended to be warm (Sager and Ferris 1986). Warm people are approachable, friendly, and easy to talk to. This trait may be very helpful in getting a customer to open up and talk about their needs.

**Masculine Traits**

Masculine traits of a salesperson were listed on a shortened form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem 1974). A study was conducted by Jolson and Comer (1992) to find out what selling situations required masculine traits. The masculine traits are as follows: defend own beliefs, independent, assertive, strong personality, forceful, leadership skills, risk taker, dominant, willing to take a stand on issues, and aggressive.

These qualities are useful in selling for establishing contacts with new prospects, directing sales presentations, giving persuasive presentations, and bringing the presentation to a strong close (Jolson and Comer 1992). Sales managers in the Jolson and Comer (1992) study felt that masculine traits were effective in prospecting, contacting, probing for needs, stimulating desire, and closing.

It is not surprising that the masculine traits are considered to be good for a large part of the selling process, since they are the traits that are often portrayed in the stereotypical salesperson. This information on feminine and
masculine traits may be particularly useful for companies that use a team selling approach. It would be a good idea for each team to have people with strong feminine traits and people with strong masculine traits in order to balance out the team and make it more effective.

One of the traits that insurance sales managers found in their top salespeople is assertiveness. This trait was identified by using the Comprehensive Personality Profile Questionnaire (Personnel Journal 1992). This coincides with what Greenberg and Greenberg (1980) have concluded in their research. They say it is important for a salesperson to be forceful without being perceived as pushy by customers. This would seem to imply that a good salesperson knows how far to go in a presentation without crossing the line. Denton (1964) concluded that the masculine trait of leadership behavior is a relevant trait to examine when hiring, since it is a quality possessed by successful salespeople. Hawes (1989) agrees with this statement by saying that one of the criteria that should be considered when interviewing college graduates for a sales position is leadership potential.

Another important masculine trait of good salespeople is a willingness to take the risk of being wrong occasionally (Greenberg and Greenberg 1976). If a salesperson only bets on what he believes to be a sure thing, many opportunities may be missed if risk is unacceptable. In a study done on pharmaceutical salespeople, high performers were found to be
dominant (Sager and Ferris 1986). This somewhat contradicts the results of an earlier study. The masculine trait of dominance was found to be only partially related to sales performance (Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). A possible explanation for this is that like forcefulness, there is a fine line that should not be crossed by salespeople, otherwise, they will be perceived by customers as being overbearing.

In another study of sales managers, one of the important desired traits of college graduates applying for a sales job is aggressiveness (Johnson 1990). This is not surprising since it is one of the characteristics often portrayed in a stereotypical salesperson.

Communication Skills

Communication skills is a broad area which involves the manner in which salespeople present themselves and their ideas, and how they get feedback from customers. Communication is the very essence of a sales presentation because without it, there can be no meeting of the minds. Communication skills are as follows: communication skills (in general), listening skills, the use of positive body language, interpersonal relations, and written communication skills.

The results of one study showed that sales managers believed communication skills to be one of the most desirable traits of sales applicants. This view is shared by others as well. Greenberg and Greenberg (1980) state that one of the important
traits that should be examined in a sales applicant is his ability to communicate with others. Gaedeke and Tootelian (1989a, 1989b) surveyed sales managers and asked what traits they look for when choosing an applicant for an entry-level sales or marketing position. Oral communication skills was the trait mentioned most often, and two other traits frequently mentioned were interpersonal skills and written communication skills. One of the other frequently mentioned desirable characteristics was listening skills (Johnson 1990). Denton (1964) also found that a characteristic of successful salespeople is having positive interpersonal relations with other people.

One very interesting study by Imada and Hakel (1977) showed the effects of interviewee body language on the perceptions of the interviewer. The results of this could be used to imply how a customer would perceive a salesperson based on body language. The applicants who used eye contact, gestures, smiling, smaller interpersonal distances, an attentive posture, and a more direct body orientation were rated much higher than those who didn't. Those applicants who used positive body language were rated as being more likely to be accepted, more successful, more qualified, better liked, having more desirable characteristics, and being more motivated and competent.

Work Experience and School/Social Activities

In a survey, sales managers were asked to rank the value of school and social extracurricular activities as preparation for a
job in sales (Johnson 1990). Starting with the most important, they were ranked as follows: Part-time job related to sales, student professional clubs, other part-time job, athletics, campus government, volunteer work, in student newspaper or radio, and in fraternities or sororities.

A study of sales managers asked an open-ended question to determine important traits desired in applicants for an entry-level marketing or sales job (Gaedeke and Tootelian 1977). Related work experience was one of the characteristics most frequently mentioned. Participation in athletics and membership in fraternities or sororities were considered unimportant factors to consider when hiring (Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989). These results are basically the same as the ones found in the Johnson (1990) study mentioned above.

These findings correlate with other research that has been conducted on the subject. Hawes (1989) says one of the traits worth considering is the amount and type of previous work experience. Employer interest in athletics was found to be one of the least important traits in an applicant for a sales position (Schuh 1973). Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) found that one of the traits of a successful salesperson is a broad range of interests, but no heavy involvement in organizations.

Job Skills

Job skills are the personal qualities that a salesperson draws upon in order to work effectively. The proper skills
can enable a salesperson to be more successful in all aspects of the job, from prospecting to follow-up.

One study was contrary to what most research has attempted to do, which is to find what traits are needed to be a successful salesperson. Weitz, et al. (1986) discuss the idea that there are no universally effective selling behaviors, therefore, a successful salesperson adapts to the situation. Two of the traits that help motivate the practice of adaptive selling are: 1) the tendency of the representative to analyze sales encounters, and 2) the degree to which the representative has the capabilities to practice adaptive selling.

Part of that conclusion has been agreed upon by other researchers. Tosi (1966) found that a desirable trait of salespeople is the ability to adapt to a variety of buyer personalities, behaviors, and expectations. A salesperson should anticipate and adapt to different social situations (Belasco 1966). This would make sense because a canned presentation is not very effective in most situations.

Time management is another important job skill mentioned in several studies. Being able to make decisions on how the spend time is important for a representative to manage the sales territory (Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). Greenberg and Greenberg (1983) agree by stating that, depending on the sales situation, knowing how to manage time can be an important trait of a salesperson.

Another trait related to time management skills is being
able to organize and plan. It seems to be a trait of salespeople with effective management styles (Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). Lee and Gillen (1989) found that self-efficacy, or the ability to organize and plan, has a partially positive relationship to performance. Hunter and Hunter (1984) found that ability, or aptitude, was the best predictor of job performance for entry-level jobs.

Churchill Jr. et al. (1985) reported the associations between performance and determinants of that performance. Just like Weitz et al. (1986), Churchill concludes that no single determinant, such as aptitude, ability, or skill level can explain a large part of the variation in sales performance. However, this study differentiates itself by showing that the strength of the association is affected by the type of products sold. For example, a salesperson's aptitude has a greater impact on performance when products are sold compared to selling services.

Another variation of the view of looking at the traits that salespeople possess is to try and match up the applicant with the right job. Different types of sales jobs require different types of people, and a good match helps produce a successful salesperson. Two of the important characteristics to look at when matching an applicant to the proper sales job are the ability to make decisions quickly and the ability to do detail work (Greenberg and Greenberg 1976, 1980, 1983). Other traits to look at when job matching are the ability to delegate, the
ability to deal with complex ideas, and the ability to negotiate (Greenberg and Greenberg 1976, 1980, 1983).

In the banking industry, it is important for bank representatives to be able to handle details without losing sight of the overall sales picture or the ultimate sales goal (Friedman 1989). This means being able to see each sale as a separate, but contributing item to the whole company.

Persuasiveness can be defined as the ability to get others to see another point of view or agree with what is being said. Johnson (1990) asked sales managers what traits they look for in a sales candidate. One of the more frequently mentioned traits was persuasiveness. Hawes (1989) agrees by stating that one of the qualities worth considering when hiring college graduates for a sales job is having the ability to persuade.

Any sales job will require a variety of tasks that must be performed on a regular basis. There are also new and unique challenges which must be dealt with. In order to keep pace with today's business client, a salesperson must be flexible enough to deal with any situation. Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) found that being a flexible thinker appears to be a trait of salespeople with effective management styles.

Perseverance can be thought of as the ability to keep pursuing a future goal even when the present seems discouraging. It can also mean not allowing oneself to get sidetracked by circumstances. According to Stanton and Buskirk (1978), perseverance is one of the predictors of sales success. In the
banking industry, it is important for representatives to be perseverant (Friedman 1989).

Background Traits

The background of a salesperson includes past experiences, both academic and on the job, and living arrangements. By far, most of the attention in this area has been geared towards academic achievements and job experience.

In a survey of sales managers, most had mixed feelings concerning the role and effectiveness of a college degree for a sales career. Business and Marketing majors are preferred, but the type of degree does not seem to be important except when specific technical knowledge is needed for sales (Johnson 1990). Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) concluded that for industrial salespeople, the ideal salesperson is not highly formally educated, but is intellectually capable of learning. Other studies have found that formal education is of little or no value in predicting the success of salespeople (Hunter and Hunter 1984; Greenberg and Greenberg 1976, 1980, 1983).

There are some more positive views concerning the role of a college degree in sales success. Hawes (1989) explains that students with a major in Marketing are better prepared and are more enthusiastic about careers in professional selling. One of the most important traits of a sales applicant is educational experience (Schuh 1973).

Regardless of the effect of a college degree on sales
performance, it is a fact that having a college degree is becoming more common among salespeople. A survey found that 20% of U.S. salespeople had a degree in 1982, vs. 62% in 1992. Those with a post-graduate degree increased from 3% in 1990 to 7% in 1992 (Pesman 1993). For most types of sales jobs, it is not necessary to have an advanced degree. However, it may be desirable if the product or service is highly technical or if the salesperson hopes to move further up the corporate ladder. The same type of disagreement exists between those who debate the importance of grade point average on sales success. One study by Hunter and Hunter (1984) concluded that academic achievement is not a valid predictor of sales performance, however, Hawes (1989) states that GPA is one of the qualities that should be considered when hiring for a sales position.

Findings on the relevance of full-time work experience are also mixed. Studies have shown that experience is not a valid predictor of sales performance (Hunter and Hunter 1984; Greenberg and Greenberg 1976, 1980, 1983). Another study found that experience is not important for missionary selling, but in prospecting, experience is preferred (Newton 1969).

Overall, other background characteristics of salespeople are not seen as being important. Some of the least important factors to look at when hiring for a sales position include the applicant's family background, where he/she grew up, marital status, and present housing arrangements (Schuh 1973). Another trait viewed by sales managers as unimportant is an applicant's
military experience (Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989).

One factor that may be considered because of the tendency of sales jobs to involve transfers is an applicant's willingness to relocate. If a sales applicant is willing to relocate, it can help make the transfer a smoother process (Hawes 1989).

Physical Traits

Physical traits are the visible qualities of a salesperson. Because of government laws, most physical traits cannot be discriminated against, although it is still useful to know whether or not and how much they affect sales performance.

Since salespeople are often the only people from a company that customers come into contact with, customers often base their perceptions of a company on its salesforce. Therefore, it is not surprising that Johnson (1990) revealed that one of the traits to look for in a sales applicant is a neat appearance.

Contrary to a common view that the best salespeople are young to early middle-aged, many studies have found that the age of a salesperson is not a valid predictor of success (Greenberg and Greenberg 1976, 1980, 1983; Hunter and Hunter 1984; Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). Newton (1969) suggests that age is partially significant, but only in certain types of selling. He concluded that older people are better for trade selling and for getting new business, whereas younger people are better for missionary selling. Lamont and Lundstrom (1977) found that height was related to success. They concluded that taller
salespeople are more successful. The weight of a salesperson was not found to be a valid predictor of performance.

Another stereotype that exists is that the better salespeople are white males; however, based on a profile analysis of salespeople, both sex and race were not found to be valid predictors of sales success (Greenberg and Greenberg 1976, 1980, 1983.)

Salespeople often must communicate to customers verbally; therefore, a good salesperson should probably have a pleasing voice. However, Schuh (1973) suggests that one of the least important traits to examine in selecting salespeople is the quality of the applicant's voice. It is helpful if a salesperson is energetic because there are so many demands in most sales positions. Several studies found that a desirable trait of salespeople is a high level of energy (Stanton and Buskirk 1978; Tosi 1966).

Values

The values of a salesperson are the inner qualities that guide how a person works and lives. Values are also a reflection of what is considered important, and they can encompass ethics and morals. In today's business environment, values are being scrutinized more closely than ever before by the media and the general public; therefore, it is in a company's best interest to examine the values that are held by its salespeople.

A survey of sales managers showed that one of the more
important traits they look for in a sales applicant is honesty (Johnson 1990). Honesty is necessary when dealing with customers and fellow employees. If the customer has reason to doubt the salesperson, it will be very difficult to build trust and a long-term relationship.

According to one theory, there are no universally effective selling behaviors that can be applied to all sales jobs. Therefore, effective salespeople adapt to the situation. One of the traits that determines how well a salesperson can be adaptive is the degree to which the representative has an intrinsic reward orientation (Weitz et al. 1986). This means that a salesperson is motivated not just by money, but by the satisfaction that comes from doing the job. The concept of intrinsic reward orientation contradicts what was found by Stanton and Buskirk (1978). Two attributes that contribute to sales success are: 1) a desire for money, status, and a better standard of living, and 2) a habit of working hard.

Having a sense of responsibility can mean a willingness to take the initiative to start and complete a project or being able to accept any consequences that result from a decision instead of trying to shift the blame on someone else. One of the traits that may be desirable, depending on the job, is a strong sense of responsibility (Greenberg and Greenberg 1976). In a survey, sales managers stated that one of the weaknesses of college graduates is a low sense of responsibility (Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989). Schuh (1973) agrees with this by saying that one of the
most important traits for a sales applicant is a sense of responsibility. He also says it is important to have a good attitude towards other peoples' opinions. A positive attitude towards other opinions may be needed when a great deal of customer input is utilized. It is not up to the salesperson to pass judgement on what the customer decides; however, a representative should not hesitate to offer advice and make recommendations.

Personality Traits

Personality traits are the characteristics a person possesses which make that person unique. Most of these are somewhat permanent or at least they are difficult to change in a short time. It is possible to modify them, but it requires a good deal of desire on the part of the person who is trying to change.

Self-motivation means taking the initiative to start something instead of waiting to be told. A survey of sales managers revealed that one of the most important qualities for sales applicants is self-motivation (Johnson 1990). Being a self-starter is one of the traits a salesperson may need depending on the job (Greenberg and Greenberg 1983). This may be particularly important if the salesperson works independently without much supervision.

Another important personality trait is motivation for the job (Schuh 1973). Sales managers stated that one of the many
weaknesses of recent college graduates is a lack of motivation (Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989). This view is not shared by everyone, however. Motivation was one of the factors studied in an analysis to show correlations of determinants to sales performance (Churchill Jr. et al. 1985). It did not account for a significant amount of the variation in performance.

If a person has genuine enthusiasm, it is contagious. The excitement that comes from working is apparent if a salesperson is enthusiastic. A positive, energetic attitude is needed to deal with the many possible rejections a salesperson will face. Sales managers have stated that one of the most important traits they look for in a sales applicant is enthusiasm (Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989, 1989; Johnson 1990). Falvey (1988) agrees with this by stating that sales candidates should be enthusiastic.

A personality trait often associated with salespeople is an abundance of self-confidence. It is the ability to believe in oneself even when the odds appear too great to overcome. It can also mean believing in one's abilities to get the job done. It is not surprising that one of the traits that sales managers look for in a sales candidate is self-confidence (Johnson 1990). Stanton and Buskirk (1978) support this belief by stating that one of the traits of a good salesperson is self-confidence.

A concept related to self-confidence is the characteristic of self-esteem. A person with positive self-esteem does not judge himself against others and feel disappointed if he does not measure up to the same level. The person's sense of self-worth
is not dependant on circumstances. One study determined that specific self-esteem has a positive influence on sales performance (Bagozzi 1978).

There are a variety of social abilities pertaining to salespeople. One of the desired traits of salespeople in the banking industry is a desire to be of service to others (Friedman 1989). This can be important because, in many cases, a good deal of a salesperson's job is being available at any time to make sure the customer is satisfied.

Another study determined that one of the traits a successful salesperson has is a need of social recognition (Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). Social recognition can come about by having other people perceive the salesperson's job as being prestigious or as providing a valuable function for society. Jackson et al. (1982) and Seis and Jackson (1970) agree with the idea of good salespeople desiring social recognition. Employment interviewers perceived affiliation tendencies and approval seeking to be qualities of successful salespeople.

It may also be important for salespeople to get along with others. This is not surprising since sales is a people-oriented job. A study of pharmaceutical salespeople found that high performers tended to be cooperative and easy going (Sager and Ferris 1986). Sales candidates should also be likeable (Falvey 1988).

There is some disagreement concerning the effectiveness of ego strength. In one study, there was a negative relation
between ego strength and sales performance (Lamont and Lundstrom 1977). However, Greenberg and Greenberg (1976, 1980, 1983) suggest that a successful salesperson should have ego strength and also ego drive. Friedman (1989) partially agrees with this by stating that one of the traits of successful salespeople in the banking industry is ego drive.

There has been a great deal of interest in the study of personality types and how being a type A or type B personality affects everything from health to job performance. It is a common perception that the hard-driving type A person is a natural for a sales job because the job would be perfect for an aggressive, achievement-oriented person, however, the results do not support this idea.

One study found no relationship between type A behavior and sales performance (Matteson et al. 1984). They state that while some type A traits are beneficial in parts of sales jobs, they detract in other parts. Lee and Gillen (1989) found no relationship between type A behavior and sales quota performance or performance ratings. They found that Type A behavior may sometimes hinder sales quantity. This may be possible if customers perceive a salesperson to be too aggressive.

Type A behavior may be beneficial in very specific circumstances, though. In a highly outcome-based, entrepreneurial sales organization, type A people will perform better because the characteristics of the job match up very well with the salesperson (Bartkus et al. 1989). One of the traits
of a person with a type A personality is competitiveness. Stanton and Buskirk (1978) state that one of the traits of a good salesperson is to be competitive.

Another trait shared by excellent salespeople according to one study is shrewdness (Sager and Ferris 1986). Sales managers identified some of the traits of their top life insurance agents and two of them were emotional intensity and intuition (Personnel Journal 1992). Sales managers who were questioned said one of the weaknesses of college graduates is a lack of maturity (Gaedeke and Tootelian 1989).

Conclusion

There are several conclusions that can be reached about what factors are important in each of the different categories of traits. In the Job Attitude category, the following traits are important for salespeople to have: proper job attitude, positive job attitude, endurance, growth potential, and dependability.

In the Feminine Traits category, the feminine traits are important for salespeople to have since they help to retain customers and form long-term relationships. Results on the value of empathy are mixed. Some studies say it is essential for sales success, while others say it interferes with sales performance. The trait of warmth may be tied to high performance levels.

In the Masculine Traits category, the masculine traits are good for many parts of the selling process including prospecting, contacting, probing for needs, stimulating desire, and closing.
The following traits are important for salespeople to have: assertive but not pushy, leadership potential, risk taker, and aggressive. The results on dominance are mixed.

In the Communication Skills category, the following traits are important: communication skills in general, oral, listening, and written skills, good interpersonal skills, and positive body language.

In the Work Experience and School/Social Activities category, the following traits are important: part-time jobs related to sales, amount and type of any previous work experience, and a broad range of interests, but no heavy involvement in organizations.

In the Job Skills category, the following traits are important: analyze sales encounters, adaptive, manage time well, able to organize and plan, persuasive, flexible, able to handle details, and perseverance.

In the Background category, the results are mixed. There is disagreement concerning the effectiveness of a college degree. Business and Marketing majors are often preferred, but some studies have found no connection between formal education and sales success. There is also disagreement on the effect of grade point average on sales success. Previous full-time work experience is not very important, however the willingness to relocate can be helpful.

In the Physical Traits category, the following traits are important: neat appearance, height (taller salespeople are more
successful), and energetic. The results on age are mixed.

In the Values category, the following traits are important: honesty, strong sense of responsibility, habit of working hard, and a good attitude towards other peoples' opinions. There are contradictions in what is said to motivate salespeople. One study says intrinsic reward orientation is important, while another says a desire for money, status, and a better standard of living is important.

In the Personality Traits category, the following traits are important: self-motivation, enthusiasm, self-confidence, positive self-esteem, desire to be of service to others, need for social recognition, affiliation tendencies, approval seeking, cooperative, easy going, likeable, competitive, shrewdness, emotional intensity, intuition, and maturity. Motivation for the job may be important, but it is not definitely related to sales success. Opinions on the effectiveness of ego strength are mixed. In general, being a type A person does not seem to affect the success of the salesperson, however it may be helpful in a highly outcome-based entrepreneurial organization.

Based on the research reviewed in this manuscript, it is not possible to say with absolute certainty what characteristics are universally common in successful salespeople. Many of the traits are only mentioned in one or two studies, and that is not enough to reach definite conclusions. When the traits are examined in a number of studies, the results are often contradictory.

There are several possible explanations for the
contradictions. Since what is measured are nonquantifiable human characteristics, there will naturally be some disagreement on what the precise definitions are. The studies were conducted on different types of salespeople in a variety of companies, in a variety of industries. What may be helpful in one type of company or industry may be a hinderance in another.

Based on this information, there are two possible alternatives to help ensure the success of salespeople. The first is the salesperson must adapt to the position. This means that the traits the salesperson has upon starting a new job may need to change in order to fit in with the new environment. This view is shared by Weitz et al. (1986). For many people, though, this is difficult to achieve. Some traits can be learned, improved, or developed, but others are impossible to change. Therefore, another alternative may be more likely to enhance sales success.

The second way to ensure the success of salespeople is to match the right salesperson to the right job. This means examining what the job demands and matching it to the person that has the appropriate characteristics. This view is shared by Greenberg and Greenberg (1976, 1980, 1983). Although it is more tempting to try to find a magic list of traits that salespeople should have, no such list appears to exist. There is no substitute for examining the job, forming a job description, and then forming a list of characteristics that are beneficial for that job. Of course, the company should be able to back up its
reasoning for disqualifying any job applicants by showing that those specific characteristics are indeed necessary for success in that position.
Table 1

Job Attitude
- proper job attitude
- positive attitude
- endurance
- willing to change work habits
- have growth potential
- realistic job expectations
- commitment
- dependable

Feminine Traits
- affectionate
- sympathetic
- empathetic
- understanding
- compassionate
- eager to soothe hurt feelings
- warm
- tender
- loves children
- gentle

Masculine Traits
- defend own beliefs
- independent
- assertive
- strong personality
- forceful
- leadership skills
- risk taker
- dominant
- willing to take a stand on issues
- aggressive

Communication Skills
- communication skills
- listening skills
- use positive body language
- interpersonal relations
- written communication skills
Work Experience and School/Social Activities
- part time job related to sales
- student professional clubs
- other part time job
- athletics
- campus government
- volunteer work
- in student newspaper or radio
- sororities/fraternities
- in professional organizations

Job Skills
- analyze sales encounters
- know how to spend time
- able to organize/plan
- aptitude
- skill level
- make decisions quickly
- can do detail work
- able to delegate
- deal with complex ideas
- able to negotiate
- persuasive
- adaptive
- flexible thinker
- perseverent

Background Traits
- college degree
- academic achievement/GPA
- full-time work experience
- family background
- where he grew up
- military experience
- marital status
- present housing arrangements
- willing to relocate

Physical Traits
- neat appearance
- age
- height
- weight
- sex
- race
- quality of voice
- energetic
Values
- honesty
- intrinsic reward orientation
- want better standard of living
- hard worker
- sense of responsibility
- attitudes towards others' opinions

Personality Traits
- self-motivation
- enthusiasm
- self-confidence
- self-esteem
- service-oriented
- need of social recognition
- affiliation tendencies
- approval seeking
- cooperative
- easy going
- likeable, nice personality
- ego strength
- ego drive
- type A behavior
- competitive
- shrewd
- emotional intensity
- intuition
- mature
Bibliography


31


