

Seven Myths and Misconceptions About Top Performing Salespeople

Predictive Sales Performance StudySM

Competition may duplicate products and undercut prices. The key strategic advantage for most companies is their sales force. The Predictive Sales Performance StudySM is designed to deliver better performing salespeople by benchmarking the traits of your top performers, and aligning your salespeople and sales managers with the critical skills necessary to excel in the sales role.

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If there's one profession that's plagued with myths and half-truths, it's sales. And no group is more subject to misunderstanding than your organization's top performers

Let's examine seven of the most common misconceptions about world-class salespeople.

Myth One: World-class salespeople just happen to be with the right company at the right time.

Reality: Sales involves thought and action. Like their colleagues in other departments, good salespeople like to innovate, coming up with great ideas and strategies for turning those ideas into reality. But at the end of the day, top performers understand that sales is about execution and results--and they understand that their ability to do that job well affects everyone in the entire organization, not just the sales team.

Myth Two: The best salespeople are naturals; they just wing it.

Reality: World-class sales performers "train" just like world-class athletes do. Our research indicates that, when compared with average performers, the best salespeople are:

- 30 percent more likely to prepare for their sales calls.
- 30 percent more likely to rely on a well-defined approach to determining which clients to target
- 24 percent more likely to have a standard approach for reviewing existing opportunities

World-class performers in any field are big on discipline and routine. They're consistent. They're constantly developing new and better systems for getting things

done. And they don't wait for breakthroughs--they make breakthroughs happen.

Myth Three: Top-performing salespeople are cutthroat competitors who want to see everyone else fail.

Reality: Like world-class athletes, sales stars don't tie their wins to others' losses. In fact, the best want everyone else to do well--they just want to do better! After all, in any field, it's more rewarding to beat competitors when they're at the top of their games than to breeze past them when they're down. There's little challenge--in sales or athletics--in beating someone who's a weaker performer or who's having a bad day. And there's no sense of accomplishment at all in winning when there's no competition.

Top performers in both disciplines are highly focused and goal-oriented. They know exactly what their goals are; they hold themselves accountable for achieving them; and as soon as they've done so, they raise the bar with new, higher goals. Their overall approach can be summed up with the acronym SMART: "specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented and time-based."

Myth Four: World-class salespeople only care about making money--after all, that's how they get to the top.

Reality: World-class salespeople believe in what they sell. Jim McCann, founder of 1-800-flowers.com, the highly successful floral and gift service, puts it this way: He really enjoys hearing how he helped somebody out of a jam at the last second. He gets to help them preserve and honor their most important relationships. Denver real-estate legend Edie Marks cites a similar secret for success; she says she loves "helping good people fulfill their dreams."

Great sales careers are built on relationships, and great salespeople value those relationships above all else. Top performers think about more than selling a house or pushing a product; they genuinely enjoy helping their customers solve problems, meet needs or move ahead with projects. In a sense, they're "pleasers;" they truly like making customers happy--and they

know that involves really understanding what their clients want to fix, accomplish or avoid.

Myth Five: World-class salespeople are intrusive and pushy.

Reality: World-class salespeople are curious. They like to learn about anything that helps them improve themselves and gain an edge--including knowing as much as possible about their customers.

For that reason, they tend to ask a lot of questions. They're curious about what their clients are trying to fix, accomplish or avoid. In other words, they try to uncover the underlying challenge or problem rather than just make the immediate sale. So, without exception, top performers are good listeners.

In discussing that capability, I'm always reminded of a fellow I know--the heir to a large fortune--who plays golf almost every day. I asked him once why he's got so much leisure time, and he laughed and said, "Sam, you've got to get into sales." He's never once asked what I do; he has no idea that I've been a sales executive for more than 20 years. For his own sake, it's a good thing he's got a trust fund: He'll never be a world-class salesperson because he doesn't ask and doesn't listen.

Naturally, good salespeople are persistent. But they don't badger or manipulate people; instead, they come back with one new approach after another. And they do care how people feel about them--after all, they're building long-term relationships.

Myth Six: World-class salespeople are, by definition, self-centered and egotistical.

Reality: Like world-class athletes, top sales performers sometimes appear self-centered or egotistical. Actually, in both cases, it's often more that they're highly efficient.

Average performers view time as uncontrollable. By nature, world-class people in any field take the opposite view, avoiding anything that removes time from their control. And they've typically got little patience for time-killing activities. They prefer to trade time only for something else of value. When they sense that their

time is being wasted, their guts start churning and they've got to move on.

And, in truth, it's the average performers who tend to be more egotistical than their world-class counterparts. When they win, they're often telling themselves: "I'm the best. It's about time somebody recognized that and acknowledged me." Top performers, on the other hand, are always thinking "Maybe I could have done better. Next time, I'll do better."

Mark H. McCormack, author of "What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School: Notes From a Street-Smart Executive," tells a story about golf greats Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus competing in a tournament. After the third round, McCormack talked individually to both men; each talked about how much better his opponent was doing. In reality, the two were tied.

World-class people in any field tend to evaluate themselves honestly, harshly and constantly. They avoid overconfidence. In fact, they often feel they're lucky when they win and completely to blame when they lose. And they typically feel they've got something to prove--but only to themselves.

Myth Seven: World-class performers are driven by rewards and recognition, and they know that, eventually, they'll be able to coast on their reputations.

Reality: Many superstars don't need acknowledgement. Often, it's enough for them to know that they're the best. They may welcome a little affirmation, but they get uncomfortable with adulation or recognition. Often, an awards ceremony can be a bit of a letdown; the real thrill came from the actual achievement or the win.

As for resting on their laurels: The best of the best never rest--not when they're ahead and certainly not when they're behind. They fear being viewed as "one-hit wonders," famous for that one big deal (or that one home run). They like to keep going. Like world-class athletes, as soon as they attain their goals, they immediately set higher ones. Not the next year, not the next quarter, not even the next month--but immediately.

Bottom line: World-class salespeople are afraid of complacency, of getting "fat and lazy." They strive for

success, but it's hard to relax and enjoy it once they get there. Remember, top performers constantly strive to improve: It's all about getting better.

Prior to his business career, Sam Reese was an All-American distance runner for the University of Colorado and was a Nike-sponsored athlete. He has been Chief Executive Officer for Miller Heiman for nearly seven years. Previously, Sam held executive positions with British Telecom, Kinkos and Corporate Express. An author and speaker, Sam is a recognized thought leader in the areas of sales force productivity and sales force effectiveness.

About Miller Heiman

Miller Heiman has been a thought leader and innovator in the sales arena for almost thirty years, helping clients worldwide win high-value complex deals, protect and grow key accounts, manage talent and optimize sales strategies and operations.

With a prestigious client list that includes Fortune 500 clients, Miller Heiman helps companies in virtually every major industry to build high performance sales teams that deliver consistent sustainable results to drive revenue.

The company is headquartered in Reno, Nevada, and has offices around the world. More information can be obtained by calling 877-552-1747.

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