

# How to create sales superstars

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Customers love them. Co-workers admire them. Competitors want them.

They are your top salespeople. Your superstars. And, like most other organizations, you wish you had more of them.

What makes the difference between an outstanding salesperson — a star player who consistently meets or exceeds sales goals — and someone who, year after year, plods along at barely acceptable levels?

If you could follow a salesperson around for a few days, are there signs of eventual success or failure you could observe — daily behaviors, large and small — that would indicate whether the person was a top player, a plodder, or someone in between?

And if aware of these signs, are there steps organizations could take to help the plodders become players — and help the players improve their performance?

To answer these questions in the context of today's sales challenges, AchieveGlobal conducted a series of global research projects to identify what salespeople actually do and say to achieve — or undermine — their success,

and the role that selling organizations play in this success or failure. The research included a review of the selling organizations' literature, interviews with decision-makers, and the collection and analysis of over 2,000 incidents of actual sales behaviors, both good and bad.

## Sales superstars serve five roles

AchieveGlobal analyzed the work of selling — the daily observable behaviors of salespeople — and dissected it into five major roles. These roles represent the core activities of the selling process to which top-performing salespeople devote the bulk of their time.

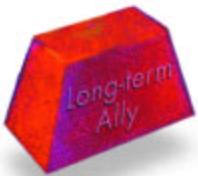
### The 5 roles salespeople serve

- Long-term ally
- Business consultant
- Strategic orchestrator
- Consistent cultivator
- Focused optimist

In light of today's increased competitive pressures, it's interesting to note that while

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AchieveGlobal research conducted in 1987 identified the first three roles, the last two — consistent cultivator and focused optimist — emerged only in these recent studies. The original three roles are considered the roles of the trusted business advisor, with the emphasis primarily on the strategies of adding value and partnering with customers. The two newer roles address more of the personal aspects of selling success, dealing with the strategies of targeting efforts and maintaining momentum.



## The long-term ally

This role is all about the interpersonal aspect of selling, and conveying a sense of shared purpose with the customer.

Star performers know the importance of developing mutual trust with customers. It allows them to enjoy the kinds of benefits the average salesperson can only dream about:

- Access to information they can leverage to keep or enhance their business.
- A human connection strong enough to withstand major problems with the

account, or even a new competitive product.

- An identification with their products or services so strong they become one of the “benefits” their customers will fight to keep.

How do salespeople become their customer’s ally? According to our research, their success is built on these clusters of practices:

- **They develop client relationships.** As a salesperson reported, “I was able to form a partnership with (the customer), where both of us were working together to make the product work; it wasn’t just one-sided.”
- **They keep communications open.** They understand, even if there is no specific progress to report, customers appreciate knowing what’s going on. Said one customer about a salesperson, “She checked in on a regular basis. I liked knowing that our account was on her mind.”
- **They become customer advocates.** It’s one thing to be nice to a customer. It’s another to do whatever you can to make the customer look good — to his or her peers, boss, or customers. “I’m always thinking, ‘OK, how can I help you be successful? How can I help you be a star in your organization?’” says

one successful saleswoman of accounting software. “I don’t wake up in the morning saying, ‘I can’t wait to go out and sell something.’”



## The business consultant

This role calls for salespeople who are focused, accurate, and knowledgeable about their products — as well as their customers’ needs, markets, and business objectives.

The star performers are so expert they are able to completely internalize their customers’ point of view. They often seem, in fact, as much employees of their customers’ organizations as they are of their own. This produces the following benefits for them:

- The stature to be asked by customers to help evaluate competitors’ newly released products.
- The opportunity to give advice on accounts’ high-level decisions and policies that have a long-term impact on future sales.
- Invitations to cross-sell elsewhere in the organiza-

tion (instead of having to request access).

The daily indicators salespeople are performing this role are:

- **They build credible reputations.** Customers should see salespeople as knowledgeable experts. “It’s important my customers perceive me as someone who is fully aware of their issues,” said one salesperson. “Basically, if I am going to advise people, they need to believe I know what I’m talking about.”
- **They build a solid knowledge base.** In many cases this knowledge is personal. “I personally tried (our) products...,” reported a cosmetics saleswoman in China. “This made me more convincing to the customer.” One manufacturing sales representative said, “I became knowledgeable about the customer’s organization. I got immersed in knowledge about them and what they wanted and needed. I had a good understanding of the company.”
- **They stay current with customers’ markets and business objectives.** “I’d been trying to sell Internet advertising to a customer for eight years,” said an account executive. “Last year I sent him articles about ad successes in his

line of business. Two months ago, I made another presentation. This time he was more knowledgeable and ready to listen, and I made a very large sale.” Said another salesperson of a customer: “They bought a \$60,000 package because we met one of their hidden goals, which we found out by doing our research.”

- **They develop the right solution.** Good salespeople know one key to selling is asking the right questions. The answers enable the salesperson to ensure the solution responds to a customer’s voiced and unvoiced needs. The truly dazzling solutions may exceed what the customer was expecting, as in this incident: “The salesman offered options that even the client didn’t see; he offered an alternate equipment package, and closed the sale.”

- **They present and propose effectively.** Many salespeople rehearse presentations. “I role-played with my managers and thought of every conceivable question a customer could ask,” said one salesperson. A well-rehearsed presentation can forestall price objections. “Our presentation was sharp and to the point,” reported a salesperson of manufacturing machinery in South

Africa. “We had every issue covered, so we left nothing to surprise. The customer felt we knew what we were talking about and could give reason for the 50 percent premium on the package.”

- **They close the sale.** When successful salespeople see buying signals from the customer, they move to summarize benefits and ask for the order. “One reason he made such good use of his time,” said a manager about a member of her sales team, “was that he knew when it was time to stop probing and asking for clarification, and wrap things up in terms of closing the sale.”



## The strategic orchestrator

This role is all about creating connections between and within the selling and buying organizations to expedite a sale, encourage the exchange of information, and make it easy for the customer to deal with the selling organization.

The star performers of this role enjoy benefits that help them improve their overall sales performance:

- A network of key players

in their accounts.

- An ability to expedite all aspects of the selling process.
- A personal infrastructure already in place within their own organization to help them take on complex and highly profitable accounts.

The observable indicators that salespeople are performing this role are:

- **They orchestrate resources to win accounts.** For example, a salesperson of financial services worked with his initial contact to identify the decision-makers in his company. “He was very grateful,” said the salesperson, “because he realized he was not able to make decisions and could only take the meeting so far. By having the right people there, we were able to go quickly from an introductory meeting to making the sale.”
- **They manage the sales process.** Successful salespeople don’t waste time trying to fight the customer’s buying process. Instead they look for ways to synchronize it with their own selling process. “I performed a project manager role,” said one salesperson. “I set up the meetings, and then provided follow-up to ensure everything was moving smoothly. I was

also the one that put the plan together in the first place, based on what I had learned in conversations with the customer.”



## The consistent cultivator

This role is all about the salesperson’s ability to plan and manage the totality of his or her accounts. Given today’s competitive pressures and the trend toward establishing long-term relationships with a few select vendors, the ability to perform this role effectively can make or break a salesperson.

The star business planners and developers are in a good position to enjoy several benefits, many of them revenue-related:

- Time to take on the more profitable accounts.
- A reputation for reviving dormant territories or accounts.
- Greater success at bringing in new accounts.

The behaviors that indicate a salesperson is performing this role are:

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## How supportive of sales is your organization?

Some assume salespeople are solely responsible for their own success. AchieveGlobal research indicates there is much an organization can do to support the selling process. What about your organization?

How well does it enable your sales force to become the customer's long-term ally? Does it:

- Provide interpersonal skills training relevant to the challenges your sales force faces, offered in a way and on a schedule convenient to salespeople?
- Maintain accurate and up-to-date information about accounts (including key players) so that a new salesperson can quickly get up to speed in a new account or territory?
- Provide easily accessible support to expedite the sales process and solve customer problems?

To what extent does it enable your salespeople to act as business consultants? Does it:

- Offer ongoing product knowledge training, delivered when and how salespeople need it?
- Provide access to current business and competitive trends?
- Value and reward the development and application of business-savvy skills?

To what extent does it help salespeople orchestrate resources? Does it:

- Offer tools to help salespeople expedite both the pre- and post-sales processes?
- Train its salespeople to support team efforts, in both the selling and the buying organizations?
- Maintain a customer-focused culture that encourages everyone in the organization to help

the customer when necessary?

To what extent does it help your salespeople cultivate their accounts? Does it:

- Help the sales force know what business to go after?
- Provide tools and comparative data to help salespeople quantify an account's success with your products?
- Supply tools to help the sales force make the best use of its time?

To what extent does it help your salespeople focus on their sales success? Does it:

- Offer rewards and recognition for achievements in addition to meeting sales quotas?
- Provide new challenges and opportunities for salespeople to grow?
- Enable sales managers to coach their salespeople and to protect them from corporate bureaucracy?

• **They manage their time and territories.** A salesperson needs to step back and take a look at how he or she is doing relative to the organization's business objectives and his or her own goals. The ability to be personally organized is crucial. "In this industry you don't have two or three big customers," said a salesperson for a computer equipment firm, commenting about a colleague. "He is professional, organized, and able to cover all the bases. You can ask him what is happening with such-and-such a customer, and he has it at his fingertips."

• **They maintain and expand their existing accounts.** Successful salespeople know where to focus their efforts. Some salespeople are able to prosper by selling broadly and deeply into existing accounts. Others depend more on leads. One group of salespeople in an office services company got creative when a traditional source of leads dried up. "We dreamed up a contest to get referrals from local merchants," the respondent said. "We set a goal of getting three referrals from each source, and it paid off."



## The focused optimist

This role is all about what top performers do to create a positive atmosphere that makes selling an enjoyable and frequent activity for sellers and buyers alike. A combination of never-give-up persistence and an ability to maintain a sense of optimism keeps them moving forward and causes others to want to work with them.

The star performers enjoy several payoffs:

- The energy to persevere during tough times.
- Access to the hard-to-reach top decision-makers in their accounts.
- Consistently returned phone calls from customers.

The behaviors that indicate a salesperson is able to maintain an optimistic outlook are:

- **They are motivated to succeed.** The most successful salespeople seem to love what they're doing, and it shows. Said one, "Selling gives you pleasure. I couldn't describe it. It not

only fills your pocket, but also your spirit and your heart." Enthusiasm can sometimes make up for lack of experience. "A brand-new consultant in my unit, with very little training sold over \$400 on her very first appointment," said a cosmetics saleswoman. "She was so excited about the product that everyone who attended (the session) believed her enough to make a purchase!"

- **They meet their commitments.** One way to demonstrate a positive attitude is by meeting — and exceeding — your commitments. "I have always been able to deliver what I promise," said an enthusiastic salesman, "and (the account) appreciates it. Because of this I was able to sign them to a \$300,000 contract."
- **They get and keep the customer's attention.** Persistence was one of the most frequently mentioned qualities of top performers. According to the research, top performers are not afraid to be creative to get their foot in the door, as in this example: "The salesperson had a great idea of sending a coconut with a note painted on the outside. The customer laughed and called to find out who had sent such a crazy thing."

## Supporting the selling process: what organizations can do

The job of selling comes with a unique set of challenges. Salespeople are out there every day — risking rejection to advance their organization, struggling to win out over the competition, trying to identify and stay on top of new opportunities, and making time to enhance relations with existing customers.

While many salespeople are self-motivated, they still can benefit from organizational support — and can suffer when it's missing. It's this support that can move average performers into the top ranks, and help the top players burnish their star.

What support do they want? Here is what some of the salespeople in our research had to say:

- **Focus.** "I have so much going on I can easily get distracted. I use the compensation plan to focus what I do. It's hard to stay focused on abstract concepts like a 'business plan.' So if our comp plan rewards new business, that's what I'll go out and get."
- **Information.** "One way the organization distracts me is by not giving me the information I need. Last week nobody could give me some pricing I desper-

ately needed on a product configuration, so I made it up. This is time-consuming and very stressful."

- **Useful tools.** "I use a time-management software program that lets me track customers, keep to-do lists, everything. The ironic thing is I battled the company for years to let me use it. Now it's the company standard."

- **Understanding.** "I rely on my innate sense of optimism. I don't expect the company to coddle me, but if they're always changing directions so you spend a lot of time dealing with the politics, you lose contact with your customers, and the rhythm you need to stay in tune. I also start thinking the company doesn't know what it's doing. It's hard to sell when you feel that way."

For more information on how to encourage stellar sales performance, including a leader's action-planning guide and the findings from AchieveGlobal's new sales performance research, contact AchieveGlobal at [www.achievetglobal.com](http://www.achievetglobal.com) for a copy of its "Creating Sales Superstars" report. ■