9 X-Factors of High-Performing Salespeople

An exclusive sales performance study

Dooly + Sales Pavilion

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Introduction

The most effective reps — the ones who consistently crush their quotas, build a healthy pipeline, and pass their knowledge onto other reps — might be a different breed, or they've simply discovered the tools they need to succeed. But what separates top performers from the rest?

We interviewed some of today's top sales leaders from high-growth SaaS companies about how they spend their time day-to-day, their relationship with leadership, how they're measured, and more.

We found that high-performing reps recognize the importance of empathy, relationships, autonomy, coachability, data fluency, and even a healthy dose of pessimism. This eBook will dive into the habits of high performers — and what's holding both high and low performers back.

What top performers do differently

In an ever-changing sales environment, top performers have a mix of strategic and soft skills to help them meet a long list of job responsibilities, including maintaining customer relationships.

The experts we interviewed identified the mix of soft skills and strategic tactics they see from most top performers. Let's dig in.

If I had to narrow it down to one word, it would be humility. Bundled up within the definition would be qualities like extreme ownership, growth mindset, grit, and resilience — these qualities are what your all-stars have."
Madalina Paul, Regional VP Major Accounts, DocuSign

Strategic & Communication Skills

There's an assumption that sales reps are, or need to be, extroverted by nature. What's more true and valuable, however, are strong strategic and communication skills.

Many of these skills come easily for top-performing reps, but they can also be taught or coached. When planning your coaching and training programs, focus on the soft skills characteristic of many top-performing reps:

**Hilary Unis, Director of Corporate Sales at TripActions**

1. They empathize with customers

As corporate sales trainer and lecturer Dale Carnegie once said, "you can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years trying to get other people interested in you."

The best salespeople know to establish a rapport with their customers. However, only 38% of customers say the salespeople they interact with understand their needs.
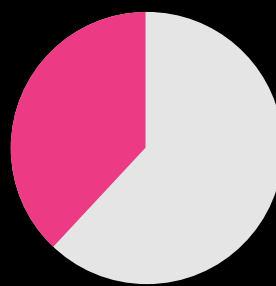
38%

of customers say salespeople understand their needs

A contributing factor to this dynamic is that many companies still operate with disparate sales and customer success teams, which means many reps never see the positive results from product implementation.

Top-performing reps are also empathetic. They take time to sit in on customer success calls, so they understand the impact their product has on their customers' day-to-day.

Lastly, they are more than twice as likely to monitor customer purchase history and customer staffing changes than their underperforming counterparts, according to Salesforce's State of Sales research.

The same study shows that 78% of reps say listening has a substantial impact on converting prospects to customers and use it to build a competitive advantage. Pavilion's recent Sales School session on Reflective Listening dug into the power of reflective listening, or the repetition of what was just heard vs. responding directly to it, shows that you're listening and invites customers to share more.

Top performers are

2X

as likely to monitor customer purchase history and customer staffing changes

78%

of reps say that listening has a substantial impact on converting prospects to customers

2. They are comfortable being uncomfortable

Many sales calls are uncomfortable. There are awkward silences, pricing conversations and negotiations, customer complaints and concerns, and more. In fact, it takes only four seconds for people to become uncomfortable with silence. Top-performing reps can sit in that discomfort and silence.

It takes only
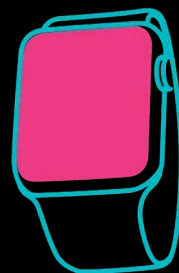
4s

for people to become uncomfortable with silence.

" You need to have those awkward conversations and be comfortable in the uncomfortable."
Conor McDonough, Senior Enterprise AE, 6sense

When it comes to sales performance, however, silence is golden. Silence gives your prospects time to consider the offer, shows you're really listening, helps you stand your ground, encourages prospects to speak truthfully and lead the conversation, and allows you to emphasize certain points. Half of the sales leaders we interviewed said top-performing reps are good at being uncomfortable.

"You need to have those awkward conversations and be comfortable in the uncomfortable," says Conor McDonough, Senior Enterprise AE at 6sense.

Over time, the ability to sit in discomfort and silence, and also weather customer concerns and complaints, builds resilience — and resiliency is key to weathering unpredictable customers and slow pipelines.

According to Michelle Pietsch, VP of Revenue at Dooly, the ability to have an uncomfortable conversation is also an indicator of leadership potential.

"If you have that coaching bone in your body, I think that's how you're going to become a successful rep to leader pretty seamlessly," says Pietsch.

**Michelle Pietsch,
VP of Revenue,
Dooly**

Dooly

3. They build and maintain meaningful relationships

Sales reps thrive on in-person interactions and rely on face-to-face communication and body language to communicate best. The pandemic challenged this norm, jarring the sales community, where many top-performing reps invested heavily in in-person relationships as a key component of their pipeline success.

Now, in an increasingly hybrid work world, reps are learning to build trust through digital interactions. As a sales leader, it's a good opportunity to coach up your reps on other communication skill sets like email writing or virtual presentations. Encourage your reps to get creative with virtual events, direct mail, or other more traditional outreach tactics to make up for lack of face-to-face time.

Dooly

4. They value and embody grit, and a figure-it-out attitude

Sales methodologies vary from organization to organization and there's no one "right" way to sell. However, certain skills set reps up for more success.

While personal characteristics may not show up in a sales playbook, our interviews showed they're crucial for success. Our interviewees identified top-performing reps as gritty, scrappy, proactive, and solution-oriented. They take ownership over their pipeline and their goals.

"

There are people who want to do well and will go above and beyond to get scrappy and figure it out — and then there are people who wait for answers,"
Hilary Unis, Director of Corporate Sales at TripActions

driven
Gritty
self-aware **curious**
humble

Solution-oriented
resilient
coachable

consistent **organized**
Proactive
hungry

Scrappy
empathetic
problem solvers
adaptable

5. They manage their time well

Top-performing reps also don't waste time, they make the most of it. They spend the majority of their time on high-value, prospect- and customer-facing activities — and when working on those activities, they tackle the most important conversations, interactions, and tasks first.

> Cut the fat and make an impact."
> **Nick Cegelski, AE, Time by Ping**

A great way to miss quota [is to] spend 60% of your day muddling around Slack and email," says Nick Cegelski, AE at Time by Ping. "Cut the fat and make an impact."
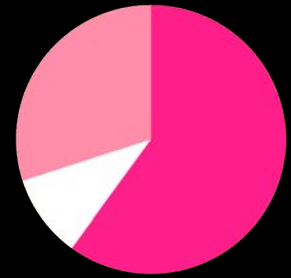
Dooly

How Top Sales Leaders Spend Their Time

- **30%** Internal meeting
- **20%** External activities
- **15%** Spending time with people/building relationships
- **15%** Problem-solving
- **10%** Strategy
- **10%** Misc.
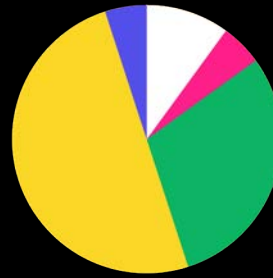
- **5%** Internal meetings
- **50%** External activities
- **30%** Prospecting
- **5%** Trainings
- **10%** Admin

- **60%** Internal meetings
- **30%** Misc.
- **10%** Admin

- **30%** Internal meetings
- **25%** External activities
- **5%** Prospecting
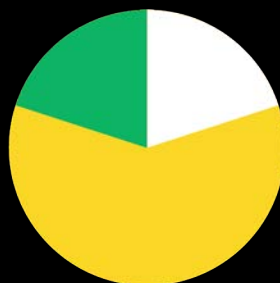- **20%** Sales training/ strategy
- **20%** Admin

- **35%** External activities
- **30%** Execution
- **35%** Development

- **15%** Internal meetings
- **50%** External activities
- **30%** External prep and professional development
- **5%** Misc.

How Top Sales Performers Spend Their Time

- **60%** External activities
- **20%** Prospecting
- **20%** Admin

- **40%** Internal meetings
- **25%** External activities
- **10%** Prospecting
- **10%** Trainings
- **15%** Admin

KEY
- Internal meetings
- External activities
- Prospecting
- Execution
- Strategy/Training
- Misc.
- Admin

Cegelski recommends cleaning up your calendar by declining meetings that aren't relevant to closing deals, shutting down notifications, and treating your "to-do" list like appointments to ensure it all gets done. Hillary Unis agrees. She says time blocking her calendar is "the easiest way to manage time."

Whether it's the Pomodoro technique, time blocking, or the 20/20/20 rule, top-performers use the tools at their disposal to tidy up their workdays and stay productive. These tactics are useful across all types of roles and industries, but can be especially useful for sales reps who often juggle multiple conflicting priorities and many distractions throughout the day.

Dooly

6. They are coachable and adaptable

In today's selling environment, adaptability is key. Business can change overnight. 79% of reps say they've had to adapt quickly to new ways of selling.

Top-performing reps can switch up processes or strategies in response. 75% of the sales leaders interviewed for this eBook said coachability is a characteristic of every top-performing sales rep.

"Adaptability and coachability are intertwined. [Reps] need to be aware….and switch things up here and there," says Colin Bohanna, General Manager of International Sales at Clio.

> "
> Adaptability and coachability are intertwined. [Reps] need to be aware….and switch things up here and there."
> **Colin Bohanna, General Manager of International Sales, Clio**

# 7. They effectively balance pessimism and optimism

According to [Brian Lee, Senior Sales Director at Pavilion](#), a pessimistic outlook can help prepare you for all outcomes. It drives you to be extra curious, over-prepare, and plan for contingencies.

"In my experience, the best sellers leave no room for assumptions, have asked all the right questions and know that they have done everything they can control to get the deal done," says Lee.

~2/3

of high performers exhibit a healthy dose of pessimism

> You will be more effective if you think about every reason you might lose something versus every reason you might win it."
> **Garrett Marker, VP of Sales, Braze**
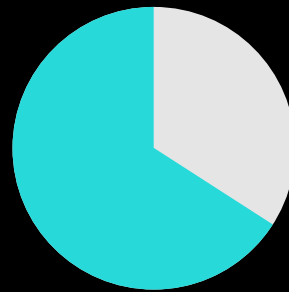
[Nearly two-thirds](#) of high-performers exhibit a healthy dose of pessimism — they don't reveal this pessimism to the customer, but they're realistic about the challenges of closing a deal.

"I think through the worst-case scenarios to anticipate or plan for any roadblocks," says Madalina Paul, Regional VP Major Accounts, DocuSign.

A little pessimism can also help reps understand the limits of the solution you're selling and set your customers up for success — which builds trust and long-term loyalty.

> I like to underpromise and overdeliver."
> **Pia Heilmann, Director of Sales EMEA at Klaviyo**

Tactical Skills

Top-notch soft skills are a huge part of the relationship-building side of sales — but reps also need practical, tactical skills to perform at their best and prove their effectiveness.

8. They automate repetitive tasks

A recent Dooly survey found 41% of the sales workday is not spent selling — and sales reps use only two thirds of their sales stack. The Dooly Sales Happiness Index also found that 36% of sales reps said they would be motivated to leave their current role for one that offered better technology or resources.

Whether they have these tools at their disposal or not, top-performing reps have found ways to automate and streamline tasks so they don't waste valuable selling energy on mundane tasks.

41%
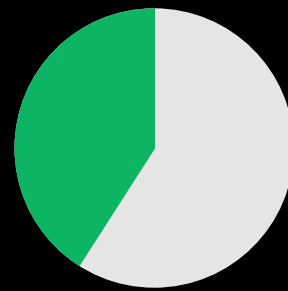
of the sales workday is **not** spent selling

> "It comes down to falling in love with the process. I'm a firm believer that if you think too much about being a top performer you're going to go into what you do each day thinking that you need that outcome or that you're lacking something. That energy feeds off into everything you do. [That's] having an abundance mindset."
> **Anthony Natoli, Account Executive, Outreach**

"One difference between the Top 10% and the Top 1% is that the very top are extremely efficient with their time," says sales expert Jason Lemkin.

What does this look like in practice? Rather than bouncing between selling and administrative tasks, top-performing reps and managers spend more time on the customer front lines.

Top sales performers also advocate for investments that help them do their jobs better, including CRM systems and add-ons that streamline manual and burdensome tasks and help them avoid wasting time working in spreadsheets.

Fortunately, as tools like Dooly leverage artificial intelligence (AI) and Salesforce integrations, mature reps are finding some relief in the form of automation.

Typical Sales Rep Schedule

Source: GetMoreDone
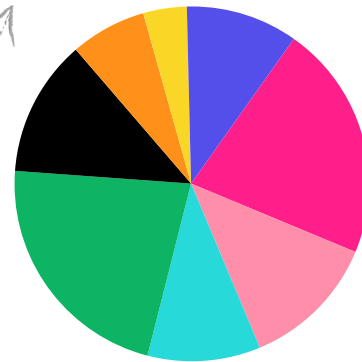
- **6%** Lunch / Breaks
- **13%** Travel
- **4%** Misc
- **10%** Planning
- **22%** Selling
- **12%** Order Processing
- **10%** Service
- **23%** Administration

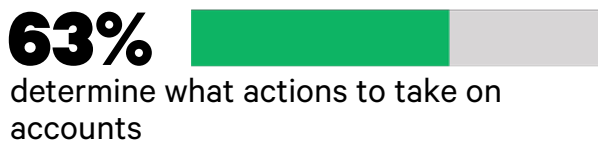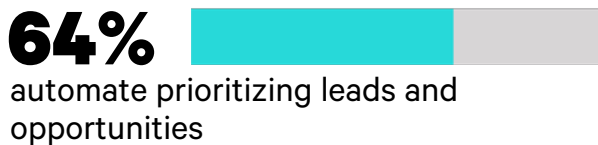## Top-Performing Rep Schedule

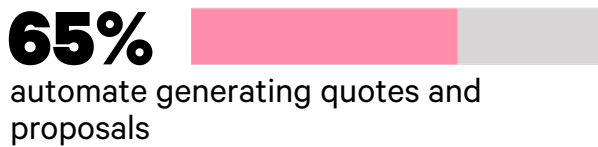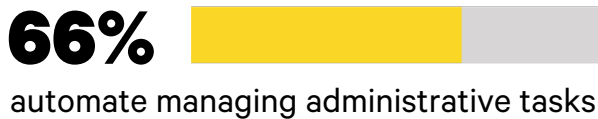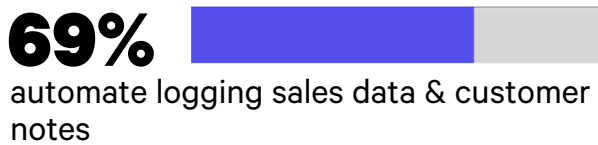Source: Pace Productivity

- **9.3%** Time Planning
- **18.7%** Provide Customer Service
- **33.6%** Build Relationships
- **28.3%** Prospecting/ Generating Leads

High-performing teams like Figma and Apollo, two of the fastest-growing SaaS companies, are often early adopters of sales productivity tools allowing reps to spend more time learning about and connecting with customers.

Top performers
Source: Salesforce

69%
automate logging sales data & customer notes

66%
automate managing administrative tasks

65%
automate generating quotes and proposals

64%
automate prioritizing leads and opportunities

63%
determine what actions to take on accounts

According to Salesforce, 69% of top performers automate logging sales data and customer notes, 66% automate managing administrative tasks, 65% automate generating quotes and proposals, 64% automate prioritizing leads and opportunities, and 63% determine what actions to take on accounts.

AI Adoption by Sales Performance Level
Source: Salesforce
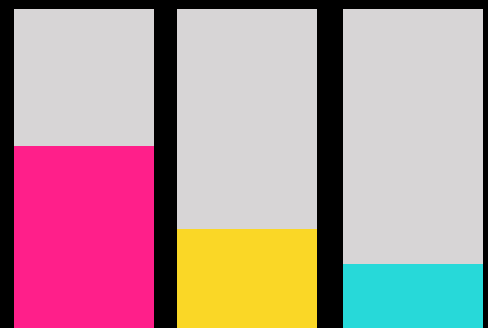
57%
High Performers

31%
Moderate Performers

20%
Under-performers

Top performers are 2.8X more likely to use AI. They see time as money and take steps to guard their calendar against non-revenue generating tasks at all costs.

9. They are data fluent and closely track deeper customer insights

The art of selling is increasingly data-driven. According to Salesforce, improved data quality and accessibility is a top tactical priority for sales leaders over the next 12 months. But the data at your reps' disposal is only valuable if they know how to decipher it and use it to improve the way they sell every day.

Top performers are data fluent, focused on achieving goals, and continuously measure their performance in comparison to those goals.

They also monitor their own metrics, from close rates to lead quality to total sales to the more qualitative aspects of performance, like email engagement, and even how they spend their time throughout the day. Lastly, they monitor customer insights, like customer satisfaction scores and lead response times, to know where there might be gaps in pipeline performance.

Sales reps rank low in data proficiency within the org
Source: 2020 Gartner State of Sales Analytics report

43%
sales reps data proficiency

49%
marketing data proficiency

49%
customer service data proficiency

53%
finance data proficiency
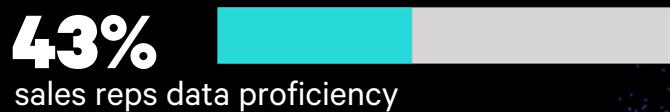
Yet, the 2020 Gartner State of Sales Analytics report reported sales reps rank among the lowest in the organization when it comes to data proficiency (43%) compared to marketing (49%), customer service, (49%) and finance (53%). And McKinsey research shows data-driven companies accomplish goals faster.

Your reps don't need to suddenly become data scientists. But empowering them with ways to quickly understand sales metrics and customer insights will give them the tools they need to be the best reps they can be.

Strategic & Communication Skills

What's holding sales reps back

Even the most well-oiled sales organizations can find room for improvement. Watch out for these common stumbling blocks when building and coaching up a top-performing sales team.

Unclear performance goals

The quickest way to underperformance is poor goal setting — and part of goal setting is a clear understanding of what metrics you're chasing.

"Obviously, 'percent to plan' is the number one metric that everyone in sales looks at," says Madalina Paul, Regional VP Major Accounts, DocuSign.

"Once you lift the hood, though, there are a ton of great data points that you can measure sales professionals on and hold them accountable so they perform better and improve consistently.

Churn rate, average sales price, and pipeline waterfall (the movement between stages) are three KPIs that I place a lot of importance on."

> If your job was to push a button every day, 100 times, and have no creativity around that, how long would you wanna be in that job?"
> **John Barrows, Sales Trainer and CEO, JB Sales**

No room for creativity

For sales trainer and CEO of JB Sales John Barrows, a key part of keeping reps interested in their work is creativity.

Cultivate an environment that allows your reps to embrace their inner artist and explore tactics that work best for them. One way to do this: create regular team meetings for reps to share their specific deal wins. This puts the spotlight on their ingenuity, while also scaling best practices across the team. You could even create a repository of these ideas, so that they're documented and widely available for future reference.

Overly structured, bureaucratic culture

Metrics and process are important — but there's a fine line between enforcing best practices and stifling your reps' creativity and instinct.

Give your reps some room to think creatively and intuitively. When they find a strategy or message that works, give them an opportunity to share their tactics with the team. Remember that you're leading a team of real people selling to other real people.

> "From a leadership perspective, while data is important, you need to remember that there is a person behind all of those data points. Stay close to and invest in your people."
> **Colin Bohanna, General Manager of International Sales, Clio**

Low-value tasks and superfluous data entry

According to Dooly's Sales Happiness Index, just 59% of the sales workday is spent selling. 20% goes to account management processes such as data entry into CRM, according to Accenture.

Logging of sales data and customer notes in a CRM is usually a manual, time-consuming process. Meetings, research, and other miscellaneous activities like training and travel also take up a chunk of sales rep time.

Activities frequently keeping revenue teams from selling

Source: Dooly, 2022 Sales Happiness Index

55%	Internal calls/meetings
54%	Scheduling calls/meetings
48%	Responding to internal inquiries via email/slack/etc
35%	Managing the team's sales pipelines
31%	Locating relevant content
25%	Updating Salesforce/CRM
22%	Searching for and/or organizing notes to effectively manage deals
09%	Toggling between multiple apps/platforms
01%	None of the above

By the way...

All of that time could be spent selling. By automating data entry and other manual tasks, reps can focus on selling time — and sales leaders can spend less time triaging deals in the pipeline and more time on coachable moments.

Strategic & Communication Skills

Unlock sales performance

In today's selling environment, a rep's job is more time-consuming and complicated than ever. Too often, reps aren't spending enough time doing the core work of selling, but rather on work that doesn't generate revenue. It might be necessary work, but if it's not managed efficiently, it can have a huge impact on the well-being and effectiveness of reps — and the success of the company.

Dooly's Happiness Index revealed 86% of salespeople say they could earn 66% more if they spent no time on non-revenue-generating activities — and earn 38% more for their companies. It's clear inefficient workflows leave money on the table, for both reps and organizations.

Top-performers use Dooly

Patrick Amberguy, SMB account executive at Formstack, was a top-performing rep before using Dooly, averaging between 80-90% of quota. After Dooly, he increased performance by 25%.

Here's exactly what happened when his sales enablement team showed him Dooly for the first time:

1. He said, "Holy sh*t, we can do this?!"
2. He created and shared four sales note templates with his team within his first hour of onboarding

If the rest of our tech stack could do what Dooly does, we'd be working two, three hours a day."
Patrick Amburgey, SMB Account Executive, Formstack

Byron Sierra-Mattos, a top performing senior executive at Apollo, had a similar experience.

He was crushing his number, but wasn't updating Salesforce. Once he started using Dooly, Salesforce updates became easy as they were built into his workflow. He also found Dooly's chronological note archiving improved his follow-up game.

Between Dooly and another sales productivity tool, Byron recovered five more selling hours in his day, which increased his company's bottom line and his earning potential.

Dooly is where high performers do their best work. Retain your top reps and get 3X more accurate data into Salesforce with a sales process reps actually use.
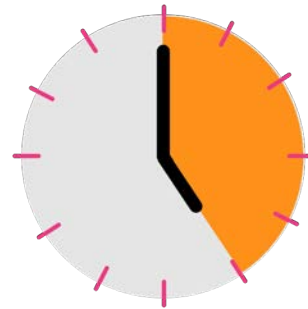
With Dooly, reps can update their pipeline in one click, fill out mandatory Salesforce fields in seconds, and access key deal information with real-time coaching, so they consistently crush their quotas, not their souls.

SEE DOOLY IN ACTION
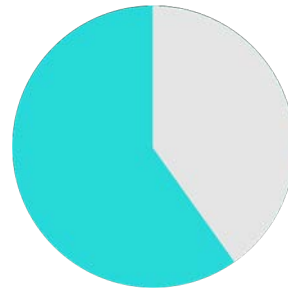
60%+

more clean data in Salesforce

5+

more hours a week per rep

Five hours a week. It's a potential of 10 demos... even at 20% close rate, two new deals per week, eight per month, times 40 reps... holy sh*t, that's 320 new opportunities closed-won."
Byron Sierra-Mattos, Senior Account Executive at Apollo

Conclusion

Top-performing sales reps embody a mix of strategic, tactical, and interpersonal skills. Making the most of those skills depends on the ability to minimize low-value work and maximize the time doing what reps do best — selling. The right tools and technology can help sales leaders spend less time on busy work and more time generating revenue.