

# NEVER HIRE A BAD SALESPERSON AGAIN

SELECTING CANDIDATES  
WHO ARE ABSOLUTELY  
**DRIVEN** TO SUCCEED

Second  
Edition



DR. CHRISTOPHER CRONER  
RICHARD ABRAHAM

# Before You Get Started...



Greetings! My name is Richard Abraham and I am co-author of the book you are about to read. Just a few words before you get started.

I have owned significant interests in many companies and personally managed three major sales forces. Of all the things I addressed in trying to grow these companies, the most important variable after the development of the product/service offering itself, was the recruitment of salespeople who could successfully close business.

This sounds simple and yet finding and hiring salespeople who can really sell – as opposed to people who literally STEAL your precious time and money without producing to the levels they promised in their interviews – can be incredibly challenging, not to mention frustrating and toxic, to the company as a whole. In fact, the range of wasted money our clients have quoted us for hiring just one bad salesperson varies from \$100,000 to over a million dollars!

I therefore found and challenged a brilliant young psychologist, Dr. Christopher Croner, to find a way to weed out the pretenders and solve for the real producers both in the recruiting process and after people have been hired but are not performing.

Dr. Croner's research, conclusions and recommendations may surprise you, but they can also lead you to a powerful solution, The [DriveTest®](#), which is based upon science and technology, instead of hunch, and can help you bring the goal of building a world class sales organization to life! Whatever you decide, I hope you enjoy our book. Dr. Croner has done a terrific job with his research and I have tried my best to translate it into clear and practical application for those of you whose businesses depend on hiring high-performance salespeople.

*Never Hire a Bad Salesperson Again* is required reading for all my sales leaders. When we hire, we reference this book. All of our final candidates must have examples of Drive before we hire them.

—Edwin D. Robles Jr., SVP, Head of Sales,  
Cengage Learning

*This book really resonates with me. It offers solid conclusions from strong research, and a no-nonsense guide to separating the pretenders from potential sales providers in the selection process. I highly recommend this as an important new resource for all hiring managers.*

—Kevin Cushing, President, Strategic Ventures Group, Alliance Franchise Brands

*If you are responsible for recruiting salespeople, buy this book. It will save you a lot of stress and hassle in the interview process. I learned exactly what to say, and, more importantly, what not to say, to make sure I get the most accurate read on a candidate. This book has sharpened my approach and accuracy.*

—Gary Napotnik, Managing Director, HDJ & Associates, Inc.

*When it comes to hiring salespeople, the cost of failure is simply unforgivable. There's no one better to provide direction on reducing that risk than Dr. Croner. Buy this book. Read it. Use it.*

—Tammy Bitterman, Founder and Managing Partner, The Acceleration Group

*Improving sales force productivity is one of the most powerful drivers of organic growth and share gain. This book provides managers with valuable tools to impact this issue early—at the time of hiring.*

—Ross Rosenberg, Vice President, Business Development & Marketing, Danaher Corporation

*Hiring the right salesperson is one of the most important and difficult decisions managers make. Hiring a candidate who lacks Drive can have a dramatic negative impact on any sales team. With so much at stake, sales managers would be wise to follow this practical guide to getting it right.*

—Kelly Grindle, Vice President, Motors Group, Johnson Outdoors

*Salespeople have tremendous impact on the fortunes of an enterprise. Croner and Abraham have provided an eminently practical guide that will prove invaluable to anyone looking to build a top-performing sales staff.*

—Thomas Gruenwald, Vice President, Strategic Resources for Tellabs

*Hiring underperforming salespeople creates financial hardship on large companies and small startups alike. This book provides a proven method for selecting talented candidates.*

—Neil Witmer, Ph.D., Principal, Witmer & Associates

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WHO ARE ABSOLUTELY  
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**SECOND EDITION**

**DR. CHRISTOPHER CRONER  
RICHARD ABRAHAM**

*Never Hire a Bad Salesperson Again:  
Selecting Candidates Who Are Absolutely Driven to Succeed  
Second Edition*

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—Christopher Croner

I would like to thank every CEO, entrepreneur, and sales manager I have ever met who shared their triumphs, heartaches, and frustrations in trying to build a world-class sales team. This book is a tool for them, so that they can continue to take risks, invest with confidence, and realize their hard-fought hopes and dreams. Thanks are also owed to my collaborator, Dr. Chris Croner, whose high standards of research and quality have raised the bar for everyone interested in what makes salespeople run. Finally, I would also like to thank my wife, Erin, and my children, Marlena and Katherine, who share and support my passion for knowledge and new ideas.

—Richard Abraham

# Introduction

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*You're never there.*

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—Tiger Woods

Tiger Woods was in an especially good mood. He had recently completed what many golf historians agree was the finest run in his sport's history. Four major titles in a row! Seventeen PGA victories! Record-breaking tournament earnings!

Yet when a reporter from the *Chicago Sun-Times* asked him what was left for him to accomplish, Tiger flashed him an incredulous, “Are you serious?” look that came from deep within the burning soul of a man born to compete—and dominate.

“You’re *never* there,” reprimanded Tiger. “You can always be better the next day. That’s how I look at golf and how I look at life. You can always, always be better. If you think you can’t, then walk, because you have no business being out here if you think you can’t get any better. That’s how I approach each and every practice session, each and every round I play.”<sup>1</sup>

Tiger Woods... Michael Jordan... Jackie Joyner-Kersee... David Beckham . . . each born with God-given gifts of coordination, strength, endurance, and intelligence. Yet such supernatural physical abilities alone are not enough to push these magnificent athletes to the astonishing levels of performance they have achieved in their careers.

No, each superstar shares another ingredient, a white-hot fuel that turbocharges their natural gifts: the electrifying personality characteristic that psychologists call Drive. Drive is the common denominator found in nearly all high-performing achievers in any competitive field. In fact, Drive is so important, and so powerful, that it often pushes less-talented individuals beyond competitors who may have been born with higher skills but lack the burning desire to succeed.

*And, as we will demonstrate throughout this book, it is Drive that is the most important characteristic in identifying and selecting people who can successfully sell for a living.*

Why is Drive so important to successful selling? Because of all professions, sales requires the most intense self-motivation in the face of rejection, and because sales exerts the most grueling and constant pressure on self-esteem. Only people who love to compete, have supreme confidence in themselves, and are willing to laugh in the face of rejection have the constitution to survive and thrive in this most competitive of business environments.

It has been estimated that up to 50 percent of the people who are currently trying to make their living by selling are in the wrong line of work. They may be

excellent communicators, gregarious, and likable, but they do not have, nor will they ever have, the Drive to provide a meaningful return on the huge investment you make in them. Sadly, a 2014 report by Stephen Bruce, Ph.D., estimated the total annual cost of hiring an underperformer in high-tech sales to be \$2.1 million (including recruiting, training, salary and lost sales).<sup>2</sup>

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**This book has been written for business owners, entrepreneurs, and managers who have suffered the frustration and financial heartbreak of placing the success of their life's work in the hands of salespeople who do not have the innate personality characteristics—aka Drive—to deliver.**

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Now, we would like you to slow down for a moment and read this very, very carefully: *It doesn't have to be that way in your company.* Through proper testing and interviewing techniques, salespeople with Drive *can* absolutely be identified, selected, and motivated to produce consistently, at high levels, for you and for your organization. While it takes time, patience, and discipline, it is possible to stock your team with A and B players—thoroughbreds—who have the intestinal fortitude and the burning will to succeed as high-producing salespeople.

A quick note of caution before we proceed: This book is not for the faint of heart. It is not for the business

owner or manager who does not appreciate the supreme importance of the sales function. It is not for the sales manager who is in denial about the cost of hiring and carrying mediocre performers. It is not for the sales manager who may not have the heart to make tough decisions. These decisions can hurt when it comes to releasing people whom the manager may personally like but who should be pursuing a different line of work, for the benefit of everyone, including the employee.

Identifying, selecting, and retaining Driven salespeople is a rigorous process requiring patience, discipline, and focus. But the payoffs are *huge*, in terms of both higher revenues and lower costs, a combination rarely achievable in other areas of your business.

We therefore invite you to take this journey with us, a journey into the hearts and minds of people who sell for a living. We will show you why some win, some plateau, and some lose. Most importantly, we will show you how you can “stack the deck” with sales athletes who are born to run—for you!

Part One:  
Elements of Drive



# 1

## Chapter

### Drive: The Foundation of Success

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*“As much as I was upset at the time, it made me think, Well, I’m going to prove that I can play football professionally.”*

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—David Beckham

When faced with the ultimate rejection—told by his football coach at age 13 that he would never play for England because he was too small and weak—David Beckham’s resolve only strengthened.<sup>1</sup> Beckham pushed himself to the limit, building speed and endurance, eventually playing for his country over 100 times and becoming one of the greatest players of all time. David Beckham and other high achievers drive themselves *beyond* their limits, not just when the money is on the line but behind the scenes, *every day*. They show their Drive in the relentless course of their preparation, dedication, and training.

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**Drive—the David Beckham type of Drive—is the most important factor for sales success. In a 1998 analysis of more than 45,000 salespeople, psychology professor Andrew Vinchur and his colleagues found need for achievement, a critical component of Drive, to be more predictive of sales success than any other trait.<sup>2</sup>**

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Drive is also essential in unleashing other sales skill sets. To be sure, relationship skills and persuasiveness are important. But these traits are simply not sufficient without Drive. Furthermore, you can provide salespeople with excellent training, but without Drive, the money is largely wasted. While it may seem counterintuitive, you will be better off in the long run if you hire a Driven person who has no sales experience and teach that person your business than if you hire a candidate who has experience but lacks Drive.

While successful salespeople have different styles, they almost always share the Drive personality trait. For example, as reported in 1994 by Geoffrey Brewer, the Gallup Management Consulting Group through two decades of research identified several skills critical to sales success.<sup>3</sup> Two of those skills, intense motivation and disciplined work habits, are hallmarks of Drive. Further, in his 2010 book, *Strengths Based Selling*, Brian Brim notes that a Gallup analysis of 250,000 sales reps at 170 companies found that the top 25% of sales performers generated an average of 57% of sales growth over the previous year. Notably, the

bottom 25% of sales performers sold less than the previous year.<sup>4</sup>

## Anatomy of a (Sales) Winner

Have you ever had the exquisite pleasure of managing one of the *great* salespeople? You know the type. They come in early and leave late. They drop in on weekends to handle “paperwork.” During the week, they’re always out with customers, on whose behalf they fight tenaciously. On the occasions when they do get rejected, they move on immediately (for surely the next sales call will be successful). And when they smell the goal line—the close—nothing and nobody can hold them back!

In the course of examining our own assessment practice, and considering more than 90 years of research in the sales sector, we now know that there is a consistent formula common to the personality of nearly all successful salespeople. They have three essential traits:

1. They are motivated by a need to achieve outstanding results, and they are willing to do virtually whatever it takes to succeed.
2. They love to compete, both with themselves and with others.
3. They are optimistic, that is, they are certain of their ability to *win*.

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**These three traits—need for achievement; competitiveness; and optimism—are *all* necessary elements of Drive.**

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### ***Need for Achievement***

Top-gun salespeople have a burning *need* to achieve. They are ambitious, disciplined, and focused on advancement.

You may laugh, at first glance, at the *disciplined* element, since on the surface, great salespeople may seem anything but straitlaced and organized (picture *Top Gun* fighter pilots at the local bar on their day off). But make no mistake about it. When it comes to “the hunt,” great salespeople have the ability to track and capture their prey with the focus and patience of a big cat.

And there is more. Driven salespeople are *never* satisfied. They can never sell enough products, never make enough money. They are insatiable, setting the bar higher and higher, for themselves and, happily, for you.

### ***Competitiveness***

Driven salespeople are hardwired to be number one. Like a thoroughbred racehorse, they are always eyeing their peers, always comparing their performance to others. They are out to *win*. They are *born* to win.

Driven salespeople compete with everybody. Even the sale itself is seen, on one level, as a battle of wills with

the buyer, a competition in which the sale signals victory.

This competitiveness is one reason great salespeople are sometimes hard to manage. They even compete, intellectually, with their bosses. But it is a trade-off that must be reconciled because competitiveness is a critical element of Drive, and without Drive, a person simply will not perform to your sales expectations.

### ***Optimism***

Optimism is the Driven salesperson's ultimate weapon. Optimism provides the body armor to withstand the inevitable rejections of the selling life. To a great salesperson, rejection is just part of the game, like grounding out in baseball. No problem, because surely the next time at bat will bring a home run.

In an interesting, psychological paradox, optimistic salespeople credit themselves for success but do not take defeat personally. Like astronauts, they have "the right stuff" when it comes to facing down fear and placing risk in a more positive context than most people are able to do.

## Recognizing Drive

Need for achievement, competitiveness, and optimism—all are essential to generate the nuclear fission that sales psychologists refer to as Drive. Given such a powerful profile, you would think we would be able to recognize a Driven salesperson when we see

one. But, in a cruel paradox for business owners and managers, *that is often not the case*. Drive is often misunderstood, and it can be faked, for a short time, leading to the waste of hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not millions, in the process. (Hint: it is often the server or the dishwasher at the local restaurant who is working to pay for college, not the campus club president, who has the Drive to succeed as a top-performing salesperson.) In fact, in an eye-opening study by psychology professor Murray Barrick and colleagues, a group of human resources professionals—each of whom had more than 12 years of experience—was *unable* to accurately identify whether job candidates were industrious or persistent in the face of failure.<sup>5</sup> They thus failed to discern two traits (need for achievement, represented by industriousness, and optimism, represented by persistence in the face of failure) that are key elements of Drive.

So, how do we recognize *real* Drive in candidates or incumbent salespeople? How can we be sure we are not mistaking chutzpah for competitiveness, anxiety for ambition? To find out, let's take a journey together into the heart of a salesperson who is Driven—a journey into the heart of a *winner!*

## Summary

- ◆ Research shows that Drive is the most important factor for sales success.
- ◆ Three elements make up Drive: (1) need for achievement, (2) competitiveness, and (3) optimism. All three elements *must* be present for the salesperson to truly show Drive.
- ◆ A company's performance is dependent on the quality of the salespeople it hires, necessitating a much more rigorous screening process to identify and select Driven candidates than many companies currently deploy.



# 2

## Chapter

### The Need to Achieve

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*Tibetan Sherpas tell the story that, moments after reaching the summit of Mount Everest, a climber briefly admired the view, then turned to his partner and said, “OK, now what?”*

---

Insatiable. Never satisfied. Demanding excellence. These are powerful personality characteristics (perhaps not easy to live with, from the point of view of one's spouse or child) but absolutely critical to the profile of a highly successful salesperson.

*Need for achievement* is the inner motivation that causes a person to relentlessly pursue excellence. As psychology professor David McClelland and his colleagues reported in their 1987 book, *Human Motivation*, people high in need for achievement want to do well for the *personal satisfaction* achievement

brings.<sup>1</sup> This intense motivation pushes people to set tough but achievable goals, to find innovative solutions, and to take personal responsibility for their performance. In other words, the prescription for a dream salesperson.

As detailed in his 1961 book, *The Achieving Society*, McClelland found an association between high need for achievement and sales ability across several cultures.<sup>2</sup> In particular, he noted that sales careers are attractive to achievers because salespeople must make decisions about which prospects to call on, take personal responsibility for making calls, choose moderate risks, find creative methods of persuasion, and monitor their success. Supporting McClelland's assertion, University of Memphis psychology professor Andrew Vinchur and his colleagues analyzed the results of 98 previous studies of personality factors that predict sales performance.<sup>3</sup> These studies spanned the years 1918 to 1996 and included a total of about 46,000 salespeople. Vinchur's group reported in 1998 that *achievement motivation showed a stronger relationship to sales performance than any other trait*. In a 1999 study at Cornell University, a group led by Renate Soyer also noted that individuals who have a strong need for achievement are likely to thrive in sales.<sup>4</sup> These researchers found that such individuals *view rejection as constructive criticism, prioritize the customer, and carefully research their competitors*.

In a 2004 study, we tested the personality traits of 89 salespeople in mixed industry sectors, including manufacturing and financial services.<sup>5</sup> We compared scores on a personality test to sales managers' ratings of each person's performance. Our results supported the research literature: need for achievement was a

more powerful predictor of sales performance than any other trait. Additionally, in a 2005 study, Douglas Amyx and Bruce Alford also tested 312 salespeople from 18 industries, including insurance, IT, and manufacturing.<sup>6</sup> They found a significant positive relationship between need for achievement and sales performance.

Finally, in a 2015 study, we assessed 175 salespeople in industries ranging from IT to commercial real estate and transportation solutions.<sup>7</sup> We again found a significant positive correlation between need for achievement scores and manager ratings of sales performance

## Testing Need for Achievement

McClelland and his colleagues found two interesting ways to test a person's need for achievement. First, they used the Thematic Apperception Test, which asks users to make up stories about a series of pictures. They reasoned that people's fantasies about the pictures were the best measures of their inner goals and desires. The pictures were all rather ordinary drawings. For example, they included a boy looking down at a violin with a sad expression on his face. But when psychologists looked at the subjects' responses, they found something striking.

People with a high need for achievement told very different stories than the average person. For example, after viewing the violin picture, someone with a low need for achievement would tell a story about how the

boy's parents bought him this boring violin and made him practice every day. He is sick of practicing and wants to smash the violin and go outside to play. The violin is too much work to learn.

However, someone with a high need for achievement would tell a story about a big recital coming up the next day for which the boy is practicing. He is dog-tired from practicing all night, but he wants to get in one more hour before dozing off. Then the following day, he gives the performance of a lifetime!

McClelland's second test to show need for achievement involved a seemingly simple experiment. He asked volunteers to throw rings onto pegs—without telling them how far back to stand. Most subjects threw from random distances. But the high achievers in the group measured the distance to produce an ideal challenge (not too easy but not impossible). Achievers love a tough task at which they can excel.

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**Through his work, McClelland concluded that many people do not possess a strong need for achievement. That means we need to be expert at selecting the genuine article when it comes to salespeople.**

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## The Birth of Desire

Where does this need to achieve come from? Like most personality traits, it is heavily influenced by a person's childhood experiences. In his 1997 book, *Psychological*

*Self-Help*, clinical psychologist Clayton Tucker-Ladd noted that achievers' parents or guardians are praising, supportive, optimistic, hardworking, and success oriented.<sup>8</sup> They expect each member of the family to do a share of the chores and follow household rules. Dinner discussions are about the child's work and studies. But these achieving kids are not always star students. They excel at whatever is important to them in accomplishing their goals. If they see academics as important, they excel there. If it's a sports career they're after, they excel at athletics. Others may devote their time to entrepreneurial activities, such as running a lemonade stand or making T-shirts. This pattern continues throughout such people's lives, right up to the moment they are sitting across from your desk in the job interview. That's why using the right set of questions will help you figure out whether a candidate is the genuine article or a sloth in a tiger's clothing.

Unfortunately, there is a catch. (There's always a catch.) Even with the best questions available, it is very, very difficult to determine who has the *real*, deep *need to achieve* and who merely "acts like" they have this need. Let's take a moment here to distinguish the "pretenders" from the "producers."

## Watch Out for Fakers

Some candidates in sales may make a good first impression but nevertheless lack the critical need for achievement to stay focused and productive for the long haul. We have identified several of these imposters, whom we classify as *narcissists, ultra-type A*

*personalities, and flatliners.*

### **Narcissists**

Narcissists are people with inflated egos who can *seem* to be ambitious, persuasive, and self-confident in a sales interview. However, deep down, they harbor intense insecurities which ultimately cause them to fail as salespeople. As Soyer's group pointed out, narcissists often can determine what you, as the employer, are looking for during an interview and then *mimic* the prototype. Narcissists can be incredibly charming, which you would think would help them succeed if hired. But their brief spurt of charm is not enough, because sales is ultimately a marathon, and the narcissist is usually a sprinter.

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**A skilled narcissist is very hard to detect without proper testing and interviewing techniques (which we will discuss in chapters 7-9). For now, be aware that the need to achieve is a legitimate, deep-seated trait that pushes high achievers and great salespeople over the long haul, not just during the lovefest of the interview and the hiring process, when the narcissist often stands out—for the moment.**

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### ***Ultra-Type A Personalities***

While it may seem confusing on the surface, there is a critical difference between what psychologists diagnose as extreme *type A* personalities and people

with a deep need to achieve. When it comes to salespeople, the distinction boils down to this: while extreme type A people can be achievement oriented, they can also be impatient, irritable, and hostile. These characteristics can lead to depression and dissatisfaction with their jobs, bosses, or clients—hardly the team orientation necessary for a company to grow and prosper as an organization.

Occasionally, a client will tell us, “We are looking for type As.” As advisers, we like to recast that goal to “We are looking for A players,” our criterion being a *need to achieve*, not a need to make everybody else crazy. Most of the best salespeople we know keep their emotions well under control, even as they relentlessly drive for achievement. They can be prima donnas, but they do not compromise their performance with excess collateral damage.

### ***Flatliners***

We received a call from a printer in Minneapolis. His story was all too familiar. Steve, his highest-paid salesperson, had plateaued. “I don’t get it,” lamented our client. “This is the third year in a row Steve has hit the same numbers. Our business is growing. We are giving him more resources. But we can’t seem to light a fire under him to raise his game.” Steve is what we call a *flatliner*. Unlike the mountain climber who reached the pinnacle of Mount Everest, Steve is satisfied with the lovely view at 10,000 feet. Steve may be motivated by money but not by more than he needs to lead a peaceful life *below your expectations*. He has designed a certain lifestyle, and he earns just enough to support it.

Now, there is nothing wrong with Steve as a person. Who's to say he hasn't achieved the "balance" we are all looking for in life? *But he is not going to grow your business.* You may want to retain him as a solid contributor, but to grow, you will need to find another horse to bet on, one with the burning need to achieve.

Sales managers sometimes make a mistake in thinking that the antidote for underachievers is, ultimately, more money. But special promotions and higher commissions rarely work for flatliners. The real A players will love it, but they would have performed anyway because they are self-motivated and do not need your help.

## It's Not About the Money

For the narcissists, ultra-type As, and flatliners, their underperformance is not about the money. It's about their inability to sustain high-quality performance over time, under any circumstances (or compensation formulas). They will not, or cannot, apply the dedication nor make the sacrifices necessary to lift your business and your investment in them on their shoulders.

On the other hand, salespeople with a strong need for achievement want to do well for its own sake. Their primary goal is achievement, not money. To an achiever, money is like points on a scoreboard. Just as Michael Jordan was not motivated simply to score points, top salespeople are not motivated by money alone. They simply use their income to keep track of how well they are doing (assuming that their

compensation is competitive with the market).

Our sales heroes, our real achievers, are born to run, not only against their own insatiable expectations but against others as well. And not only do they need to *achieve*, they *love to compete*, keep score, and win. Let's find out why and discover how to recognize this thirst for competition in our next chapter.

## Summary

- ◆ Ninety years of research have shown *need for achievement* to be a critical component of sales success.
- ◆ This basic desire for personal excellence is especially important in sales, where the freedom from daily supervision can attract slackers who want a free ride.
- ◆ Sales careers also attract self-centered narcissists, ultra-type A personalities, and flatliners, all of whom can be charming in a sales interview. It is imperative that managers know how to weed these people out early to avoid the hemorrhaging of resources they will likely cause if hired.



# 3

## Chapter

### The Thrill of Competition

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*“We were killing time, and I beat Michael (Jordan) in a casual game of pool. You would have thought I stole his last dollar. He made me keep playing, game after game, until he finally beat me.”*

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—Phil Jackson

We know from our last chapter that Driven salespeople have a deep-seated need to achieve. It motivates them to train longer, try harder, and never give up when it comes to reaching their goals and objectives in life. Now comes the second piece of the puzzle: their passion for *competition*. People with Drive love to *compete*. They relish the thrill of the race, the rush of winning, virtually anytime, anyplace. And, like Michael Jordan,

they *hate* losing. In fact, their loathing for losing is often as strong as their lust for winning—a potent combination indeed.

We have all read stories about older professional athletes who attempt to make comebacks, well past their prime. Or others who attempt to take up a different sport, such as professional golf, later in their careers. These people cannot live happily without competition. The lucky ones find new and equally exciting ways to compete as they get older.

## Competitiveness is Crucial

Psychologists define *competitiveness* as the desire to win and to outperform others. Competitive salespeople monitor their performance constantly to make sure they are surpassing their peers. They work hard to prepare for a task to make sure that they outperform others.

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**To a competitive salesperson, the sale is often viewed as a contest of wills with the customer. Essentially, it is a contest between the salesperson's product or service and the customer's resistance or inertia, hence the expression "winning the sale." This desire to convince others of the validity of one's opinion is also a form of competitiveness. Organizational psychologist Herbert Greenberg and his colleagues in 2001 labeled this aspect of competitiveness *ego-drive*, or an individual's desire to persuade**

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**others. They noted that this trait is crucial for success and *impossible* to teach.<sup>1</sup>**

## Competitiveness Research

In a 1994 paper, Geoffrey Brewer, editorial director of *Gallup Press*, reported a survey of a half million salespeople from companies including Federal Express, Strycker Surgical, and Home Savings of America, which concluded that competitiveness is an essential trait for sales success.<sup>2</sup>

University of Memphis marketing professor Balaji Krishnan and his colleagues conducted a study to find out why competitiveness improves sales performance.<sup>3</sup> They tested 182 real estate salespeople and reported in 2003 their finding that competitiveness combined with other key personality traits caused salespeople to work harder and subsequently outperform their peers.

In a 1998 study, University of Houston marketing professor Steven Brown and his colleagues tested 158 medical supplies salespeople and found that highly competitive salespeople who saw the company climate as competitive consistently set higher goals.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, salespeople who were low in competitiveness consistently set lower goals, regardless of what they thought of the company climate.

In a 2016 study, Michigan State University professor Wyatt Schrock and colleagues, extended this research

testing 117 human resource services salespeople. As expected, this analysis indicated that competitiveness was significantly correlated with higher sales performance.<sup>5</sup> However, this effect was increased when the salesperson described their environment as highly competitive. Similarly, a 2021 study by economics professors Ophy Quamilla and Gugup Kismono at the University of Gadjah Mada, tested 61 automotive salespeople, and found a significant correlation between competitiveness and sales volume.<sup>6</sup> This study also found that competitive salespeople who viewed their environment as competitive showed stronger sale performance. These results indicate that companies that both hire competitive salespeople and foster a competitive environment give themselves a strong advantage.

Taken together, previous research shows that *competitiveness leads to greater effort and better performance in sales*. Many sales managers realize this fact but make a crucial mistake: they assume that a former athlete will make a great salesperson. That is a myth, pure and simple. Most sales managers have hired one or two former high school or college athletes who once set the gridiron or basketball court on fire with their athletic prowess. Then, months down the road, something shocking happens. These managers find out that a number of ex-athletes do not cut it as producers. What is going on here?

## Competitiveness is not enough!

In reality, there is no guarantee that former athletes will be good salespeople. Remember, competitiveness

is only *one* element of Drive. Although it is an essential trait, competitiveness is not enough for sales success. Top performers must also have the need for achievement we discussed in chapter 2. Need for achievement is what causes star athletes to set their sights on a championship instead of just surpassing their peers. Need for achievement is what puts superstar status in the crosshairs of top salespeople. These two factors work together to motivate what we call *Competitive Achievers*.

In our work with sales managers, we have gotten to know some extraordinary salespeople who exemplify Competitive Achievement. These people are consistently ranked above their peers and produce remarkable numbers. Our interviews with them have shown that the combination of achievement motivation and competitiveness holds the key to generating consistent, superior performance. We will briefly describe two such examples.

### **Case Study 1**

One such sales star, Greg, was a sales representative for a large manufacturing firm. He consistently outperformed his peers and was a mentor to the newer salespeople in the position. As we were discussing his work habits, he said, “I exceed my manager’s expectations by working 70 hours a week. I feel good every month when management sees my numbers. I’m motivated to please our CEO. I’m also competitive every day with Jack [the company’s other top salesperson]. I beat him in two of the last three months . . . It’s nice to make the money also.” Here we can see

the combination of need for achievement and competitiveness delivering the necessary one-two punch. Greg sets the bar for his own accomplishments high and does whatever it takes to meet his goals. He is also constantly competing for the spot of top dog on the sales team. It is clear in Greg's record-setting track record that the combination of strong achievement motivation and competitiveness gives him the Drive to succeed.

### ***Case Study 2***

Another top salesperson with a hydraulics company, Janice, granted us some time to discuss how she consistently achieved stellar numbers and surpassed her peers. She said, "In every sale, I go in with a purpose and a focus: is my action making money or losing money? I'm very competitive. I want to know where I stand overall [compared to other sales reps]; I was *born* with Drive."

Again, here we clearly see the intense love of competition. Janice is focused on being the top salesperson in her company. Her need for achievement keeps her motivated to set performance goals much higher than those of the average rep.

Both of these top performers amaze their managers and are the envy of their peers. Both of them achieve remarkable results and reap significant rewards. And it is clear that both rely on the combination of competitiveness and need for achievement as the foundation of their success. Without these two traits, neither could attain such high levels of performance.

Fortunately, passion for competition is relatively easy to identify through the course of proper testing and

interviewing. While our old friend the narcissist can *claim* to love competition, we can flush that element out with questions which put this person in a position to choose between a competitive situation and alternatives that require less risk and less reward.

It's important to remember that there is a key difference between a love for competition and simply a desire to win at all costs. The former involves the lust for a good game, the invigoration and growth that come from the competitive process itself.

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**Our A and B salespeople never stop competing and consequently never stop developing. Wise business owners and sales managers feed this tempest with internal and external competitive challenges that bring out the best in their top producers and often help identify those who cannot, or will not, engage. They know that the big dogs love to keep score, relish feedback, and thrive on the thrill of the game.**

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The latter can involve shortcuts and easy routes to a shallow victory.

At this point, we have two parts of the Drive model for high-performance salespeople in place. Let's now move to lock in the third critical element—the characteristic that pulls it all together—the top salesperson's supreme sense of self-assurance: *optimism*.

## Summary

- ◆ Competitiveness is crucial to sales success. This finding has been supported by academic research and our extensive practice.
- ◆ *Competitiveness* must be combined with the *need for achievement* to create a high-performing Competitive Achiever. Such a person is motivated to achieve and loves to compete.
- ◆ Hiring a former athlete is no guarantee that you will have a top performer. The person must also have the *ambition* to match the desire to win.
- ◆ Competitiveness and need for achievement are still not enough to give a salesperson *lasting* Drive. Optimism, the third element of Drive, is also crucial.

# 4

## Chapter

## Optimism

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*Years ago, when I played high school basketball, I had the “privilege” of guarding our state’s best player, a real gunner whom I “held” to 49 points. Later, we became good friends, and I asked him if he ever felt discouraged if he missed a shot. He said, “Actually, it’s just the opposite. I’m around a 50 percent shooter. If I miss a shot, I can’t wait to take the next one because I’m absolutely sure I’ll make it.”*

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—Richard Abraham

You would think that the combination of a burning *need to achieve* and a *love of competition* would be enough to drive our super salespeople to succeed. But even some of our Competitive Achievers won’t make the cut because of a brutal anomaly: while they yearn for success, they are *terrified of failure*. They are so terrified,

in fact, that fear blocks the realization of hopes and dreams that their skills could otherwise achieve.

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**Years of testing have revealed that salespeople who *expect to succeed every time* will *close* far more often than those who are afraid of the alternative. In fact, salespeople's expectations of success or failure ultimately determine whether they can unleash the full power of their natural talent. When they think about tomorrow's meeting with a key prospect, they see only the close. To them, there is no other possibility!**

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This sense of certainty comes from the third and final facet of Drive: *optimism*. More than 30 years of research have shown that *optimism is a critical element for sales success*. Salespeople with optimism have two key advantages over their pessimistic peers:

1. *Optimists expect to win.* When they think about the sales call tomorrow, they *see* the close. This positive visualization sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy of success.
2. *Optimists are thick-skinned.* They don't take rejection personally. They interpret a failure as something temporary, unusual, and outside of their control. They have the constitution to put rejection in its proper perspective.

In a 1999 review of 30 years of optimism research,

Peter Schulman, research director of the Martin Seligman Research Alliance, discussed the relationship between optimism and motivation.<sup>1</sup> He noted that “the ability to succeed and the desire to succeed are not always enough without the belief that one *will* succeed. Someone with the talent of a Mozart can come to nothing in the absence of that belief. This is particularly true when the task at hand is challenging and requires persistence to overcome obstacles and setbacks (like sales!).”

Although optimism seems like an obvious necessity, many managers don’t recognize or emphasize its importance when recruiting salespeople. Even as trained psychologists, *we* learned about the supreme importance of optimism the hard way.

Several years ago, we performed a psychological evaluation on a potential salesperson for a hardware leasing company (let’s call him Chuck). The interview showed that Chuck was absolutely a Competitive Achiever. He had a track record of going for the gold and for working as hard as necessary to get it. He also had other personality traits we were looking for in salespeople, so we recommended him for the position. However, after about six months, he began to bog down. Though Chuck had lofty goals and wanted to be at the top of the sales team, his sales did not match his ambitions.

We and our client were confused. How could someone who was clearly a Competitive Achiever, with such other necessary traits as persuasiveness and relationship and organizational skills, not make the grade? Something else was obviously missing—but

what? As we dug deeper, the mystery began to reveal itself. Chuck's sales manager told us that in a recent sales meeting, a reluctant prospect became the subject of conversation. Chuck thought this topic was a waste of time, saying that the prospect clearly did not want to buy because he did not understand the value of the service being offered. Chuck wanted to change the subject to bigger goals and warmer leads. But one of his peers stopped him: "Wait a minute; this is a huge opportunity to educate this customer about the value of our service. This could be a profitable client, and I'm sure we can land him." Chuck just looked perplexed.

Clearly, Chuck was motivated, but he lacked the *optimism* to keep pushing. He loved to succeed in general but just did not have the optimism necessary to succeed at the rough-and-tumble game of overcoming rejections. In the end, he felt so bad about not reaching his goals that he offered to pay the sales manager back every dollar of salary he received. Chuck's manager admired his character but did not take him up on the offer. Chuck and his company parted ways, amicably, having learned a valuable lesson.

This incident from our early days of practice caused us to research the optimism trait in depth. We learned that a salesperson can be highly motivated but lack the sense of certainty that he or she will succeed. Without optimism, Chuck and thousands like him have struggled desperately in sales careers—aiming high, wanting to do well, but unable to muster the confidence to persevere and succeed.

## The Evidence for Optimism

Martin Seligman and his colleagues pioneered the study of optimism in salespeople. More than 30 years of their research with more than one million salespeople have confirmed the importance of this trait. We now understand what causes some salespeople to keep moving forward and others to crumble when they hear the word *no*. It's usually based on the way salespeople perceive and explain rejections and setbacks to themselves and others.

For example, in a 1986 study, Seligman and Schulman tested the explanatory style of life insurance agents for Metropolitan Life and compared it to their sales performance.<sup>2</sup> The results showed that salespeople who habitually explained a negative event as internal (“it’s my fault”), stable (“it’s going to last forever”), or global (“it’s going to undermine everything I do”) consistently sold much less insurance than optimistic salespeople did. In fact, the optimistic salespeople sold 37 percent more insurance than their pessimistic coworkers. Unlike the pessimists, the optimists explained negative events as external (“I’m not at fault”), unstable (“this is only temporary”), and specific (“this is isolated to this one situation”). Cutting it even finer, the most optimistic salespeople of the group sold 88 percent more insurance than the most pessimistic. The researchers also found that optimists stayed on the job at twice the rate of pessimists, who were more likely to quit at great cost to their employers.

Seligman and Schulman then applied their findings to recruiting at Metropolitan Life. They tested 14,000 applicants for optimism. Applicants also completed

Metropolitan Life's regular personality test, which identified applicants whose personality profiles matched current top performers. Two interesting findings emerged. First, optimists outsold pessimists by their second year; and second, *optimists even outsold the pessimists who scored higher on the regular personality test.*

Schulman went on to compare optimism scores to performance of salespeople across several industries, including office products, real estate, banking, and car sales. The results he reported in 1995 across all industries studied indicated that optimists outsold pessimists by 20 to 40 percent!<sup>3</sup>

In a 1993 study, marketing professors David Strutton and James Lumpkin examined why optimists are more likely to succeed at sales.<sup>4</sup> They tested the personalities of 101 salespeople from the textile manufacturing, furniture manufacturing, and communication technology industries. The findings showed that optimists and pessimists differed in how they dealt with a problem. Optimistic salespeople focused on solving the problem because they believed that the situation could change. Pessimists, on the other hand, were more likely to react by focusing on their own bad feelings and giving up. Obviously, the pessimist's reaction leads to poor performance.

A 2016 study by marketing professors Bruno Lussier and Nathaniel Hartmann echoed these findings in an assessment of 175 pharmaceutical, food and beverage, financial, and industrial salespeople.<sup>5</sup> Their analysis indicated that optimism and resilience increase customer-oriented behavior (i.e., identifying possible

problems and solutions). This customer-oriented behavior subsequently increased sales performance. Optimistic salespeople are more likely to view problems as opportunities and believe they would be successful at resolving them. This belief increases the likelihood that they will take the actions necessary to succeed.

Optimism is an incredibly positive characteristic in all walks of life, but it is particularly crucial to the success of a salesperson. Optimistic salespeople believe problems can be solved, so they persist. Pessimistic salespeople give up, often before the opportunity to close has been fully developed. Optimistic salespeople do not dwell on rejection. Pessimistic salespeople focus on their bad feelings, often blame themselves, or avoid the selling situation altogether to reduce stress. Optimistic salespeople feel that the next call will be a winner.

## The Perfect Storm

So, there we have it—the three elements of Drive: (1) the need to achieve, (2) competitiveness, and (3) optimism. Two out of three won't cut it. All must be present in the heart of the great salesperson. We have established that need for achievement and competitiveness combine to create what we know as *Competitive Achievement*. We have also made it clear that all the motivation in the world won't carry the day if a salesperson lacks optimism. Optimism is the third force that gives us real *Drive*.

As one psychologist puts it, “if need for achievement is

the engine, and competitiveness is the steering wheel, optimism is the key to the engine. Without it, you're never getting out of the garage."

Our 2015 study of 175 salespeople in a variety of industries found that salespeople scoring high on Drive (a combination of Need for Achievement, Competitiveness, and Optimism) were twice as likely to be strong performers as those scoring low on Drive.<sup>6</sup>

## The Four Types

The following model provides an interesting snapshot of the relationship between Competitive Achievement and optimism in salespeople. We will describe each of the four unique types of salespeople categorized by this model.

<b>Competitive Achievement</b>	<i>High</i>	Realist	Driver
	<i>Low</i>	Collaborator	Believer
			<i>Optimism</i>
			<i>High</i>

### ***Collaborator***

This type results from the combination of *low Competitive Achievement and low optimism*. These people are pretty easy to identify. They are focused on attaining a good work-life balance. Collaborators may

be great at customer service roles. However, if you ask them to pursue new business development, they will give you headaches with their inaction. They put off prospecting and are slow to follow up. It is nearly impossible to change these people. They'll show brief flashes of effort when they think their job is threatened, but then they'll fall back into their old patterns.

### ***Believer***

This type results from the combination of *low Competitive Achievement and high optimism*. These people show strong optimism, which can help them overcome psychological challenges others may not be able to handle. Believers are often cheerful and fun to be around, which can be helpful in maintaining the team's morale. Customers probably like this person as well, because they love to entertain or bring gifts. However, they will often leave a call without asking for the order. If you confront them, they will insist that orders are going to close any day. But they will not be able to sustain enough Drive to convert high hopes to closed sales. Several years ago, a sales manager we worked with fired a Believer only to receive calls from customers saying how much they had liked him! Of course they liked him—he never pressed them for an order.

A word of caution. Believers are likely to stick around forever unless you make a move. In their 1986 study, Seligman and Schulman found that low producers who were high in optimism remained in their positions significantly longer than those low in optimism.

Be careful of Believers in job interviews! They often

come highly recommended by customers. When assessment results indicate that a candidate has a low Drive score but a high optimism score, hiring managers are often shocked. “But he got such rave reviews from his customers,” the manager may protest. Exactly, and *your* customers may love him too. But the name of the game is not likability, its production, and that inevitably requires exerting some pressure on the customers to close the sale.

### ***Realist***

This type results from the combination of *high Competitive Achievement and low optimism*. Realists often like to consider what might go wrong in an upcoming meeting or presentation. Realists may also get discouraged after they experience repeated rejections. Realists may occasionally use their concerns to prepare thoroughly for prospect meetings. Although this tendency can be very helpful, interviewers need to make sure that the Realist will remain persistent when the going gets tough.

### ***Driver***

This type has the winning combination: *high Competitive Achievement and high optimism*. These people are our sales heroes. They are our top performers. Drivers work hard to establish new accounts and strengthen current relationships. They love the thrill of getting new business. They are full of ambition and certain of victory.

Where do *your* salespeople fit in this model? If your company is like most, you will have a scattered

diagram ranging from a handful of real Drivers to a slew of salespeople you intuitively know are Believers, or Collaborators, or even Realists.

Fasten your seatbelt or knock back a stiff shot of bourbon before you read the next chapter because we are going to help you calculate how much it's costing you to keep low-Drive salespeople, who are not born to sell, in Hunter roles. But don't get too discouraged. We will spend the rest of the book working with you to identify, recruit, and motivate real producers—the only type that deserves to be representing your interests in the marketplace.

## Summary

- ◆ Optimism is an essential component of Drive, a trait that turns Competitive Achievers into closers.
- ◆ Optimistic Competitive Achievers have two key advantages:
  1. They set up a self-fulfilling prophecy of success.
  2. They have a thick skin and thus bounce back quickly from rejection.
- ◆ Research evidence has shown that optimists consistently outsell pessimists.
- ◆ Competitive Achievement and optimism combine in certain ways to make up four common types of salespeople.
  1. *Collaborator* salespeople are low in both Competitive Achievement and optimism.
  2. *Believer* salespeople are low in Competitive Achievement but high in optimism.
  3. *Realists* are high in Competitive Achievement but low in optimism.
  4. *Drivers* are high in both Competitive Achievement and optimism.

# A Look Ahead

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Now that you understand the core psychological foundation critical for high-performance salespeople, Drive, we look forward to showing you how to identify, recruit, hire, and onboard your own high-Drive producers in the coming chapters.

## **Chapter 5 – The High Cost of Low Performance**

Throughout this chapter we will be discussing:

- The outrageous cost of tolerating sales mediocrity.
- How many A, B & C players are on your team.
- How to use the Cost Calculator to calculate lost revenue due to low-Drive salespeople.

## **Chapter 6 – Filling the Recruiting Pipeline**

In this chapter, we turn to the solution or formula for identifying, hiring and retaining high-Drive, A & B players. We explore:

- Techniques to attract high-performance salespeople with your job ad.
- Tips for sourcing candidates in places other than big job boards.
- Key resume indicators to look for when hiring a salesperson.

## **Chapter 7 – Testing: The First Step**

After filling your recruiting pipeline with candidates, there are two steps to hiring Drivers: testing and interviewing. This chapter is dedicated to testing. We discuss:

- The importance of testing and testing early.
- Not all tests are created equally.
- The DriveTest®, our assessment for identifying high-Drive salespeople.

## **Chapter 8 – The Drive Interview**

We tackle the second step in the hiring process in this chapter, interviewing. We will outline:

- The Five Classic Errors interviewers make which lead to bad hiring decisions.
- The 3-Ps Process for setting up an interview.
- More than 45 specific experience and aptitude questions for you to use during your behavioral interview, along with interview scoring recommendations based on your candidate's responses.

## **Chapter 9 – Interviewing Secrets**

Throughout this chapter, we will provide details for mastering the art of interviewing. It is not only about knowing what questions to ask, but how to ask them. In this chapter, we cover:

- 5 probing techniques to gain more details from your candidates.
- 4 questioning techniques for getting past your candidate's guarded answers and discovering the truth.
- Red Flags to observe in your candidate's past behavior that may compromise their future behavior at your company.

## **Chapter 10 – Onboarding High-Drive Salespeople**

Now that you have found and hired a high-Drive salesperson, you may be ready to set them free to start producing for you. But this assumption can get you into trouble. New salespeople, even those high in Drive, need a little bit of time to ramp up. In this chapter, we discuss the critical, first 90 days of employment and ways you can elevate the experience for your new employee including:

- Creating a welcoming first day experience.
- Elevating day one lunch.
- Conducting a well-planned Mission Meeting.

## Additional Resources

In the additional resources section, you will find worksheets and guides to help you make the most of your sales hiring process, including:

- Writing a High-Drive Job Ad Worksheets
- Drive Interview Planning Form
- First Day Ritual Checklist
- First Day Outline
- Mission Meeting Guide

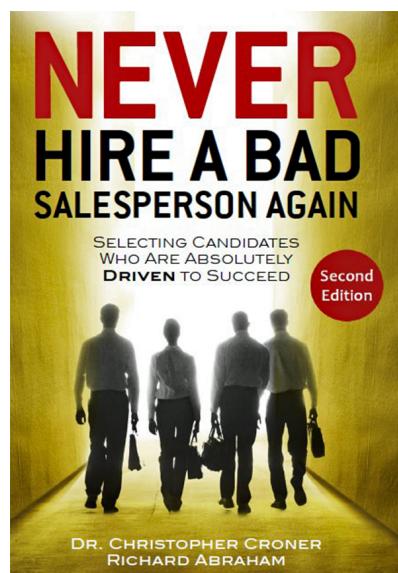
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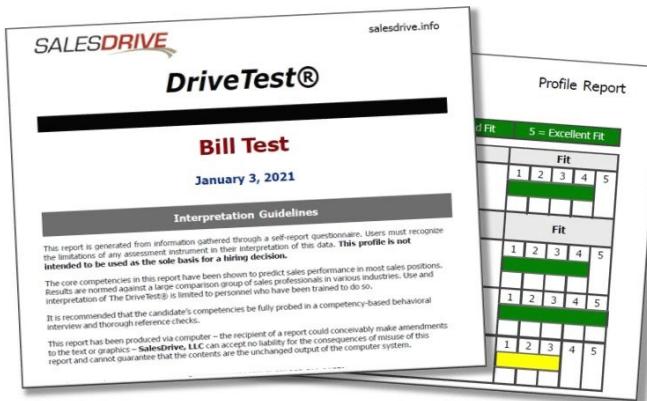


## About SalesDrive, LLC

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SalesDrive, LLC simplifies the sales hiring process to help companies build better sales teams. Our proprietary sales assessment test is designed to identify Drive, as well as other fundamental characteristics common to high-performing salespeople.

For more information and to claim one complimentary DriveTest®, please visit <https://salesdrive.info/> or contact us at (866) 972-5373.



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