



Hard sell:

How sales teams can reclaim the profession

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Introduction



Sales is one of many professions reeling from a years-long trend of eroding trust, compounded by a whirlwind of cultural and technological changes.

When developments in tech move at breakneck speed, contributing to what is already rampant misinformation and information overload, knowing who or what to believe can feel like a game of chance.

AI tools have simplified communication but reinforced the importance of connection; salespeople are already embracing them and seeing positive results, while customers exercise caution. Meanwhile, negative perceptions of the role are managing to seep into teams, pointing to uncertainty around the future of the profession and a potential drag on UK business health and revenue.

What we do know is that almost every business relies on sales, yet those in the role still face scepticism. This report proves that, and interrogates the disconnect by examining the gap between public perception and the reality of working in sales in 2026.

As pressure mounts and sales shame becomes amplified, something needs to change. Sales must shift to a relationship-driven model, away from high-pressure tactics. It's time to rewrite the profession, with feeling.

Sean Evers
VP of Sales & Partner at Pipedrive

Key findings

- 1** Only **21%** of the general public said the sales profession is trustworthy; **43%** say it is not trustworthy.
- 2** Simplified communication doesn't equal better connection: salespeople are embracing AI-driven sales tools, but half (**55%**) of the population don't fully trust AI.
- 3** The stigma around sales can be detrimental to performance, especially for younger professionals/career-starters: **67%** of salespeople said negative perceptions of the role have affected their performance, climbing as high as **88%** for 18-24s and **80%** for 25-34s.

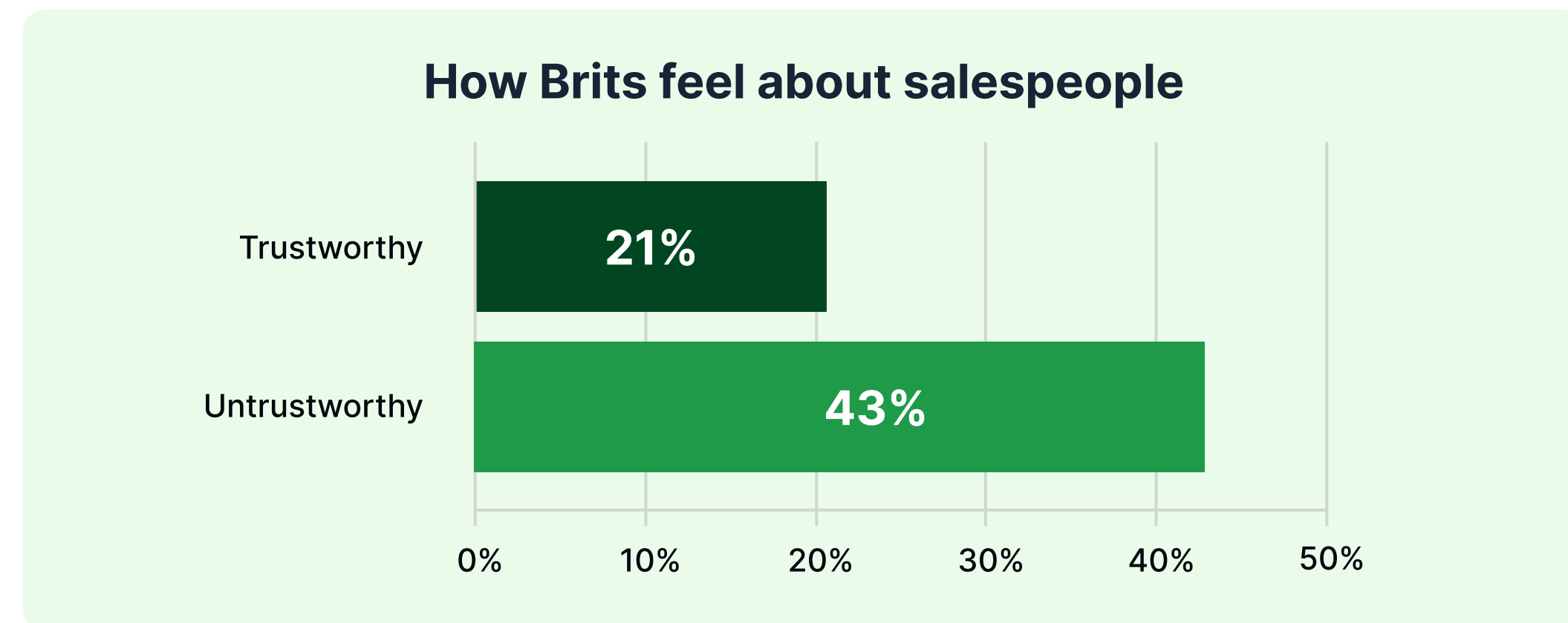
- 4** The impact of sales stereotypes is more acute in roles where responsibility is higher: The job roles most affected by internalised negative perceptions of sales are project managers (**81%**), executive management (**75%**) and senior management (**71%**).
- 5** Negative perceptions of the sales profession are lowering work morale, affecting 18-24s the most (**32%**).



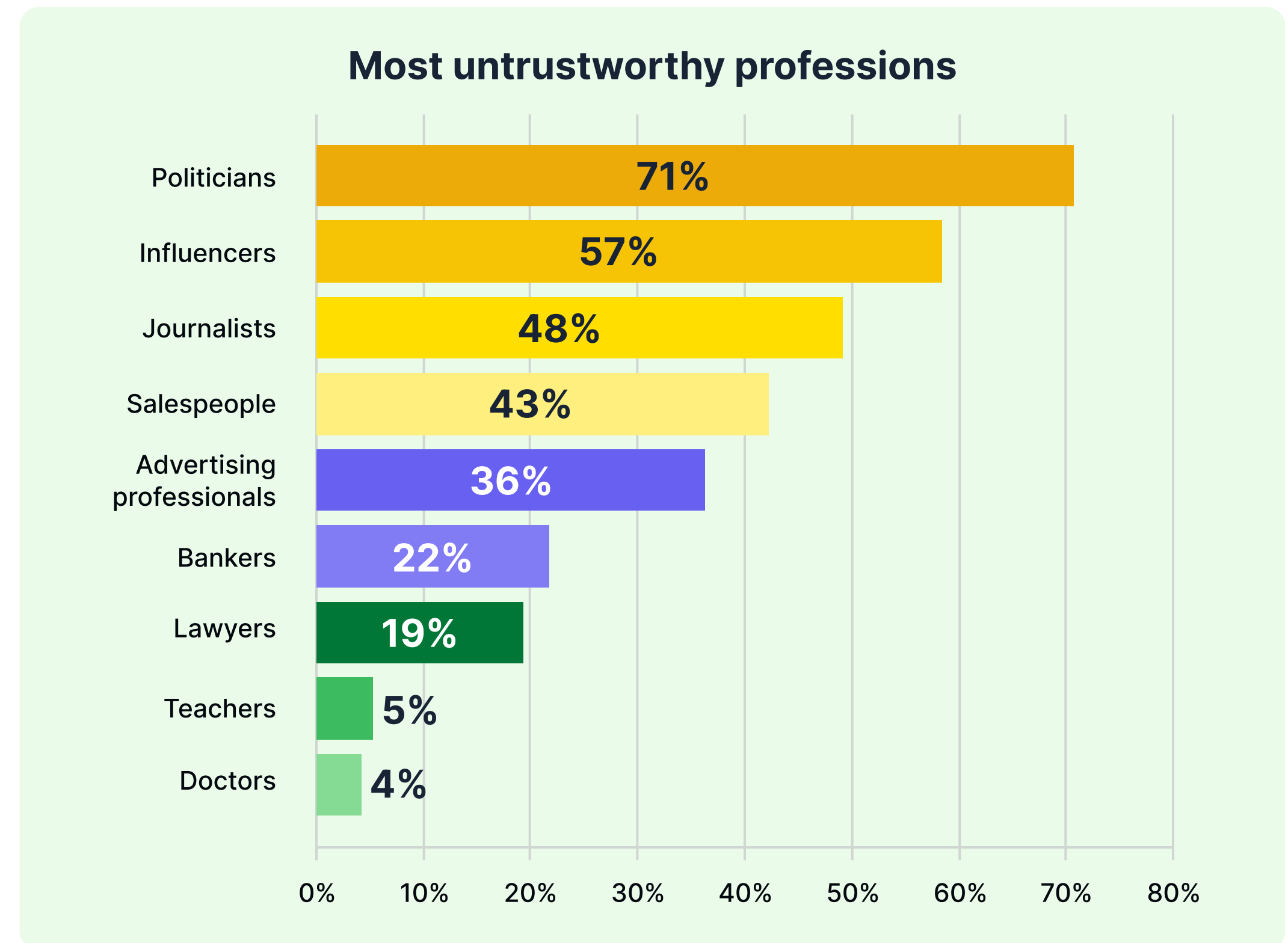
Section 1

The story of sales so far

We've all encountered salespeople in some form: the traditional merchant, the door-to-door salesperson, the call centre rep, the savvy tech software seller. They prop up our economy, and yet **43%** of the general population deem people in the profession to be untrustworthy.



But this isn't the full picture. In fact, in 2026, the public has even less faith in politicians (**71%**), influencers (**57%**) and journalists (**48%**).

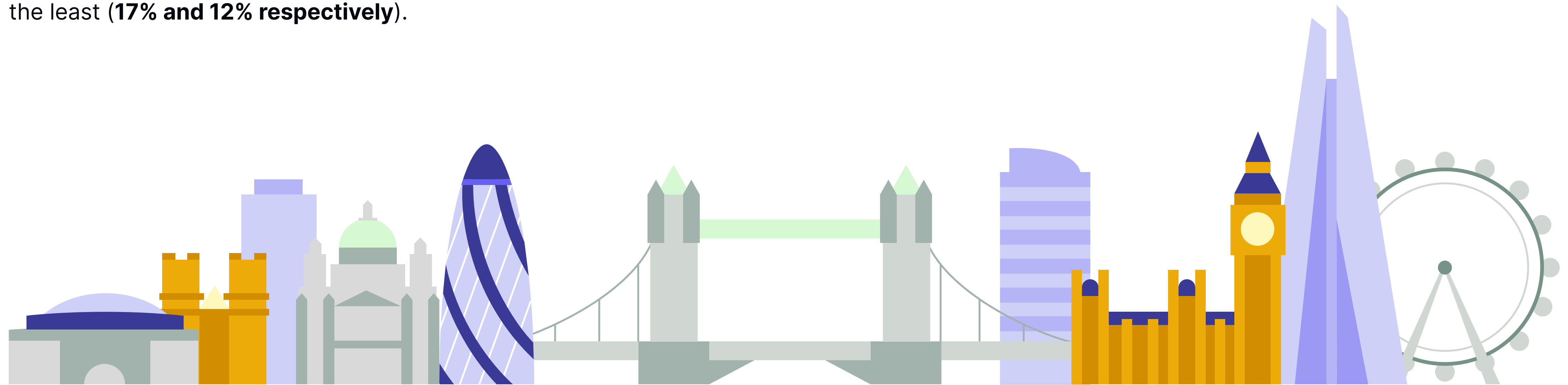


Sales culture thrives in the city, but is met with cynicism by older crowds

When it comes to perceptions of sales, age isn't just a number: a third (**34%**) of the general population can't remember ever having a positive experience with a salesperson, which peaks at **39%** for 55-64s. Meanwhile, for 18-24s, it drops to **21%**.

This isn't just a coincidence; younger cohorts happen to be the most trusting of salespeople, with those among the general public who deem the profession to be trustworthy being mainly made up of 18-24s and 25-34s (**both 32%**), and 55-64s and 45-54s trusting the least (**17% and 12% respectively**).

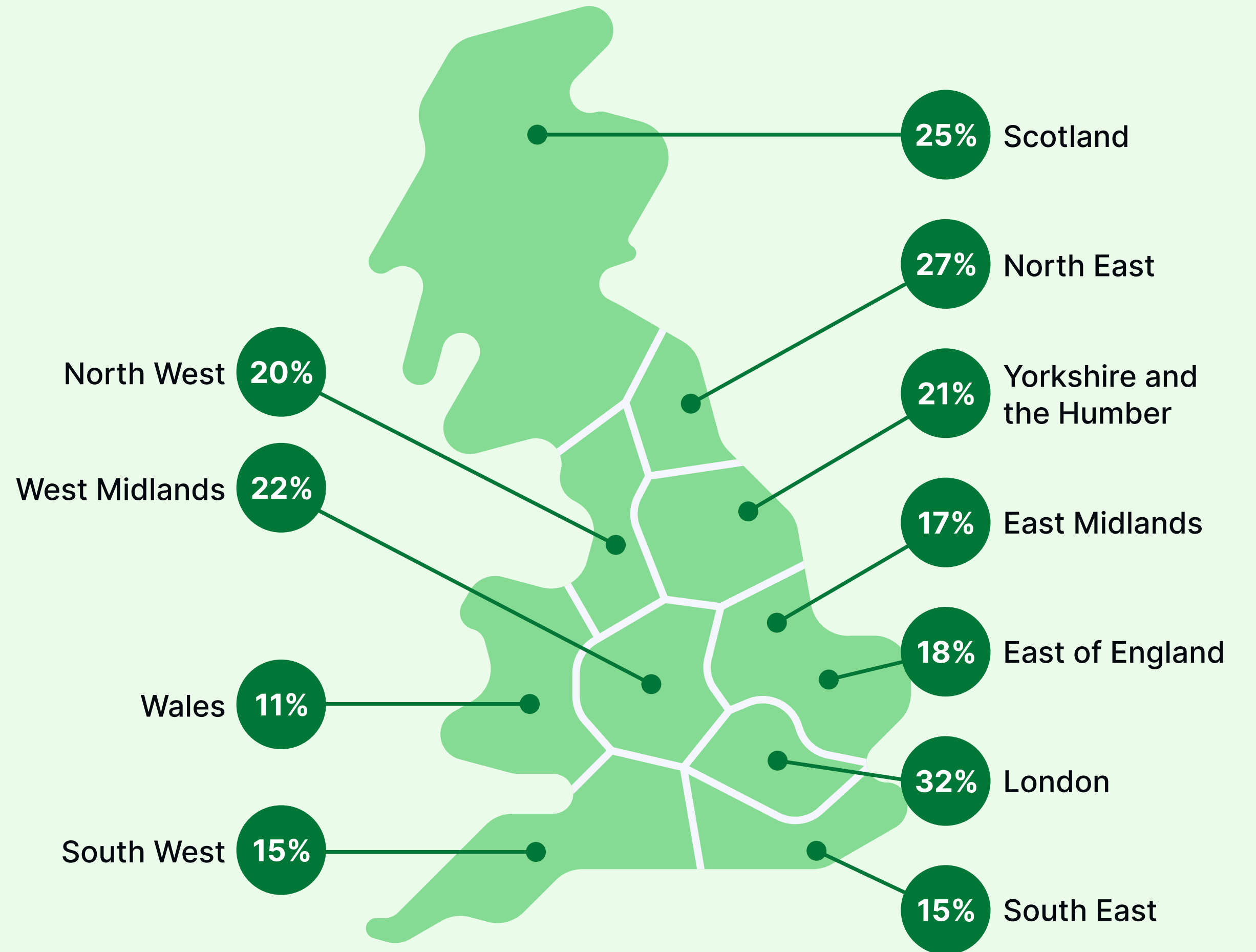
As far as the motivations of salespeople are concerned, there is a visible intention gap between public perception and how salespeople actually feel about their role. Despite a fifth (**20%**) of salespeople citing personal pride in their work as one of their motivations, a meager **9%** of the general population believe this to be true.



Unsurprisingly, older generations, i.e. those aged over-65 (**9%**), 55-64 (**8%**) and 45-54 (**4%**), are significantly less likely to believe pride in their work is important to salespeople than 18-24s (**14%**).

In that same vein, just **35%** of the general population associate salespeople with being pushy, compared to **69%** of 45-54s and **71%** of 55-64s.

United Kingdom sales trust map

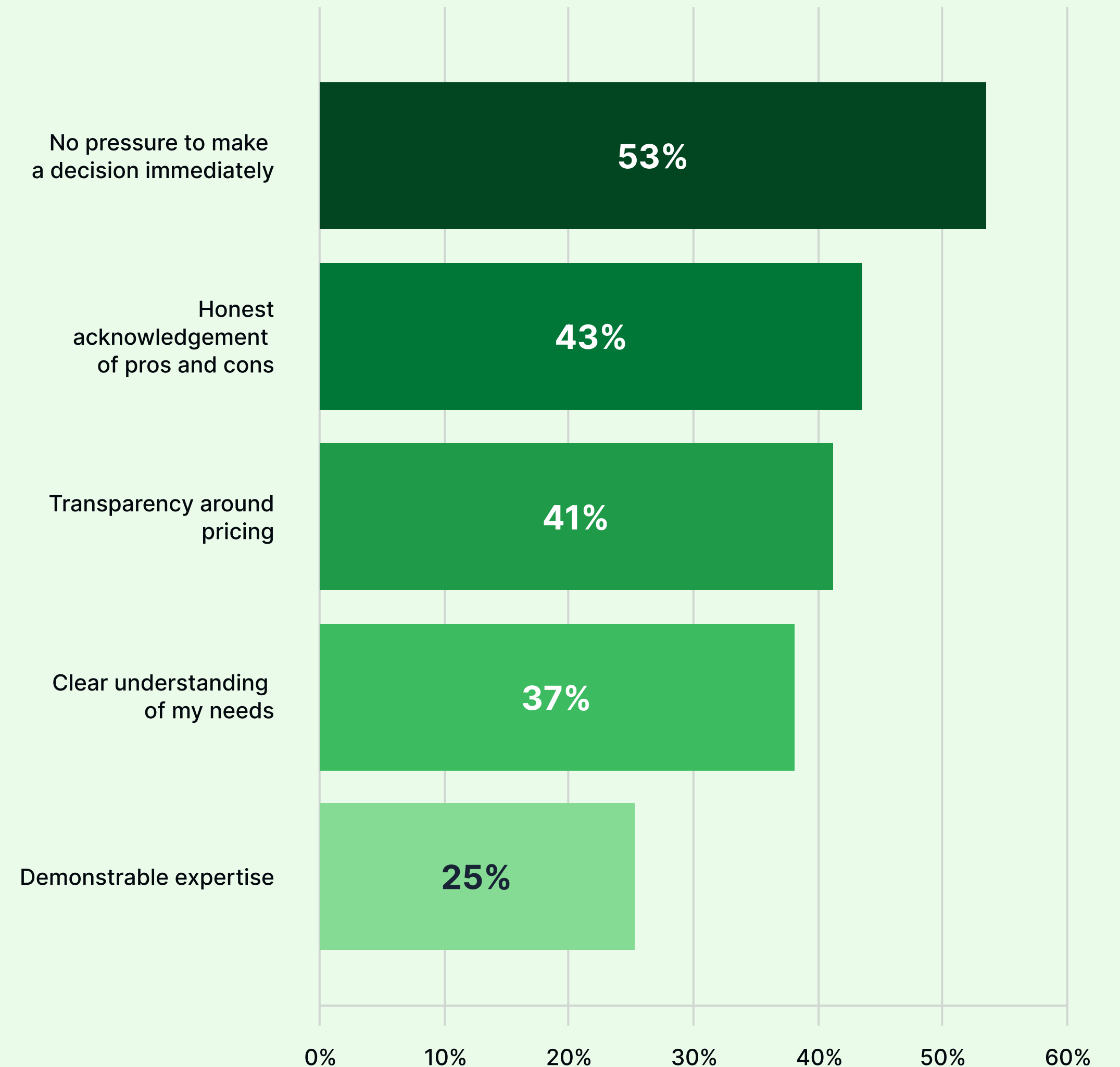


Communication style correlates with perception

In the sales world, first impressions can make or break a relationship, especially if that relationship starts off over the phone. Over half (**57%**) of the general population are mainly contacted by salespeople via phone call, and that same group are more likely to have a negative view of salespeople (**65%**) vs. those contacted mainly by text (**20%**), social media (**18%**) and other online channels (**15%**). So what is it about sales phone etiquette that doesn't always quite land?

People feel more pressured to make a decision or purchase when contacted via phone call (**35%**) vs. when contacted by email (**25%**), social media (**17%**) or text (**16%**). Affirming that patience pays off, over half (**53%**) of the general population said that no immediate pressure to make a decision would make them trust a salesperson more, with over-65s (**61%**) feeling this the most. People also said that honest acknowledgement of pros and cons (**43%**) and transparency around pricing (**41%**) would help to build trust.

What would make you trust a salesperson more?

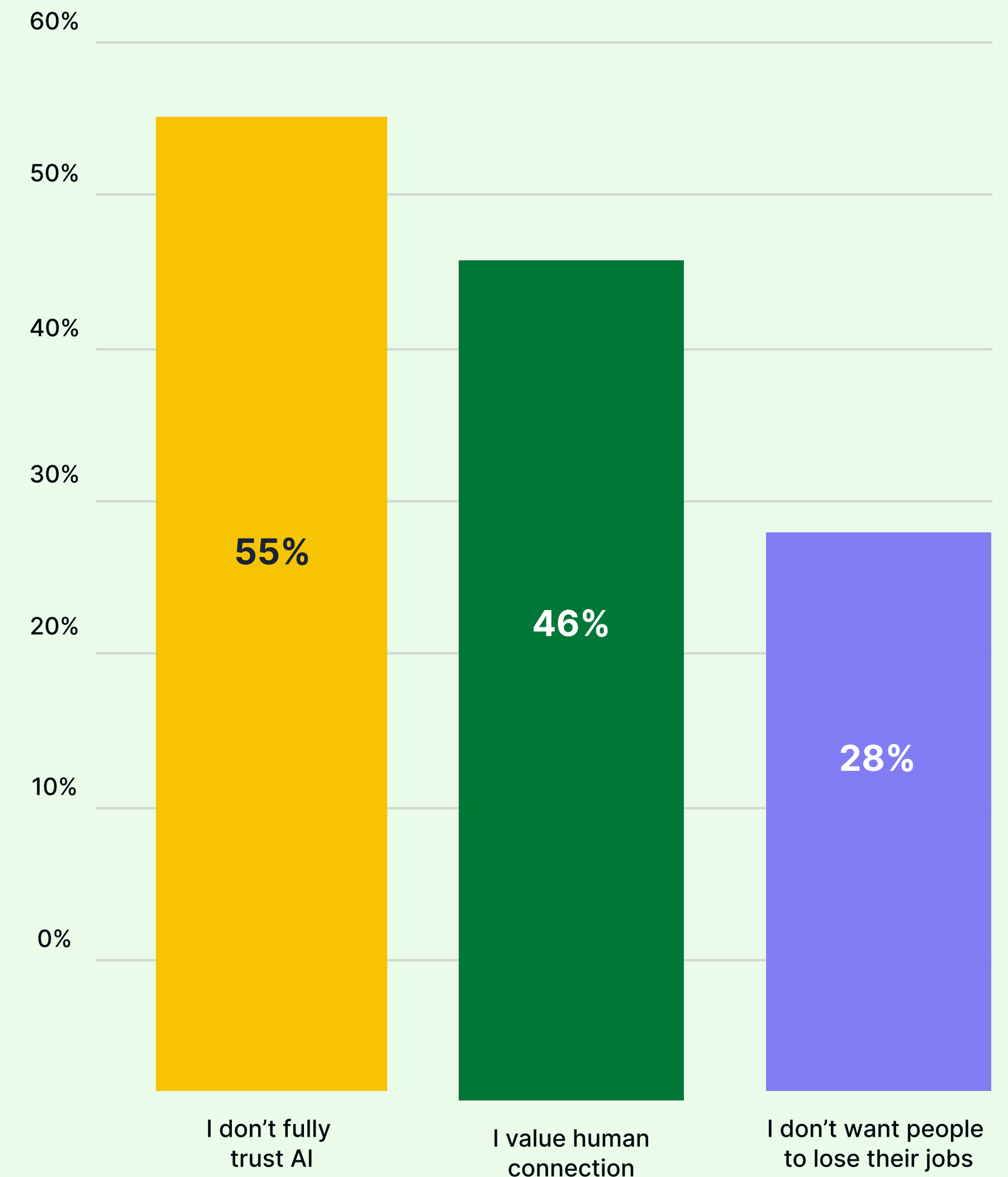


AI tools pose a threat — but also an opportunity for salespeople to win with (actual) intelligence

A wave of AI-driven sales tools have arrived on the scene, but the human-AI balance is off. Those who already hold negative views of salespeople are significantly less likely to be open to buying from AI-driven sales tools (**19%**) compared to those who hold positive views of salespeople (**63%**). This comes down to a lack of trust in AI (**55%**) and valuing human connection (**46%**), suggesting that those with a negative view of salespeople find experiences with both salespeople and AI to be inauthentic.

The bottom line: AI should be offloading digital admin so that salespeople can get back to focusing on customer service and relationship building. But customers don't currently feel that these tools are conducive to that outcome.

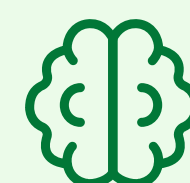
Reasons for not buying from AI tools



Attitudes towards AI sales tools also vary depending on region, but more notably perception: people residing in London are more open (**42%**) to buying from AI tools compared to Wales (**17%**), the South West (**15%**) and the South East (**13%**) — regions which also happened to score the highest for not being able to recall ever having a positive experience with a salesperson.

There is an opportunity here for salespeople to shine where AI tools fall short, and prioritise evolving soft skills like communication, empathy and emotional intelligence.

Build stronger sales connections with emotional intelligence



Why emotional intelligence matters in sales:

Sales EQ (emotional quotient) helps you understand customer emotions, build meaningful relationships, and shift from transactional to relational sales strategies which ultimately improve trust and loyalty.



Key emotional intelligence skills to develop:

Focus on enhancing self-awareness, empathy, social skills and self-control. These skills enable you to better connect with prospects, understand their needs and close more deals in the long term.

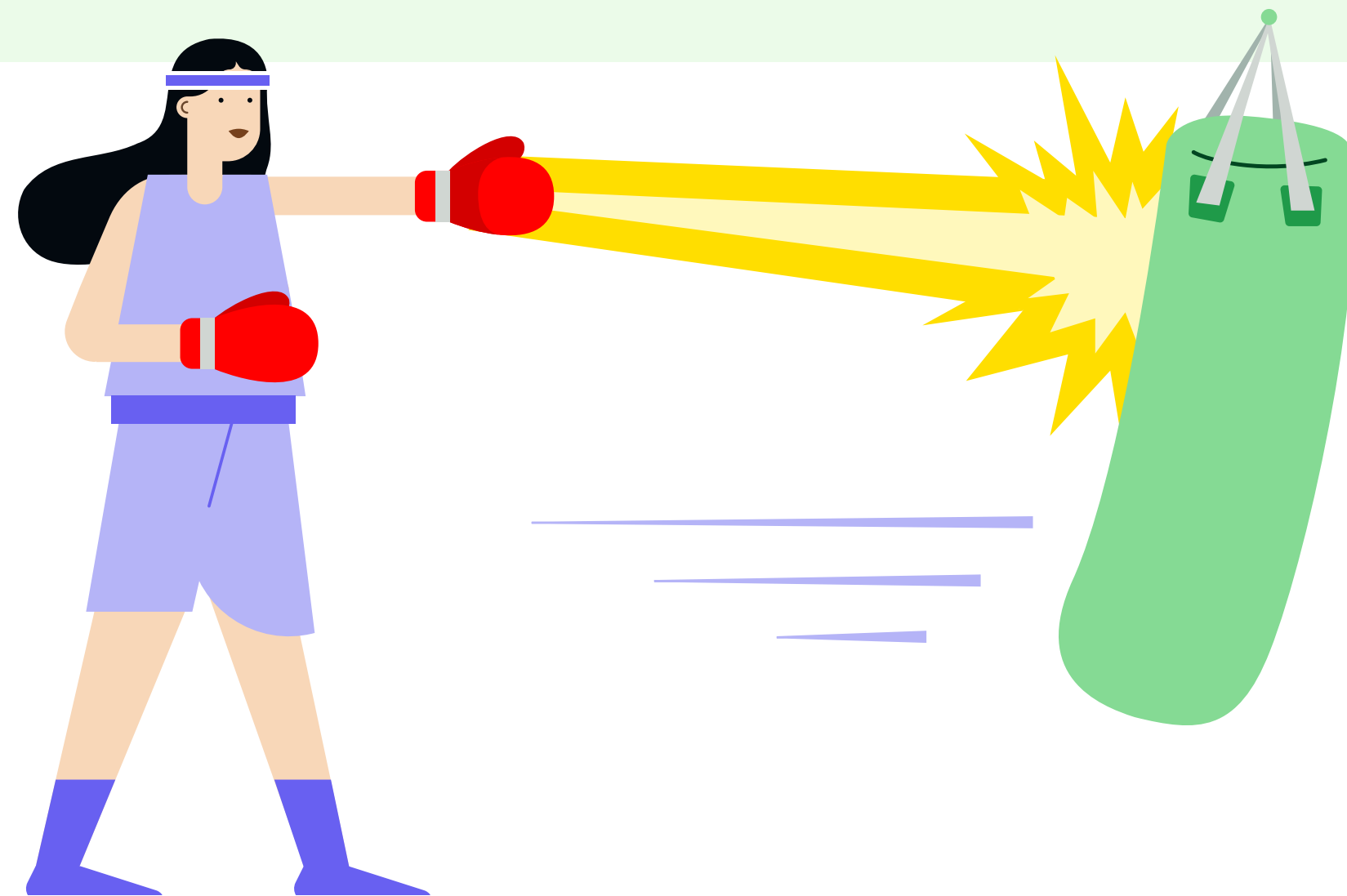


How Pipedrive supports relationship-based selling:

Pipedrive provides tools to personalise interactions, track progress and refine strategies that prioritise relationship-building.

The impact of negative perceptions of sales on performance

Sales shame is hitting young professionals and senior roles in particular, but a minority of executives are channelling it into motivation.



External perceptions of sales can weigh heavily on those in the role, especially in cases where pressure and responsibility levels are already high.

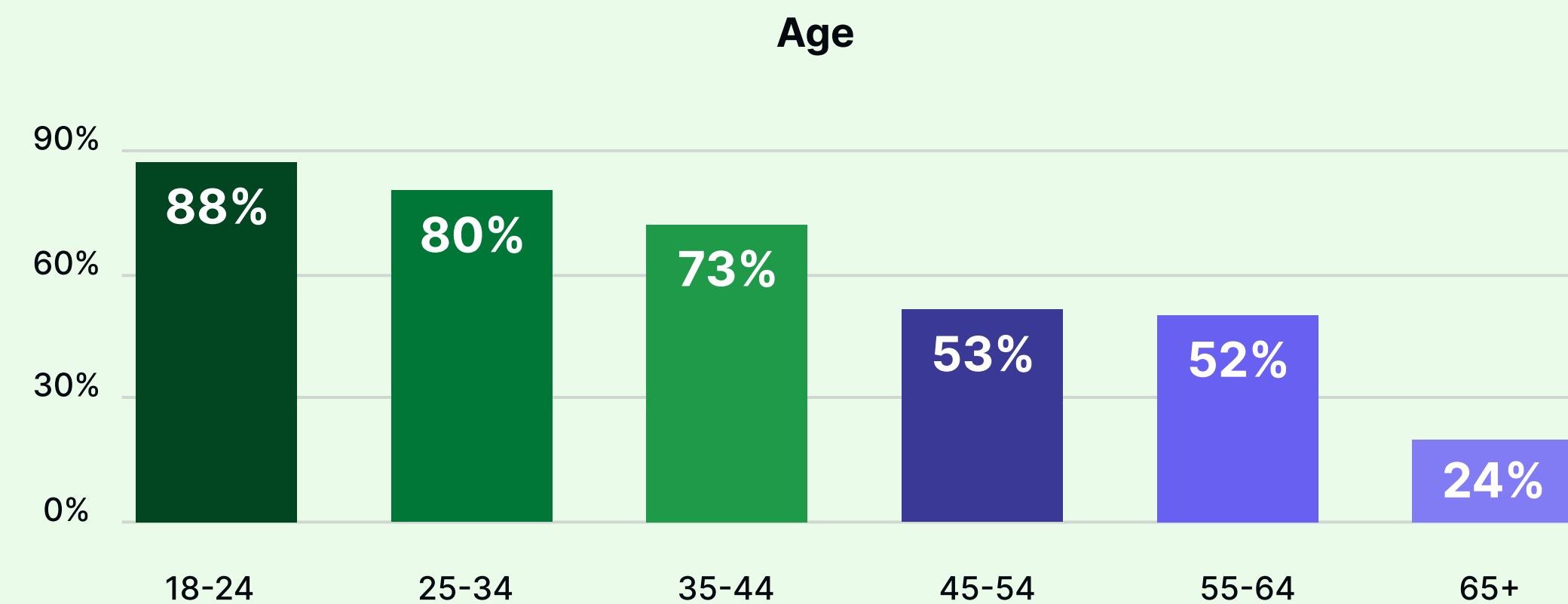
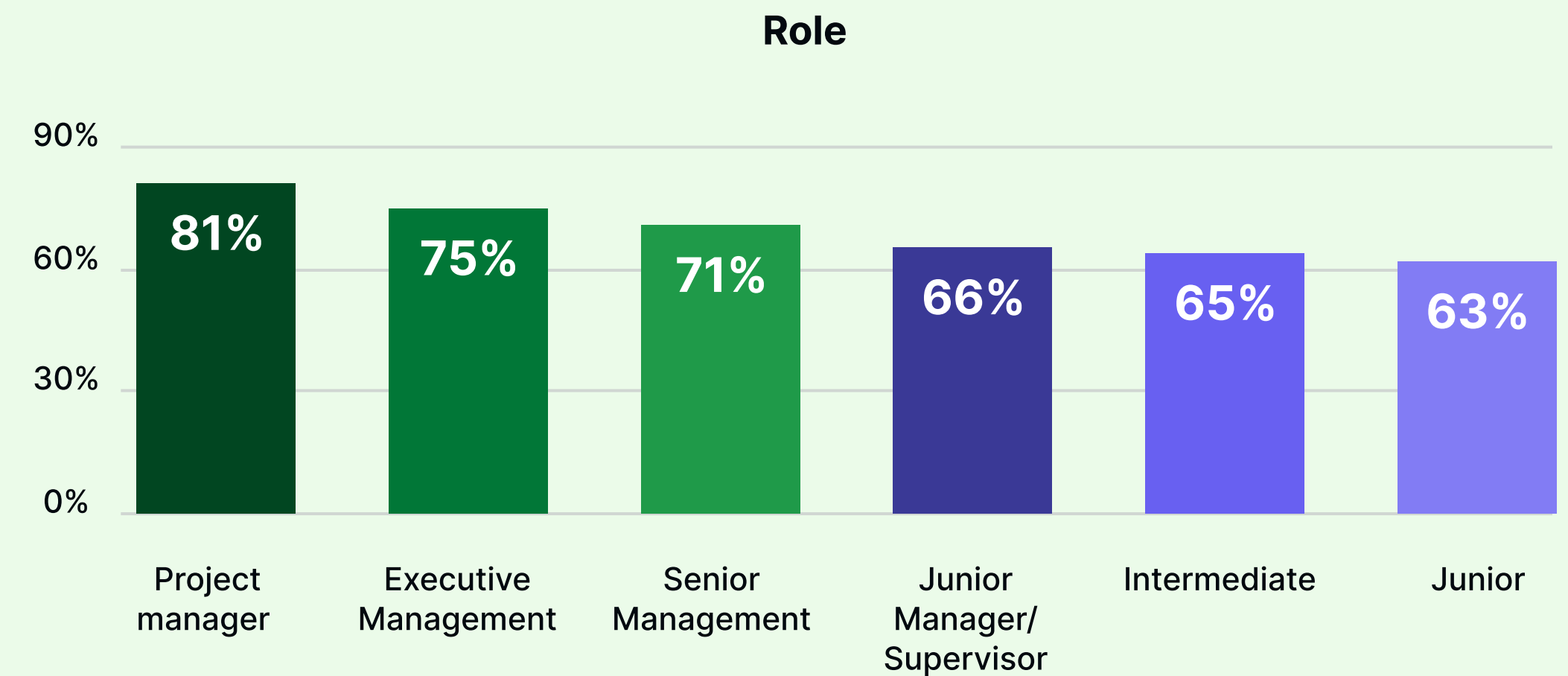
67% of salespeople said negative perceptions of the role have affected their performance, climbing as high as **88%** for 18-24s and **80%** for 25-34s, with the most affected job functions being project managers (**81%**), executive management (**75%**) and senior management (**71%**).

Sales shame can manifest in different ways: **27%** report having experienced lowered work morale as a result of negative perceptions, followed closely by personal stress (**24%**), reduced motivation (**24%**) and defensiveness about the profession (**23%**).

Though, for a select few, that outside noise is what drives them. A fifth (**20%**) of salespeople said negative perceptions had actually increased their motivation to do their job, this being most applicable to those in executive management roles (**33%**).

Execs are also the least affected by encounters with rude customers (**38%**), while junior managers and supervisors (**55%**) feel it the most. Although this may be generational, or a sign that those more senior have developed resilience over the course of their careers, it also alludes to the possibility that such stressors can erode confidence and even hinder progression in the long run.

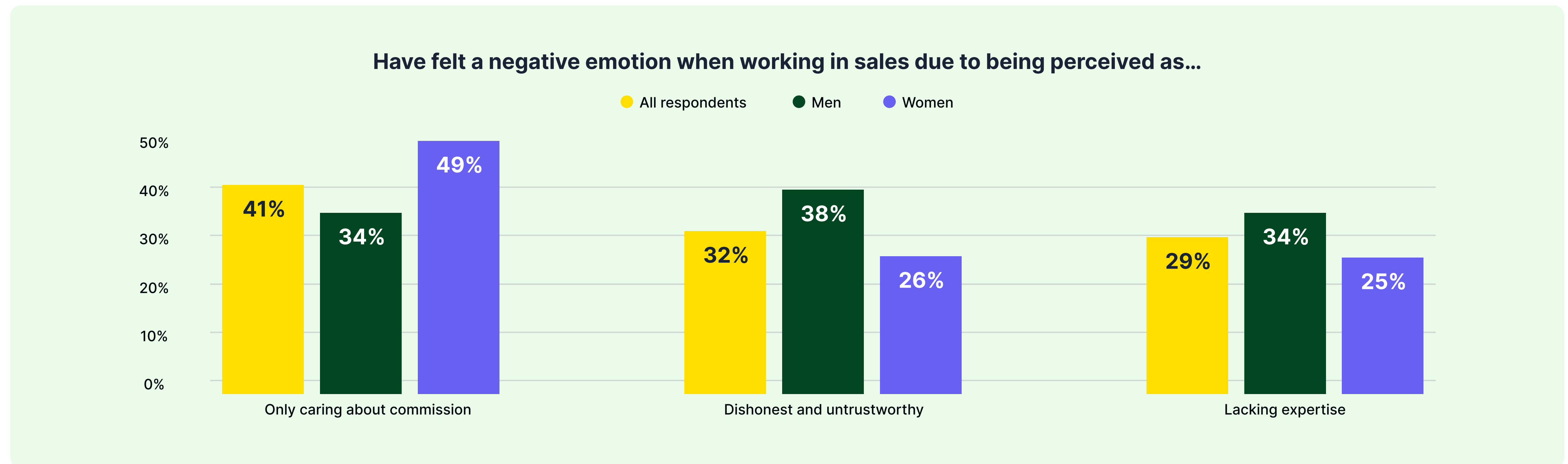
Salespeople most impacted by negative perceptions



Sales shame affects everyone differently

Men and women's experiences of negativity while working in sales are not the same — they pose different threats. Among women, being perceived as only caring about money is more of a concern, while men are most concerned about coming across as dishonest, untrustworthy and lacking expertise.

Imposter syndrome in sales is real, and it grows with seniority. Those in senior management (39%) are the largest group to report having felt a negative emotion about being perceived as lacking expertise compared to junior managers (30%), intermediate team members (29%) and junior team members (26%).



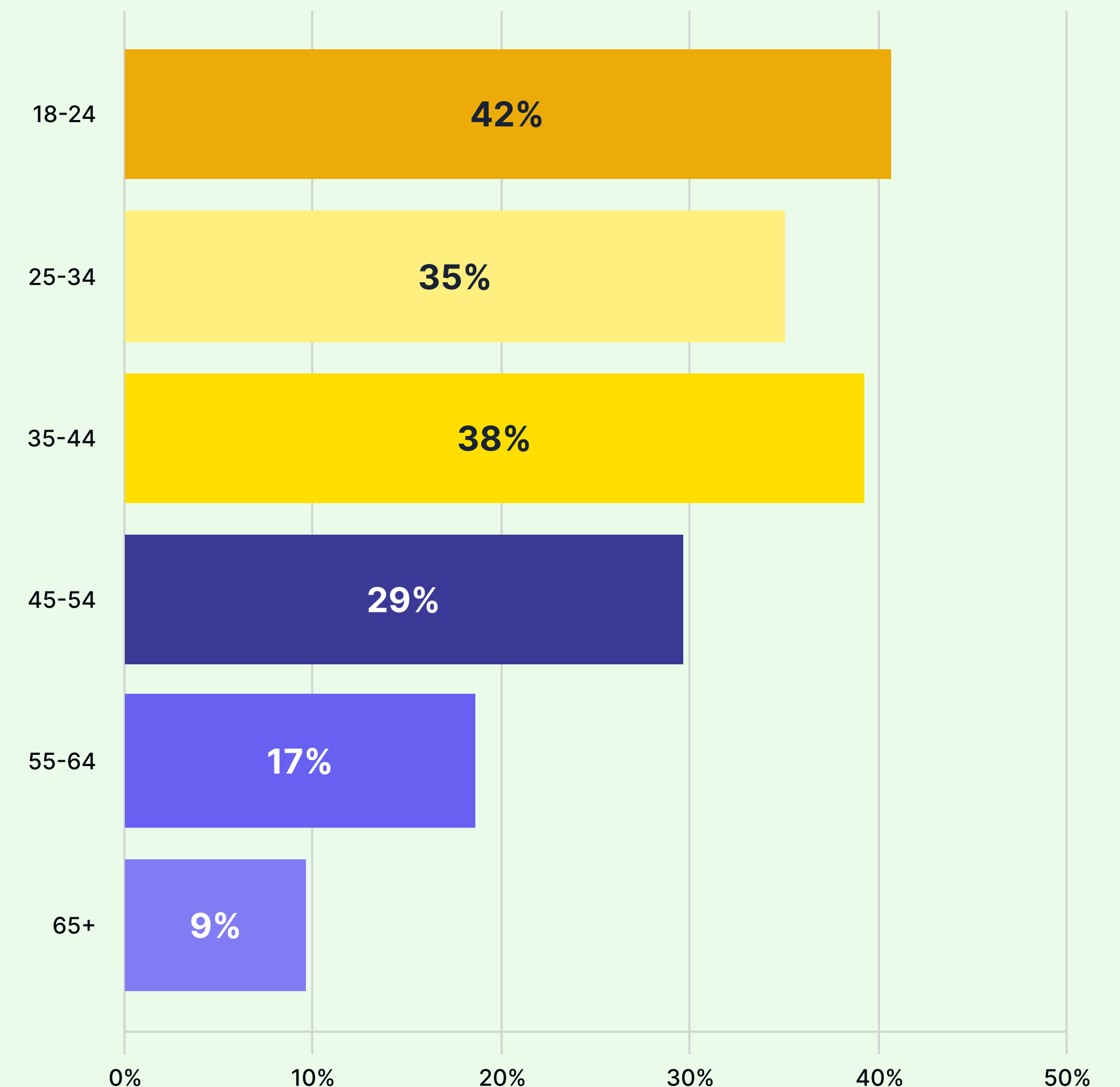
Working in sales comes with an identity challenge, namely for younger professionals

Younger generations are more susceptible to feeling self-conscious about working in sales. On average, a third (**31%**) reported feeling judged when telling people that they work in sales, which increases with age. This group was also the largest to have experienced lowered work morale as a result of negative perceptions.

The inner conflict this brings has even led **22%** of salespeople to rebrand what they do just to avoid saying that they work in sales, most commonly among 25-34s (**32%**) and 35-44s (**22%**).

Despite Londoners being the most trusting of the profession, salespeople living in London have felt the need to rebrand what they do the most out of any region (**32%**). This may be a sign that their reasoning is more related to career misalignment than other people's opinions.

Have felt judged when telling people they work in sales



Section 3

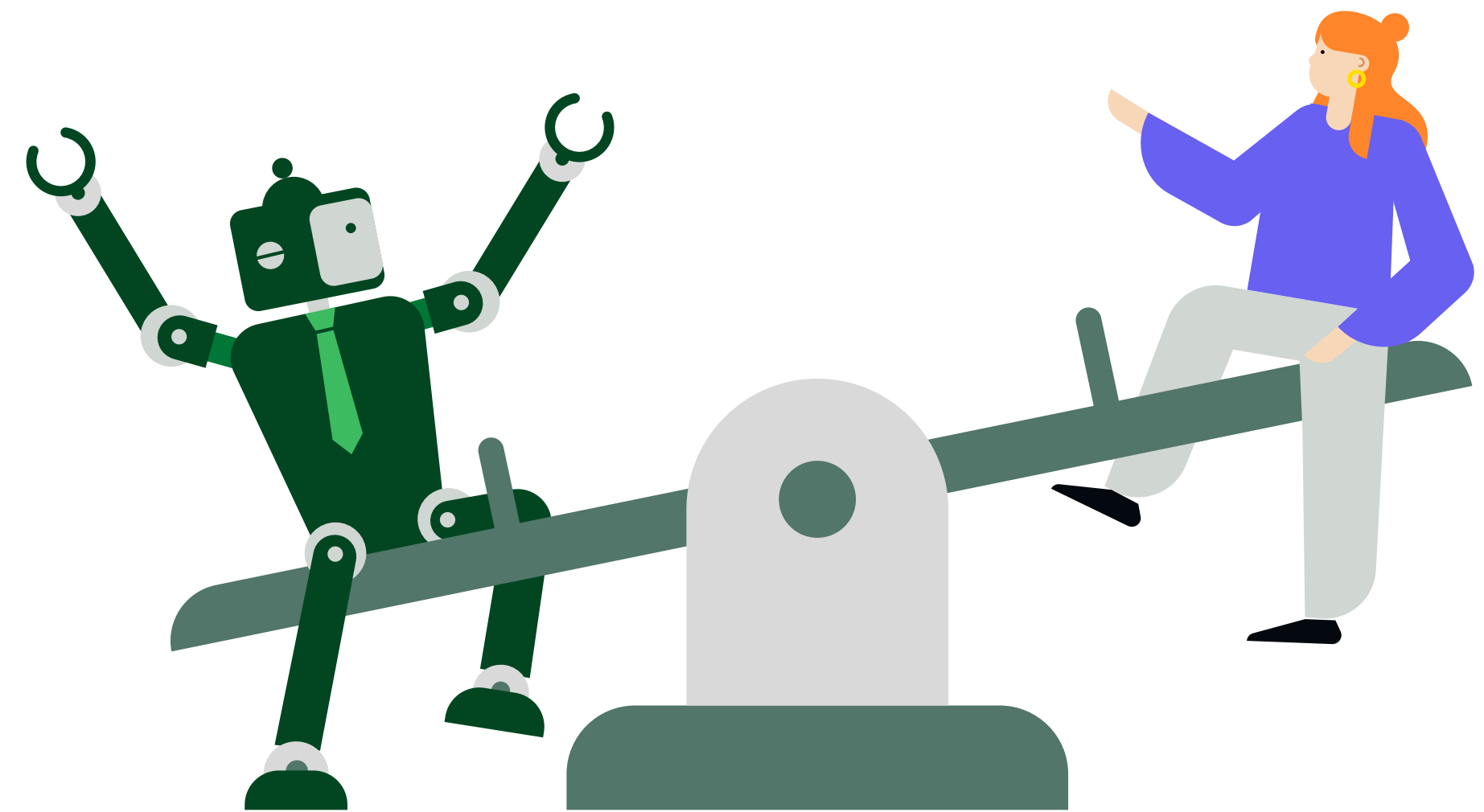
Reclaiming the future of sales

AI is an opportunity for salespeople to reclaim the profession.

Those who work in sales realise the potential of AI to reduce friction and improve pipeline health, but are also aware of its limitations.

When asked what they believe they can do to maintain their edge as AI develops, most (**43%**) salespeople said they could show more emotional intelligence, proving that human connection is something they clearly value. On the flipside, most of the general population (**42%**) said salespeople could be less pushy, pointing to a strategy problem.

The trope of high-pressure sales tactics is no longer cutting it; sales culture needs to make room for building relationships, an issue that is especially pressing as over half (**55%**) of the public do not fully trust AI. This opens up the floor for salespeople to show up and be better, by doubling down on connection and getting the human-AI balance right.

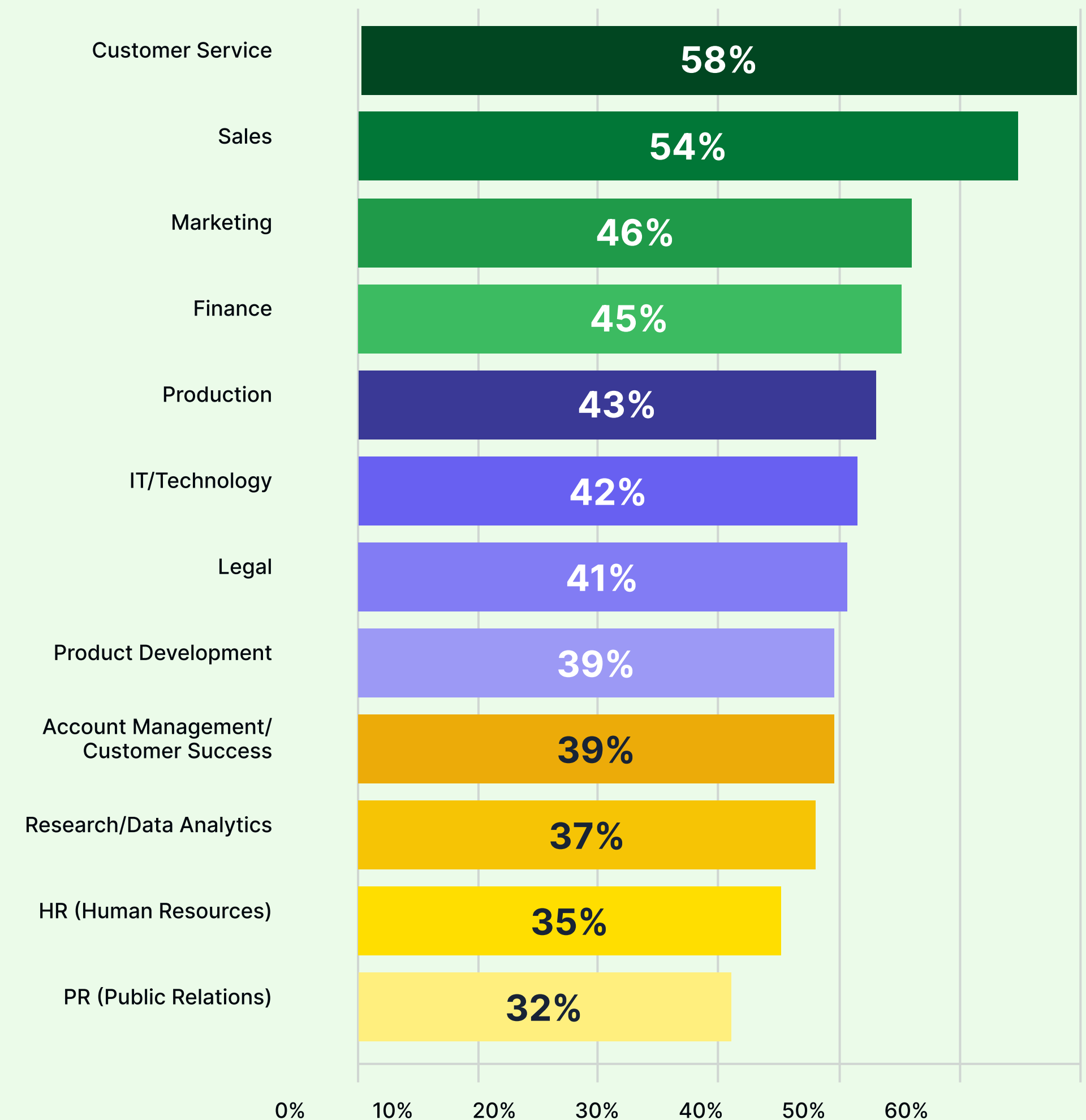


Salespeople have heart — even if people think it's in the wrong place

People who work in sales are deeply misunderstood; only **9%** of the general population believe salespeople are motivated by a desire to help customers solve their problems. Yet those in the role rate customer service the highest in terms of level of importance (**58%**) over all other departments in their organisation.

And, even though nearly half (**48%**) of salespeople agree that earning commission motivates them in their role, a quarter (**25%**) also said they dislike selling products they don't personally believe in.

Most important departments according to salespeople



Wise salespeople will know that a sale to the wrong customer can cause problems for business health later on. They can counter this by being honest about the pros and cons of the product they're selling, not pressuring customers to make an immediate decision, being transparent about pricing, making a concerted effort to understand the customer's needs, and demonstrating their expertise.

The Intelligence Index



Conversational intelligence:

Conversational intelligence is the ability to understand, analyse and respond to customer interactions in real time. It helps salespeople pick up on cues, refine messaging and personalise conversations, while turning every interaction into a learning opportunity.



Emotional intelligence:

AKA the human edge in sales. The ability to recognise, understand and respond to emotions, both your own and your customer's. It helps salespeople move from transactional exchanges to meaningful relationships. As trust becomes harder to earn, emotional intelligence is what makes this possible.



Sales intelligence:

Sales intelligence refers to the data, insights and tools that help sales teams make smarter, more informed decisions. From identifying high-quality leads to understanding buyer behaviour, it turns guesswork into strategy, improving both efficiency and outcomes.

Conclusion

Sales isn't broken, trust is

Sales is one of the most misunderstood professions in the UK, not helped by a dwindling state of trust and the advent of new-to-world technology.

Even if they don't tell the full story, negative perceptions have the potential to stifle selling confidence, and in some cases even performance. Sales shame is emerging as a real barrier to individual and wider business success, while AI reveals a sobering truth: efficiency for efficiency's sake doesn't build trust, and it can't compensate for the human qualities customers value most.

Reclaiming sales comes down to the ability to unite sales and customer service. How you engage your customers post-sale is just as important as closing the deal, leading to more sales, increased loyalty and better objection handling. Also known as sales as a service.

Connect better. Close more. Try Pipedrive's CRM.



Teams can implement sales as a service with these four practices:

- 1 Establish clear lines of communication**

Business models typically split their pre- and post-sales processes, which leads to siloed and misaligned teams. By getting your customer support and sales teams together, they can communicate their current goals, challenges and understanding of your customers' needs, and optimise the buying cycle.
- 2 Encourage customer feedback**

When information isn't adequately shared between teams, customers have to repeat themselves to multiple team members, meaning solutions and requests get fragmented or forgotten. It also lessens opportunities for repeat business. Instead of focusing on efficiency, focus on deepening customer relationships by prioritising metrics such as customer satisfaction scores and customer lifetime value (LTV).
- 3 Perfect your after-sales service**

After-sales service is about keeping customers engaged and more likely to spend more over a longer period of time (e.g. an automated email campaign in the days after onboarding). But you can do this from day one, with personalised messaging (whether a handwritten note or a special email); rewarding loyalty with referral incentives and discounts; and identifying upsell and cross-selling opportunities when an upgrade or specific subscription becomes available.
- 4 Track everything with a CRM**

With a CRM, customers feel like they're talking to one unified organisation rather than multiple entities, no matter who they're speaking to. Because a CRM centralises all of your company data, information can be shared in a harmonious loop, ensuring that everyone is on the same page.

Methodology

The survey was conducted among 1,500 respondents from the UK aged 18+, including 500 current and former salespeople and 1,000 members of the general population.

Among the sales respondents, the majority worked in small to mid-sized organisations (11–250 employees).

The interviews were conducted online by Sapio Research in March 2026 using an email invitation and an online survey.

