



Sales stereotype report

pipedriven

Foreword



Sales is one of the most ubiquitous professions in America, but also one of the most misunderstood. Nearly every business depends on it, yet public perception of the profession remains clouded by outdated stereotypes, compensation myths, and cultural baggage that doesn't reflect what selling actually looks like today.

That gap has a trickle-down effect. When people underestimate what sales actually pays, demands, and what it takes to do it well, talented people opt out of careers they might excel in, leaving companies to compete for a smaller talent pool than necessary.

At Pipedrive, we work with sales professionals every day. We've seen how modern selling has evolved into a consultative, data-driven, relationship-focused discipline. Today's top performers are problem solvers and strategic thinkers who understand their products deeply and prioritize long-term customer success. That reality rarely matches the public perception of the profession.

Misconceptions persist, from skewed views of compensation to limited understanding of what salespeople actually do. These blind spots make it harder for individuals to see sales as a viable career path and for organizations to build strong teams.

To better understand the disconnect, we surveyed Americans about their views of sales careers, including what they respect, what concerns them, and where perceptions fall short. The findings carry important implications for attracting and developing talent.

Sales is at an inflection point with AI reshaping the role, and a new generation is forming its opinions now. The opportunity to redefine the profession is real, but it starts with understanding how it's perceived. That's what this report is designed to do.

Paulo Cunha
CEO, Pipedrive

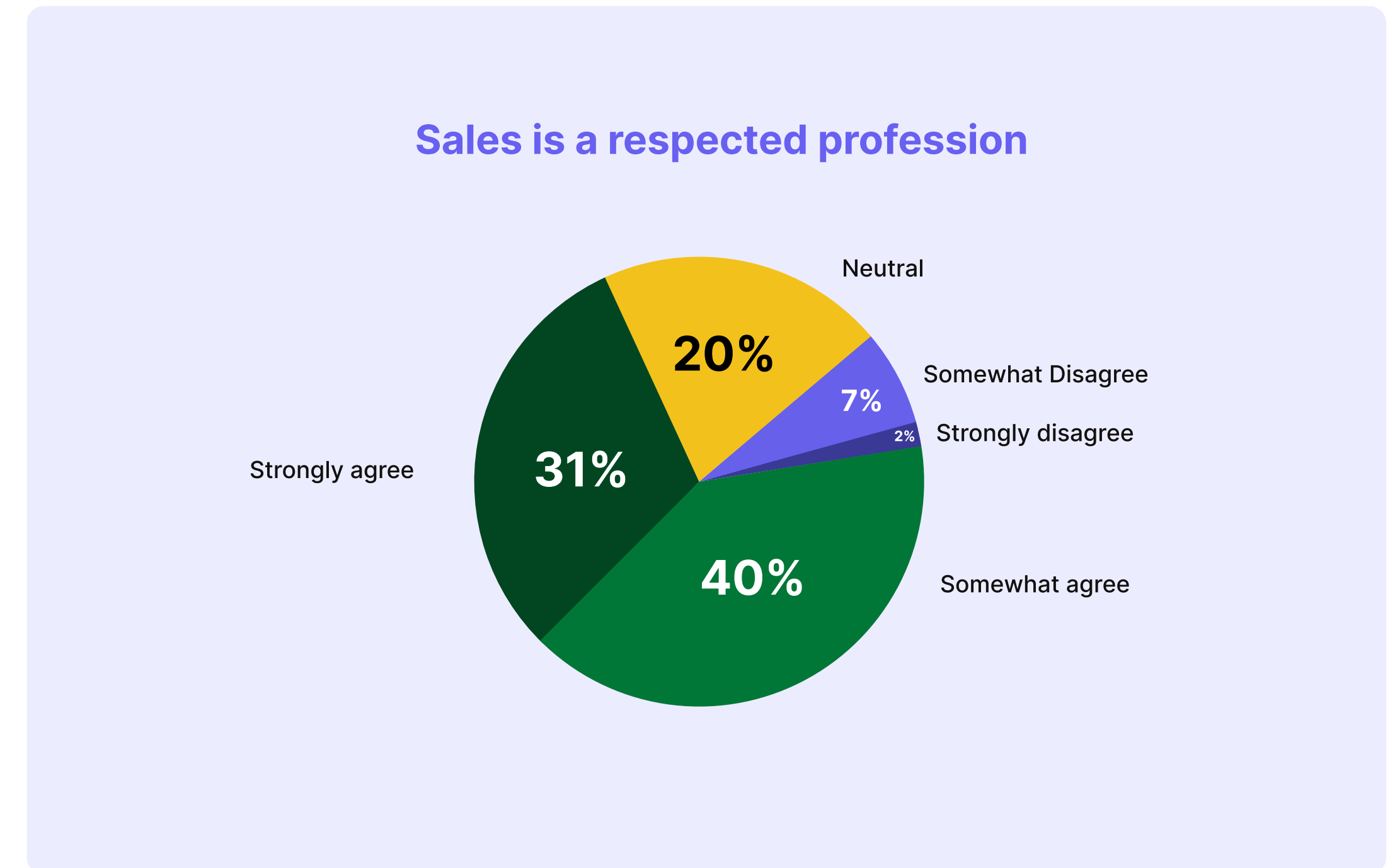
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01 Sales is respected, but misunderstood

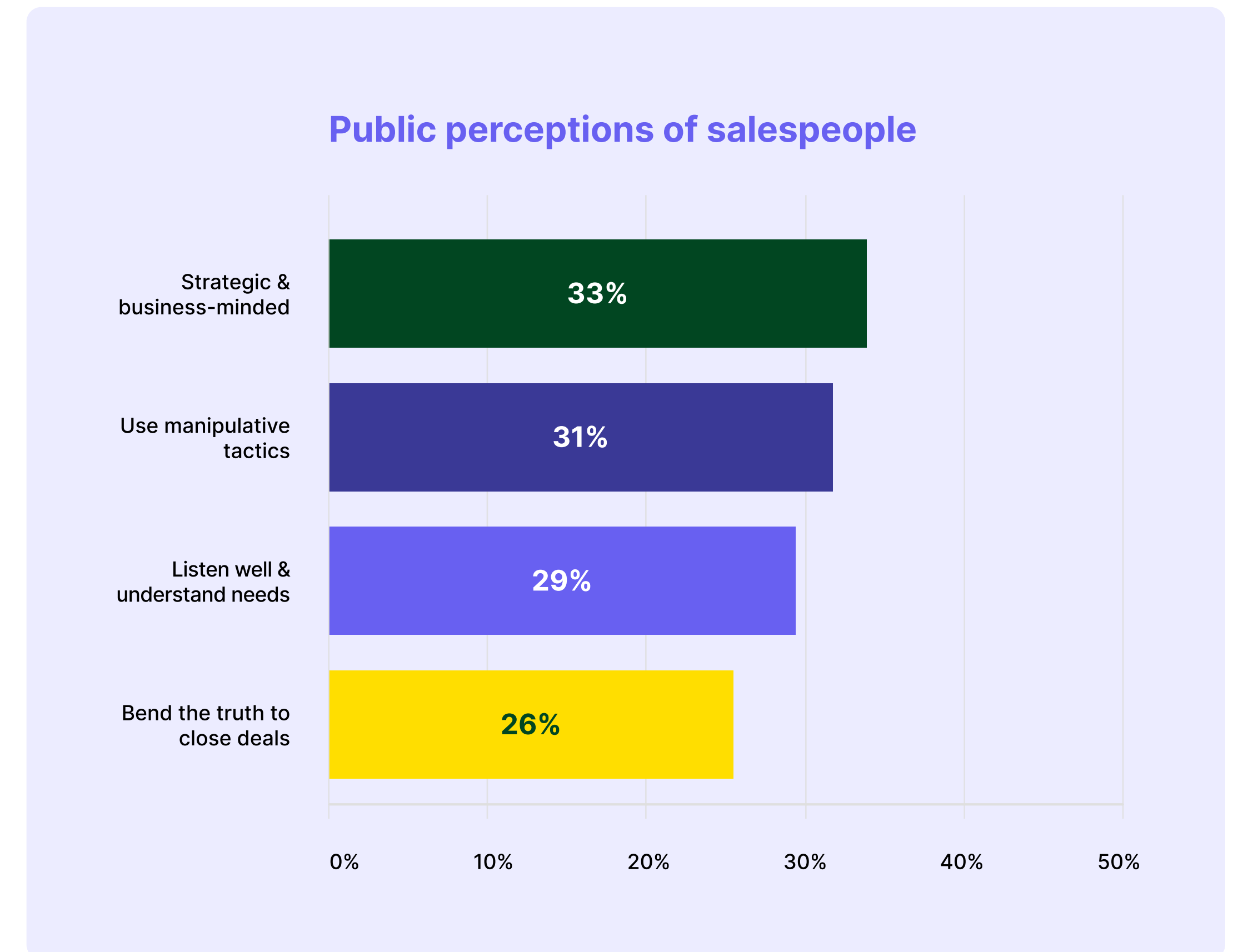
A profession that Americans admire in theory, but don't fully understand in practice

Most Americans hold sales as a career path in relatively high regard: **71%** agree that "sales is a respected profession," with **31%** strongly agreeing and **40%** somewhat agreeing. Yet this surface-level respect masks a deeper disconnect. Nearly half of the public (**53%**) admits they have only surface-level knowledge or less about what modern salespeople actually do day-to-day.



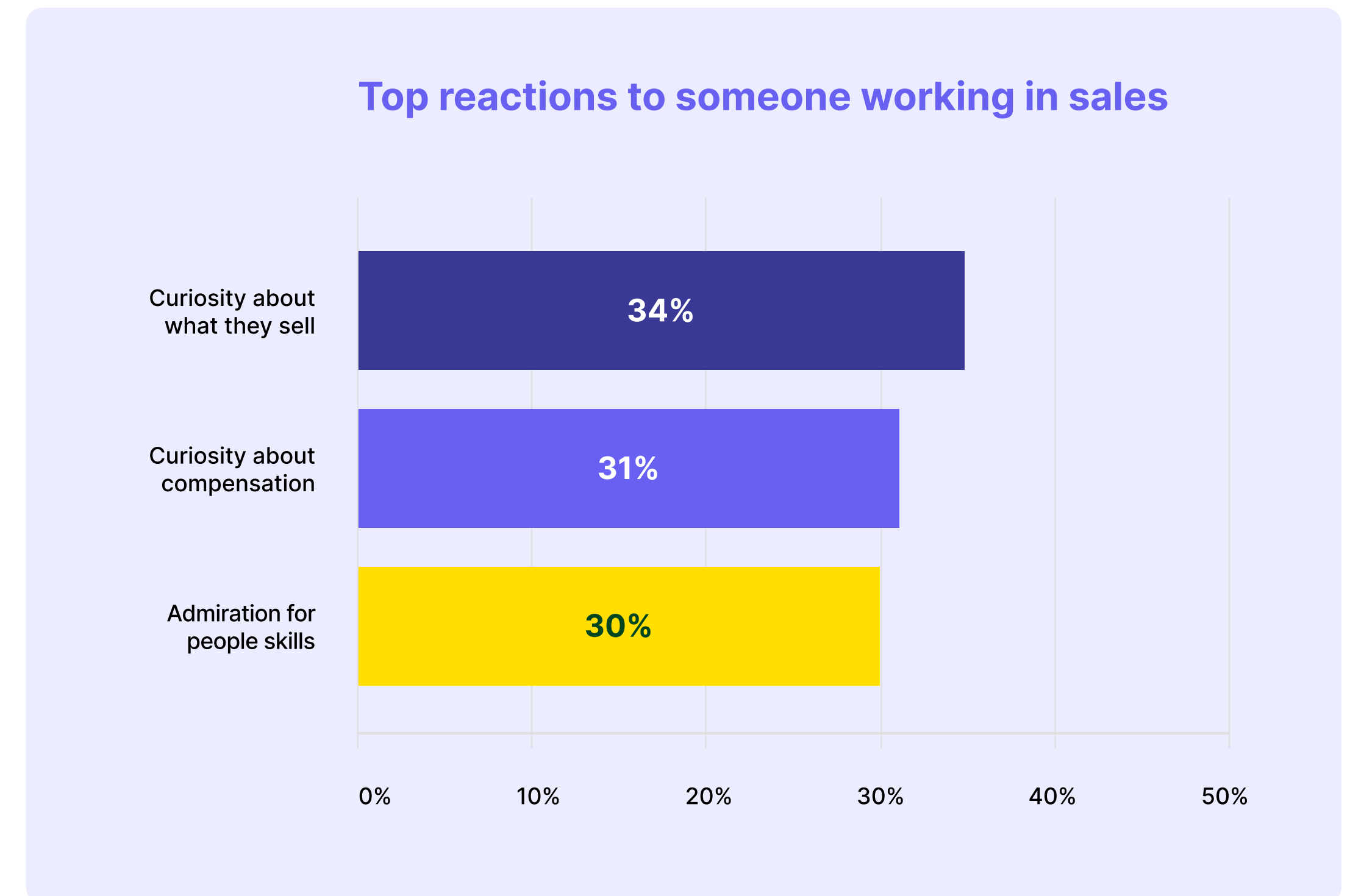
Recognition of sales expertise is rising, but distrust still shadows the profession

That knowledge gap has consequences, with nearly a third of Americans (**31%**) describing salespeople as using "manipulative tactics," and **26%** saying they believe salespeople are willing to "bend the truth to close deals." These unflattering characterizations persist even as a growing share of respondents recognize more positive traits. **33%** describe salespeople as "strategic and business-minded," and **29%** say they "listen well and understand needs."



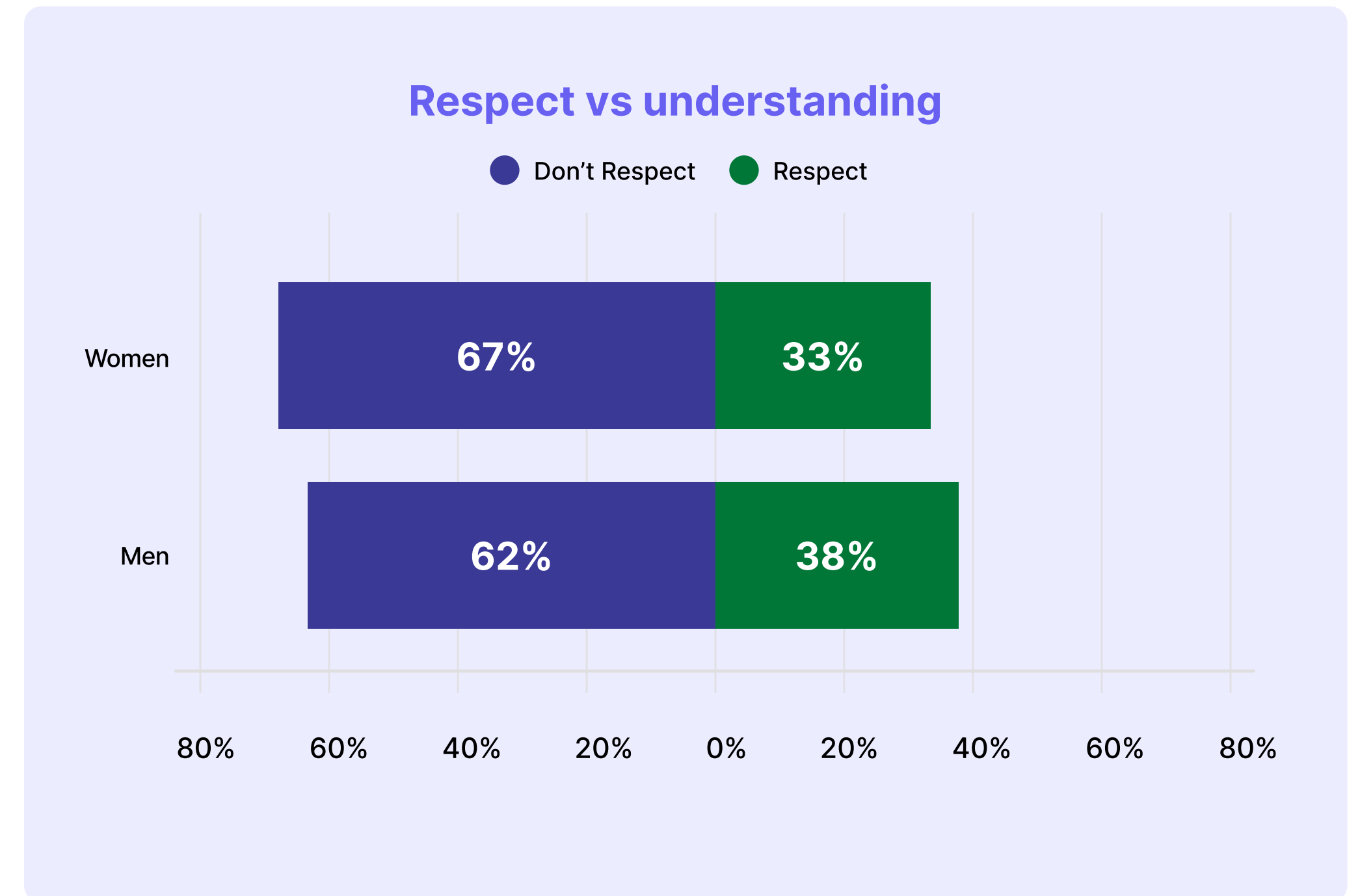
Sales careers draw interest, but the questions reveal how little people know about the job

When someone says they work in sales, the top reactions are curiosity about what they sell (**34%**), followed by curiosity about their compensation (**31%**) and admiration for their people skills (**30%**), highlighting a mix of genuine interest and lingering skepticism that reflects just how conflicted public opinion and actual understanding of the profession really are.



Respect for sales shifts across generations and demographics

Respect for the profession also varies across demographics. Younger respondents (18-24) are more likely to strongly agree that sales is a respected career, but this conviction diminishes with age. Responses also show that men (**38%**) are slightly more inclined than women (**33%**) to respect sales as a profession, and those with advanced degrees tend to express more measured respect for sales than those with less formal education.

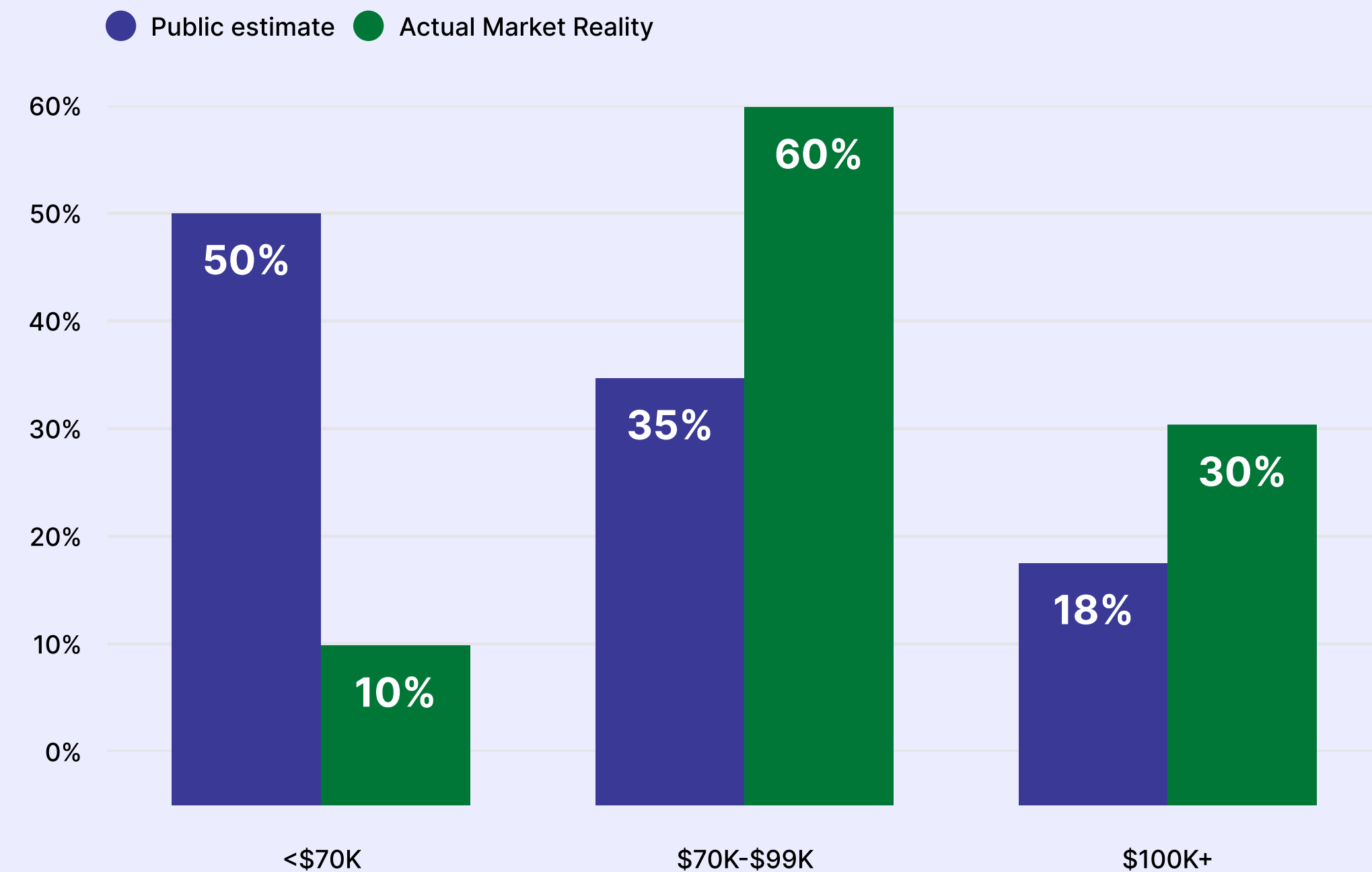


02 The paycheck perception gap

Skilled salespeople earn far more than most Americans think

One of the most striking findings in this data is how dramatically the public underestimates what salespeople earn. Half of Americans believe an experienced sales professional earns less than \$70,000 in base salary annually, which is well below actual market rates that typically land between \$85,000 and \$90,000 for mid-to-senior level roles. Meanwhile, only **16%** believe experienced salespeople earn \$100,000 or more in base salary, and just **5%** think top performers can earn \$150,000 or above.

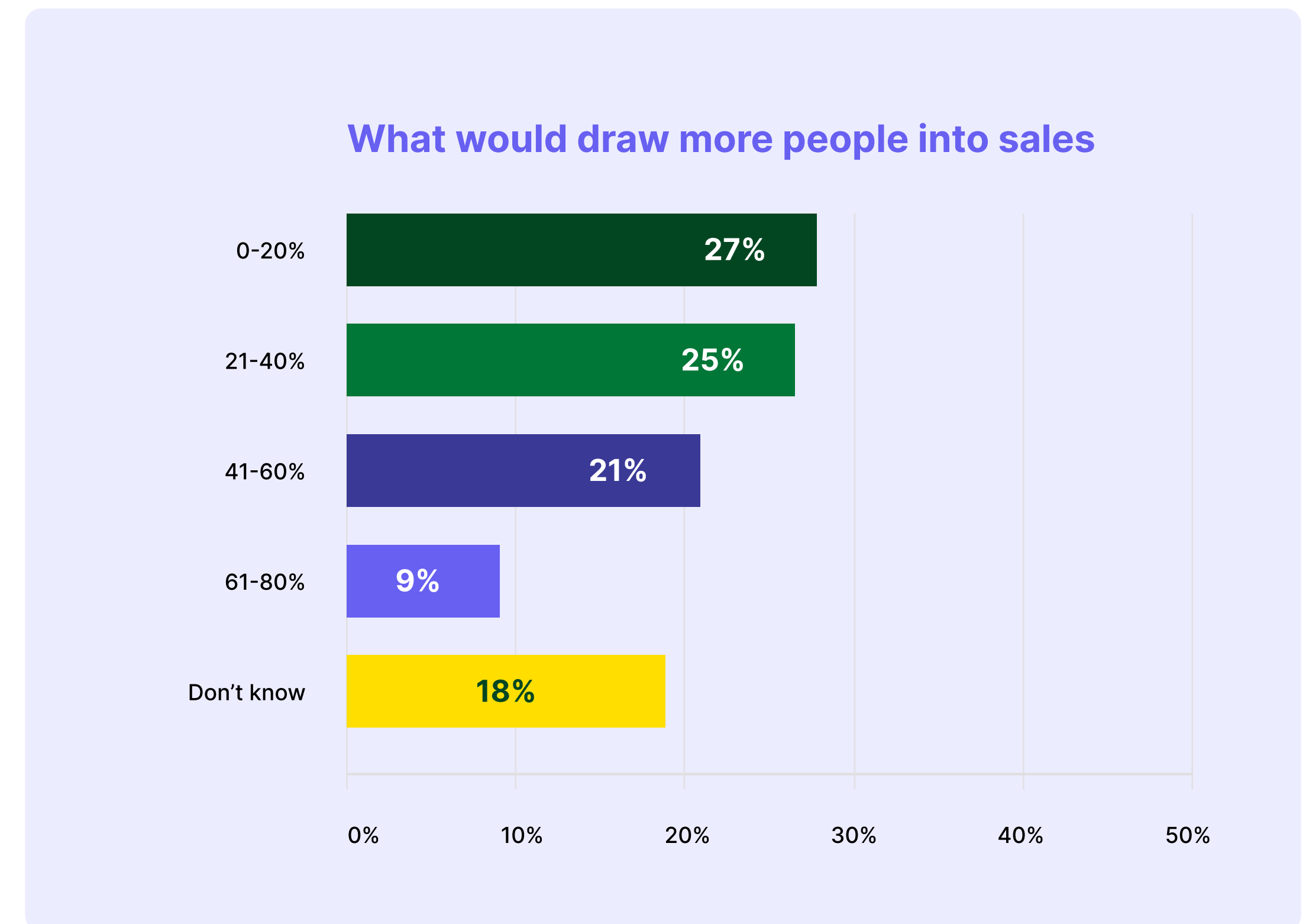
Perceived vs actual base salary for experience sales pros



Misunderstandings about commission reveal a broader pay perception gap

Confusion around commission only makes this problem worse. Slightly more than half of respondents (**52%**) think commission makes up 40% or less of a salesperson's income, and just **30%** estimate commissions account for 41-80% of total earnings.

These findings highlight broader uncertainty around how sales compensation actually works, with **18%** of respondents saying they have no idea what salespeople earn.

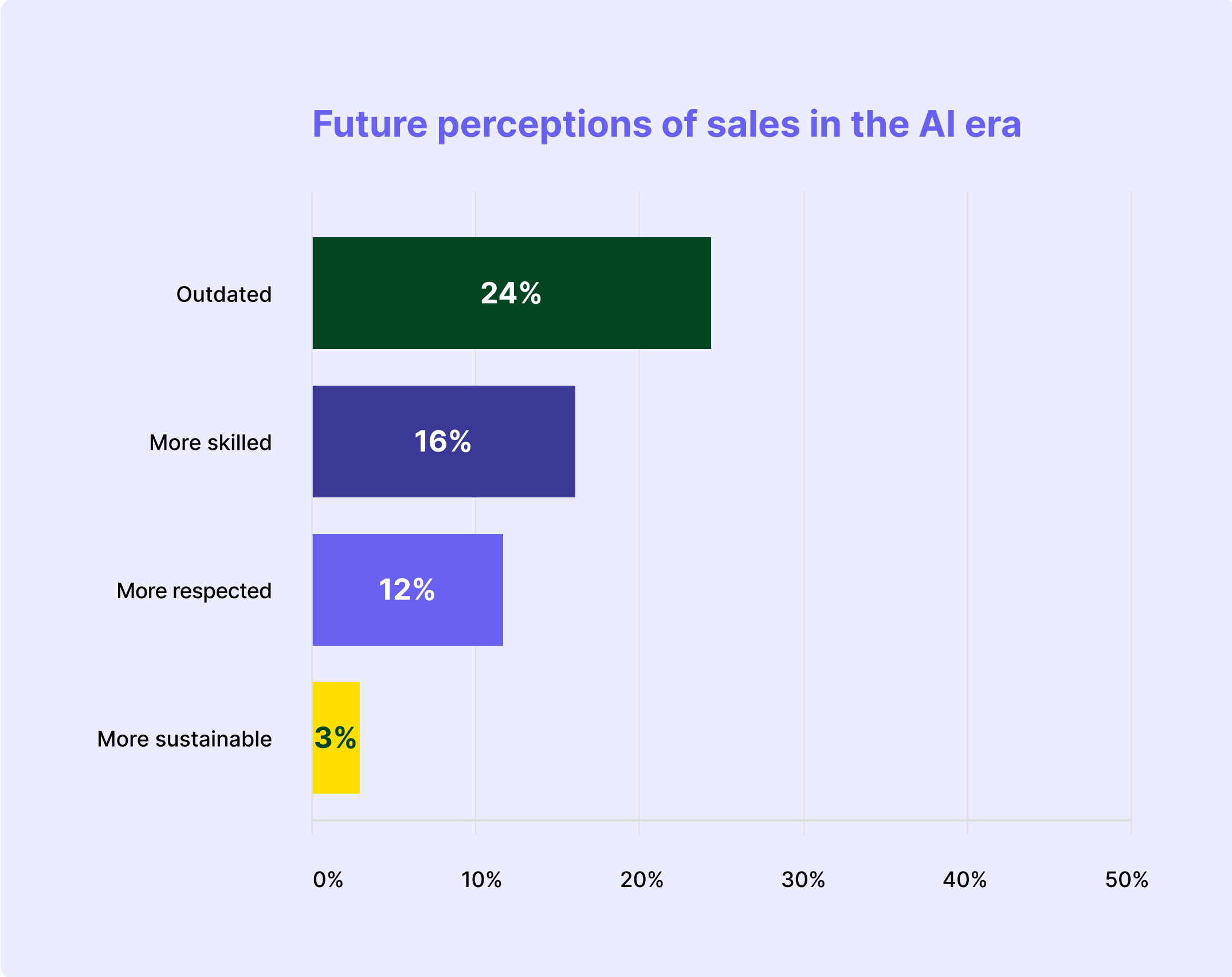


03 The public is divided on sales and AI

Many see disruption ahead, but a meaningful share sees opportunity in AI

Uncertainty about AI's impact on the workforce is playing out sharply in how Americans think about the future of sales careers. Nearly a quarter of respondents (**24%**) believe sales will be "seen as outdated as AI and automation takes over," making it the most common prediction about how AI will impact the profession's future.

At the same time, **16%** believe sales will gain recognition as a skilled, consultative profession, and **12%** think it will become more respected in the AI era and viewed as strategically important. Yet, only **3%** expect sales to be seen as a more sustainable career with better work-life balance.



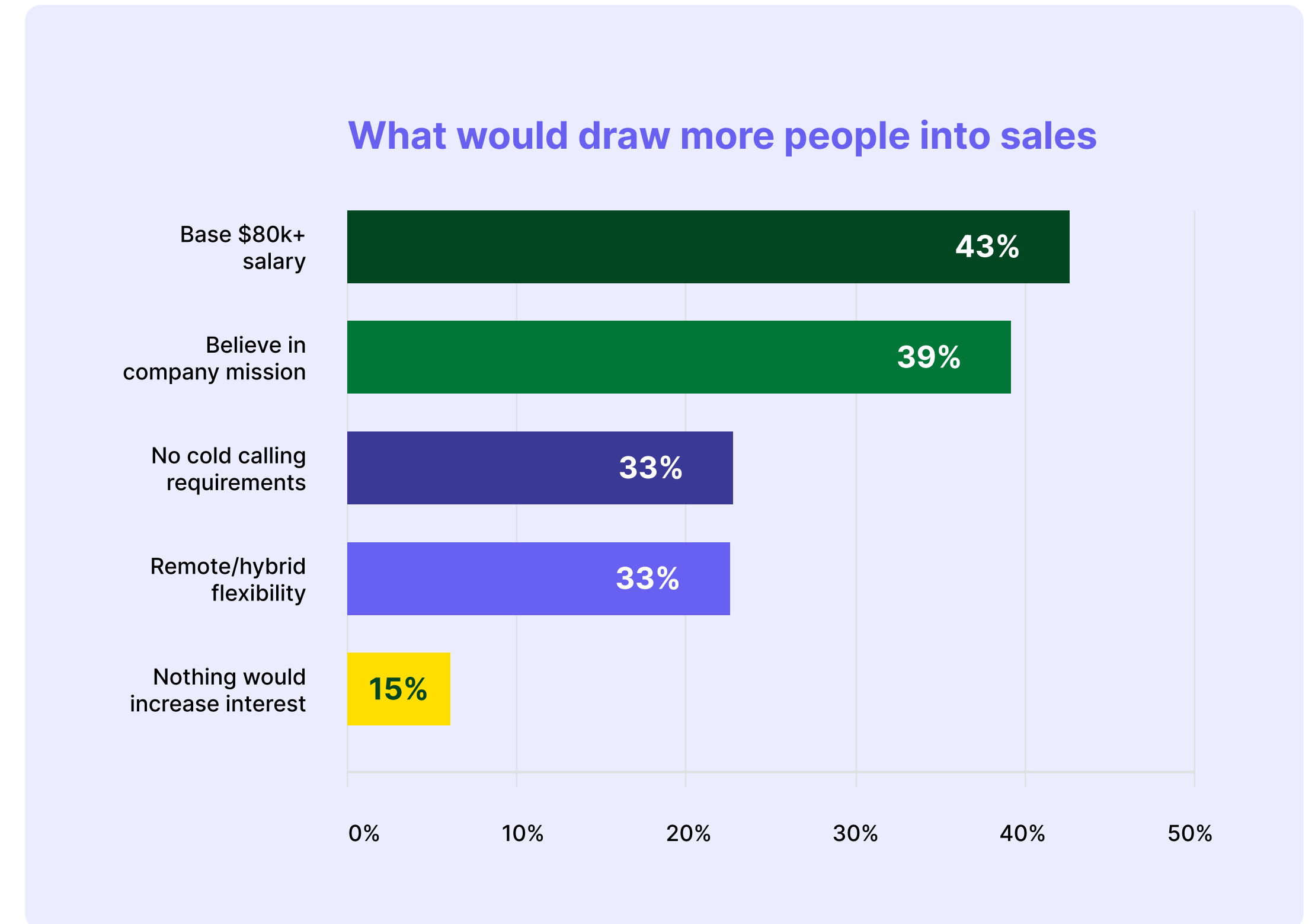
04 What would draw more people into sales

Financial stability, company values, and workplace flexibility are the deciding factors

For those considering a career in sales, the hesitations are real, but so are the incentives that might win them over. The single most influential factor is financial security: **43%** say a guaranteed base salary of over \$80,000, with less reliance on commission, would most influence their interest in a sales role.

Mission and culture matter to respondents, as well. **39%** say they'd be more open to sales if they believed in the company's product or mission, signaling that purpose-driven selling has genuine recruiting appeal. Structural changes also matter: **33%** say removing cold calling and outbound prospecting requirements would make sales more appealing, and an equal share (**33%**) want remote or hybrid flexibility before they'd seriously consider it.

Still, some minds may simply be made up, with **15%** of respondents claiming nothing would provoke their interest in sales, and they're simply not open to it.

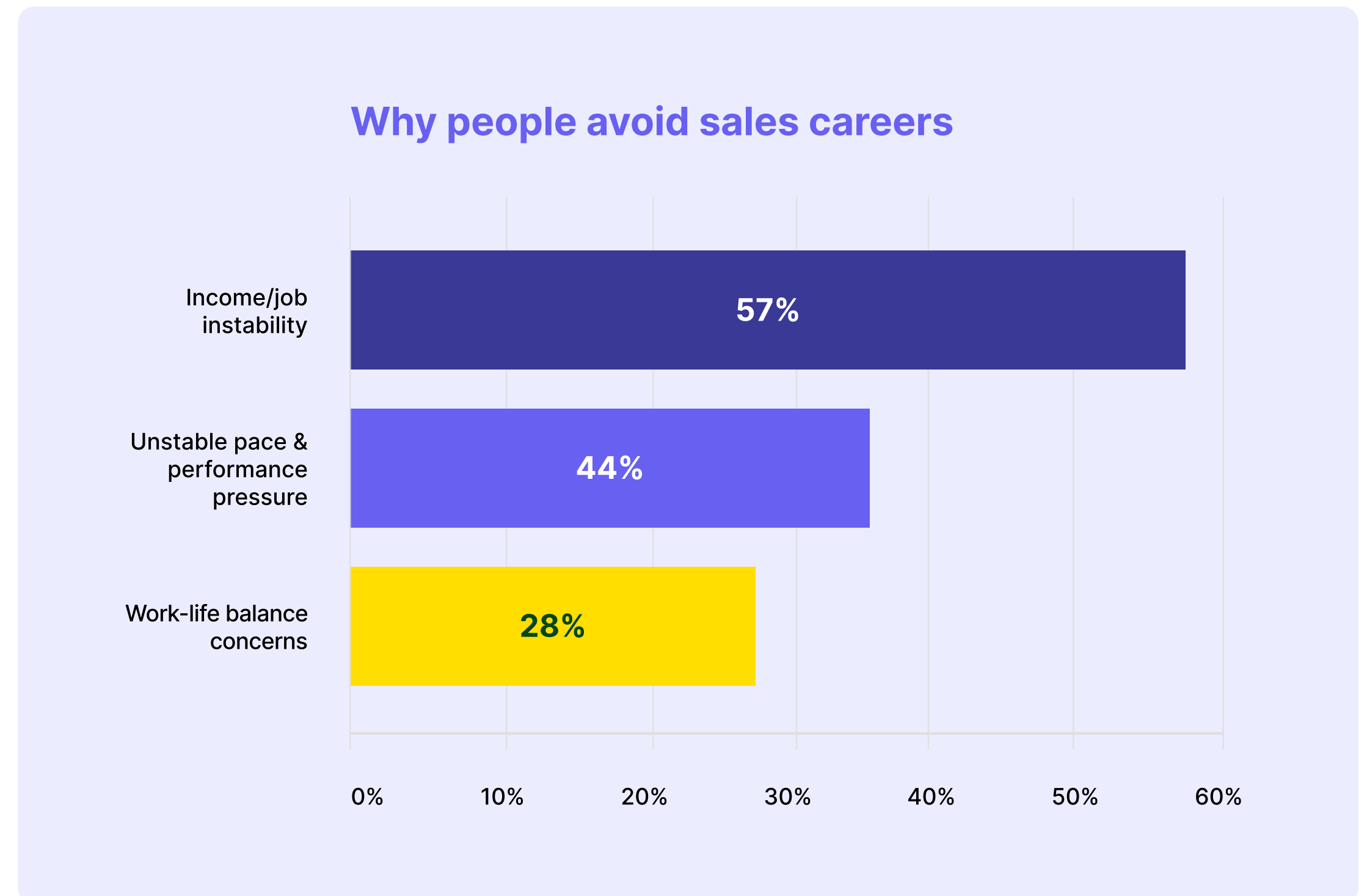


05 Income anxiety is the #1 deterrent

Fear of financial instability keeps talent out of sales

When Americans explain why people avoid sales careers, the answer is consistently money anxiety. More than half (**57%**) of respondents cite concerns about income consistency or job stability as a top reason people avoid sales careers, making it the most commonly selected deterrent by a wide margin.

The financial fear is made worse by other pressures: **44%** point to the unsustainable pace, pressure, and performance expectations associated with the role, and **28%** flag work-life balance concerns.



Perceptions of high-pressure culture continue to shape attitudes toward sales careers

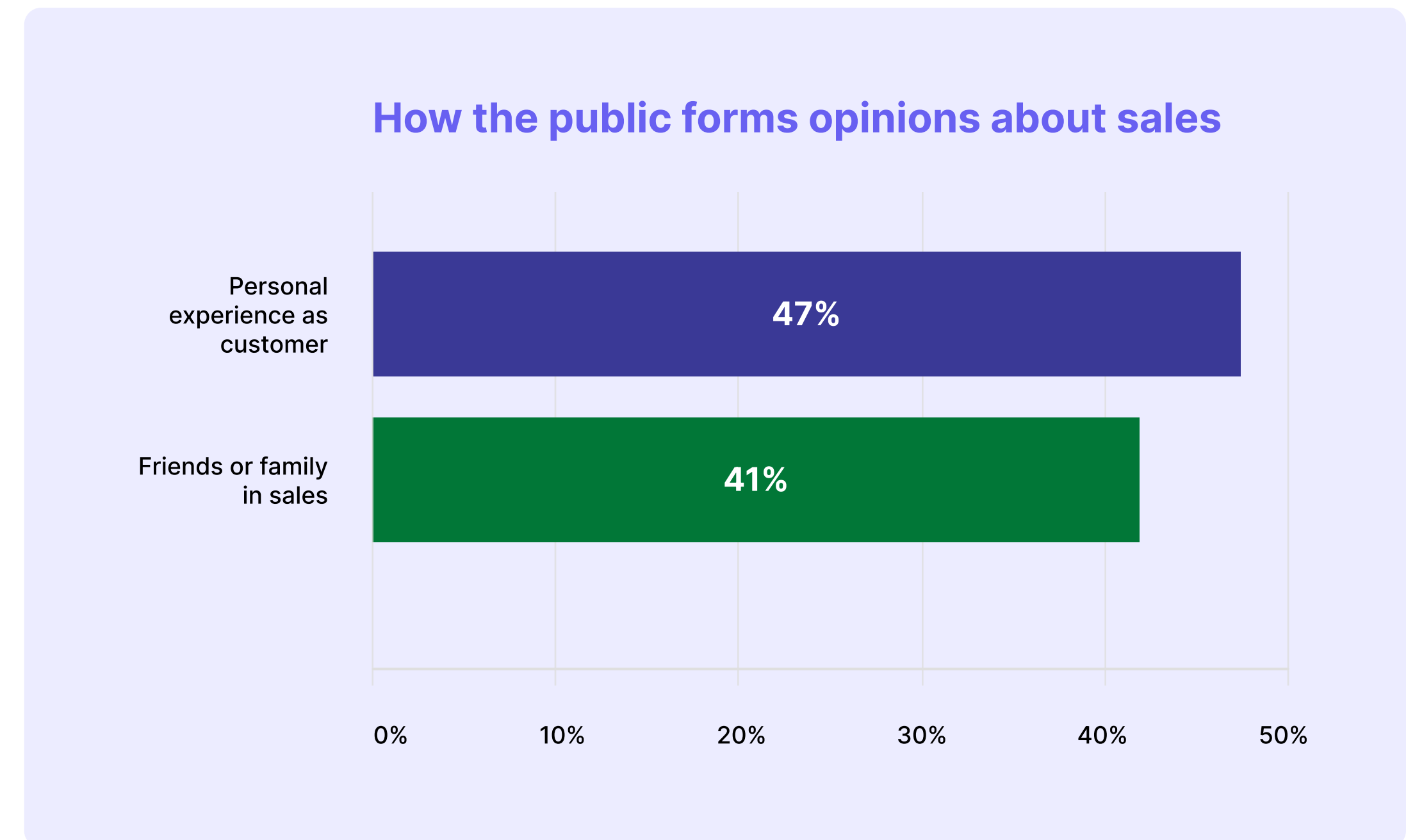
Culture also plays a role. **26%** cite negative perceptions of sales culture or leadership as a reason people steer clear. When asked what would be most stressful about a sales career day-to-day, respondents point to meeting quotas and performance pressure (**27%**), and the uncertainty of commission-based income (**18%**).



06 Personal experience shapes the sales image more than anything else

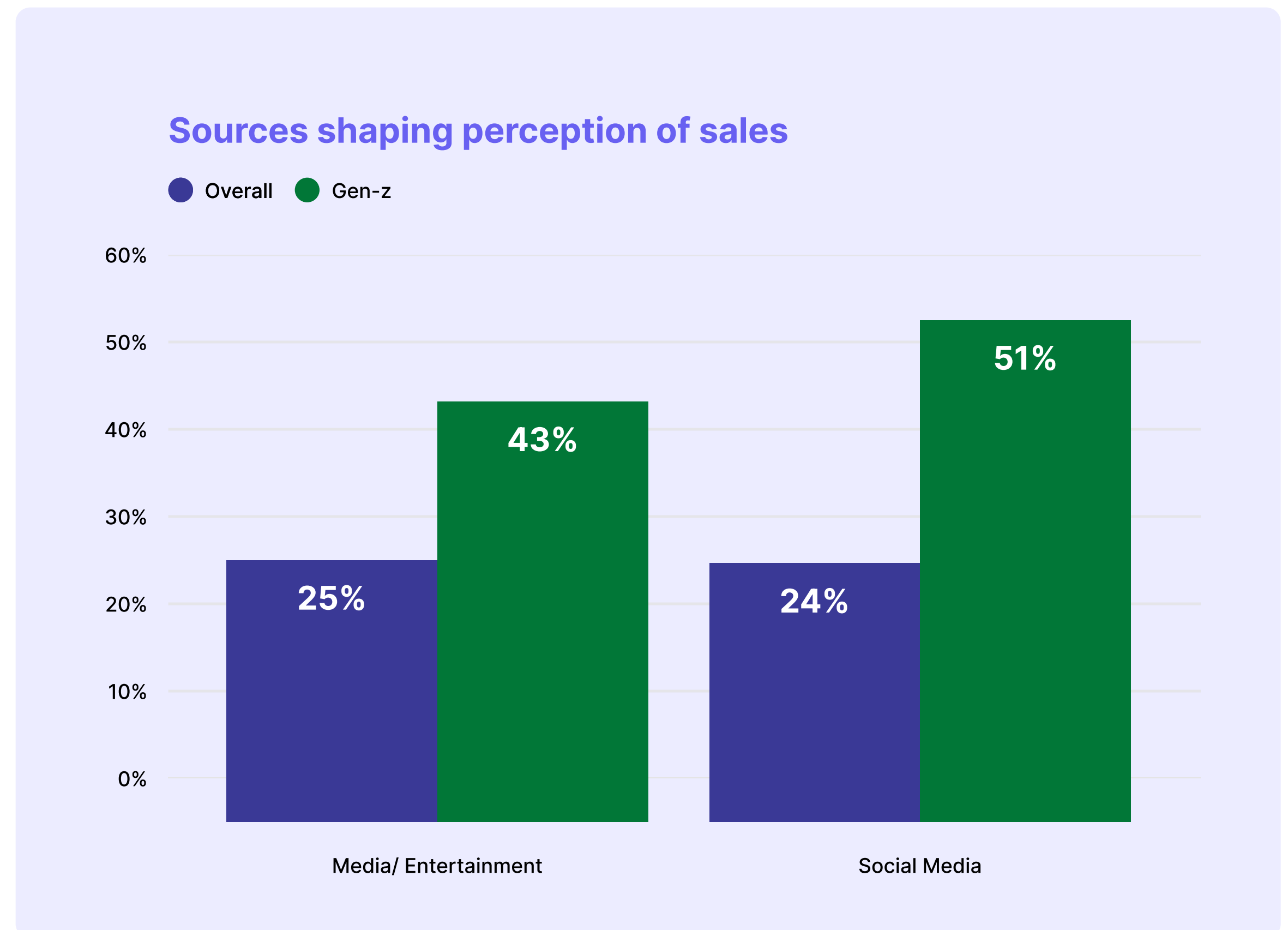
Real-world interactions form the public's perception

How does the public form its opinion of sales? Overwhelmingly, it's through direct experience. Nearly half of Americans (**47%**) say their impressions of sales come from personal experience as a customer, and **41%** cite friends or family members who work or have worked in the profession for insights into sales.



Pop culture and social media influence how Americans view sales careers

Media plays a secondary but notable role, with **25%** pointing to movies, TV, or entertainment as a source of their perceptions. This figure jumps to **43%** among Gen Z. Social media is also an increasingly influential channel, particularly for younger audiences: while **24%** of all respondents cite it as a source of their image around salespeople, that number climbs to **51%** among Gen Z. Formal education, by contrast, barely registers. Only **8%** of respondents cite college courses or career counseling as a meaningful source for their perception of sales careers.

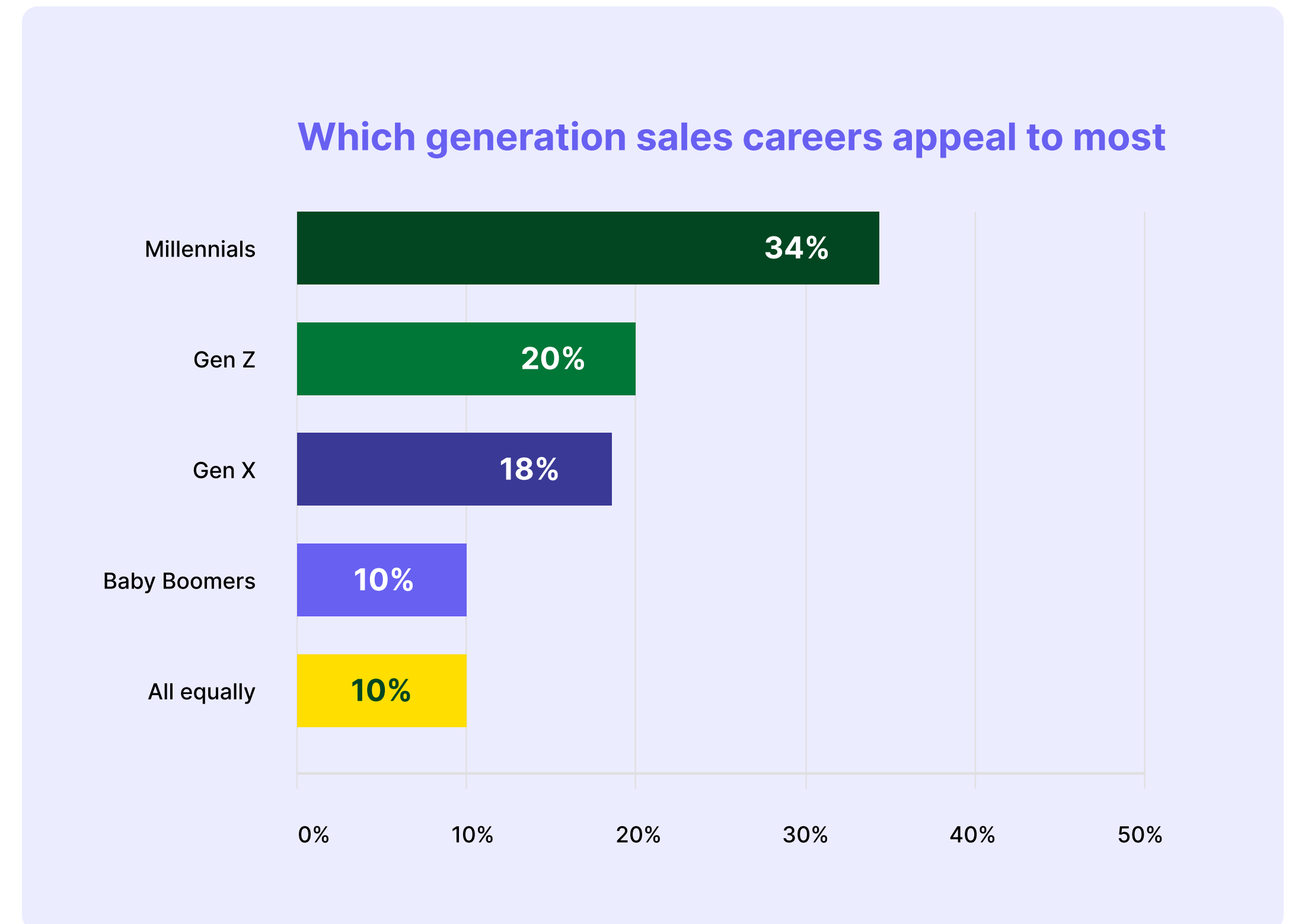


07 Millennials own the sales brand

Millennials shape today's sales identity, while Gen Z represents the next wave of talent

The general impression is that sales is a Millennial profession. **34%** of Americans say sales careers appeal most to Millennials, with Gen Z ranking second at **20%**, followed by Gen X at **18%** and Baby Boomers at **10%**. Another **10%** believe sales appeal equally across all generations.

The generational divide goes beyond perception of fit. Millennial and Gen Z respondents are more likely to view sales as dynamic and full of opportunity, while older respondents tend to focus on its challenges and stresses. Industry background also shapes openness to sales. Those in retail, health, and IT are most open to considering sales roles, while those in manufacturing, construction, and education are least inclined.

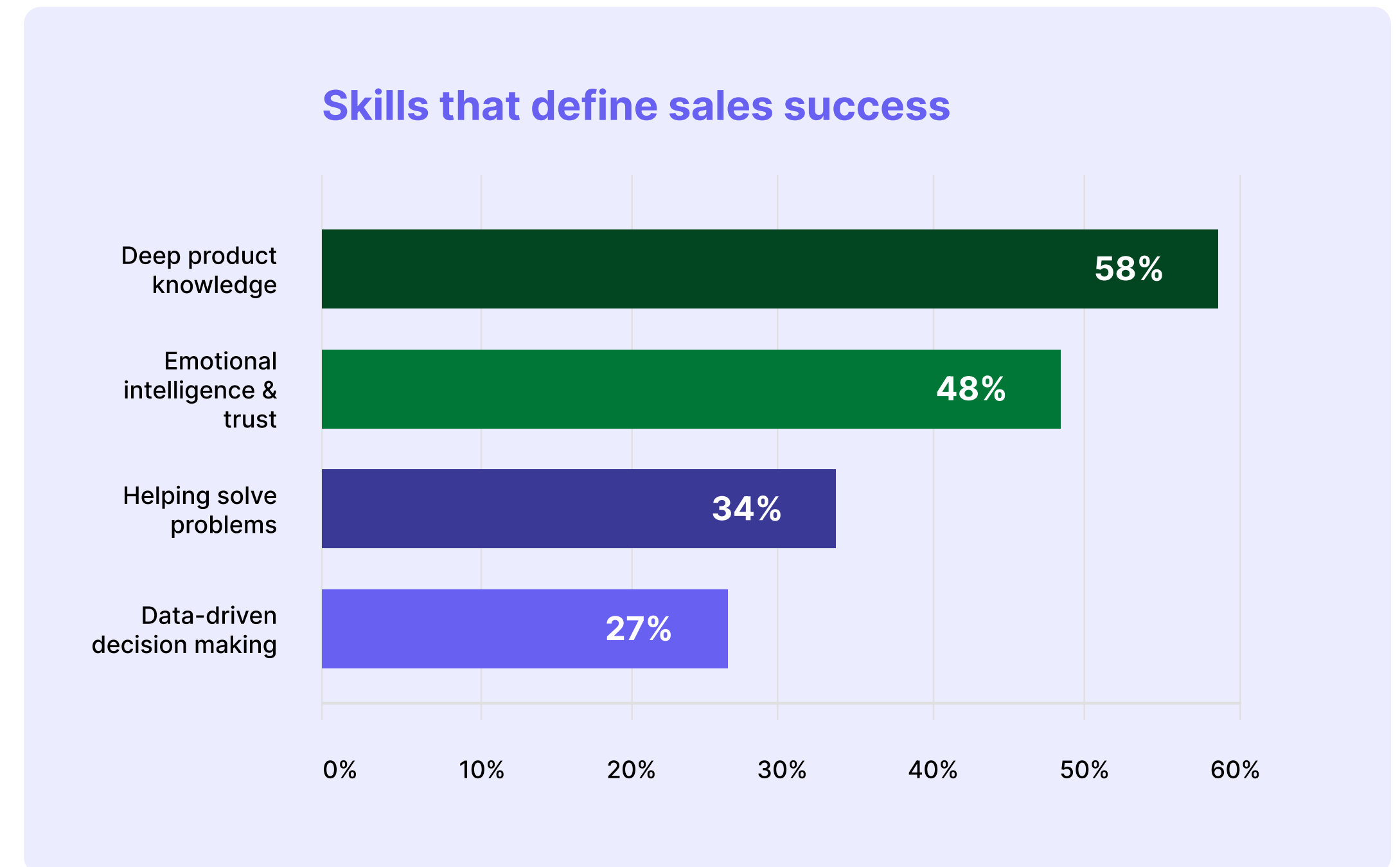


08 The skills people think sales actually requires

The public is moving toward a consultative view of selling

When Americans think about what makes a salesperson successful, their answers increasingly reflect the realities of modern, consultative selling. Product knowledge tops the list: **58%** say deep knowledge of products or services is among the most valuable skills for sales success. Emotional intelligence and building trust come in second at **48%**, a notably human-centered skill that also aligns with how modern, consultative selling actually works.

34% say helping solve problems, rather than just closing deals, ranks among the top skills. This is a sign that the public increasingly recognizes a more consultative model of selling. However, only **27%** value data-driven decision-making as a top skill, a significant gap given how analytics-driven modern sales organizations have become.



Key takeaways

01/02

01 Sales is respected, but misunderstood

Americans respect sales in theory but hold onto unflattering stereotypes in practice, which is a contradiction that reveals just how little the public truly understands the modern sales profession. Salespeople's reputations are being shaped by outdated assumptions, rather than by awareness of how consultative and strategic modern sales roles have become.

02 The paycheck perception gap

There's a massive compensation blind spot when it comes to sales. The public is dramatically underestimating what skilled salespeople can earn, and the confusion around commission structures is keeping high-potential talent on the sidelines. Without clearer visibility into how compensation actually works, sales will continue to lose top talent to industries that simply market their earning potential better.

03 The public is divided on sales and AI

Public opinion on AI's impact on sales is far from settled, and a meaningful portion of Americans see the profession becoming more strategic and valued as technology evolves. The tension between fear and optimism suggests AI is seen as either disrupting sales entirely or transforming it, with little middle ground.

04 What would draw more people into sales

Clear, tangible incentives, including stable compensation, mission alignment, and flexibility, are the most influential deciding factors for prospective sales candidates. The data reveals that interest in sales is largely determined by organizational setup, such as how roles are compensated, supported, and positioned within organizations.

Key takeaways

02/02

05 Income anxiety is the #1 deterrent

Fear of financial instability is the single biggest thing keeping potential talent out of sales, and it's made worse by burnout concerns, pressure culture, and a leadership perception problem that organizations have yet to meaningfully address. Without acknowledging both compensation and cultural concerns in tandem, recruiting resistance for the role is likely to persist across industries.

06 Personal experience shapes the sales image more than anything else

Real-world interactions are forming the public's image of sales, not advertising or recruitment campaigns. For organizations looking to shift perceptions of their sales teams, authentic human stories will carry far more weight than polished messaging. Every customer interaction doubles as reputation management for the profession as a whole.

07 Millennials own the sales brand

In the public's mind, sales is a Millennial profession, but Gen Z is close behind and represents the next frontier for talent recruitment. How Gen Z ultimately defines the role may determine whether the profession's reputation strengthens or stagnates in the next decade.

08 The skills people think sales actually requires

The public sees sales success as rooted in expertise and relationship-building, a picture that closely mirrors the consultative, customer-first model that modern sales organizations are actively building toward. However, the relatively low emphasis on data-driven decision-making reveals an incomplete understanding of how analytically sophisticated modern sales has become.

Methodology

This report is based on a national survey of **1,000 U.S.-based respondents**. Respondents answered quantitative questions about their perceptions of the sales profession, including attitudes toward compensation, career appeal, the impact of AI, and the skills they associate with sales success.

Data was collected in **February 2026** via a structured online questionnaire.