Virtual Selling Emerges as a Priority for CRM Sales Technology Programs

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Initiatives: CRM Sales Technology and 2 more

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a need for new B2B sales tools and sales motions, a trend that Gartner calls virtual selling. To increase sellers’ engagement with customers, application leaders must work with business stakeholders to implement telesales and digital sales rooms.

Overview

Impacts

- Due to the paradigm shift brought about by COVID-19, B2B sellers can no longer meet directly with customers, which impairs their ability to sell to multiple stakeholders.

- Because the pandemic has essentially made every seller a virtual seller, sales organizations are looking for sales technologies that increase seller efficiency and sales process discipline.

Recommendations

Application leaders supporting CRM sales technology programs should:

- Improve the quality of virtual buyer and seller interactions by implementing digital sales rooms (DSRs).

- Increase the sales execution efficiency of remote sellers by implementing telesales technology.

Strategic Planning Assumption(s)

By 2025, 50% of all enterprise B2B sales technology implementations will include digital sales rooms.

Analysis

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gartner has spoken with hundreds of sales organizations that are finding they need to update their sales technology programs with new virtual-selling tools. Finding that sellers no longer have the same level of in-person engagement with prospects, they are seeking tools that will help sellers build quality interactions with their customers’ decision makers. And knowing that all their sellers will have to sell from their desktops...
and telephones for the foreseeable future, they are looking for telesales tools that previously were used only by customer service or telesales agents.

Gartner terms this change to new tools for remote interactions “virtual selling.”

Virtual selling is the collection of processes and technologies by which human sellers engage with human buyers remotely using both synchronous and asynchronous communications. These communications replace the in-person, face-to-face sales conversations with decision makers that were the common selling paradigm prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Put differently, they are seeking tools that replicate the ability of face-to-face meetings to build engagement with multiple stakeholders. The two primary classes of technology for virtual selling — DSRs and virtual channels — are depicted in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Gartner’s Vision for Virtual Selling](image)

Virtual selling with telesales technology is not new; it has been used for decades by outbound sales agents. What is new is the fact that sales leaders now want this technology for their field-based sellers, the very people who previously relied on face-to-face meetings. DSR technology is not new either, having been on the market for the past four years. But it is not yet widely adopted.

Application leaders supporting sales organizations should adopt both forms of technology to update their sales technology programs, following the recommendations in this document, which
Impacts and Recommendations

Remote Sellers Need Tools That Improve Engagement With Buying Teams

Organizations that sell physical products are particularly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. They cannot bring customers to their factories to see prototypes, nor can they bring scaled demonstrations to clients’ facilities.

Organizations that rely on relationship selling, such as those in the life sciences sector, are similarly affected. They are not allowed on-site, and thus lose the chance to hold educational conversations with practitioners.

Some organizations are ready to quickly transform their selling model from in-person selling to virtual selling. For example, one Gartner client who employed hundreds of field sellers, said:

“We need tech-enabled selling ... to perform customer/dealer meetings [in a virtual setting that previously were] physically conducted by our sales teams in different organizations.”

— Gartner client (June 2020)
Achieving this transformation, however, is difficult if organizations stay with their legacy sales technology and sales processes. A review of the technologies profiled in “Hype Cycle CRM Sales Technology, 2019” would reveal that every technology pertains to tools that sellers need to use to manage asynchronous, analog interactions with customers.

Sellers need a new channel for managing sustained sales engagements with multiple stakeholders, one that allows for synchronous engagement: the real-time, bidirectional exchange of information in a virtual environment. They also need an asynchronous tool for efficiently distributing information to buyers outside real-time meetings. And they also need a means of measuring whether they are having a positive impact on their customers.

Videoconferencing and virtual meeting technologies only partially address these needs. They support synchronous selling, via virtual meetings, but they lack an asynchronous tool for sending information, such as sales content, to customers. They also lack engagement analytics to measure whether customers are invested in a virtual meeting or reading the sales content that has been shared with them.

The answer is an emerging form of technology that Gartner terms the digital sales room (DSR). DSRs are an evolution of the microcontent pages and customer portals already used by sellers in their sales enablement tools to distribute sales content to prospects.

DSRs are composed of the following:

**Microsites for Account Team Selling**

Microsites are secure webpages that are generated by sellers to manage the distribution of sales content to customers. They are most often used for asynchronous sales content distribution to multiple customer stakeholders, such as when sending RFP responses. Because of their virtual meeting capabilities, microsites allow for a high degree of collaborative, synchronous communication. They can also be configured to allow customers to upload their own documents into a content repository within the microsite.

Microsites have several advantages over portals and email for content distribution:

- Microsites are secure, password-controlled webpages, which means sales content distribution is limited to authorized users.
- Sellers can generate microsites themselves, which means there is no reliance on using their company’s portal system for customer engagement.
- Sellers can create a separate microsite for every customer they assist.
- Sellers can add members of a customer’s buying team to the DSR, or sellers can allow decision makers to add other colleagues.
Virtual meetings managed via a DSR represent one of the most compelling reasons to implement DSR technology, because it approximates the synchronous communication style to multiple decision makers that is used in face-to-face meetings. In this context, sales meetings are conducted using virtual meeting software, but they are anchored to a microsite that was created for the meetings’ decision makers.

The seller initiates a virtual meeting from a DSR in one of two ways:

- Via a plug-in that integrates with the seller’s own virtual meeting software, such as Cisco Webex, GoToMeeting or Zoom.
- Via native virtual meeting software embedded in the sales enablement application.

Virtual meetings conducted within native virtual meeting software have the following advantages:

- The system captures the name and email address of every attendee, which is helpful for producing sales engagement metrics.
- The content displayed during the meeting can immediately be posted to the DSR, which saves sellers time with content distribution.

Longer term, virtual sales meetings will increasingly gain more advanced collaboration features, such as virtual whiteboards, collaborative document markup and real-time surveys.

See the Notes section for the types of virtual meeting capability offered by a sample of sales enablement vendors.

Dynamic Content Creation

Sales enablement tools, as detailed in “Market Guide for Sales Engagement Platforms,” have mature capabilities for sales content creation and distribution. The most modern providers have functionality that enables sellers to assemble and update sales presentations while they are managing a sales meeting within a DSR.

Engagement Analytics
All sales leaders want to know if their customers are committed to the deals that sellers present to them. However experienced they are, sellers should not be the sole judge of customers’ intent and commitment. Sales enablement tools have long had capabilities that support sales content engagement metrics. These tools measure how many pieces of sales content have been shared with customers, how many have accessed the content, how frequently they have accessed it, and how long they have spent with it. DSR tools use the same metrics when the sales content is distributed via DSRs, but these tools also have a new, emerging form of engagement analytics: "digital body language" at both the decision maker level and the account level. DSR tools with engagement analytics maintain a continually calibrated set of benchmarking key performance indicators (KPIs) that can depict, in a single KPI, how engaged a decision maker is, or the customer's team of decision makers are, in comparison with the historical benchmarks of engagement. This is particularly relevant for complex B2B sales deals that involve selling to multiple stakeholders, and it represents a leading KPI measurement that sellers do not have in traditional sales content tools.

Gartner expects that, in time, the concept of digital body language will expand into real-time engagement metrics, using body language measurements assessed during virtual meetings. The technology is already provided by some pure-play meeting solution vendors, as detailed in “Critical Capabilities for Meeting Solutions.”

Augmented Reality/Virtual Reality and Visual Configuration Tools

Augmented reality/virtual reality (AR/VR) technology is an evolution of the sales content distribution capabilities detailed in "Market Guide for Sales Engagement Platforms," and represents a promising application of technology that has been used only for B2B field service and B2C sales use cases to date. It has considerable relevance to selling physical or heavy equipment. The same capabilities used by field service representatives to remotely diagnose issues can be employed to help prospects digitally "experience" a provider's services. An example can be seen in surgical equipment sales, where VR solutions can help a surgeon “use” the equipment virtually before buying.

Visual configuration tools are well-established. They enable sellers to see a 2D or 3D visual representation of the products they want to order, with the options and features they have selected. Gartner believes that sellers will increasingly put these tools in the hands of customers, and thus enable them to design their own products. Sellers may help buyers with the configuration process, via a virtual meeting, but this will frequently be a self-directed process.

Future Direction of Digital Sales Rooms

DSR technology holds the promise of being a manifestation of the composable application model presented in Gartner's keynote research (see “Future of Applications: Delivering the Composable Enterprise”). In this research, Gartner establishes how end users can build their own application experiences using componentized applications selected from a menu of the applications they are permitted to use.
Even though this concept is not yet offered by sales technology vendors, Gartner believes that the DSR fits into it and will be used in this manner in the near future, for two reasons.

First, many providers of DSRs have built their applications on low-code platforms, which means they already allow for integration with application components.

Second, it is a very attractive option for optimizing customer engagement. Because DSRs for selling interactions are provisioned and controlled by end users, not IT administrators, sellers can decide what functional components are shared in the DSRs. Sellers can choose to provision a DSR that shares only product marketing messages at the start of a sales cycle. If a deal matures, they can add another component for self-service quote generation. And if the deal reaches a negotiation stage, the seller can add a different component to manage contract red-lining.

**Recommendations**

- Replace the type of extended, one-to-many communication afforded by traditional face-to-face B2B sales meetings with DSRs.
- Improve the efficiency of sellers’ sales content distribution to stakeholders by using DSRs in lieu of email or portals.
- Improve measurement of customers’ commitment to sales deals by using the engagement analytics provided by DSRs.
- Prioritize B2B digital commerce and virtual sales rooms over the other technologies, because they offer the fastest time to value.
- Do not underestimate the change management implications of using DSRs. There are no established best practices for using this technology.

**Remote Sellers Need Tools That Improve Sales Process Discipline**

Gartner asked several dozen companies in 2Q20 about technologies that will immediately improve how their field-based sellers connect with accounts with which they do not have deep relationships. They, in turn, inquired about tools that would improve the consistency and quality of those sellers’ daily sales motions, and specifically tools for managing both synchronous and asynchronous communications between a seller and a single decision maker, via telephone and email.

Fortunately, the virtual technology for outbound, multichannel communications via telecommunications and email is well established. Commonly used for massive outbound communications to consumers at scale, it can be repurposed for field-based sellers who will be inside sales representatives for the foreseeable future.

Gartner separates virtual channels into two groups:

- Sales acceleration technology
Sales Acceleration Technology

Sales acceleration tools provide functions that enable virtual sellers to maintain a consistent level of asynchronous outbound engagement with customers, removing the guesswork that sellers often encounter. They help with questions of whom to contact next, what channel to use and what message to deliver.

Sales acceleration tools are most commonly used by inside sales representatives in the high-tech sector, for lead qualification processes at scale. They provide a single interface for managing all outbound communications with prospects via telephone, email, social or SMS channels. But they can also be deployed to field sellers who are expected to maintain a consistent level of daily sales execution discipline.

They feature capabilities and functions that fit in between traditional telephony systems, marketing automation tools and sales force automation (SFA) systems. As such, they bundle the following core technologies into a single application:

- Computer-telephony integration (CTI) and dialer integration
- Dynamic call-down lists with artificial intelligence (AI)-based best time-to-call or best-time-to-email recommendations
- Guided selling playbooks and customer-specific communication cadences
- Prescriptive next best actions
- Marketing campaign cadences
- Integration with customers’ social media profiles
- Engagement monitoring for viewing when customers open emails or visit the seller’s website

Gartner gives this technology high marks because it is one of the few that delivers both efficiency and effectiveness improvements in equal measure. For examples of sales acceleration providers, see the profile of sales acceleration in “Hype Cycle for CRM Sales Technology, 2019.”

Telephony and Telesales Technology

Sales acceleration tools are not the only means of improving the sales process discipline of virtual sellers. Gartner has recently spoken with some clients who want to leverage existing, legacy telephony solutions for their sellers. The top capabilities of telephony and telesales technology for sellers include:
Sales Consoles

Sales consoles are also known as “cockpits” because they display a combination of functional components and dashboard components on a single screen. This user experience design is an improvement on the traditional application design paradigm that is common to field sellers’ SFA systems. And it saves users from having to switch their screen view to a different application each time they need to complete a different functional process.

Examples of functional components include widgets for daily call-down lists, quick note capture, news feeds that display all-real-time feeds of which emails customers have opened recently, and screen-pops that display the last three interactions with a customer.

Examples of dashboard components commonly displayed in a sales console include sellers’ month-to-date pipeline level, relative to their quota attainment level and sellers’ week-to-date sales activity metrics.

CTI Integration and Dialers

CTI integration and dialers are technologies common to telesales and inside sales processes. Both are commonly provided by unified communication (UC) solutions (see “Magic Quadrant for Unified Communications as a Service, Worldwide”). For a list of vendors that have built functionality specific for sales use cases, see the Notes section.

Given the costs associated with purchasing and implementing tools of these types, the technology is most relevant to field-based sellers who conduct dozens of outbound telephone calls per day, as would be common for short-cycle B2B sales or B2C financial services sales.

Call Recording and Conversational Analytics for Sales

Human-to-human interactions are stubbornly analog. And when sellers and buyers talk, any summary of that meeting will necessarily lose much of the meeting’s context and detail. When that context and detail are lost, sellers lose a valuable source of signals that helps them assess the relative health of the deals they are pursuing.

Conversational engagement analytics for sales’ tools provide automated functions for monitoring, recording and analyzing the quality of telephone conversations with customers. They use proprietary AI algorithms to analyze audio conversations for the purpose of delivering relevant contextual insights into the quality of interactions with customers.

Most notably, these tools have transcription functions that convert the audio track into text. Once converted, AI algorithms analyze the text for semantic intelligence and highlight key discussion topics or customer sentiment analysis.

For more information on this technology, or to view a list of conversational analytics providers, see “Hype Cycle for CRM Sales Technology, 2019.”
Recommendations

- Improve sellers’ efficiency at managing their daily outbound sales calls by implementing sales console and sales acceleration tools.

- Increase sales process discipline by deploying the sales cadence functions inherent to sales acceleration tools.

- Ensure that the content and context of every sales conversation is digitized by implementing conversational analytics tools.

- Improve sales managers’ coaching routines by using the call-coaching functions in conversational analytic tools.

Note 1. Examples of Vendors


2. Examples of sales enablement vendors offering DSRs for account-based selling: Beehivr, DocSend, Journey Sales.

3. Examples of sales enablement vendors offering native virtual meeting functionality: Beehivr, ClearSlide, Pitcher, Showpad.

4. Examples of sales enablement vendors with connectors to virtual meeting software providers: Highspot and Showpad.

5. Examples of vendors offering CTI and dialer capabilities for B2B selling: Dialpad, DialSource, ringDNA, XANT.

Recommended by the Authors

Use AI to Improve B2B Sales Revenue and Optimize Costs
Leverage B2B Digital Commerce for Cost Optimization, Improved CX and Revenue Growth
Improve Revenue Forecast Accuracy With Emerging Forms of Sales Forecasting Technology
A Strategic Approach to Reducing Communications and Collaboration Spending in Light of COVID-19
Hype Cycle for CRM Sales Technology, 2019
The Applications of the Future Will Be Founded on Democratized, Self-Service Integration
Market Guide for Sales Engagement Platforms
Magic Quadrant for Unified Communications as a Service, Worldwide
Recommended For You

Coaching Evaluation Template
Developing Direct Reports
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