The Future of Sales in 2025: A Gartner Trend Insight Report

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Initiatives: Sales Strategy and Operations and 2 more

Over the next five years, an exponential rise in digital interactions between buyers and suppliers will break traditional sales models. This special report prepares organizations to build adaptive sales models that engage the “everywhere customer,” support hyperautomation and increase sellers’ digital skills.

Overview

Opportunities and Challenges

- Today’s level of interconnectedness and interdependency is unprecedented, creating unique, unpredictable B2B buying behavior — amplified by COVID-19 market volatility.

- Exponential digital interactions require people, process and technology to continually adapt.

- Most B2B organizations lack the hyperautomation, artificial intelligence (AI) and digital scalability to deliver the multiexperience strategy that buyers seek.

What You Need to Know

- As customers migrate from in-person channels to digital alternatives, chief sales officers (CSOs) must engage in a fundamental mindset shift from leaders of sellers to leaders of selling; sales leaders belong where selling happens.

- By 2025, sales organizations will require sellers to develop new digital skills, using digital channels for remote selling or co-selling to customers.

- Sellers’ decision making will be based on data, analytics and AI, not on intuition and experience.

Strategic Planning Assumption(s)

By 2025, 50% of CSOs will shift their focus from being leaders of sellers to being leaders of selling.

By 2025, 80% of B2B sales interactions between suppliers and buyers will occur in digital channels.

By 2025, 60% of B2B sales organizations will transition from experience- and intuition-based selling to data-driven selling, merging their sales process, sales applications, sales data and sales
analytics into a single operational practice.

**Insight From the Experts**

**Transformational Strategies for the 2025 Digital Sales Organization**

![Tad Travis, VP Analyst](image)

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We started this work well before the COVID-19 pandemic, when Gartner saw that the strategies, processes and techniques of selling were already changing.

Some trends were well-known, such as buyers’ independent learning and sellers’ limited access during the buying process. Others were less explored, particularly the rise of B2B digital commerce and the emergence of data-driven sales processes.

But the pandemic has accelerated this transformation. Sales organizations have to accept that buying preferences have permanently changed and, as a result, so too will the role of sellers.

To help you over the next year, Gartner will present dozens of research articles that:

- Define how selling and buying processes are changing.
- Offer best practices for transforming how sellers add value to sales cycles.
- Examine new technologies and analytical practices that help buyers buy from you.

The first phase of the special report is detailed below. Gartner will release Phase 2 of this report in February 2021.

Sincerely,

Tad Travis, Cristina Gomez and Michele Buckley

**Executive Overview**

**Definition**
The Future of Sales is the permanent transformation of organizations’ sales strategies, processes and allocation of resources, moving from a seller-centric to a buyer-centric orientation and moving from analog sales processes to hyper-automated, digital-first engagement with customers.

As COVID-19 spurs market volatility, B2B buying behavior is increasingly unpredictable. For example, one Gartner client reported that its quarterly deal pipeline shrank to nearly zero in March 2020 when its prospects suspended all nonessential expenditures. Other Gartner clients report their sellers are unable to build the type of engagement that helps them validate their pipeline predictions because they can no longer meet in-person with all of their customers’ decision makers.

Simultaneously, Gartner finds trends toward multiexperience selling, where B2B buyers show a growing preference to engage with suppliers through digital and self-service channels. This preference is forcing suppliers to rethink how sellers should engage with customers. Suppliers find that they must give buyers a choice on how to interact with them, whether through in-person, digital or blended channels, including bots.

The movement to multiexperience selling will exponentially increase the number of touchpoints, interactions and transactions that suppliers will have with customers. This increase means that sellers will need new technology capabilities to support those roles and processes. It will also require AI to deliver those technology capabilities for sales and buyer enablement.

The rise in interactivity will also lead to more interdependence of people, processes and technology that will render the traditional and mechanistic sales models less reliable over time — something for which most sales organizations are unprepared.

To stay relevant and drive revenue, sales organizations need to build adaptive systems that are based on hyperautomation of interactions and transactions between sellers and buyers, digital scalability for sellers and AI.

This special report will help organizations prepare to build adaptive sales models and systems that will:

- Align with customers’ changing expectations, engaging the “everywhere customer” effectively with buyer-oriented (not product-oriented) integrated commercial channels and systems.
- Increase the digital skills of sellers to enable them to sell with digital channels and dynamically adapt to changes in the buying environment.
Invest in technology to support hyperautomation objectives using AI to execute basic sales tasks, detect buying signals and predict business outcomes.

The Future of Sales is the convergence of three practices and technologies that have not been widely embraced in B2B sales to date (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Future of B2B Sales — The Convergence of Hyperautomation, Digital Scalability and Artificial Intelligence**

### The Future of B2B Sales
The Convergence of Hyperautomation, Digital Scalability and Artificial Intelligence

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**Table 1: Additional Terms to Know**

| Hyperautomation | Hyperautomation is a Gartner-coined term that refers to an effective combination of complementary sets of tools that can integrate functional and process silos to automate and augment business processes. For sales leaders, this means automating sales process steps that were previously very analog. It also means moving more and more customer interactions and transitions into the digital channel that your customers prefer, such as digital commerce. We examine these concepts in all three Research Highlight sections that follow below. |

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Permanent Change in Buyer Behaviors Will Change Selling Behaviors

B2B purchases are complex. Today, an average of 11 individual stakeholders are involved in a B2B purchase; that number can occasionally flex up to nearly 20.¹ An influx of information to inform a purchase decision adds to its complexity. Over half of all B2B buyers reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of trustworthy information they access. Worse, nearly half of the buyers found supplier information trustworthy, but simultaneously contradictory. As a result, they spend an average of 15% of the buying cycle reconciling different information sources.²

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Thirty-three percent of all buyers desire a seller-free sales experience — a preference that climbs to 44% for millennials.

— Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

Despite this increased complexity and uncertainty, B2B buyers are not turning to sales reps for support. Today, only 17% of the total purchase journey is spent in interactions with sales reps (see Figure 2).
In fact, 33% of all buyers desire a seller-free sales experience — a preference that climbs to 44% for millennials. As baby boomers retire and millennials mature into key decision-making positions, a digital-first buying posture will become the norm. When customers increasingly learn and buy digitally, sales reps become just one of many possible sales channels.

Accordingly, CSOs must embrace a new identity, shifting from leaders of sellers to leaders of selling, irrespective of channel. Their organizations need to be able to sell to customers everywhere the customer expects to engage, interact and transact with suppliers.

Embracing this change requires CSOs and the application leaders who support them to adopt the principles of hyperautomation. To start, CSOs must accept that they have to meet customers where they already are.

Hyperautomation also means that CSOs must bring B2B digital commerce into the fold. A B2B digital commerce site must be treated as a full-fledged, self-service sales channel, one that integrates with and complements other channels.

Where do sellers fit in? The answer revolves around the impetus for purchase decisions.

A recent Gartner survey found that 93% of respondents identified their purchase decision as a result of a larger organizational initiative — with all of the associated disruptive operational
barriers, market considerations and organizational structure implications. But over 80% of customers voiced uncertainty in their own ability to manage such change. This uncertainty has consequences for suppliers: B2B buyers with moderate to high uncertainty are 30% less likely to complete a purchase at all, and 42% less likely to complete a high-quality deal. 4

There is a solution: Improve the quality of a buyer’s decision making to decrease buyer uncertainty. When customers are more confident in their decision, they are 3.6 times more likely to complete a high-quality deal. 4 Rather than be the source of information, the role of sellers should be to help customers make sense of everything they’re learning, irrespective of source or channel.

Of course, as CSOs turn to enabling selling through all channels, they will have to rethink their sales force deployment model, particularly for field-based sellers. In the next five years, CSOs indicate to Gartner that traditional field-based sales will see fractionally less investment in favor of remote selling and digital commerce channels.

The following research notes give more detail about the trends described above.

Related Research

Some recommended content may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Five Ways the Future of B2B Buying Will Rewrite the Rules of Effective Selling

A look at disruptive trends in B2B buying behavior that will rewrite the rulebook for world-class selling in 2025.

Leverage B2B Digital Commerce for Cost Optimization, Improved CX and Revenue Growth

For B2B organizations, digital commerce leads to cost optimization, revenue growth, improved customer experience and digital transformation. Application leaders should either launch or optimize B2B digital commerce to stay ahead of competition and achieve business goals.

How Buyer Dynamics Will Change Sales Force Deployment

Forward-looking CSOs must recognize changes in buying dynamics to optimally deploy sales resources. Sales execution and channels are likely to polarize points of high effectiveness and high efficiency based on shifts in B2B buying, customer preferences and resource constraints.

Three Sales Models That Enable Scalable Growth

New market trends are impacting sales effectiveness at a fundamental organizational level that supersedes an individual’s sales skills, tenure or territory. Conventional wisdom that has been built over many years is now losing efficiency and effectiveness in today’s market conditions.

3 Strategic Sales Imperatives for the Postpandemic Reset
During the crisis response phase, CSOs are forced to stabilize the sales force and contain costs. A greater challenge comes as leaders recover and rebuild amid lingering uncertainty. CSOs must focus on the intersection of disruptions, trends and future demands to create value and optimize costs.

Engaging B2B Buyers in an Uncertain Environment

B2B buyers face multiple layers of environmental uncertainty when they consider a major purchase, which leads to delayed or smaller deals. Chief marketing officers can use this report to help B2B buyers manage through uncertainty and feel confident about moving forward with ambitious purchases.

The Future of Sales Requires New Digital Skill Sets

The shift toward sense-making for the “everywhere customer” fundamentally changes the skills expected of sellers. The ability to persuade, particularly via building rapport with their customers’ decision makers, will no longer be enough to close deals. Over the next five years, sellers will need to embrace new tools and channels, as well as a new manner of engaging with customers. They will also need help understanding how to match their sales activity to their customers’ buying practices and information-collecting needs.

Because sellers will increasingly have less facetime with customers, virtual selling via digital channels will predominate. To that end, sellers need digital tools that build engagement with customers, particularly with their customers’ decision makers, in a way that replicates the traditional forms of selling. These digital engagement tools are necessary to overcome the challenges of aligning larger groups of internal stakeholders virtually and asynchronously.

Further, sellers have to be able to use multiple, different, simultaneous digital sales channels. For example, a Gartner client built a new co-selling portal for its top national accounts. Customers could request quotes or place orders directly via the portal. If the quote required special pricing or special terms, the workflow engine in the portal triggered a request to the supplier’s account team and to the supplier’s pricing team. To complete the negotiation, sellers managed all interactions with the client in the portal, thereby ensuring they efficiently and accurately managed interactions in a single system of engagement.

To learn how to align selling activity to customers’ preferred engagement channels and purchasing journey, sellers will need entirely new methods of sales enablement. Our 2019 survey of B2B sales organizations indicates that sales enablement was the most critical priority last year. The pandemic accelerated this priority, as CSOs seek new techniques to reduce risk of lost sales.

To keep sellers engaged and executing sales, CSOs must find the “techquilibrium” that provides balance between the technology deployed and the volume of content sellers interact with to do their jobs.
Given the global nature of large sales organizations that sell complex B2B solutions, it's nearly impossible to train and coach at scale through the traditional sales enablement approach of information sharing and one-off training sessions. To optimize their virtual sales enablement practices, CSOs and sales enablement leaders must train sellers both synchronously and asynchronously.

The following research notes give more detail about the trends described above.

**Related Research**

*Some recommended content may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.*

**Pandemic Recovery: Key Sales Roles and Technology Impacts for B2B Sales**

Application leaders supporting CRM sales need to pivot direction and importance of methodology to recover and thrive. This research explores different scenarios of “reopening business” and makes recommendations to support that business model for the seller role.

**Framework to Enable Effective Virtual Selling**

Sales enablement leaders need a clear strategy to support the sales force in a virtual selling environment. Use this framework to review and align virtual selling with new buying realities, including precall sales planning, remote customer interactions and virtual selling enablement.

**Virtual Selling Emerges as a Priority for CRM Sales Technology Programs**

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.

**Find the Techquilibrium in Sales Enablement to Maximize Seller Productivity**

The volume of technology and content given to sellers is increasing exponentially, leading to digital fatigue. Application leaders supporting sales enablement must find techquilibrium or face seller disengagement and performance that risks revenue reduction for the organization.

**Digital Optimization Objectives Elevate B2B Sales Technology Programs**

Leading organizations are not just automating, but digitally optimizing their sales processes and technologies. All application leaders supporting B2B sales can elevate their technology initiatives by investing in digital tools to enhance their sales execution processes.

**Sales Execution Will Be Driven by Data, Analytics and Artificial Intelligence**

Every B2B sales organization aims for better sales execution, which means closing more deals with increasingly efficient means of engaging with prospects. But no matter how disciplined sellers
are, consistent sales process execution is not enough to ensure that sellers can successfully qualify leads, advance sales deals or build complex quotes.

Sales leaders require sales applications that do more than just instill sales process discipline. They need to optimize their sales processes with data-driven insights about the health of their pipeline, what deals to focus on or, at a more basic level, what to do next on a specific deal.

Achieving that goal, however, has been an idealistic quest. Traditionally, the sales organization has treated sales processes, sales applications, sales data and sales analytics as four distinct practices. This separation has prevented sales organizations from optimizing processes with data-driven insights, much less automating processes with AI-based sales applications.

But advances in sales technology are rapidly transforming how sales organizations operate. Within five years, there will be no separation between sales process, applications, data and analytics. All four parts will merge into one single concept: artificial intelligence for sales.

The merger will mimic the process model depicted in Figure 3, in which AI-based guided selling tools support prescriptive next best actions.

Figure 3: The Four Primary Components of AI-Based Guided Selling

In this environment, the top priority for sales technology programs is to build a sales technology roadmap that includes advanced approaches such as predictive analytics and guided selling. AI,
particularly prescriptive next best actions, can tell sellers what to do next to close deals and prospects as quickly as possible.

Organizations outside of sales are already taking advantage of more advanced forms of analytics with the help of data science and AI. Meanwhile, many sales organizations remain stuck on native reporting, dashboards and spreadsheet-based approaches.

When building a sales technology roadmap, CSOs should prioritize where AI-based guided selling functions would be most relevant by identifying the least efficient parts of the sales value chain. These target areas can include processes that require a lot of human educated guessing, such as what to do next on a complex B2B deal.

Beyond optimizing processes, technology can help CSOs attract top talent from the Gen Z demographic, which values remote work opportunities and digital collaboration. Particularly at a time when organizations are looking to ramp up virtual selling, CSOs should invest in digital technology that improves the buyer experience. This includes arming sellers with high-quality audio and video hardware, along with reliable remote meeting platforms that allow sellers to conduct productive customer interactions.

The following research notes give more detail about the trends described above.

**Related Research**

*Some recommended content may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.*

**Case Studies in Sales Enablement Technology That Drive Commercial Impact**

Heads of sales enablement should embrace the digital innovation currently changing the sales enablement landscape. An emphasis on sales enablement technology will increase sales enablement's impact and drive revenue in the modern buying environment.

**Transform Sales Operations for the Future**

Sales operations leaders will struggle to evolve as current strategies are insufficient for the future. The challenge to meet the ongoing needs of more stakeholders, along with generational shifts in staff and needs for data science, will lead to misalignment unless leaders prioritize the future.

**Optimize Sales Execution With Artificial Intelligence for B2B Guided Selling**

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, B2B sales organizations are exploring new ways to enforce sales process consistency and discipline. Application leaders that support sales technology should help sellers improve sales execution by adding AI-based guided selling to their CRM roadmaps.

**Improve Revenue Forecast Accuracy With Emerging Forms of Sales Forecasting Technology**

Traditional sales forecasts are often inaccurate, leading to missed sales targets and budget shortfalls. Application leaders must work with business stakeholders to use new capabilities
Use AI to Improve B2B Sales Revenue and Optimize Costs

This research outlines AI technologies that can support B2B sales organizations in driving revenue growth and decreasing costs. It focuses on AI-based technologies that are proven to reduce costs or support revenue growth.

Infographic: AI Use Case Prism for B2B Sales

This infographic identifies 14 of the most prominent AI use cases that can improve B2B sales operations. Across many industries and organizations, data and analytics leaders can use this as a starting point for further fine-tuning.

Gartner Associates Supporting This Trend

Dave Egloff
Ilona Hansen
Melissa Hilbert
Steve Rietberg
Craig Riley
Adnan Zijadic

Related Resources

Webinars

Get actionable advice in 60 minutes from the world’s most respected experts. Keep pace with the latest issues that impact business with both live and on-demand webinars for CIOs and other IT leaders.
Winning Through Sense Making: Enabling Sellers to Succeed in the Information Era

Winning Through Sense Making: Frameworks for Driving Seller Success in the Information Era

Best Practices for Maximizing Sales Manager Impact

Enabling Buyers Through Improved Sales Process Design

Sales Essentials: Creating a Customer Buying Journey

Articles

Adjust to the Reality of Virtual Selling

What Sales Should Know About Modern B2B Buyers

How High-Performing Sales Managers Deliver More Commercial Impact

Peer Insights

Gartner Peer Insights is a free peer review and ratings platform designed for enterprise software and services decision makers. Reviews go through a strict validation and moderation process in an effort to ensure they are authentic. Choose enterprise IT software and services with confidence. Read verified reviews from the IT community.

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Peer Connect

Peer Connect is a private community in which Gartner clients can exchange insight and advice on their mission-critical priorities.

Join the discussions occurring in the Sales forum to ask questions and share answers on key initiatives.

Evidence

1 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

2 2017 Digital B2B Buyer Survey

3 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

4 2019 Gartner B2B Buyer Survey
The data in this research report comes from multiple quantitative studies conducted over many years. The main data points cited come from two separate 2019 surveys of over 1,100 B2B buyers each, and a 2017 survey of over 700 B2B buyers.

The results presented in this research are also based on information collected through hundreds of research calls with heads of sales and frontline managers, B2B buyers, and from client inquiries and secondary research.

**Recommended For You**

How Buyer Dynamics Will Change Sales Force Deployment

The Gartner Sales Podcast With Brent Adamson: Returning Field Sellers to the Field, With Maria Boulden

Why Sales Capacity Matters

The Gartner Sales Podcast With Brent Adamson: Redesigning Sales Territories in a Time of Disruption With Dave Egloff

The Gartner Sales Podcast With Brent Adamson: 3 Guiding Principles for Sales Compensation in Uncertain Times with Steve Herz