2022 Strategic Roadmap for B2B Digital Selling

Published 14 December 2021 - ID G00756620 - 20 min read

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Initiatives: Digital Commerce and CRM Sales Technologies

The shift from B2B seller-driven commerce to buyer-led purchasing means providers must update their B2B sales technology plans. Application leaders responsible for CRM sales and digital commerce should use this strategic roadmap to plan their B2B digital sales technologies strategic direction.

Overview

Key Findings

- An overall average of 43% of Baby Boomer, Gen X and Millennial customers prefer a rep-free experience.
- By the end of 2021, the total number of business-to-business digital commerce transactions is expected to overtake the total number of B2B direct sales transactions.
- B2B organizations will implement digital sales rooms that blend the physical and digital sales experiences.
- B2B organizations’ digital sales rooms will enable salespersons to intelligently interact, collaborate and influence the buying process with a customer.

Recommendations

Application leaders responsible for CRM sales and digital commerce should:

- Move to a digital sales room by selecting, purchasing and integrating technologies that support a digital and physical sales customer journey.
- Enable intelligent coordination, which integrates all customer points of interaction to provide a contextual customer experience at any time or customer point of interaction.
Strategic Planning Assumptions

By 2025, 50% of all enterprise B2B sales technology implementations will include digital sales rooms. (Source: Predicts 2021: New Selling Imperatives Drive CRM Sales Technology Roadmaps.)

By 2024, 15% of B2B organizations will use digital commerce platforms to support customers and sales reps in all sales activities. (Source: Magic Quadrant for Digital Commerce.)

By 2025, 80% of B2B sales interactions between suppliers and buyers will occur in digital channels. (Source: Market Guide for Sales Enablement Platforms.)

By 2025, 20% of B2B companies will see revenue growth from multiexperience sales due to a well-executed “everywhere customer” vision. (Source: Predicts 2021: New Selling Imperatives Drive CRM Sales Technology Roadmaps.)

Introduction

COVID-19 and generational preferences as to how sales should be conducted are challenging organizations forcing them to develop their B2B digital selling capabilities. As we move toward 2024 applications, leaders responsible for sales technologies will see three major trends influence the future of B2B digital selling:

- **Where people will work has changed, and will continue to change.** Gartner’s future-of-work research has shown that 45% of those surveyed agree there will be a rise in demand for hybrid work models (see Quick Answer: What Are the Future of Work Trends With the Greatest Impact on Organizations? [see Figure 1]).
Figure 1: Most Impactful Future of Work Trends for Organizations

Most Impactful Future of Work Trends for Organizations
Percentage of CHROs

- Shortage of Critical Talent: 52%
- Rise in Employee Demand for a Hybrid Work Model: 45%
- New Service Models or Go-to-Market Strategies: 33%
- Increasing Digitalization: 28%
- Greater Employer Responsibility for More Aspects of Employee Well-Being: 20%
- Increase in Job Displacement by Technology: 15%
- Evolving Purpose of Physical Workspace and Office Space: 15%
- Rise in Importance of Sustainability/ESG Considerations in Strategic Decisions: 15%
- Emerging Demand for Novel Skills: 12%
- Rising Expectations that Employers Will Take Action on Social Issues: 10%
- Rise in New Employment Models (Gig, Apprenticeships, etc.): 9%
- Increasingly Aging Workforce: 7%
- Increasing Need to Collect Employee Data: 4%
- Gen Z Entering the Workforce: 1%
- Others: 3%

n = 69
Q: Which of the following do you think will have the greatest impact on your organization? (Select up to three)
Source: Gartner CHRO Survey April 2021
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Source: Quick Answer: What Are the Future of Work Trends With the Greatest Impact on Organizations?
The shift to digital channels. The days of meeting the client or prospect in the office are fading away, and it is becoming difficult to even schedule face-to-face meetings with customers who are working from home.

- Gartner forecasts that, by 2025, 80% of B2B sales interactions will occur in digital channels (see Gartner's Future of Work Reinvented for Chief Sales Officers).

- By the end of 2023, the total number of B2B digital commerce transactions is expected to overtake the total number of B2B direct sales transactions.

- By 2023, buyers and sellers expect the digital commerce channel to capture the largest share of transactions. Assuming linear growth between 2020 and 2023, B2B sales are likely to become “digital-first” around the end of 2021 (see Increase Profits and Delight Buyers by Becoming a Digital-First, Omnichannel B2B Seller).

- An average of 43% of baby boomers, Gen X and millennials customers prefer a rep-free experience. This is a generational change in preferences (see Figure 2).
This generational trend is where digital commerce sites play a role in helping the customer to assess their needs and determine their requirements. This could lead to a customer completing the sale without a sales representative or, at a minimum, supporting a click-to-lead model by delivering a fully qualified lead directly to a salesperson to close the deal.

Working with sales representatives has its own advantages during the needs and requirements stages, as well as during negotiations. A salesperson can help to lower buyer purchase regret, enable pricing negotiation and increase a customer's confidence in their purchase decisions. Much of that key support is lost in a rep-free model, likely leading to fewer high-quality deals to close.

Moreover, in the world of B2B buying, the differences between competing offerings can be subtle, yet important, and high levels of perceived supplier differentiation are associated with a 5.1% increase in customer confidence. (See How to Reinvent B2B Selling for a Digital Buying Environment.)
Organizations seeking a strategic roadmap for B2B digital selling can use this research (see Figure 3) to

- Understand the future state of B2B digital selling
- Compare themselves to the current state of B2B digital selling
- Determine the gaps in the B2B digital selling
- Determine their migration plan steps

**Figure 3: Strategic Roadmap for B2B Digital Selling**

**Strategic Roadmap for B2B Digital Selling**

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<th>Current State</th>
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<td>Lack of visibility into where customers are in their buying journey.</td>
<td>Develop B2B personas and customer journey maps.</td>
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<td>A growing number of customers prefer a representative free team experience.</td>
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<td>Lack of coordination across all customer points of interactions such as call centers, websites, chat, email, etc. providing the customer with an inconsistent information.</td>
<td>Enable support for salespeople and processes in the B2B digital commerce site.</td>
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<td>Sales and communications enabled across all customer touchpoints.</td>
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<td>Lack of customer context during interactions. Collaboration happens but is driven by the salesperson’s manual coordination.</td>
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The future of B2B digital selling will happen over a period of several years, and the timeline below shows the drivers of each year as we move to 2024 (see Figure 4).
In 2022, we will still see the influence of COVID-19 and the remote selling that resulted from it as major drivers of change. During that time, Gartner believes that visual configuration, virtual customer assistant and conversational artificial intelligence (AI) for digital commerce will be technologies that organizations will look to incorporate into their current B2B digital-selling portfolios.

In 2023, the desire to create an improved digital sales environment will drive organizations to seek value from voice-driven sales apps, conversational engagement analytics for sales and digital adoption solutions.

By 2024, organizations will seek to create an immersive digital sales environment. This will include augmented reality (AR)/virtual reality (VR) for sales, and emotion AI, along with many existing sales and collaboration technologies to create the first generation of digital sales rooms (DSRs).

(For more details on the technologies, see Hype Cycle for Digital Commerce, 2021 and Hype Cycle for CRM Sales Technology, 2021.)
**Future State**

**DSRs emerge, with salespeople still heavily involved**

The future of B2B digital selling will be an immersive, first-generation DSR experience that increases buyer confidence, supports individual buying experiences and reduces purchaser regret.

However, for some buyers, such as those buying configurable products, pricing and finding the best deal will still make buyers want a salesperson to work with them. For other buyers, such as those buying spare parts, they will want to buy those using a website — provided all negotiated discounts are applied.

**Integrated digital commerce capabilities for DSR**

DSRs will play a key role in enabling buyer and salesperson interactions and collaboration, but will also support the self-service requirements from buyers.

DSRs are privately formed for a vendor and a customer to collaborate digitally, or for a vendor, channel partner and customer, from lead through the customer life cycle. Persistent microsites will include internal/external collaboration, embedded video conferencing, buyer engagement analytics, sentiment and emotion analysis, as well as links to digital commerce platforms. Customer-facing resources will leverage marketing, sales and customer success to collaborate with the customer, creating a consistent customer experience.

**Connected and contextual customer journey**

DSRs of the future will integrate digital commerce capabilities for asynchronous digital self-service or act as a stand-alone, lead-to-purchase transaction solution.

Digital commerce capabilities, such as personalization; self-guided configuration, pricing and quoting; repeating orders; and others will enable the customer to choose how much of the buying process they want to do on their own. DSRs will enable a customer journey that is connected and contextual through all phases of the journey, because the DSR brings all of the customer's and seller's activities into one digital environment.
DSRs are formed between direct sellers and buyers. Although these sites can be surfaced via a portal, they do not extend to partner channels where the selling organization would facilitate a site between the channel partner and the buyer. PRM solutions that offer portals will still use these for one-way communication of information and as such they would not meet DSR requirements. Although the possibility exists for DSRs to extend to partner relationship management (PRM), this will not be a near-term development.

**Sales and communications enabled across all customer touchpoints**

All points of interaction will support both outbound and inbound customer communication.

Sales is enabled across all customer points of interaction. All revenue-facing team members will have access to these communications, and the DSR will enable both buyer and selling to have context for all their interactions, regardless of the points of interaction used.

**Current State**

**Due to COVID-19, where people work has changed and will continue to change**

The move to remote working changed many organizations’ and employees’ views about their work environment and where they work. As organizations review their return-to-work plans, many are asking “Should we go back to the way it was?” Or should we change where people work? As mentioned above, 45% of those surveyed agree with the rise in the demand for a hybrid work model. However, this does not mean that all organizations will move to a hybrid environment, because each organization will have to choose what is best for their organization’s business and operating model.

Because of this, more changes are likely to happen to people's work environment, as organizations and employees figure out what works best for both. This is a trend to watch as we move toward 2024, because it will help shape the future of digital selling.

**A growing number of customers prefer a representative-free team experience**
As stated above, an overall average of 43% of Baby boomers, Gen X and Millenials prefer a rep-free experience (see Evidence Figure 2). This is being driven by generational factors and the impact of COVID-19, and it's also influenced by buyers' personal shopping. This has increased during COVID-19 and has formed a habit for many to make their purchases online. This habit of buying with clicks comes with these buyers to work. We have already seen that many purchase evaluations begin online and then lead to buyers reaching out to sales once they have already informed themselves about the products and/or services that they are seeking for their organizations.

Organizations should seek ways to take advantage of this behavior by enabling customers to create a DSR on a buyer's site to work with the organizations on their purchases. This allows customers to dictate their desired mix of interactions with a vendor, while not losing the benefits of the vendor's guidance.

Poor customer and employee journey experiences, due to websites and sales tools not working together or supporting each other, leave salespeople at a disadvantage and buyers without confidence in their decisions.

Gartner's Integration Maturity Model research from 2020 shows that 64% of respondents have integrated at least one application, and 13% had plans to integrate CRM applications by YE20.

These plans have continued into 2021 and will continue beyond 2022 (see Figure 5). This integration of CRM applications is to support the improvement of CRM processes such as sales, marketing, customer service and digital commerce for both the customer and the employee journey experience. This integration is to remove activities, such as having to sign on to multiple applications, remove broken or disconnected processes, as well as other problems resulting from a lack of interoperability between systems and data. For example, integration of campaign management, lead management, salesforce automation (SFA), and configure, price and quote (CPQ) applications to support a "campaign to quote" business process reduces time and effort for the customer and the salesperson.
Disconnected customer journeys across different points of interaction, and customer points of interactions are not fully used or connected with each other.

The number of customer points of interaction — e.g., email, text, virtual assistants, internet of Things (IoT) devices, websites, social and communities, face to face, collaboration tools, web meeting tools — create an environment where customers can “mix and match” these points of interactions to their own personal communication styles. This issue mandates that all of these points of interaction have context of activities done via different points of interactions (see Quick Answer: How is Unified Commerce Different from Omnichannel Commerce?).
For example, a single customer can use multiple points of interaction at the same time or sequentially, while interacting with the selling organization and sales people will need to be aware of all of these interactions. This could also be the same dynamic for a customer decision making team that is making a buying decision. This will drive organizations need for intelligent coordination across all points of interaction (see Enable Great Customer Experiences Using Gartner’s Customer Experience CORE Model).

Lack of customer context during interactions — collaboration happens, but is driven by the salesperson’s manual coordination.

When added together, the second and third points made below explain why a salesperson must use manual coordination to keep all customer interactions in sync and to have context with the customer. This manual coordination takes time away from actual selling activities and reduces the time available for a salesperson to sell. This is where the salesperson and the customer could use a micro-site that stays with the customer — salespeople, client success people and enables these capabilities:

- Bidirectional communication
- Schedule and support video conferences.
- Recordings of meetings
- Links to digital commerce systems

**Gap Analysis and Interdependencies**

**Lack of visibility into where customers are in their buying journey**

Lack of integration between B2B digital commerce capabilities and digital sales capabilities, such as digital sales room persistent micro sites working independently of B2B digital commerce sites.

Organizations had automated sales processes over the years via applications. The problem this created was that customer- and employee-facing processes were most often a set of application experiences that were not integrated together to support a horizontal process. The integration of campaign management, lead management, SFA, CPQ applications to support a “campaign to quote” business process is an example of this problem.
This is why an organization now needs to seek out where these application interdependencies are and begin to integrate these applications to reduce the customer and employee effort it takes for them to move from one application to another. Organizations must identify these gaps in the customer sales journey to reduce the customers’ and the salespersons’ efforts, so they can focus on the execution of a deal.

Lack of coordination across all customer interaction points

Lack of capacities to understand where a customer is in their buying journey and what is the customer's current state.

Just like applications, various digital selling points of interaction have been added over an organization's life. However, as each new point of integration was added, intelligent coordination of these points of interaction was neglected.

Often, the customer became the intelligent coordinator of its activities with an organization. The customer knew which emails, SMS/texts and other communications it had with the seller. The customer knew what they had done online, via phone or chat. The challenge here has been enabling the salesperson to have all of those customer touches available when he or she interacts with the customer. The answer to this challenge is to enable intelligent coordination of all points of interaction. This is where an audit of all customer points of interaction should be done to determine what the customer is using those points of interaction for. This would enable the organization to understand how these points of interaction should be sharing information with each other to provide an in-context interaction with the customer.

Lack of coordination across all customer points of interactions, such as call centers, websites, chat and email, providing the customer with inconsistent information

Not only do the points of interaction need intelligent coordination, the information and content used by customers in those channels needs to be intelligently coordinated. For example, a customer may see product information on a website that is up today, only to be emailed an out-of-date version of the same product's information. This is where the management of the information and content provided to a customer must be the same across all points of interaction.
**Migration Plan**

**Higher Priority**

**Develop B2B personas and customer journey maps**

Build and use B2B personas and B2B customer journey maps. Use these tools to identify and remove gaps in the desired B2B sales experience.

To deliver great customer experiences, organizations need a model of that great experience they are trying to deliver. This is where customer journey maps come in. These journey maps enable the organization to see what the customer goes through to get to the business outcome they are seeking.

To further improve this journey map, it is necessary to have B2B personas defined based on an organization's voice of the customer programs. These personas enable the organization to have a clear definition of the customer they are trying to serve during that journey.

The journey map and the personas enable the organization to remove unnecessary steps and reduce the customer's effort, which will optimize the customer experience for the buyer. This will increase customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Organizations must use both personas and customer journey maps as guides as to the technology needed to support those personas and their journey with the organization.

**Integrate advanced digital commerce capabilities into the digital sales room**

Integrate B2B digital commerce capabilities, such as self-service CPQ, AR and VR, and co-browsing/co-configuring into the digital sales room microsite.

The ability to deliver a quote quickly to a buyer can be a key competitive advantage. CPQ applications can save time, increasing both quote and configuration accuracy. In addition, in some situations, it may be done entirely in a self-service model.

When the buyer needs to see what the product being purchased looks like, both AR and VR can help. It can also help with issues such as part identification, when the buyer doesn't know what part needs to be replaced. Both AR and VR help buyers with the visualization and identification of products and can help them get to a fast decision, because "seeing it" enables them to determine it meets their needs.
The ability to bring together CPQ, AR/VR and co-browsing/co-configuring into the DSR microsite will enable buyers and sellers to have common areas to digitally work together toward finding the right product at the right price in a collaborative digital environment.

**Enable support for salespeople and processes in the B2B digital commerce site**

Enable the company digital commerce site to support salespeople with the sales process.

Organizations must enable all of their digital touchpoints to work together (see *Innovation Insight for Multithreaded Engagements for B2B Sales*), This concept is known as intelligent coordination, and an organization's digital commerce site will play a key role in sales. The site can support product or service information and evaluation to help a customer determine what product or service they are seeking to buy. It may support a click-to-lead process in which the buyer will select and configure what they want and then be turned over to a salesperson, such as you see in the auto industry for consumer auto sales.

However, that is not the only way the digital commerce site can support salespeople. The site can take on the sale of consumables, MRO supplies, or spare parts in a B2C consumerlike shopping experience, enabling the salesperson to focus on more strategic sales, such as the sale of new equipment into the organization.

Another use case is sales view, where sales can log into the customer account and see what the customer sees, and add items to the cart, suggest bundles or even order on-behalf. This makes it more proactive in upsell/cross-sell and encourages repurchases.

Organizations now need their website not as a stand-alone channel buy, instead of all points of interaction working together to help the buyer fulfill the needs of their organization and help them to achieve the business outcomes they seek.

**Create unified experiences across touchpoints and enable visibility for employees.**

Enable all points of customer interactions to have the same customer information on all aspects of the customers’ interactions with the organizations. Both the customer- and revenue-facing employees must always have the same information across any point of interaction at any time.
When customers interact with your organization, they should be interacting with only one organization. However, what has happened over time as different points of interaction, such as email, SMS/text, messaging applications, websites and call centers, have led to customers using all of these point interactions differently.

Another challenge has been for the organization to maintain context with the customer during their multiple interactions with the organization. For example, a customer may be looking at a spec sheet online, while chatting with an agent that doesn’t have that spec sheet available. This makes it hard to have a conversation about that spec sheet. To make it worse, the customer may have been emailed that spec sheet in a marketing campaign; however, the salesperson is unaware of that and sends the same information to the customer a second time.

Therefore, organizations must improve the intelligent coordination of all points of interaction by integration of the points of interaction, and the sharing of data, content and information across all points of interaction.

**Medium Priority**

Enable intelligent customer engagement to ensure consistency

Enable intelligent coordination of revenue-facing personnel to ensure that customers do not get multiple uncoordinated touches.

A key factor of a collaborative sales team’s success is to work like a team and for that to be visible to the customer. The customer must get the feeling that they are being supported by a well-coordinated team that is focused on their success. Anything large or small that happens to the customer that comes across as a lack of coordination on the buyers’ sides will cause doubt in the buyer as to whether this is the right organization to do business with. For example, they might receive many calls, texts, and emails from different team members about a product sale on a sales blitz day. This could have the buyer asking, “Don’t they all work together and know what each other is doing?”

Therefore, how all revenue-facing personnel collaborate around a customer becomes another area of improvement for organizations, as they increase the number of digital touchpoints for their customer.

**Coordinate incentive plans across channels**
Coordinate internal teams’ incentive plans to include the use of an organization's digital commerce website in the sales process.

Incentives drive behavior and if the incentives for the digital commerce website do not align with sales incentive, or vice versa, then the client will not get a single customer experience. Instead, they will feel the pull of one organization from another. This is not new and was seen in the early days of e-commerce. Store managers had no incentives to support online sales or returns, and online sales had no incentives to drive customers to stores, even when they knew that another channel had the item the consumer wanted. This type of behavior can happen in the B2B world, if the incentives are not aligned. Organizations will need to review how they motivate both channels to support the customer first.

**Lower Priority**

*Evaluate emotion AI as the technology matures*

Although customer experience is about customer feeling and experience with an organization, and that organization wants to know how they are doing with creating positive emotions with customers, the use of Emotion AI is still nascent. This can have ethical issues that are yet to be discovered. Therefore, organizations should give this technology time to mature if the organization is adverse to experimenting with new technologies.

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**Recommended by the Authors**

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

- How to Reinvent B2B Selling for a Digital Buying Environment
- Increase Profits and Delight Buyers by Becoming a Digital-First, Omnichannel B2B Seller
- Future of Work Reinvented for Chief Sales Officers
- Quick Answer: How is Unified Commerce Different from Omnichannel Commerce?
- Enable Great Customer Experiences Using Gartner's Customer Experience CORE Model
- Innovation Insight for Multithreaded Engagements for B2B Sales
- Hype Cycle for Digital Commerce, 2021
- Hype Cycle for CRM Sales Technology, 2021
- Quick Answer: What Are the Future of Work Trends With the Greatest Impact on Organizations?