



Harvard Business Review

Sales Management Handbook



How to Lead
High-Performing
Sales Teams

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Harvard Business Review

Sales Management Handbook

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Contents

Introduction: Sales Management in the Digital World	1
The sales system	2
Sales leadership roles	4
How digital is changing sales management	6
Why this book?	7
How to navigate this book	8

SECTION ONE

Linking Sales Leadership to Execution and Results

1. Why We Still Need Salespeople in a Digital World	15
Types of sales jobs	17
How salespeople add value	19
Salespeople coexisting with digital and virtual sales channels	25
2. The Sales Manager: The Force Behind the Sales Force	29
Three pillars of responsibility	30
The sales manager's role in the organization	32
The sales manager's operating rhythm	35

3. Driving Salespeople's Success with Customers	39
Assisting with market-sensing and agile sales planning	40
Ensuring effective execution and enabling change	
with sales sprints	45
Enabling the sales team to share customer insights	53
Facilitating customer relationship transitions	54

SECTION TWO

Talent Management

4. Personalizing Talent Management	61
The building blocks of talent management	61
Using personalization to develop, engage, and retain	
salespeople	63
5. Hiring and Onboarding for Speed and Impact	71
The sales manager's role in the hiring process	72
Defining the candidate selection criteria	73
Sourcing talent	76
Selecting talent	77
Attracting talent	85
Onboarding and acculturating	87
6. Empowering Salespeople with Continuous	
Learning and Development	93
Strategy and content	95
Training	97
Coaching	99
Work-based learning	105
Blended approaches	106
L&D trends	107
7. Managing Performance to Drive Results	111
Sales performance: Managing inputs and outcomes	112
Four types of performers and how to manage them	113

8. Motivating Sales Teams with Incentives and Goals	123
Understanding what incentives do	124
The building blocks of incentive plans	126
Linking incentives to your sales strategy	
and environment	128
Setting goals that motivate	133
Assessing an incentive plan's health and performance	137
9. Managing Retention and Turnover	143
Understanding turnover costs and dynamics	144
Using tailored retention strategies	147
Succeeding in high-turnover environments	151

SECTION THREE

The Digital Transformation of Sales Management

10. Leveraging the Growing Power of Digital in Sales Management	159
Digital's impact on sales decisions and processes	160
11. Making Faster and Better Decisions with Analytics and AI	165
Using analytics and AI to drive sales actions and impact	166
Understanding the basics of AI	167
Empowering human judgment	170
Building a data-driven team	174
Spanning the sales and digital boundary with sales ops	175
The evolution of analytics and AI	177
12. Designing the Sales Organization for the Digital Age	179
Structuring choices	180
Specializing sales roles	184

Leveraging inside sales to increase reach and reduce costs	189
Dynamically adapting the sales structure and size	191
13. Unlocking Five Digital-Age Sales Competencies	195
The five competencies for salespeople	196
Hiring, developing, and supporting the five competencies	202
How the five competencies apply to sales leaders	204
14. Synchronizing Sales Channels for Maximum Impact	207
Optimizing digital, virtual, and in-person communication	208
Enabling channel collaboration	211
Supporting sales teams with a digital enablement concierge	219
Adapting communication methods and channels continuously	220
15. Accelerating and Streamlining Selling with a Digital Customer Hub	223
The role and components of a DCH	225
Architecture choices and strategies	229
Building a DCH	233
The sales leader's role in a DCH	235
16. Amplifying the Power of Salespeople with Digital Assistants	241
Empowering salespeople with AI-driven tools	242
Adopting and implementing AI assistants	248
17. Boosting Talent Management with Digital	253
Digital recruiting	255
Digital learning and development	258
Digitally boosting incentive plan traction	261
Linking digital talent platforms	262

18. Managing a Recurring Revenue Business	267
Strategy, process, and metrics	268
Driving performance	274
Managing the transition to recurring revenue	279
 SECTION FOUR	
Driving Improvement and Implementing Change	
19. Continuously Improving Your Business	287
The sales productivity hunt at Novartis	288
Discovering opportunities	289
Rationalizing and prioritizing opportunities	296
From opportunities to solutions	300
Capturing market opportunity at Google Cloud Platform	304
20. Navigating Sales Force Change	309
Seven steps to successful change	311
Managing difficult changes	323
Conclusion	329
Five key takeaways	329
What's next for you?	331
<i>Index</i>	000
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	333
<i>About the Authors</i>	335

Introduction

Sales Management in the Digital World

Salespeople are entrusted with a company's most valuable asset: its relationships with its customers. To buyers, the salesperson is the company. And as a sales manager, or any leader of a sales organization, you are also the face of the company, to both your sales team and customers. You connect the business to those it serves, bridging the gap between strategy and execution. Effective sales management directly supports revenue generation, customer satisfaction, and overall business success.

At the same time, your sales force—the extraordinary human capital that you are charged with leading—is expensive. For many companies, the team's costs are the largest part of selling, general, and administrative expenses. By our estimates, investment in US nonretail sales forces exceeds a trillion dollars per year, including personnel, travel, support, and technology.

The high impact and high cost of sales forces bring high expectations and constant scrutiny. Companies are always looking for ways to elevate the impact of their salespeople while reducing costs. Fortunately, as we will unpack in this book, every organization can do both.

2 The HBR Sales Management Handbook

Leading a high-performing sales team is fulfilling, complex (due to many moving parts), and dynamic (due to constant change). You must manage people who each have their own personality and needs. You are responsible for key talent processes such as hiring, coaching, and performance management. You must balance the goals of multiple stakeholders—customers, salespeople, other sales leaders, and other departments in your organization, including marketing, finance, and compliance. There are never-ending demands; the important and the urgent vie unrelentingly for your attention. And when change occurs in your sales organization, whether large or small, you are at the center of making it work.

The key driver of change in sales organizations today is *digital*, a term we use broadly to mean the use of technology, data, and analytics to design and support business processes and decisions. Digital has already led customers to become increasingly knowledgeable and self-reliant and to have higher expectations. Concurrently, sales organizations are leveraging evolving technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), to streamline processes and enable more-informed decision-making. And companies are engaging customers through digital channels and more-immersive digital experiences.

Sales forces remain important for B2B organizations to bring solutions and innovations to their customers, even as the power of digital channels grows. Leading a sales force is at the confluence of art and science, of strategy and tactics, of people and processes.

The sales system

The sales organization is part of a system of five groups of decisions, processes, and resources that connect company strategy to customers. (See figure I-1.)

The five sets of sales decisions, processes, and resources are as follows.

- **Customer strategy** links business goals to priorities for who to sell to, what value to offer, and how to connect with customers to create mutual value.

FIGURE I-1

Sales system

Sales decisions, process,
and resources

- Customer strategy*
- Organizational design
- Talent
- Customer engagement*

Company
strategy

Outcomes

Salespeople's
capabilities and
motivation

Customer
value

Company
results

* Joint sales and marketing responsibility

4 The HBR Sales Management Handbook

- **Organizational design** includes the sales channels, roles, and structures for providing effective and efficient customer coverage.
- **Talent** is about designing and operating processes to hire, develop, manage, and motivate salespeople and managers.
- **Customer engagement** involves designing and operating processes and systems for executing sales, marketing, and support activities with channel partners and customers.
- **Technology, tools, and the support team** enable the decisions and processes in the first four groups. Often, these resources are part of a sales or commercial operations function.

It is up to the leadership team to design and oversee all of these. Done effectively, your salespeople will have the needed capabilities and motivation and will engage in the right activities and behaviors to drive value for customers and, ultimately, the company.

The specific challenges you face depend on your role.

Sales leadership roles

These jobs range from head of sales to frontline manager, and the number of jobs in between varies with the size of your sales force. (See table I-1.)

Sales heads: Driving results through team and system management

With titles such as VP of sales, chief sales officer, sales director, and chief growth officer, a sales head leads one or more teams, including managers and salespeople. This role is accountable for aligning the sales vision and strategy with business goals and for driving outcomes by designing, operating, and constantly improving the decisions, processes, and resources that make up the sales system. Sales heads must also adapt the system continuously in response to change, both internal (e.g., a product launch or a revised marketing strategy) and external (e.g., a competitor's move or an economic shift). The goal is to keep all components—the team's size and structure,

TABLE I-1

Sales organization roles and responsibilities

	SALES LEADERS		
	Sales heads	Sales managers	Salespeople
Results	Drive performance of the sales force	Drive performance of a sales region or a team of salespeople	Drive performance of a sales territory
Customers	Be accountable for customer strategy	Localize customer strategy, engage customers through and with salespeople	Manage and engage customers, ensure customer success
Sales team members	Hire, develop, manage, motivate, and retain sales team members	Hire, develop, manage, motivate, and retain salespeople	
Sales systems and processes	Be accountable for design, enhancement, and innovation	Manage and execute, provide input for improvement	Operate, provide input for improvement
Change	Set vision and strategy, select leadership team, inspire change	Design and implement	Provide input and implement

the talent, and the customer engagement processes—aligned with each other and with the business strategy.

Sales heads work with and through their sales managers.

Sales managers: Achieving results by linking sales strategy to execution

Referred to in this book simply as “sales managers,” frontline sales managers directly manage a team of salespeople. These managers have people management responsibilities, such as hiring, coaching, motivating, and managing performance. They also engage with customers, especially when it comes to key decision-makers and large opportunities. Sales managers are responsible for aligning, steering, and improving the business in their region by connecting salespeople, buyers, and the company.

These roles also collaborate with functions across the organization to ensure overall business success. They work with marketing to align priorities and actions. They work with customer support to ensure smooth post-sale customer experiences. And they collaborate with functions that

aren't customer-facing, such as HR for recruiting, development, and performance management; IT for digital support; and finance and legal for contracts pricing and compliance.

How digital is changing sales management

For you, as a sales leader at any level, digital is the X factor—and you must constantly be solving for an ever-evolving X. Every day, you will grapple with questions around it: What does digital mean for you, and how do you leverage it? How will digital affect what your customers need and how they engage with your company? What digital sales channels will you use and for which customers and tasks? How will you and your salespeople use real-time data, analytics, and AI to make your work more impactful and responsive to the market? How will digital continue to change your business?

With the world becoming more information-powered, customers are growing more knowledgeable and more able to learn on their own. This knowledge makes them more demanding and assertive. They decide when and how to engage with salespeople and when to use digital self-service channels. And they expect interactions with salespeople to be tailored to their constantly changing needs, coordinated with other channels, and helpful in driving the success of their business.

Digital also has the potential to power everything sales leaders do, from how you hire, develop, and manage people, to how you and your team engage with customers, to the speed at which you must respond to changing needs and strategies. Making this new paradigm work is an exciting and ongoing part of your job.

You face an onslaught of new challenges as the digital world transforms how you and your salespeople work and the products they sell. AI, for example, is emerging as a valuable digital assistant for salespeople. Leaders are likewise embracing digital tools to help them identify opportunities and manage their teams and customers. Your job as a leader will continue to evolve as digital does.

The impact of digitalization extends beyond tools and technologies. It also affects the competencies required of salespeople and the struc-

tural design of sales organizations. And it enables the multichannel collaboration required to create a compelling customer experience.

As digital comes to sales, you must work with your team to ensure that you and your team embrace digital. You must drive consensus around a vision, help find the right change leaders, marshal the needed resources, and break down organizational barriers. Your role in enabling change is a dual one. First, you contribute to the design of the change by sharing on-the-ground perspectives about customer and sales force needs while catalyzing salespeople to do the same. Second, your words and actions guide and direct your team through change, impacting their willingness to embrace new systems, programs, and processes.

Why this book?

We wrote the *HBR Sales Management Handbook* to help you navigate the complex and ever-shifting world of sales management—a world that balances the digitally accelerated future and the time-honored fundamentals of building relationships, delivering value, and earning trust. The book shares easy-to-use decision frameworks and dozens of examples and lessons learned from organizations at the leading edge of the journey. Any reader—whether they are a new sales manager, an experienced sales executive, or a director of sales operations—will come away with tangible ideas they can put to work right away to lead high-performing teams.

The three authors are leaders at ZS, a management consulting and technology firm focused on leveraging leading-edge sales and marketing analytics to help clients improve outcomes. Founded in 1983 by two marketing professors, Andris Zoltners and Prabha Sinha, by 2024 ZS had grown to encompass more than fourteen thousand employees in thirty-nine offices worldwide. It has delivered services and solutions to more than four thousand clients in industries that include life sciences (pharmaceuticals, biotech, medical technology, health plans), financial services, high tech and telecommunications, industrials and business services, private equity, and travel and hospitality. With deep roots in data, analytics, and commercial strategy, ZS has helped sales organizations improve their efficiency and

8 The HBR Sales Management Handbook

effectiveness and drive long-term growth. In this book Prabha is joined by two ZS colleagues, Arun Shastri, a leader in the AI practice who develops and implements strategies for sales organizations across industries, and Sally Lorimer, a coauthor of seven books and more than seventy articles for *Harvard Business Review* and hbr.org on sales management.

The authors' personal consulting experience, along with ideas shared by numerous clients and other ZS leaders, is the foundation of the broad and practical perspective we share in the book. In addition, the research-driven roots of our founders provide an anchor for discovering cause and effect and generalizable patterns for improving our ideas. Those ideas are further shaped by our experiences selling services to our clients and observing how our teams deal with the salespeople who sell to ZS when we buy computer hardware, cloud technologies, travel services, and other products and services.

How to navigate this book

As an in-depth manual, this handbook is dense and rich with ideas, frameworks, checklists, and questions to ponder. You will likely get the most out of the chapters if you take some time between them to think about what you have learned and what it means for you and your organization. Also, each chapter stands on its own independently—take a look at the table of contents and feel free to skip ahead to any topics that speak to your interest or an acute challenge you're facing. An exception is if you are new to sales management or are currently a salesperson looking to move up. In that case, you will benefit most from reading the book cover to cover over a number of sittings.

This handbook is two books in one. The first half covers sales management fundamentals. The second half focuses on digital, delving into its reshaping of sales management—and how to manage that change in your organization.

We cover the fundamentals and digital impact separately to ensure every reader gets the most value from the book. Those new to sales management get a solid foundation in the basics before tackling the topic of digi-

tal impact. Seasoned leaders can dive right into aspects of digital change, while using the fundamentals chapters as a reference and a refresher. The book provides a logical progression from traditional concepts to the latest insights and trends that are reshaping and affecting the fundamentals of sales and sales management.

Sections 1 and 2: Sales management fundamentals

The chapters in these sections are directed at sales managers. We purposely keep the pervasive force of digital in the background to highlight key manager responsibilities with customers and salespeople. Most of the ideas covered are relevant no matter how much a company is affected by and leveraging digital.

Section 1, “Linking Sales Leadership to Execution and Results,” sets the stage by sharing insights about the critical roles that salespeople and managers play in connecting customers and the company. The chapters and key questions are:

1. **Why we still need salespeople in a digital world.** What is the role of salespeople in meeting the needs of customers and the company as digital transforms the business landscape?
2. **The sales manager: The force behind the sales force.** How are the sales manager’s responsibilities divided across customers, people, the business, and change management?
3. **Driving salespeople’s success with customers.** How can managers use a market-sensing and agile cadence for customer planning and execution to empower salespeople’s success?

Section 2, “Talent Management,” is a guide and a reference for people management responsibilities. The chapters and key questions are:

4. **Personalizing talent management.** How can sales managers develop and use insights about each of their salespeople to manage them better?

5. **Hiring and onboarding for speed and impact.** How can managers ensure that they hire the right salespeople and help them get off to a strong start?
6. **Empowering salespeople with continuous learning and development.** What is the right blend of training, coaching, and work-based learning for building sellers' competencies?
7. **Managing performance to drive results.** How can managers energize stars and core performers, develop those with the potential to become stars or core performers, and prevent disengagement?
8. **Motivating sales teams with incentives and goals.** How can leaders collaborate with the sales operations team to design incentive plans and set motivating goals for directing salespeople's efforts?
9. **Managing retention and turnover.** How can managers hold on to their best salespeople and assure success despite inevitable turnover?

There is another use of the first half of this book, one that can benefit any sales manager. Most hospitals have checklists that surgeons use before engaging with patients. Two items on these checklists remind them to (1) wash their hands and (2) check the patient's name. All surgeons know they are supposed to do these things. But without a checklist to remind them, they may get distracted and omit these steps. A 2009 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* found that in a diverse range of hospitals worldwide, the use of such checklists cut patient death rates almost in half while significantly reducing inpatient complications. Subsequent research further supported the importance of checklists for reducing errors and improving patient outcomes. Checklists help overcome attention gaps, not knowledge gaps. In most chapters in sections 1 and 2, we include checklists that you will want to use, or adapt to use, with your team.

Sections 3 and 4: Digital

The chapters in these sections focus on the ever-increasing impact of digital on sales management, and on what leaders can do to help their

organizations adapt. Leaders at any level will benefit as they work to keep their teams relevant and thriving.

Section 3, “The Digital Transformation of Sales Management,” focuses on how digital is making sales management more market-sensing and agile. The chapters and key questions are:

10. **Leveraging the growing power of digital in sales management.** How is digital affecting customer strategy and engagement, organizational design, talent management, and more?
11. **Making faster and better decisions with analytics and AI.** How can sales organizations use data and analytics to complement managerial judgment for improved decision-making?
12. **Designing the sales organization for the digital age.** How can the structure of sales organizations (including channels and roles) keep up with the ever-changing needs of customers?
13. **Unlocking five digital-age sales competencies.** How is digital driving the profile of what it takes to succeed in sales, and how can managers bring new competencies to their teams?
14. **Synchronizing sales channels for maximum impact.** How can leaders enable collaboration across channels and find the right blend of in-person, virtual, and digital communication for meeting customer needs?
15. **Accelerating and streamlining selling with a digital customer hub.** How can companies bring together digital assets and expertise to support more-effective customer engagement?
16. **Amplifying the power of salespeople with digital assistants.** How can AI-based insights and recommendations increase salespeople’s effectiveness?
17. **Boosting talent management with digital.** How can digital capabilities make talent management for sales teams more marketing-sensing, agile, efficient, and effective?

12 The HBR Sales Management Handbook

18. **Managing a recurring revenue business.** As recurring revenue business models become increasingly common, what does it mean for sales management?

Finally, section 4, “Driving Improvement and Implementing Change,” brings management and digital impact together by exploring the dynamic nature of sales leadership and how you can bring continuous improvement to your team and navigate perpetual change. The chapters and key questions are:

19. **Continuously improving your business.** How can leaders prioritize, adapt, improve, and innovate to drive the long-term success of the business?
20. **Navigating sales force change.** How can sales leaders help the organization design, prepare for, implement, and sustain successful change?

Because of the immense variety of salespeople and customers, a manager’s job is fast-moving and fulfilling. There are no repetitive days or weeks. You’ll need to think creatively to address many of the situations you will face. You will interact with and influence your salespeople, your key customers, and colleagues inside your company daily. Your actions will have an impact on people and results. Your success will be visible.

As a sales leader, your job is vast in scope and dynamic in nature. The *HBR Sales Management Handbook* is not a list of silver bullets, nor is it an encyclopedia covering every aspect of sales leadership. Instead, this book is a collection of selected, time-tested yet also forward-looking ideas to help you win by helping your team and customers win. The topics balance the need to build and lead a team for company and customer success now, with the need to adapt as digital disruption changes sales and brings new opportunities for the future. This journey starts with you and your critical role in linking company strategy to execution.

SECTION ONE

Linking Sales Leadership to Execution and Results

1.

Why We Still Need Salespeople in a Digital World

With the growth of e-commerce and the buzz about digital and virtual, one can imagine a world where digital channels, self-service, and inside salespeople replace field salespeople. And without field salespeople, the thinking goes, there is no need for their managers. This all begs the question—do we still need salespeople (and managers of salespeople)?

It's true that the role of salespeople has been greatly reduced in some businesses. From 2005 to 2017, US pharmaceutical companies slashed one-third of their sales forces, while the use of digital information sources (email, podcasts, mobile apps, websites) grew. From 2014 to 2020, industrial supply distributor W.W. Grainger cut more than 40 percent of its branch locations and more than seven hundred outside sales jobs in the United States as it continued to boost investments in inside sales and digital sales channels. Meanwhile, many high-tech companies, such as Google and Amazon, actually grew their sales forces. In 2023 companies that prospered

16 Linking Sales Leadership to Execution and Results

with the help of thousands of salespeople in the United States alone included technology companies (e.g., Microsoft, Apple, Verizon, Salesforce), health-care companies (e.g., Thermo Fisher Scientific, Stryker, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson), and financial services and insurance providers (e.g., Citigroup, Edward Jones, Hartford Financial Services, Aflac). Innovative companies with complex products needed salespeople to thrive.

We're at an unprecedented moment, but at the same time, we've been here before. For more than a century we have seen predictions that salespeople are going away. In 1916 an article in the *New York Times* asked: "Are salesmen needless?" The article quoted an expert who said, "Advertising is producing better results than the old method of personal solicitation . . . The traveling [sales]man is a middleman, and the evolution of business is gradually eliminating the middleman." Yet sales force numbers kept growing.

Fast forward to 2015, when Forrester Research predicted that one million B2B salespeople would—lost to e-commerce—become obsolete by 2020. Since then, some companies have cut salespeople, but others added many more. Overall, sales force employment remained stable.

What *has* changed over the past hundred years is the *role* of the salesperson. Sales is an ancient profession; for centuries we have relied on salespeople to learn about new products. In the nineteenth century, buyers usually became aware of new offerings when a "traveling salesman" showed up at the door with a novel technology, like a clock or a sewing machine. The salesman helped the buyer understand the product and evaluate what to purchase. He then took the order and later fulfilled it by delivering the goods on wagon or horseback.

In the early twentieth century, advances in transportation, storage, and distribution largely took the task of the physical fulfillment of goods away from salespeople. In the late twentieth century, a proliferation of media options made buyers aware of products before talking to a salesperson. (Also around that time, "salesman" was replaced by "salesperson," reflecting gender diversity in the profession worldwide.) As innovation eliminated some of the job's responsibilities, new ones emerged and entirely new kinds of companies and industries formed. Throughout all

these developments, one aspect has remained constant: effective sellers add value for customers and their companies.

This chapter explores different types of sales roles, since what your salespeople do affects what you need to do as a sales manager and leader. Then the chapter discusses the timeless job of adding value, and concludes with insights about how salespeople can coexist and thrive alongside digital and virtual sales channels.

Types of sales jobs

When you are a salesperson, you are steeped in serving customers: planning for and prioritizing them, and then finding, engaging, and nurturing relationships with them.

Table 1-1 shows several examples of customer responsibilities for different sales roles and salespeople's expected results at four very different companies. (In chapter 2, we will see how the sales job at each of these companies leads to a complementary role for the manager.) Reflect on how these responsibilities and expectations overlap with those of salespeople at your company. And think about how the sales roles and responsibilities could or should change as the needs of customers, salespeople, and the business do.

The job descriptions in table 1-1 (and most such lists we see) don't explicitly mention responsibility for customer experience and value. We strongly recommend that you include these in your lists of responsibilities, and in the job description for sales managers too. Examples include creating a positive customer experience, helping customers better understand their needs and options, seeking customer feedback about needed improvements, and reinforcing how products and services add value to the customer's business.

Companies have many different sales roles (and even more titles), depending on their situation. A simple environment might have a single sales role that does everything, while more-complex situations typically have several sales roles working together. Here are some examples:

TABLE 1-1

Salespeople's responsibilities for customers and results

Company (Industry)	Sales role, customer responsibilities, and expected results
Amazon Web Services (Enterprise cloud services)	<p>Account executive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Own the full sales cycle, from identifying opportunities to building relationships to negotiating and contracting Understand solutions and connect that knowledge to customer ROI Proactively seek opportunities for expansion (upsell, add-on, cross-sell) Maintain customer relationships, prepare sales proposals, engage in sales activities Develop strategies and coordinate cross-functionally to help customers maximize value Achieve sales quota
W.W. Grainger (Industrial supplies)	<p>Field account executive</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify opportunities, negotiate sales, manage needs and cost requirements Be responsive to customers' real-time needs Use many communication methods to increase sales through all channels Achieve or exceed shared metrics of daily calls and customer face-time minutes Grow revenue to reported thresholds and meet performance targets
Liberty Mutual (Insurance)	<p>Sales agent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify prospects through existing book of business and community prospecting Use consultative sales techniques to drive new business Follow up with customers to keep retention high and find cross-selling opportunities Address customer concerns, coordinating with other departments to ensure quality service Meet monthly goals for new business sales
AstraZeneca (Pharmaceuticals)	<p>Sales representative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop and maintain in-depth market knowledge of your sales territory Educate and engage health-care professionals about clinical evidence, product profiles, and prescribing for patients Capitalize on opportunities using a variety of promotional and personnel resources, and analytics to meet local customer needs Drive performance and ensure sales forecasts and budgets meet or exceed expectations

- **Territory manager.** Develop business in a geographic territory (prospect, sell, and manage the ongoing customer relationships).
- **Business development manager.** Identify and pursue new business opportunities.
- **Account manager.** Nurture and grow relationships with existing customers.
- **Strategic account executive.** Manage relationships with the most important customers by leading a team of product, solution, and service specialists.
- **Sales engineer.** Work alongside account executives to understand customer needs and configure technically complex solutions.
- **Private banker.** Build and grow relationships with ultra-high-net-worth individuals.
- **Sales agent.** Promote a company's products as an off-roll commissioned seller who works for a third-party agency or as an independent contractor.
- **Channel account manager.** Develop and maintain relationships with channel partners.

While some of the roles above are field-based and others are purely remote (or inside), the reality is that technology has turned most traditional field sales roles into hybrid roles: selling in person while also using the phone and web to connect with customers. At the same time, technology has elevated the role and impact of inside sales. Leveraging technology, inside salespeople are selling complex products costing hundreds of thousands of dollars without ever meeting a customer physically.

How salespeople add value

Before you buy something unfamiliar, you will search for information to boost your knowledge and confidence. And even when buying familiar

20 Linking Sales Leadership to Execution and Results

things, you are likely to check if something new, better, or cheaper is out there, especially with expensive or high-stakes purchases. Business buyers are no different—they have questions at each step of their journey.

- When customers are defining their needs and want to discover the best solution:
 - What is my need or opportunity?
 - What are my options?
 - What are the benefits and costs of each option?
- When buyers and sellers must agree on a solution and terms:
 - Which sellers do I trust?
 - How do I get all the players on my team to agree on a solution?
- When customers want to get the most out of what they purchased:
 - What value did we realize?
 - How can I get continuing benefits from this and future purchases?

To answer these questions, buyers will search online, talk to peers, and turn to the various information channels that sellers provide, including salespeople themselves. A customer will choose to use a salesperson if that individual can answer one or more of their questions. They're especially likely to want help when the situation is complex, there is uncertainty, or complete answers are not readily apparent. Complexity occurs when products or services are multifaceted and customized, customers have heterogeneous needs, or buying processes involve many steps and stakeholders. Sometimes all these factors occur at once.

While salespeople can (and should) add value for customers in complex and uncertain situations, the company also gains value—not only because salespeople increase the likelihood of a sale, but also because they gain market and competitive insights.

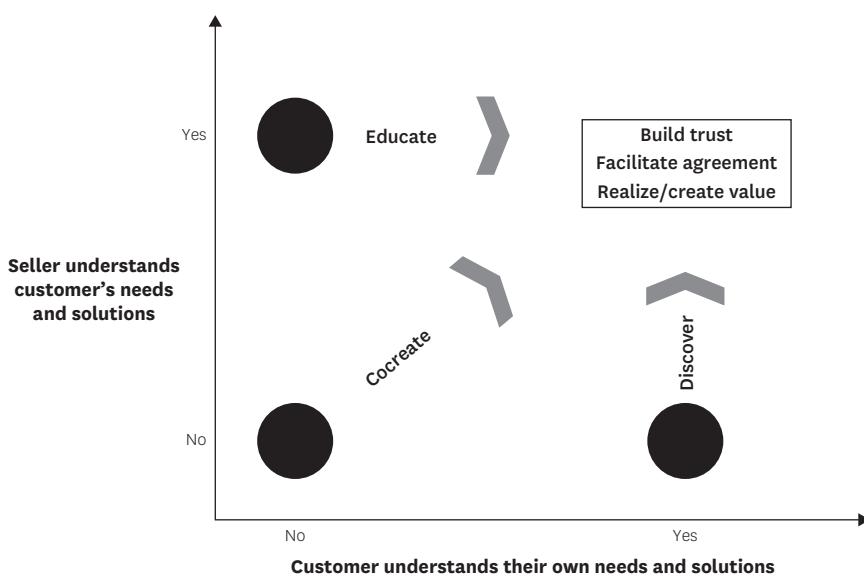
Defining buyers' needs and closing knowledge gaps

The path to a productive business relationship begins with sellers and buyers developing a shared understanding of what the buyer needs and how the seller can meet those needs. How salespeople close knowledge gaps depends on how well the customer understands their own needs and the possible solutions, as well as on how well the seller understands the customer. Figure 1-1 shows three situations in which knowledge gaps exist (there are many possibilities in between) along with additional steps salespeople must take even after those gaps have closed.

Next, we discuss how salespeople discover, educate, and cocreate to close knowledge gaps in the three cases when understanding is lacking on either or both sides. (The section after that covers salespeople's additional responsibilities once there is mutual understanding.)

FIGURE 1-1

How salespeople help pave a path to mutual buyer-seller value



DISCOVER. This is when buyers understand their need or opportunity and are seeking the best solution. An HR leader is looking for health insurance coverage for employees. A chief of staff is looking for a venue for an executive offsite. An architect is looking for the latest in lighting management solutions for a building still in drawings. In these cases, buyers have a reasonable idea of their needs. The requirements could be quite detailed, as is the case in a request for proposal (RFP), or defined more loosely, with room for suppliers to shape needs and solutions. Salespeople work to *discover* what the buyer wants, then help craft the answer.

Discovery involves a range of activities. These include probing to learn the customer's goals, knowledge, and budget, mapping the buyer organization to understand roles and authority, and observing and interpreting customers' nonverbal cues (facial expressions, change in posture, tone of voice) to gain a deeper understanding of their emotions, concerns, and motivations.

The best salespeople know their markets and keep their ears open. They get in on early conversations with buyers as an RFP is being formed, which allows them to help define the buyer's requirements, giving their company an edge in winning the deal. They help assess whether a deal is winnable, or if a competitor already has a lock on it (and the RFP is simply a way to keep the competitor honest). For winnable deals, salespeople shepherd the response, discover buyer influences and unspecified criteria, discern the competitive landscape, and coordinate the effort of their team members.

EDUCATE. This is when sellers have insights that buyers lack. John Deere is known for its farm and construction equipment, but it is also a leader in precision agriculture, a high-tech approach that uses real-time data about crops, soil, and air that is collected by sensors on the ground as well as by drones and satellites. Precision agriculture aids growers in making decisions about plant spacing and their usage of water, fertilizer, and pesticides to improve profitability and environmental sustainability. Deere's salespeople don't only sell equipment—in most cases they must also *educate* growers about the methods and benefits of precision agriculture.

Education often involves sharing knowledge with customers about what has worked (and not worked) in similar circumstances. It is also about bringing customers ideas for addressing needs that they haven't expressed or recognized, or aren't aware that a solution exists for.

Product innovation creates an ongoing need for salespeople to educate customers in numerous industries. It explains why cloud service providers such as Amazon Web Services and Microsoft have hefty sales forces. Players in the medical device industry, such as Boston Scientific and Medtronic, launch multiple products with novel features each year, sustaining the need for salespeople as educators.

COCREATE. This is when sellers and buyers work together to hunt for opportunities and solutions. Sometimes, both sellers and buyers are heading into unknowns. Cocreation requires problem solving, creativity, and resourcefulness. Companies with innovative offerings relish being in this situation, as it provides a great opportunity to partner with customers and accelerate innovation ahead of what competitors offer. For example, business technology providers often create novel offerings by inviting customers to participate in the design and testing process. If these pilots succeed, they may result in follow-on work and relationships that benefit both parties. To even get started on such *cocreation* efforts, a level of comfort and mutual trust must exist between the buyer and the seller. Salespeople are the ones tasked with earning and managing that trust.

Discovery, education, and cocreation are not all-or-nothing constructs. Both customers and salespeople can be somewhere along the spectrum of understanding needs and solutions. Plus, different decision-makers in a buying organization, as well as different participants from the selling organization, may be starting at different points.

Building trust, facilitating agreement, and realizing value

Whether you begin the buying and selling journey with discovery, education, cocreation, or some combination, the buyer and the seller must align on a solution. Salespeople play a key role in making this happen by

24 Linking Sales Leadership to Execution and Results

building trust, facilitating agreement, and helping both organizations realize value.

BUILDING TRUST. In B2B contexts, trust is the foundation for buyers and sellers to work together, especially when purchases are complex and high-stakes. Over time, trust is built by meeting commitments, but earlier in relationships salespeople are stewards of those commitments. Ethical behavior, competence, reliability, and credibility are essential to establish the trust that starts and sustains long and fruitful relationships. Emotional connections foster trust as well.

FACILITATING AGREEMENT. For most complex purchases, both buying and selling are team efforts. A timeless responsibility of salespeople is helping buyers and sellers come together. When our firm negotiated a global enterprise contract with a cloud services supplier, multiple parties were involved. On the supplier's side, there was an account executive (AE), a partner reseller account executive, and a customer success manager. Supporting them were a finance person, a sales manager, and systems architects. Our team was led by our vice president of cloud services and included a director of cloud services, a head of IT system engineering and operations, and a finance specialist. The supplier's AE played a critical role in aligning interests, connecting decision influencers with the necessary resources, and facilitating meetings to achieve consensus, resulting in a positive outcome for all involved parties.

Salespeople also help to harmonize thinking within their organization, since having different perspectives in the selling organization can delay deals. For example, a sales manager wants to craft an offering that maximizes the odds of winning the deal, the marketing manager is concerned about product mix, and the finance person pushes to maintain margins. The salesperson can advocate and broker agreement within their company to ensure that all parties are satisfied with the deal while the buyer perceives value.

CREATING/REALIZING VALUE. With many products and services, salespeople have a growing role in helping buyers get the most out of what they pur-

chase. Consider the role of clinical sales associates at Intuitive Surgical. These salespeople are responsible for helping surgeons “enhance their surgical precision and greatly improve patient benefits.” Clinical sales associates “drive utilization of the da Vinci® (Robotic Surgical) System by working with surgical teams to select appropriate procedure applications; [and] drive continuous expansion of the user base by working with key hospital staff and thought leaders to develop a qualified lead funnel,” according to the company. Positions such as this one require salespeople to largely work on-site at the hospitals they serve.

Often, mutual value for sellers and buyers accrues over time as the customer benefits and then continues and expands their purchasing. This has resulted in the expansion of roles such as a customer success manager (CSM), responsible for ongoing customer care and growth. An IT buyer at ZS describes the CSM role this way: “She brings ideas about how we can use her products better . . . Every month she spends a full day on-site with us. Every quarter we review our spending and look at other issues that are important to us. These include cost reduction, speed of handling critical problems, security, and the path forward.”

Bringing market and competitive insights to the company

Salespeople are on the front lines, working with customers every day to learn their preferences, pain points, and opportunities. They observe market trends and shifts in customer behavior firsthand. They learn about competitor offerings, pricing strategies, and sales tactics, and find out how customers react. By sharing these types of insights internally, salespeople help the organization improve products and services and create smarter strategies for differentiating offerings. Sales managers help to channel these on-the-ground insights back to the company.

Salespeople coexisting with digital and virtual sales channels

As the seller’s responsibility for helping customers address complexity and uncertainty persists, digital channels and inside sales are taking over many

of the tasks that field salespeople once performed. Yet while salespeople stay focused on the complex, they also need to team up with digital channels and inside sales to ensure customer needs are met.

The tasks moving away from field salespeople

Field salespeople are no longer “talking brochures” or order takers. Numerous simple customer-facing tasks once done by them have shifted to digital channels, self-service, and inside sales. Prospect identification and lead qualification is now handled largely by inside and digital resources. Websites, email, video, chatbots, and other tools have taken over sharing product information. Order-taking is moving online as well. In 2000 Dow Corning created Xiameter, a separate online business that sold standard silicones in large quantities with a fixed price and a specified minimum lead time. Salespeople were no longer in the equation. (Xiameter has since become a brand within Dow’s business.) Grainger’s Zoro (in the United States) and Mono-taRO (in Japan) are similar online-only distribution businesses, selling industrial supplies from an extensive catalog.

Leveraging digital and pivoting to hybrid engagement

While digital is replacing some field sales tasks, it is also assisting salespeople with the steps of selling. Customer relationship management (CRM) systems capture a buyer’s information, history, and preferences, helping salespeople personalize their approach. AI-based tools provide suggestions about which customers to target and which offering is most likely to resonate. Field salespeople use LinkedIn to build their network and engage with potential customers.

Field salespeople now mix in-person, virtual (video, phone, collaboration platforms), and text-based interactions with customers. Virtual outreach works well in many circumstances. These include when sellers and buyers have a trusting relationship, when buyers are highly motivated, and when offerings are differentiated. Virtual also works well early in the process, when buyers and sellers want to efficiently assess whether pursuing a relationship is worthwhile.

Customizing offerings to customer needs has always been part of a successful sales playbook. Now it's also about customizing communication modes, finding the right mix of face-to-face and virtual personal selling, along with digital outreach and customer self-service. Success requires tailoring interactions at each step to buyers' knowledge and preferences.

We started this chapter with a question: Do we still need salespeople in the digital age? Even as their responsibilities shift to complex situations and as hybrid engagement becomes the norm, salespeople are in no way becoming obsolete. The question we should be asking instead is: How can we enable them to work alongside digital to build increased customer value and trust? The next chapter will explore the role of managers in this new reality.