



The Future of Sales Teams:

Embracing the Customer Journey





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Here's a widely known yet controversial fact for you. The Internet has changed the way we shop. Full stop. It doesn't matter if you shop for groceries for your home or a multi-million dollar SaaS solution for your business. With the digital tools available on our phones and laptops, we practice different shopping behaviors than ten years ago. Namely, we use these tools to research products and services before contacting companies to purchase. If we don't find the information we are looking for, we move on to the next supplier.

The controversial part of this fact is that many B2B sales teams have not changed their sales process in response to our new shopping behaviors. They are not meeting leads and prospects where they are now nor providing relevant materials to shepherd them through this new buying journey.

Today's buyers are more educated than ever before. Sales teams are finding leads and prospects already fully engaged in the buying process. However, most B2B buyers still need a sales rep to get across the finish line. As a result, savvy B2B leaders have realized two things:

- ✓ Sales and marketing teams should no longer operate in silos.
- ✓ The traditional sales process must adapt to the modern buyer's journey.

When it comes to the future of B2B sales and marketing, we believe that teams must collaborate using customer-focused content to educate and engage buyers and enable sales reps to become successful closers at the right time and with the right messages.





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Today's B2B Buyer's Journey is Complex

In addition to the enhanced availability of digital research and shopping tools, most B2B sales cycles have become longer and more complex. Single touchpoint sales are rare. One recent study found that, on average, there are 31 touches involved before a B2B deal is closed. The B2B buying journey is also no longer linear. Instead, buyers engage in a cycle of research and information consumption, using self-service digital tools and internal review meetings, revisiting channels and information as needed until an in-person sales interaction is approved. This could happen simultaneously at multiple levels for the same product within one company.

Here's an example of the new B2B buying cycle. Gartner research finds that when B2B buyers consider a purchase, they spend only 17% of their time meeting potential suppliers. When buyers compare multiple suppliers, the time spent with a sales rep is only about 6%. More time is spent independently researching possible solutions and meeting with internal stakeholders. The typical decision-making group for a B2B solution involves six to ten decision-makers. Each decision-maker researches and finds four to five pieces of information and shares them with the group. At the same time, the set of options the group is considering may change as they discover new technologies, products, suppliers, and services and add them to the list. This is all happening before contacting a sales representative.

Needless to say, this complex process can be intimidating and frustrating for end users. Buyers value suppliers that make navigating the purchase process easier with high-quality and readily available information on their products. In fact, Gartner found that customers who thought the product information they received from suppliers was valuable were 2.8 times more likely to feel "purchase ease" and three times more likely to spend more money with less regret.

Sales Is Not the Only Channel Available to Customers

This new and more complex B2B buying process means that sales reps are not the only way new customers can choose a supplier. Sales is simply one channel. Some customers come to you entirely on their own through digital channels, even offline channels like events. Alignment across your marketing and sales teams is crucial for supporting customers in how they actually research and buy.

Traditionally, B2B marketing materials had a "pre-sales" focus. While there is still a need for marketing materials that address the top of the sales funnel, the new buying process also means that companies must provide marketing materials for the middle and end of the funnel. If there is no available information for prospects at these stages, they may never contact a sales rep to receive it. They'll move on to companies that do.



The Future of Sales Teams: Embracing the Customer Journey

When the Sales Team is not Aligned with Marketing

Let's be very specific about what can happen when a sales team's process is not aligned with the buyer's journey or their own marketing team. When the sales team operates independently, it can lead to several challenges and negative consequences for both the sales team and potential customers. Here are some of the common issues that can arise:

BUYER ISSUE:

Poor Customer Experience:

First and foremost, the supplier is not providing good customer service because they are not meeting the customer where they are. Prospects may feel pressured, frustrated, or overwhelmed if the sales process doesn't match their needs and pace. They might receive irrelevant information or offers at the wrong stage of their decision-making process.

SELLER ISSUE:

Wasted Resources:

The sales team might spend time and resources on leads that are not ready or qualified to buy, leading to inefficiencies. The marketing team can waste resources by generating leads that don't match the target customer.

BUYER / SELLER ISSUE:

Inconsistent Messaging:

Misalignment between marketing and sales can lead to inconsistent messaging across different channels, confusing potential customers and diminishing the brand's credibility.

SELLER ISSUE:

Difficulty in Sales Forecasting:

Forecasting sales and revenue becomes challenging when the sales process doesn't align with the buyer's journey, making it harder to predict when deals will close.

SELLER ISSUE:

Lost Sales Opportunities:

Misalignment can result in missed opportunities because potential customers may disengage or choose competitors who better understand their journey and provide more relevant materials. When a sales rep pushes for a sale before the lead is ready or doesn't provide the information a lead asks for, the customer may abandon the sales process.

BUYER / SELLER ISSUE:

Decreased Trust:

If potential buyers perceive the sales process as disconnected from their needs, trust in the supplier may erode. Buyers may question the authenticity and credibility of the sales team, making it harder to establish long-term customer relationships.

SELLER ISSUE:

Even Longer Sales Cycles:

Lack of alignment can extend the sales cycle as customers struggle to find the information they need or navigate a process that doesn't match theirs. Sales teams may encounter more resistance and objections due to the disconnect.

At SyncShow, we help clients update their sales process to align with their marketing teams' output to reflect their customer's buying journey better. We do this through a transparent review of their current sales process and the available marketing and sales materials. Then, we help them develop a new strategy that provides more relevant product content at critical buyer's touchpoints and better meets prospects and customers where they are.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Buyer's Journey Step 1: Problem Identification & Research

The buyer's journey starts when a B2B buyer recognizes a problem or need within their organization. The need could be triggered by factors like changes in market conditions, internal challenges, or new business opportunities.



Old Way:

Buyers began their journey by asking for referrals from people they know or tapping industry resources. They may attend an event or trade show to gather information. They may make some phone calls to potential suppliers to have product information sent to them. This stage has traditionally been the marketing department's responsibility, so much so that in many companies, the sales team has no idea what kind of content their marketing department produces or what the messages are.

The only time a traditional sales team may be involved in this stage is in the event of an event or trade show. In those cases, unique sales-related materials are created expressly for event attendees.



New Way:

Today, the buyer's journey usually starts with extensive online research using search engines, website reviews, social media recommendations, and content downloads. Content marketing, including blog posts, eBooks, and whitepapers, is crucial in educating and attracting buyers at this stage. The marketing department is still the driver of materials here. However, smart sales teams are collaborating with their marketing colleagues on messaging and calls-to-action, because they've realized just how critical this first step can be. After all, they know the target customer best.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Buyer's Journey Step 2: Buyer Engagement

The next step in the buying journey is engagement. During this phase, buyers refine their requirements and list potential solutions or vendors that might address their needs.



Old Way:

In the past, this was traditionally when a buyer would contact a sales rep for more information. Sales teams needed to be ready to provide more customized information and address specific questions.



New Way:

Today, many prospects are engaging the vendor through the website to start the engagement phase. If they like what they see, they go deeper, either by asking questions through a chatbot or a webform, downloading content such as in-depth articles or case studies, or making a phone call to the sales team. For some buyers, this process means deep involvement and one-to-one conversations with the vendor, and for others, this is a quick review and the buyer moves directly into the next phase, which is consideration.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Buyer's Journey Step 3: Consideration

During the consideration stage, buyers narrow down their list of vendors even further and dive deeper into each vendor's solution.



Old Way:

In the past, the consideration phase required an in-person needs assessment meeting where the sales team learned about the prospect's pain points and requirements for the solution they seek and provided initial information about their product.



New Way:

The buyer has talked to a sales rep and downloaded relevant content. They are now determining if the vendor is a possible solution partner. They may view a demo online independently of the product's sales team. Today, the consideration phase is often lengthened as buyers reevaluate and reconsider their initial problems when more stakeholders get involved. More research is done and the list of possible solutions changes as needs and budget change, all without input from a sales team.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Buyer's Journey Step 4: Evaluation

Finally, buyers are ready to request and review proposals and narrow down their choices.



Old Way:

In the B2B world, this is often the stage when more key stakeholders get involved. In the past, sales teams played a pivotal role in building those new relationships, providing personalized solutions, and demonstrating the value of their offerings. The evaluation process was very hands-on for sales teams, meaning they needed to be available for multiple meetings with different departments, often with completely different points of view on the product or service they were evaluating.



New Way:

In reality, not much has changed in this stage. There is no "new way". The old way still applies today. The buyer has narrowed down their list of potential vendors and are getting detailed proposals and quotes.

However, today's buyers are also looking for ways to reduce risk and gain more return for their investment from a vendor. As a result, they are asking really difficult questions and challenging each sales team to deliver more value. So, sales teams need to bring their A-game to the evaluation stage to showcase their company in the best light. Storytelling and having a strong value proposition are critical. If a sales team does not showcase how their solution provides the best value to a buyer, they end up competing on price and that is a race to the bottom.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Buyer's Journey Step 5 and 6: Confirmation and Commitment

In the final stages, the buyer chooses the solution they want, negotiates pricing, terms, and contracts, and seeks approval from all decision-makers. Sales professionals need strong negotiation skills and the ability to overcome objections.



Old Way:

Transactions involved significant paperwork, and the process was often manual and time-consuming.



New Way:

Today, many buyers never meet the sales team in person, and all paperwork is completed digitally. To be competitive, sellers need to streamline their sales process to make it easy for a buyer to do business with them.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Buyer's Journey Step 5 and 6: Confirmation and Commitment

It's also important for sales teams to consider more than pricing and perceived value of the product. The onboarding process, change management process, the systems in place to minimize downtime, and the ability to reduce risk are all of critical importance to the buyer, and therefore must be important to the seller.

These stages still require marketing and sales materials. Smart sales teams provide onboarding services and comprehensive user guides to support customers in using their solutions effectively.

While the buyer's journey has changed significantly for many B2B customers, the sales process has not, which causes friction between sales and customers and between sales and marketing teams.

Changes in the Traditional Sales Process

The sales process has also seen a shift in focus. In the past, sales teams followed their process instead of the buyer's journey. The traditional sales process was typically seller-centric, meaning it revolved around the actions and strategies of the sales team. It followed a linear and prescriptive path. The traditional sales process was bolstered with materials created by the sales team. The tactics used were very reactionary instead of proactive, meaning the process focused on handling objections and closing the deal instead of providing value to the customer. It was more transaction-focused instead of customer-focused.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Sales Process Step 1: Awareness



Old Way:

In the traditional sales process, sales teams depended on the marketing team to create awareness for their brand and drive sales leads to their inbox. They expected leads to be entirely up to date on the solutions they offer and ready, willing, and able to move forward in the purchasing process. While sales teams would further qualify leads after this first awareness stage, this first marketing outreach step required significant supplier time and resources before customers were sent to the sales team.



New Way:

As mentioned in the previous section, today's sales teams should be a part of the awareness building and outreach function to be competitive in the market today.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Sales Process Step 2: Lead Qualification and Conversion

The main objectives for this stage are to qualify the lead further and build a relationship.



Old Way:

This involved making the first sales outreach to the customer. The goal was to establish initial rapport and understanding of the lead's specific needs, pain points, and challenges. The traditional sales process was very hands-on and interactive, which few sales prospects want to engage in today.



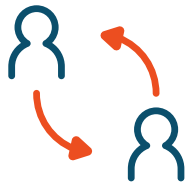
New Way:

Remember, only 17% of buyer time is spent talking to suppliers. In a different survey of 1,000 B2B buyers, Gartner found that **43%** preferred not to interact with a sales rep at all. You may say that today's complex business solutions require hands-on and personal sales interactions for customers to find what they need. Still, customers are telling us that they prefer to do much of the research themselves. They also prefer to use self-service tools like web forms and chatbots to provide the information necessary for qualification.



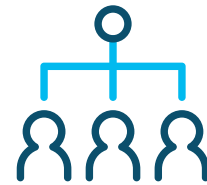
Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Sales Process Step 3: Proposal



Old Way:

The next step in the traditional sales process was providing a proposal to the buyer. The goal was to become the recommended choice for the lead to take back to their internal decision-makers. The sales team demonstrated the value and benefits of a product or service through presentations and product demos.



New Way:

Today, even when leads interact with sales teams at this stage, they may take the recorded demos and proposal to decision-makers without the sales team answering questions and providing additional insights.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Sales Process Step 4: Objection Removal



Old Way:

In the past, sales teams were given the chance to address objections or barriers to sale through interactive Q&A sessions and updated proposal submissions.



New Way:

Today's buyers are doing their own research on overcoming those objections and making their own decisions on moving forward. A salesperson may be unable to interact with decision-makers regarding barriers to sale until it's too late.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Sales Process Step 5: Agreement



Old Way:

The traditional sales process ended with a sale. An agreement is reached, money exchanges hands and the sales team moves on to the next lead. There may be some follow-up to gather customer testimonials and other information to create new sales materials.



New Way:

Smart sales teams know that this is just the beginning of a lucrative and successful customer relationship. They use this time to provide outstanding customer service, implementation assistance, extra perks and more so that the customer becomes a loyal ambassador for the brand.

The very structured and precise traditional sales process is not conducive to the variable and lengthened present-day buyer's journey. It focuses on making a sale rather than a customer. A new B2B sales process is necessary to meet prospects where they are and build long-term customer engagement.

Today's Integrated Sales & Marketing Cycle

We urge our clients to align their sales and marketing processes with their customers' buying journey. The new buyer's journey is a continuous cycle, meaning that it never ends. It continues throughout the life of the customer. We help them create meaningful touchpoints for this new cycle, leveraging all their available communication channels, both online and offline. We give them tools and metrics to check performance all along the way. Our team will also assist our clients in creating relevant sales and marketing materials to enhance the buyer's journey and the sales process. Here's what a client's new integrated sales and marketing funnel might look like.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Integrated Sales and Marketing Cycle Stage 1: Lead Generation

Instead of relegating this to one team, both teams work together to find qualified sales leads. The first step in integrating these functions is developing detailed buyer personas that help both teams tailor strategies and messaging to resonate with a specific audience. This aligns and centers all activities around the customer instead of the product or the team function.

Lead generation is accomplished using content marketing, social media, email marketing, digital and traditional advertising, SEO, trade shows, networking, and cold calling. Required channels include an optimized website, active social media accounts, an email list, trade association memberships, and an engaged sales team. The goal is to provide valuable digital content, resources, or incentives in exchange for lead contact information. Content can include eBooks, whitepapers, case studies, user videos, and thought leadership content. Dedicated landing pages with clear and compelling CTAs encourage visitors to fill out lead capture forms and receive their content. The integrated sales and marketing team collects the visitor's information and starts the next phase of the customer journey.

Integrated Sales and Marketing Cycle Stage 2: Lead Nurturing and Management

The lead nurturing and management begins once a lead's information is captured. First, a lead must be scored and qualified for purchase. Not all leads are equally valuable; some may be more sales-ready than others. Assigning a lead score based on engagement and behavior prioritizes which leads are more likely to convert into customers. Also, segmenting leads based on budget, needs, preferences, or industry will further inform the team's messaging so that sales and marketing materials are more engaging and relevant, increasing the chances of conversion. Timing is also a consideration. Different segments of leads may be at various stages of the buyer's journey. Segmentation helps the team send the right content at the right time, ensuring they are not overwhelming leads with information they're not ready for or missing opportunities to nurture leads prepared to move forward. The number of leads collected at this stage is an indication of success. Another good metric measures the number of leads collected and converted per channel, which helps teams understand which channel performs best.

This stage focuses on personalized marketing and selling strategies both online and offline. Email is a common channel, as well as good old human contact like sales calls and product demos. Content is highly customized to the lead and their needs and could include case studies, comparison materials, sales collateral, and personalized webinars and presentations. By the end of the lead nurturing phase, all leads should be wholly engaged in their buyer's journey and ready to make a purchase decision. This is your metric for success.



Updating the Traditional Buyer's Journey

Integrated Sales and Marketing Cycle Stage 3: Sales Conversion

The tactics involved in this stage include performing a personalized customer needs assessment, addressing objections and barriers, providing requested data, analytics, and more, and creating customized proposals and pricing. There is still considerable relationship building and nurturing during this stage as more stakeholders become involved. The team may need to deliver multiple proposals and presentations to prospects customized to specific stakeholders' needs. Good sales and marketing teams also start the long-term customer nurturing process at this stage with content and resources that make implementing the solution easier for the customer once they've decided to purchase.

Integrated Sales and Marketing Cycle Stage 4: Post-Purchase

Integrated sales and marketing teams stay in touch with customers and nurture the relationship further so that customers purchase more from them in the future. This is critical to the success of any B2B company because it is significantly less expensive to keep an existing customer than to find a new one. Also, the ongoing sales cycles are shorter and likely more successful.



A Case Study

Our client, CDS, came to us to drive online engagement, build resilience, expand their business model, generate leads, and achieve growth. After analyzing their sales process, we saw an opportunity to improve their online visitor-to-customer conversion rate by aligning their marketing and sales teams' functions to their specific customer buyer's journey. We recommended analyzing factors such as website design, marketing and sales content, the user experience, and their alignment with customer expectations. By implementing strategies to optimize these aspects and provide compelling incentives, the team was confident that CDS would increase their overall conversion rates and achieve higher success in converting digital visitors into paying customers.

The goals for our first year of working together were:

- Enhance the CDS website with comprehensive UX/UI and SEO strategies to increase brand awareness and user engagement.
- Create marketing cycles for transactional and contractual buyers that showcase educational content in editorial and video mediums and enhance the buyer's journey.
- Create and maintain a content generation rhythm and process for consistent and ongoing lead generation and personalized lead nurturing.

In other words, we aligned and optimized the sales process with the digital buyer's journey that prospects were already taking. Our strategy led to a remarkable 9.29% increase in average page per session and a 36.83% growth in Contact Us page views. The Contact Us page form became CDS' highest attribution source, with more than 200 form submissions. With new HubSpot-powered marketing automation, we also improved customer management and automated marketing processes. This included a 22.93% increase in LinkedIn followers, reflecting CDS' expanding online presence and industry influence.

This is just the beginning of CDS' new sales story. We aim to help them achieve a consistent 10% annual growth rate for the next three years. Our commitment to developing integrated sales and marketing strategies and compelling value proposition messaging will sustain the positive momentum CDS has achieved so far.





Wrapping it Up



The customer buying journey has become a continuous cycle instead of a linear funnel. Customers no longer follow a strict linear path from awareness to purchase. They engage with brands and products across multiple online and offline touchpoints. They enter the buying journey at various stages and may come and go several times before making a purchase decision. Some may start with product research, while others may be triggered by a specific need or a recommendation from a peer. The Internet has provided customers with easy access to vast amounts of information. They can research products, read reviews, compare options, and gather insights at any point during their journey. They are willing to do their own research without the help of a salesperson. Content marketing like blogs, videos, and webinars provides ongoing value to customers throughout their buying journey.

And the customer journey doesn't end at the point of purchase. Post-purchase stages, such as onboarding, customer support, and loyalty programs, contribute to the ongoing relationship between the customer and the supplier. This post-purchase relationship is critical to the success of any brand.

In this continuous cyclical customer buying journey, the focus shifts from simply converting leads to building long-term customer relationships. To succeed in this evolving landscape, brands must be agile, adaptable, and customer-centric. By aligning marketing and sales efforts and ensuring that leads are receiving the product information at the right time and in the right format, a B2B brand will maximize its revenue potential. Effective collaboration between the two departments is essential for a successful growth strategy. It helps create a cohesive customer experience, optimizes lead conversion, and fosters a culture of collaboration within the organization. Understanding the dynamic nature of the journey and providing value throughout the entire process is essential for modern businesses.