

The Importance of Sales Enablement in B2B Marketing Strategies

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Abstract

This paper examines the rapidly changing, competitive landscape of B2B sales and the challenges this environment presents to marketing and sales teams. In light of this, the paper reflects on the need for these two functions in a business to be aligned in how they communicate their company's value to deliver a seamless buying experience to their customers. This alignment is rooted in developing marketing strategies with a strong consideration for sales enablement, defined as the processes that empower sellers to optimize the sales cycle in every interaction with customers.

To form a sound thesis around this topic, research on the sales enablement space was conducted across several databases. This research was based in several studies that can be further categorized by the following three subtopics: the B2B market, how sales and marketing teams can be more aligned through sales enablement and measuring the effectiveness of sales enablement through revenue as the main KPI.

In conclusion, marketing is able to arm sellers with the right content at the right time when communicating with buyers through sales enablement efforts. When sales professionals are empowered to offer hyper-relevant content at the appropriate time in the deal cycle, the cycle itself is accelerated—positively impacting revenue. Since revenue is a key performance indicator of a successful marketing strategy, sales enablement should be not only a key component, but a priority for marketing teams who operate in the evolving B2B landscape.

1.0 Introduction and Discussion of Topic

1.1 The B2B Landscape

It's worth noting that a business to business (B2B) sales cycle is much longer and more involved than the average business to consumer (B2C) cycle. Accordingly, 74.6% of B2B sales cycles take at least 4 months to close, and nearly half (46.4%) can last upwards of 7 months, see Figure 1.

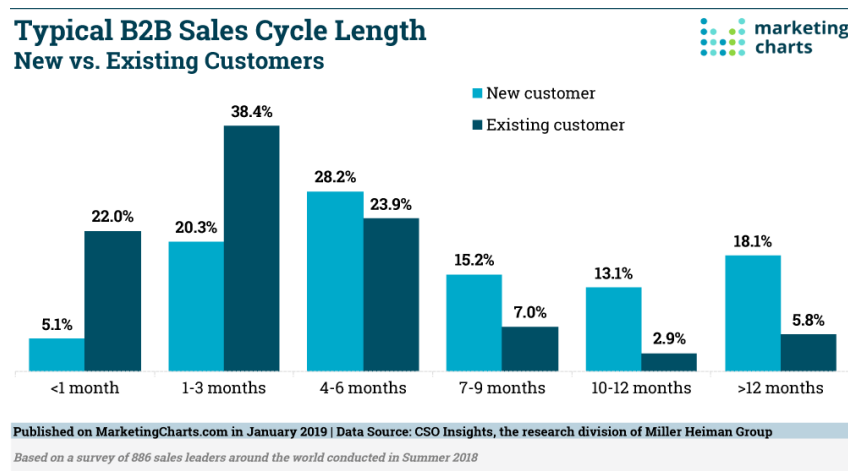


Figure 1 Typical B2B Sales Cycle Length, further segmented by new vs. returning customers (Warren-Payne, 2019)

Additionally, there are many more stakeholders who play a part in the decision-making process and there is strong competition amongst industry players. It's also important to consider that there are many solutions available in the market to solve any one business problem, and the challenge facing both sales and marketing teams, in this ultra-competitive landscape, is to explain how their solution can better perform over others by providing unique value to the customer.

1.2 Sales Perspective

In the digital age, the salesperson is no longer the “expert in the room.” The consumer has access to a wealth of information about solutions on the market at their fingertips, made possible by the Internet. As they have become more informed, the buyer is much more independent and in

control of their decisions. Research in a 2022 Gartner study shows that 43% of B2B buyers (and 54% for millennial buyers) prefer a “seller-less” buying experience where the salesperson plays a very minimal role in the process (Gartner, 2022). Furthermore, Highspot’s State of Enablement reported that 43% of executive leaders note that buyers prefer a digital-first experience (Highspot, 2022). According to Insight in 2015, “As customers grow more independent, sales must leverage marketing content to become indispensable.” Sales is faced with a unique challenge to endorse marketing’s messaging and continue value-adding conversations with a buyer who is more knowledgeable about possible solutions than they once were.

1.3 Marketing Perspective

Simply put, marketing’s job in the B2B equation is to create content and messaging that conveys their solution’s value. Oftentimes, their key performance indicator (KPI) is their campaign’s impact on revenue. Their challenge is that they’re rarely (if ever) face to face with the buyer and have limited to no control over how and when the sales pitch can be made. As eloquently put by Shaffer in *Pharma*, “Marketing must find ways to organize and provide access to the right content at the right time yet allow sales to be the primary (physician) interface,” (2010).

1.4 Bridging the Gap Between Marketing and Sales

In large businesses, departments can become siloed and there can be far too often a gap between the sales and marketing functions. Ironically, both teams have the same goal— to increase revenue. Marketing is pushing out content outlining their solution’s value, hoping to resonate with potential buyers. Sales, who is actually in contact with customers, may not be using the most relevant and up-to-date marketing content (or even be aware of its existence).

This is a major error in the integrated marketing communication (IMC) strategy. It permits sales to continue to put content and messaging in front of potential customers that may not be resonating with them—failing to “speak the buyers’ language” and meet them where they are in their long and arduous B2B buyers’ journey. It’s a constant struggle between both sides of the house—“Sales teams want more quality content and content marketers want the customer access that sales teams have daily.” (Pophal, 2016)

To drive revenue, sales and marketing must be aligned to work together like a well-oiled machine. As the interface between marketing and the buyer, it’s imperative that sales teams use marketing’s messaging and curated content to align with the buyer and their specific needs. This is where sales enablement comes into the equation and can have a powerful impact on a company’s business outcomes.

1.5 Sales Enablement

Sales enablement is a relatively new concept, and it can have different meanings for different companies (Britton, 2021). It can be formerly defined as “a strategic, ongoing process that equips all client-facing employees with the ability to consistently and systematically have a valuable conversation with the right set of customer stakeholders at each stage of the customer’s problem-solving life cycle to optimize the return on investment of the selling system,” (Krauss, 2011). In simple terms, sales enablement is ensuring that sellers have the right content in hand at the right time to have productive conversations with their buyers.

Sales enablement, although not necessarily a direct marketing function, is a key component of a successful B2B marketing strategy because of how the alignment of sales and marketing teams can impact revenue.

2.0 Literature Review and Theory

2.1 B2B Market

A Gartner survey in 2022 analyzed the market changes affecting B2B sales. As mentioned in the introduction, a large number of B2B buyers lean into the digital aspects of the buying process and therefore, rely less on sales reps than they once were. Although nearly all buyers engage a sales rep at some point before purchasing, only 24% of transactions in a primarily sales representative-led purchase were considered a high-quality deal, while the remaining 65% self-navigated the process.

Gartner suggests that in light of this trend, a positive buying experience for the customer is not necessarily directly attributed whether the sale was led by a sales representative or digital-led. Rather, their satisfaction is attributed to the self-reflection that took place during the buying process and they are 1.47 times more likely to buy when experiencing self-reflective learning.

This research reviews the role of the sales person in the buying process. As their role is more consultative than before, their interactions with buyers require a more personalized approach to contribute to that experience of self-reflection. This emphasizes the need to deliver content that aligns with what they discovered in their self-exploration and provide an experience that is hyper-relevant (Costello and LoDolce, 2022).

A 2021 paper in the *Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management* by Bongers, Schumann, and Schmitz further explores the effect of e-commerce on the B2B market. This paper conjectures that the introduction and popularization of digital sales channels presents a unique opportunity for salespeople to reallocate their resources toward strategic and more personal channels. The authors also identify the need for heightened “sales empowerment” for sellers in a digital era as the skillset required to have productive, consultative conversations with

buyers that will drive deal cycles forward is much higher when the base level of knowledge is obtained through the internet (Bongers et al, 2021)

The research around the current B2B landscape, shaped by the heavily digital environment in which we work, suggests that although sales representatives are less often called upon by buyers in the early stages of their journey, such as need recognition and evaluating available solutions. The sales representative has a unique opportunity in the later stages of the buying process to present a very personal and consultative interaction between the vendor and the buyer.

2.2 Sales and Marketing Alignment

Sandeep Pal (2018), Chief Marketing Officer of Citrix's APJ region, explores how the alignment of sales and marketing is evolving in synchrony with the changing B2B landscape. Pal explains the changing role of sellers in the digital world described in the introduction, noting that the seller has evolved from "being the gatekeeper to being the guide" in the buying process when most of the information the buyer seeks in the early stages of his journey are accessible on the Internet. He concludes that the relationship with the customer is now a "handoff" between sales and marketing.

Michael Kraus (2019), president of the market Strategy Group, analyzes the sentiments of several C-level executives leading the enablement initiatives at their respective organizations. Particularly, the organizations surveyed were UPS, Blackboard, and Corporate Visions. The consensus, according to Krauss, was that these executives "believe in using sales enablement to align messages, reduce distractions and build common ground between marketing and sales," (2019). As these examples suggest, the impact of sales enablement can be profound at organizations of any size. UPS reports that their sales enablement tools have positively impacted

revenue growth, while at Corporate Visions, sales enablement has helped refine their value proposition that they bring customers. All three executives agree that “bridging the gap between sales and marketing starts by empowering sellers.” (2019).

Research around the changing relationship between sales and marketing suggests a need for sales enablement functions within a business in order to drive a business forward.

2.3 Revenue as a KPI

In Sandeep Pal’s 2018 paper, he also explores how companies can measure the effectiveness of sales and marketing alignment. He suggests that revenue is the main indicator of a strong alignment between the two functions. Pal also believes that there are a number of KPIs at all stages of the marketing funnel that can be used to measure the marketing function’s effectiveness amongst the changing market--from unique visits to their page down to pipeline dollars and conversions (Pal, 2018).

Furthermore, CSO Insights, Miller Heiman Group’s research group, found in a study that companies who have invested in and implemented sales enablement functions win more than companies that don’t—their margin of success is 10.2% when analyzing revenue plan attainment. They also discovered that companies with a formal enablement function see 63% of their sellers reach annual quota, compared to those lacking the function at 50% (Matthews, 2016).

Research around the topic suggests that revenue is the main key performance indicator that is used to determine the effectiveness of sales enablement efforts.

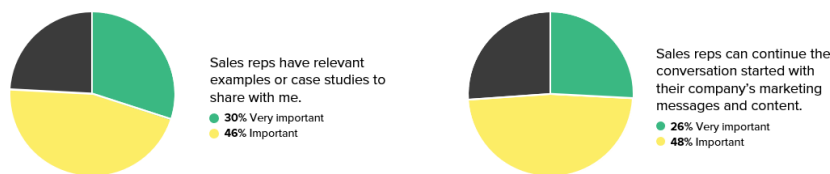
3.0 Evidence

3.1 Sales Enablement: the Right Content at the Right Time

As mentioned in the introduction, salespeople often stick to what they know. They use the same collateral that's worked for them in the past. They use the same talk tracks and same messaging when speaking to potential customers. With deal cycles that are so complex, it is not enough to have one, impersonal approach. Different buyers have different needs, and even the same buyer will resonate with different collateral and messaging at different stages in their buyers' journey.

From the buyers' perspective, they're often inundated with content from salespeople. It wouldn't be uncommon to be in conversation with more than one company at one time, and the sheer volume of content being sent their way can be overwhelming. It is critical that the content that sales people are sending buyers is impactful and worth their while to read. According to Forrester's 2021 Content Preference Study, it is important to buyers' that salespeople are equipped with case studies and examples that are relevant to them and can expand on the messaging put forth by marketing (See Figure 2).

Sales Reps Play An Integral Role In Content Marketing Success



Base: 655 technology buying decision-makers at global enterprises
Source: Forrester Content Preferences Study, October 2021

Figure 2 Sales reps and the success of content marketing (Phua, 2022)

Sales enablement platforms have the capability to analyze past data from the CRM to determine which pieces of collateral were effective in driving deals forward. They also can pick up on data points such how the content performed with respect to the buyers' role, industry, and stage in the deal cycle. Using AI, the platform can serve up the right content to sellers at the right time—all based on data. The seller is now equipped with the most relevant content to speak the buyers' language.

3.2 Impact on Revenue

When sellers are armed with the right content, they're able to close more deals and close them faster. According to Highspot's 2022 State of Enablement Report, organizations who have enablement efforts in place have shown a 12pt increase in win rates (Highspot, 2022).

Additionally, their research has shown that companies who have had enablement processes in place for longer than 2 years have an average win rate of 50%--a 7-percentage-point improvement when compared to their win rates prior to enablement (Highspot, 2022).

Furthermore, in many organizations, a few high-performing salespeople bear the burden of quota while under-performing team-members ride the coattails of their success. Figure 3 outlines the imbalance of quota attainment in a sales organization pre-sales enablement.

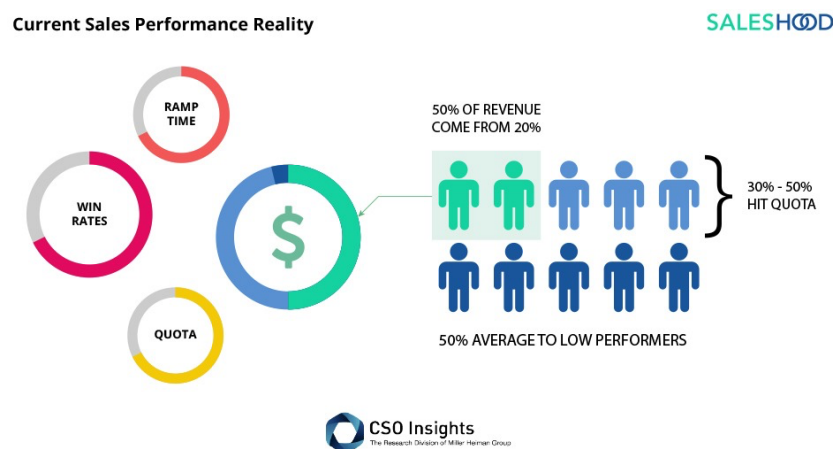


Figure 3 Sales performance reality prior to enablement efforts (Cohen, 2022)

Through the data analysis of content performance as part of sales enablement, the selling motions of the high-performing people can be replicated for the rest of the team—enabling everyone to succeed and meet quota, further impacting revenue. Seismic, a leader in the space, reports that their customer’s new reps have brought in 65% more revenue since implementing their enablement solution (Seismic, 2022).

3.3 Measuring Marketing’s Effectiveness

As according to the research done by Pal and CSO Insights, the number one metric to measure the impact of sales and marketing alignment and sales enablement is revenue. In Pal’s research, he also highlights that pipeline (measured in dollars) and conversions are strong KPIs to measure “the performance of the modern marketing engine” in the new B2B buying era (Pal, 2018). Although revenue is typically a sales KPI, Pal’s research suggests that the metrics that impact revenue, pipeline and conversion rate, are ultimately owned by marketing. As a result, a successful marketing strategy with positive pipeline and conversion KPIs will have a positive impact on revenue, thanks to the alignment between sales and marketing.

3.4 Implementing Sales Enablement in Marketing Strategies

It’s clear that prioritizing sales enablement efforts can have an immense impact on revenue. If marketing’s bottom line is to increase revenue, it would be remiss to not incorporate sales enablement efforts in their strategy. Creating effective content is not enough in today’s selling environment; marketing must also ensure that their messages are being communicated in a way that is buyer-centric and hyper-relevant.

Conclusion

The research in this paper suggests a strong relationship between prioritization of sales enablement in B2B marketing strategies and positive revenue growth. Because of the correlation between the two, revenue can be used as a strong KPI by which to assess the alignment between sales and marketing functions and the marketing communication strategy at large.

When sales enablement efforts are at play, an organization effectively breaks down siloes between marketing and sales for a more collaborative go-to-market effort. As a result, sales and marketing can deliver a more cohesive and resonant experience to the buyer—playing in their favor when trying to sell their solution in the saturated B2B competitive landscape.

When marketing prioritizes sales enablement efforts in their communication strategies, it has the potential to change the B2B buying process. Perhaps even in a digital world where information is easily accessible, buyers will lean into sales representatives more than they have been in recent years. Sales teams, when supported by sales enablement efforts, can provide consultative guidance that supplements the marketing materials available on the Internet. The salesperson is empowered to communicate with the buyer to complement their self-guided buying behaviors and pick up where mass marketing communication efforts leave off.

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