

**Marketing**

# **Traditional B2B Sales and Marketing Are Becoming Obsolete**

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**Summary.** Long the elusive objective of virtually every B2B commercial team, the time for sales and marketing “integration,” has passed. Instead, the most progressive B2B commercial organizations are completely reconfiguring commercial operations to better address... [more](#)

Most B2B sales and marketing teams typically function in a “serial,” or linear manner. Marketing engages prospective buyers early in their purchase journey, qualifying their readiness and fit for sales rep engagement through digital “content nurturing.” Once those leads have been designated “marketing qualified,” individual sellers take over, pursuing those leads through in-person or virtual interactions. In the middle is the “handoff,” where marketing passes the baton to sales, and online customer engagement gives way to in-person customer engagement.

Even in more advanced “account-based marketing approaches” those linear “physics” remain largely unchallenged. First the marketing, then the sales. Or, more accurately, first scaled digital engagement, followed by targeted seller interaction. And the decades-long pursuit of tighter “sales and marketing integration” has centered on progressing deals along that journey as “seamlessly” as possible, eliminating “friction” and aligning metrics, data, and sometimes even incentives and reporting structures to ensure the handoff from digital to human selling is as efficient as possible.

## The rise of digital B2B buying

For years, however, B2B buying has dramatically evolved to a far more digitally dominant buying behavior, rendering much of that commercial model not only out of date, but nearly obsolete.

Consider the following data from Gartner research: In a pre-pandemic survey of 750 B2B customer stakeholders involved in complex “solutions” purchase within their organization, customers reported spending only 17% of their total buying time interacting directly with supplier sales teams. Instead, much of their purchase activity comprised independent learning online (27%), independent learning offline (18%), and building consensus across a wide range of internal and partner stakeholders (22% and 11% respectively).

As small as it is, however, that 17% of purchase activity allocated to supplier interaction (both virtual and in-person), represents *all* suppliers, not each supplier. So, if three suppliers are competing for the same opportunity, one can assume customers divide that time roughly equally across all three, leaving any given sales team with a vanishingly small window of opportunity to interact directly with that customer — perhaps 5% or 6% of total buying time if they are lucky.

For many sales leaders, that dramatically small window of direct interaction represents the single biggest challenge their sales teams face today, an overall lack of access — and therefore lack of opportunity — to materially impact purchase deliberations and bend customer preference toward their company’s unique offering.

As one head of sales put it, “We have very few ‘at bats’ to actually influence customer buying behavior.” Put another way, today’s typical B2B buying journey leaves supplier sales teams very little “surface area” for actual selling.

### **Multi-channel buying**

Instead, today’s B2B buyers rely heavily on digital information to support progress across their entire buying journey. In a survey of over 1,000 B2B buyers engaged in a complex purchase, respondents reported using digital channels — particularly the supplier’s own website — with nearly equal frequency as the supplier’s sales reps to gather the information necessary to complete a range of buying “jobs,” e.g., Problem Identification, Solution Exploration, Requirements Building, and Supplier Selection. Ultimately, customers have become largely agnostic regarding where they find the information necessary to advance purchase deliberations.

In this sense, for sales leaders seeking to “regain customer access,” it turns out customers never really wanted seller access in the first place. Instead, they sought out sales conversations not for the sake of the conversation itself, but as a practical means to acquire the information necessary to complete a specific set of buying jobs. Now that much of that information is available online, sales reps are no longer *the* channel to customers, but *a* channel to customers. And customers are “voting with their feet,” leaving

many sales reps struggling to provide sufficiently unique value to merit the additional time and effort of person-to-person sales interactions.

Despite individual sellers' struggle to remain relevant, however, organizational leaders will find in customers' channel agnostic buying behavior a critically important lesson for future commercial success: Helping today's B2B buyers buy isn't a sales challenge, nearly so much as an *information* challenge (or, alternatively, an information opportunity). The companies that best provide customers the information they most urgently seek, specifically through the channels they most clearly prefer, are in a far better position to drive commercial success in today's rapidly evolving digital commercial landscape.

### **Preference for a rep-free experience**

When asked, many B2B buyers of complex solutions express a strong preference for a purchase experience free of sales rep interactions altogether. In a survey of nearly 1,000 B2B buyers, 43% of surveyed respondents agreed that they would prefer a rep-free buying experience. When cut by generation, 29% of Baby Boomers preferred to buy solutions without rep involvement, while remarkably over half of Millennials, 54%, expressed the same sentiment. Clearly, both practical experience and data driven evidence indicates a potentially dramatic generational shift in customer engagement preferences across the coming five to ten years.

In fact, taken to an extreme, one might conclude the “death of sales” is nigh. That interpretation of the data, however, appears unrealistic. On the one hand, commercial leaders argue that many complex solutions require a certain level of collaborative customization necessitating human interaction, effectively rendering sales reps “essential workers” in B2B buying. Simultaneously, most would equally agree that current B2B buying experiences are nowhere near robust, nuanced, or advanced enough to support customers preferring to buy completely on their own.

Still, just because today’s customers *can’t* buy complex solutions without sales rep involvement doesn’t mean that they wouldn’t prefer to do so if it were possible. In that sense, what’s most dramatic about this data is the degree to which suppliers and customers are increasingly out of sync regarding how they’d prefer to interact. Simply put, suppliers aren’t selling the way many customers prefer buying. And that “preference gap” leaves suppliers increasingly exposed to the risk of a competitor or disruptor finding a way to bridge that gap in new and creative ways — much as taxi drivers found their business nearly decimated when they were unable or unwilling to close a similarly large gap between rider preference and rider reality.

### **The “Unified” Commercial Engine**

What do shifting buying behaviors have to do with organizational structure? Everything.

While once a relatively accurate proxy for the underlying buying behavior it was meant to approximate, the serial commercial engine is hopelessly out of date — and dangerously out of sync — with how today’s B2B buyers buy. In today’s B2B buying journey, there is no single “handoff” from digital to in-person (or, for that matter, from marketing to sales). Today’s buyers are not only channel agnostic in terms of behavior, they’re digitally dominant in terms of preference.

As a result, customers may seek sales rep input early in a deal to explore solutions but return to digital to build requirements.

Later, as additional stakeholders become involved, they may revisit — possibly even rethink — their initial problem altogether, leading them to then re-evaluate, or even reconsider potential solutions, all both with and without sales rep involvement along the way.

In world like this, simply “aligning” sales to marketing to ensure a seamless “handoff” as a deal “progresses” along a linear buying “process” represents a woefully inadequate solution to a radically new buying reality (similar to a taxi driver hanging an air freshener in the back of their cab and hoping they’ve somehow “fixed” an otherwise deeply flawed rider experience).

What’s the alternative? In the words of Jenna Pipchuk, former head of sales at SMART Technologies, the answer is to “rebuild it from the ground up.”

## **The case of SMART Technologies**

Based in Calgary, Canada, SMART Technologies is a provider of hardware and software solutions to educators around the world.

Eighteen months ago, as the world headed into a global pandemic, commercial leaders hunkered down to weather the storm. Led by Jenna Pipchuk, head of sales, and Jeff Lowe, head of marketing, the team at SMART, however, opted for a completely different tack. Having observed the same shifts in their own B2B buyers, Jeff and Jenna were acutely aware of the growing misalignment between how they were selling and how their customers were buying. The result was not only missed opportunities to drive engagement and growth with both existing and prospective customers, but also costly and inefficient duplicative efforts around messaging, analytics, and even technology housed in traditional silos that no longer made logical sense.

Recognizing the limitations of simply “better aligning” their commercial functions, however, the team completely dismantled traditional sales, marketing, success, and service altogether and reconfigured them into what SMART calls the “Unified Commercial Engine” (UCE). Unlike traditional silos, mapped to internal processes, the UCE is built back from a careful mapping of customers’ buying journeys across a range of predictable “jobs to be done” as part of a typical educational technology purchase.

Through that initiative the team identified five common buying jobs (Learn, Buy, Order/Install, Adopt, Support) and established an internal team specifically deployed to support each one,

reassigning nearly every member of legacy marketing, sales, service, and success staff as a result. In all, over 250 team members received new job designations as part of the process.

In addition, SMART created three centers of excellence, where they consolidated otherwise duplicative efforts across traditional functional boundaries, one for data and analytics, and one for customer insights and positioning, and one for creative and digital experience.

Finally, the team then deployed their staff in geographically aligned “pods,” where each pod contains members supporting each of the respective five buying jobs. So, the pod for the southeast United States, for example, is made up of combination of individuals tasked with supporting the entire range of customer jobs from Learn to Support across all relevant digital and in-person channels (including third-party distribution).

Pods are managed by a brand new UCE dashboard, comprising a range of metrics spanning traditional marketing, sales, and service activity. Each pod leader is then tasked with helping the team ensure that SMART provides buyers in that geography with whatever support they might require, through whichever channel, at whatever time, on whatever job.

The results of the effort have been dramatic. In 18 months, lead volume is up 50%, lead acceptance has increased 35%, and most dramatically, year-over-year growth stands at an incredible 48%, all during a global pandemic. Jenna and Jeff, meanwhile

introduce themselves today as “the former head of sales” and the “former head of marketing,” simply because, in their words, they no longer have sales and marketing. They have the Unified Commercial Engine.

It is a disruptive and challenging journey, to be sure, but SMART’s story is a fantastic example of the kind of sweeping change likely necessary in most organizations to effectively overcome functional myopia and re-align the old-world commercial engine to a completely new world of B2B buying.

The future of B2B sales and marketing? An end to B2B sales and marketing. Welcome to the world of supporting the new B2B buying.

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