

Gartner for Sales Leaders

How Challenger Sales Organizations Make Sense of Sense Making

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A photograph of a snowy mountain road with a map in the foreground. The road is a narrow, winding path through a snowy, mountainous landscape. In the foreground, a map is spread out on a surface, showing a route. The map is a topographical map with various colors and lines. The Gartner logo is visible in the bottom right corner.

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Just a few months ago, Gartner for Sales released new research highlighting an unconventional approach that is striking a chord within the sales world: We call it Sense Making. Similar to the Challenger Sale, which we first highlighted a decade ago, this research sheds light on what separates the best sales efforts from the rest. Since we released this work, many organizations have asked us to help make sense of Sense Making, particularly in light of our work on Challenger™.

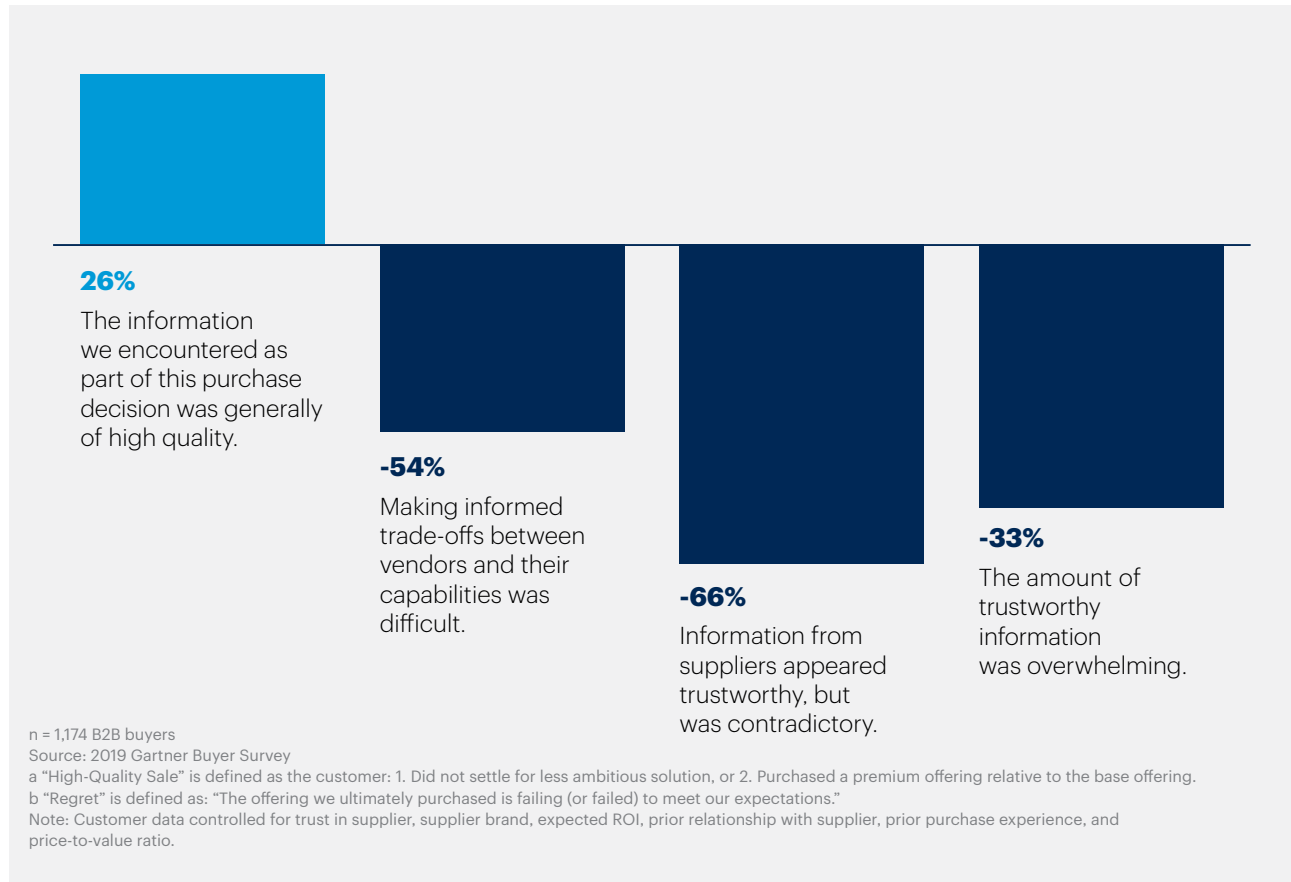
What is Sense Making?

For those unfamiliar with Sense Making, the idea originated from detailed analysis into nearly 1,200 B2B purchase interactions. Our previous research on B2B customer buying behavior showed that customers often felt awash in too much information. This left the purchase process subject to navigating a maze of options, choices and noise. However, our latest research highlights a new phenomenon: Customers are not simply awash in too much information, there is an abundance of good, substantive, evidence-based and highly credible information from suppliers and other third parties. Improvements in data and analytics, content thought leadership and sales messaging have resulted in a high-quality information set that now informs nearly every B2B purchase. Indeed, 89% of customers reported encountering high-quality information in their purchase process.

While that might seem like a good thing, this overabundance of good information is seriously hampering the customer's ability to make a purchase decision. We found 44% of customers reporting that various information they encountered made contradictory claims. Half of customers claimed the amount of trustworthy information was overwhelming, and 55% felt that making informed trade-offs between vendors and their capabilities was difficult based on the information encountered.

Worse yet, the impact on sales outcomes was dramatic, with overwhelming information harming the likelihood of closing a high-quality sale reduced 54%, contradictory information reducing those odds 66%, and conflicting information on trade-offs between vendors reducing those odds 33%.

Figure 1. Impact on Closing a High-Quality, Low-Regret Deal When Clients Agreed With the Statement



Furthermore, we found that customers who felt **confident** in the information they based their purchase on, as well as those who felt **little skepticism** toward any claims made by sales reps, ultimately made bigger and bolder purchase decisions. In other words, optimizing to higher customer confidence and lower skepticism of sellers' claims is critical to sales success in today's information-rich buying environment.

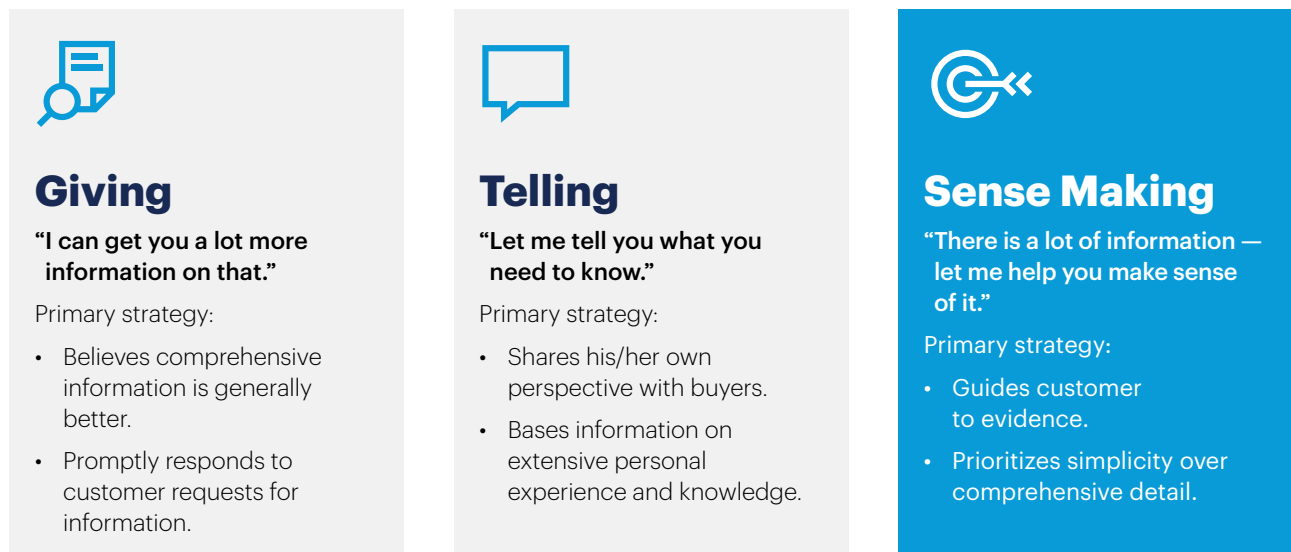
Figure 2. Impact on Closing a High-Quality, Low-Regret Deal*
Logistic Regression



Knowing this, we set out to better understand how customers get value from today's top sales reps. Through a detailed survey asking B2B customers to reflect on their experiences with both winning and losing supplier sales reps, we were able to isolate three distinctive information-sharing approaches:

- **Giving** sales reps are characterized by a responsive posture, providing comprehensive information and operating under the assumption that more is better.
- **Telling** sales reps overtly share their opinion, stories and anecdotes. They are very forward with providing information, taking on a more aggressive sharing posture.
- **Sense Making** sales reps carefully share information. They guide customers toward a clearer, more rationalized view. Their posture is one of helping customers elevate their perspective on the information they've encountered and to simply make sense of it.

Figure 3. Approaches to Engaging Customers With Information
Cluster Analysis



n = 1,174 B2B buyers
Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

In an era of too much good information, this Sense Making approach engenders greater customer confidence, reduces customer skepticism and, most importantly, yields far greater likelihood of the customer purchasing an upgraded, premium offering from a supplier.

Figure 4. Out of 10 Deals, the Number of High-Quality, Low-Regret Deals Varies by Seller Approach

Giving

3 out of 10



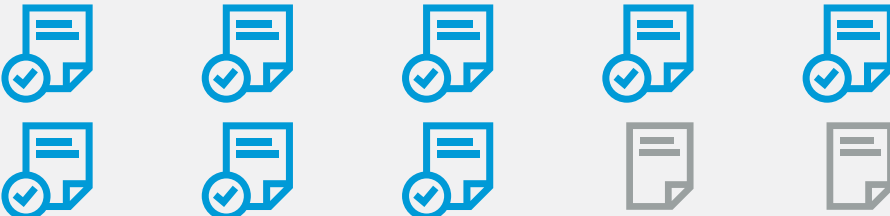
Telling

5 out of 10



Sense Making

8 out of 10



n = 1,174 B2B buyers

Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

* Seller approach was derived from 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey about seller behavior.

Eight out of 10 sense makers closed a high-quality deal.

How does Sense Making differ from Challenger?

Challenger and Sense Making operate independently, where Challenger is based on a **supplier-out** view, capturing how the best sales reps explain what makes their offerings distinctive. Remember, the critical distinction of Challenger is to lead **to** your solution, not **with** your solution, by reframing how the customer thinks about their own business. Challenger, in this regard, is about powerfully sharing your capabilities with the customer.

Sense Making, by contrast, is based on a **market-in** view **from the customer's perspective**. With Sense Making, sellers essentially move their chair to the customer's side of the table, jointly "look out at the market" with the customer, noting the variety of good — if conflicting — information and possibilities, and admit it may seem like a mess, but to fear not. This is decidedly not a moment for Challenging; those moments can (and will) present themselves. In this regard, Sense Making is more of an overall posture taken with the customer, and not necessarily an acute moment.

Challenger is neither exclusive nor inclusive of Sense Making; Challengers aren't necessarily Sense Makers, nor are Sense Makers necessarily Challengers. They are simply different approaches, both conceptually and statistically. You could have Telling Challengers, Giving Challengers or Sense Making Challengers (with the latter obviously preferred). Sense Making takes specific skills that differ from the main Challenger skills including diagnosing customer purchase challenges, understanding the competitive market exceedingly well, planning and patience for appropriately sharing information, the ability to rationalize and simplify complex ideas, and a good dose of organizational support to enable these skills. If anything, Sense Making incorporates a dramatically heightened awareness — even empathy — for the customer's purchase process. This means having a reasonable understanding of the true frustration that a purchase process can inflict on a customer and their organization, and well-honed instincts to spot when customers are getting confused or are on the wrong track.

Lastly (and statistically speaking), we discovered Challenger and Sense Making through two very different analyses on sales effectiveness. The Challenger research was based on sales manager perceptions of their sellers, and was therefore inherently focused on how sales reps deliver messages to customers. Sense Making was a product of surveying customers, specifically assessing how their various sales reps helped them process all the good information and viable perspectives. Statistically speaking, there is no co-dependency on the two approaches, though we do believe they can coexist in practice.

Is Challenger still effective?

As a research organization, we've long been on the record saying that if we ever find that Challenger is no longer effective, we want to be the first to make that claim. We can definitively say that Challenger, while a decade old, is still highly effective. However, just as products and solutions face increasing commoditization, we are also seeing "good enough" credible information crowd out even the best sales messages. As companies that have developed strong commercial insights will tell you: "It's just a matter of time until the competition can lay similar claim." Naturally, without strong sales messaging and great insights to challenge a customer's thinking, you may fall outside of the consideration set. So in this regard, we advocate for having a really sharp sales message — at best, a true commercial insight. But that's increasingly necessary, and not nearly as sufficient as it once was.

It's not fair to say that commercial insights are now table stakes (indeed, we still see very few companies create great Challenger-worthy commercial insights), but such insights compete with a vastly improved information set from your competition. In that regard, it is becoming more difficult to have your commercial insights fall on the customer's ears, unless you help funnel the customer's hearing toward them (à la Sense Making). So while we don't believe the efficacy of the Challenger method has entirely waned, in the very environment in which we find ourselves today — with an overabundance of high-quality information — we found an emerging opportunity for commercial distinction.

Isn't Sense Making just free consulting?

On the surface, Sense Making may appear to be "supplier-agnostic," that is, done for the good of the customer regardless of the supplier's interests. An important point to remember, however, is that we analyzed sales actions, which clearly have an agenda of selling **something**.

Anecdotally, we often hear of Sense Making sellers who may strategically share a competitor's claim along the way — perhaps even highlighting an advantage that competitor may have. That sounds like a classic free consulting trap where a supplier creates value for a customer only to lose them to the competition, never to be paid for helping the customer.

We know from our data that Sense Making not only instills customer confidence about the information they are using, but also drives down skepticism of the sellers and their claims. Together, those create a strong sense of control on behalf of the customer, with attribution (in the form of a high-quality purchase) going to the supplier that enabled that control. That seems to take the "free" out of "free consulting."

And while we have further research to do in this area, it may be that a Sense Making posture is more commercially distinctive than the use of powerful sales messaging. Taking a step back and looking at the information landscape customers currently must wade through, it is entirely possible — if not likely — that making sense of that information is more valuable than is adding more information to the mix, no matter how good it may be. **We also have a strong hypothesis that Sense Making sellers, through the course of helping a customer rationalize all the information they encounter, can help the customer better process the rep's information versus the competition's.**

Is Sense Making innate or can it be taught and enabled?

We believe Sense Making can certainly be hired for, and have developed clear guidance for Sales organizations to skew their hiring profiles in this regard. However, we also believe Sense Making is a learned skill that can and should be supported and scaled throughout an organizational capability. We've worked with many organizations to improve their sales enablement, supporting sellers to be far more cognizant and prepared to help customers make sense of the purchase, varying this guidance by both buying and selling stage.

Further, we're rapidly evolving our view on buyer enablement to incorporate Sense Making into the tools that customers directly use to support their decision making. Our firm belief is that the organizations that rapidly build such capabilities — and rely less on sheer talent/skills — will have a clear first-mover advantage. Training will still matter, but organizational capability persists and scales, whereas trained reps do not.

When should you implement Sense Making vs. Challenger?

Our answer here depends on how mature your organization is in deploying Challenger. We see three distinctive segments:

- **Companies that have been on the Challenger journey for some time.** These organizations have conducted multiple rollouts, have strong commercial insights, and have seen the number of Challenger sellers within their sales ranks increase over time. **This is the most complex scenario in which to introduce Sense Making; as such, we encourage a discussion with our team.** Generally speaking, we're seeing many clients view Sense Making as the preferred way to improve the efficacy of Challenger without introducing extensive change management. The key is to introduce a far greater awareness of the **other** information sources customers are likely encountering, and a talk track that helps the customer parse out what the subtle differences mean for their business. While there is a skills-building aspect to this, we believe these organizations will have laid a good baseline set of seller skills related to tailoring interactions, providing a more natural jump-off point to teach Sense Making. As always, we strongly advocate for building organizational capabilities that support these skills.
- **Companies that have recently initiated their Challenger journey.** For these firms, which are typically in their first or second year of a Challenger rollout, we believe that development of commercial insights is still the most critical step. When the appropriate moment arises to help customers think differently about their business, you want your team armed with sharp insights. Without a portfolio of commercial insights, you'll have no grounds on which to challenge customer thinking. However, we also believe that Sense Making should be factored into the initial training, helping reps better empathize with customers. Indeed, incorporating these skills at this point in time is less intrusive (and certainly less costly) than starting up a new training effort at a later time. We also believe the sales process, buying process and core sales tools

like account planning, opportunity planning and deal review prep should factor in Sense Making, specifically by prompting sales teams to consider what the customer has learned (or is likely to learn on their own).

- **Companies that have not implemented Challenger.** Most of the firms we know within this segment have made a strategic choice not to deploy Challenger (we empathize and understand the extensiveness of change management, and the risks of getting it wrong and harming customer relationships as a result, but also stand ready to support if you reconsider). For these organizations, we believe Sense Making presents a vastly improved means to make sure your message and insights are more clearly rationalized and understood by the customer — even if they're not presented as commercial insights. Sense Making carries little risk of upsetting customers, as it doesn't require challenging them. Our data shows customers have strong receptivity to such a commercial approach. Our guidance is to focus on a more narrowly scoped training and enablement initiative to introduce this idea to your teams and incorporate it within your sales process, account planning and opportunity management.

Can Sense Making work with other sales methods?

Given that Sense Making largely focuses on helping the customer cope with an overabundance of seemingly high-quality information in the marketplace (whereas nearly all sales methods deal with better conveying information from the supplier outward at customers), our belief is that this is an effective overlay approach to any sales method or model.

For now, we're focused on continuing to help our Gartner clients incorporate Sense Making into their sales teams, and continuing to both learn more about this approach and expand our support. We look forward to supporting you and your organization as you help your customers make better sense of today's information.

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