

# 2019 AI-for-Sales Research Report

## *Is AI Ready for Primetime in Sales?*

**Jim Dickie | Barry Trailer**

Advisory Services Clients

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Additionally, our thanks to [Kim Cameron](#) Sales Mastery's Sales Enablement Analyst for her help in making this project possible, along with [Dr. Diane Hodges](#) and her editing team.

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### Introduction

Why conduct an AI-for-Sales research project? Numerous studies show that selling is harder today than ever before. Productivity numbers are dropping along with the percentage of salespeople able to achieve their revenue goals. Even when companies win deals, they report suboptimal success at expanding their wallet share within those accounts. Clearly, the sales enablement approaches companies have been using are not able to keep pace with the need for greater efficiency and effectiveness gains across the sales organization. Something else must be added to the equation. The question is what?

At the same time that challenges are intensifying for sales organizations, the buzz around the impact that Artificial Intelligence (AI) could/will have on all aspects of business is increasing. Attitudes range from viewing AI as the game changer for all aspects of business to AI being yet another overhyped fad that will repeat the “not ready for prime time” results it had in the past.

While there is no shortage of thoughts about the viability of AI, there are few metrics. Reflecting on the wise words of W. Edwards Deming, “Without data you are just another person with an opinion,” we launched an initial research effort into the uses of AI—specifically focusing on the functional area of sales.

To be honest, as we’ve both had experience co-founding software companies, we have a healthy degree of skepticism when it comes to the true value that emerging technologies can generate in the early years of adoption. As a result, we designed a study that focused on the experiences and insights of sales management, sales operations, and sales enablement professionals that were not biased by any preconceived attitudes we, or our team, might have.

The following report is based on data received from over 420 study participants on what role, if any, AI-for-Sales plays within their sales organization and what their longer-term expectations are.

If you have any questions on this research effort or the 2019 report, please feel free to contact us directly.

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## AI-for-Sales Landscape

AI is clearly generating a lot of interest from sales enablement solution developers as well as significant funding from investors. The current version of *Sales Mastery's AI-for-Sales Solutions Guide* profiles 130+ applications which were culled from over 200 solutions we researched. We readily admit there is still work to do. At the time of writing this report, we have 55 more applications on the “to be evaluated” list and are sure we will find more to look at in the coming months. The following graphic shows the array of sales enablement developers that currently have AI strategies in place. There are some well-known names as well as a host of emerging companies all placing bets that AI-for-Sales will be a game changer.





## AI-for-Sales Solution Introduction

Drilling into the AI-for-Sales marketplace, it quickly became apparent that there are not robust, fully integrated suites of tools that augment the performance of sales organizations across the full continuum of the Customer Lifecycle Management framework. Instead, we see a variety of solutions that allow sales teams to improve how they do certain aspects of their jobs, in some cases, an order of magnitude better than how they currently perform. Based on our benchmarking work efforts on AI utilization, we started to segment the solutions in relationship to optimizing the following aspects of sales/sales management that early adopters are looking to augment and enhance.

## AI-for-Sales Optimization Categories

- ❖ **Market Segmentation/Sales Intelligence Analysis:** Support for assessing a company's total addressable market, prioritizing the best accounts to pursue, and identifying the right stakeholders to engage and why.
- ❖ **Sales Process/Training:** Support for providing individualized training and reinforcement on a company's sales process, ensuring the sales organization has the abilities to fully comprehend and effectively apply the process across the sell cycle as related to the customer's journey.
- ❖ **Lead Generation/Management:** Support for sequencing, enhancing, and managing emails, calls, and social outreach to optimize prospecting effectiveness via direct efforts of salespeople or chatbots. Also includes lead and opportunity scoring and lead nurturing.
- ❖ **Appointment Setting:** Virtual admin support for salespeople to manage meetings with prospects including scheduling, rescheduling, attendee tracking, invitation personalization, and session follow-up.
- ❖ **Stakeholder Engagement:** Support for effective and value-added face-to-face, phone, and email interactions with prospects and customers via individualized persona analysis, targeted conversation insights, emotional feedback queues, impactful visualizations, etc.

- ❖ **Content Management:** Support for identifying which sales tools to leverage, with what type of stakeholder, and at which stage in the sell cycle to enhance their understanding of your solution and its competitive differentiation, including buyer interest and intent analysis.
- ❖ **Sales Conversation Analysis:** Support for automatically recording, transcribing, and analyzing every sales call; real-time virtual coaching during the call, sales management effectiveness via detailed call metrics, and sharing the voice-of-the-customer across the enterprise.
- ❖ **Sales Activity Analysis:** Support for analyzing seller and buyer interactions, (e.g., emails, appointments, calls, etc.) to assess alignment, automate CRM record creation/updating, and provide actionable insights for both sales professionals and managers.
- ❖ **Solution Configuration Management:** Support for enhancing solution/needs alignment and competitive differentiation, improving cross-sell/up-sell, and providing insights to justify pricing and ROI to minimize discounting.
- ❖ **Forecast Management:** Support for providing sales management with the metrics needed to continuously assess the status of each deal in the forecast, proactively identify deals that are at risk and why, and provide insights into either how to get deals back on track or what deals to stop pursuing.
- ❖ **Key Account Management:** Support for navigating the complexity of key accounts including relationship mapping, strategy mapping, account plan development, and tracking the ongoing implementation and evolution of the plan.
- ❖ **Sales Coaching/Mentoring:** Support for sales managers to assess which sales team members need what type of opportunity management or skills development help and insights into how to proactively work with them on an individualized basis.
- ❖ **Sales Talent Management:** Support for leveraging a data-driven approach to identifying sales professionals who fit your sales culture and have the existing skills or the capacity to learn in order to effectively connect with your customers and close more deals.



## AI-for-Sales Plan Analysis

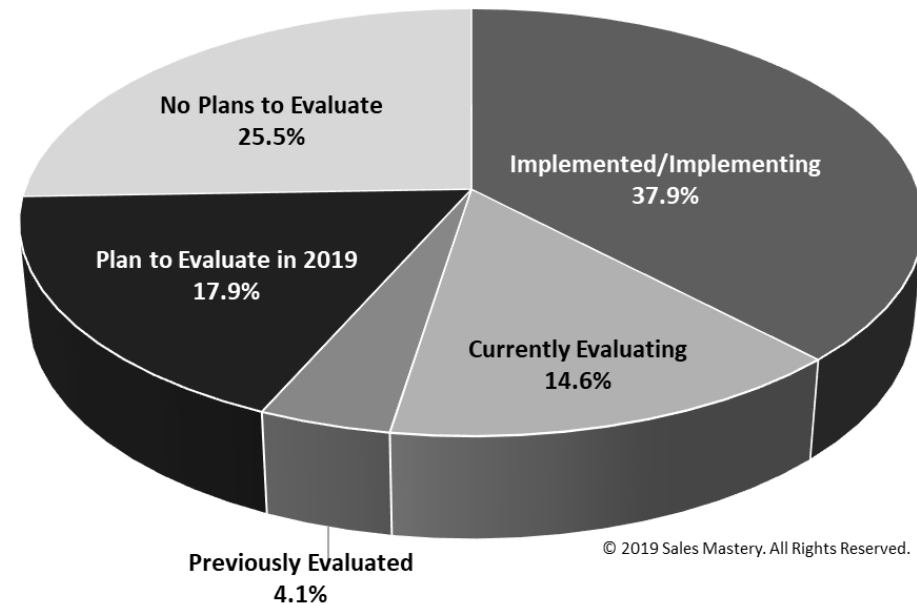
For the purposes of this study we sought input from three different classes of sales organizations; those that have already evaluated AI-for-Sales solutions, those that are currently or plan to evaluate solutions this year, and those that have no current plans regarding AI-for-Sales.

The chart to the right summarizes the breakdown of the study participants. It is important to note that because of the study design objective of ensuring adequate representation from all three cases of use, these figures DO NOT reflect the market penetration of AI-for-Sales. Our past benchmarking found that the percentage today is still in the single digits. However, we are seeing an increase in firms looking to evaluate these solutions.

We found that 42% of the firms participating in the study had evaluated AI-for-Sales solutions. Of those, 89.2% elected to move forward with implementing applications, while 10.8% elected not to move forward upon concluding their product reviews. Considering that AI-for-Sales is an emerging technology which can generate skepticism regarding whether the applications are ready for prime time, we found the “no decision” number to be noticeably lower than expected.

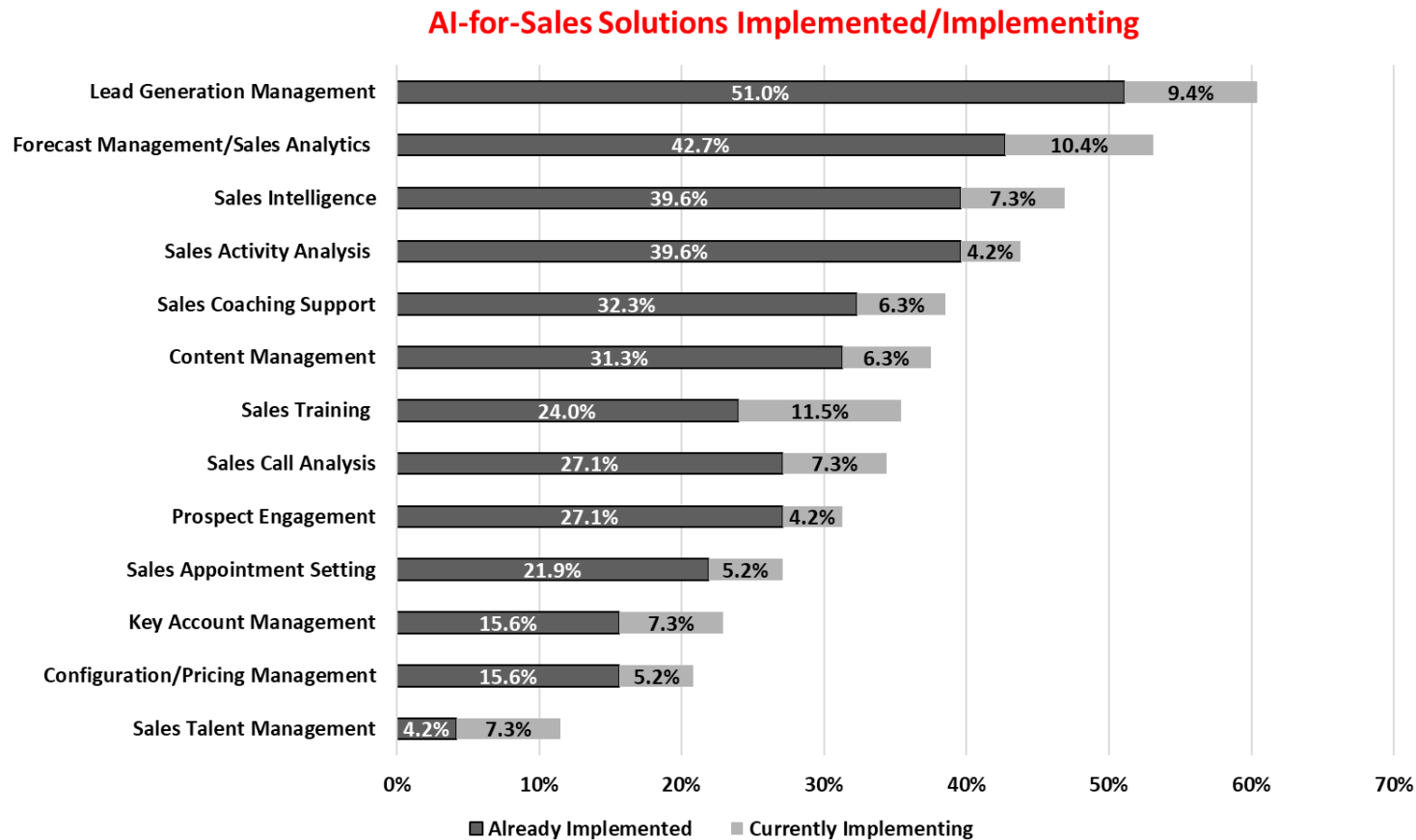
For the purposes of this report, we focused on the input from the firms that chose to move forward with the implementation of AI-for-Sales. We will be publishing follow-up analyses on the approaches firms that are evaluating/planning to evaluate AI-for-Sales are taking and drill into the reasons other firms are choosing not to do anything in this area. The remainder of this report explores the experiences of early adopters, solutions they are utilizing, what, if any, impact AI-for-Sales is having on their sales performance, and advice they have for their peers based on their implementation experiences.

### Status of AI-for-Sales Within Organization



## AI-for-Sales Solutions Implementation Analysis

Reflecting on the various categories of AI-for-Sales, we were interested to see the specific classes of technology that organizations were gravitating toward. The chart below summarizes what study participants told us about the specific types of AI solutions they had implemented or were currently implementing.



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In the previous chart we see the wide range of interests that organizations have as they look to leverage AI to optimize the performance of sales and sales management within their organizations. Topping the list is looking to at AI to improve lead management. This was not a surprise as in separate research efforts conducted this year, when we asked sales management to share the top operational goals they had for 2019, closing new accounts and further penetrating existing accounts were cited as the top two objectives. So, it is logical that anything that helps sales organizations get more leads into the funnel is going to get a lot of attention from sales management.

Our operational goals research found that increasing win rates of forecast deals was also a high priority. Based on this, the number two reason for implementing AI, as shown on the chart, is optimizing the forecast management process and the generation of more, and higher quality sales analytics. This is also an area where we expected high interest. One of AI's core strengths is that it can bring the science of math to the art of sales. At a time when the odds of closing a forecast deal are often lower than the odds of winning on a pass bet at the craps tables in Las Vegas, any value that AI can bring to proactively help understand which deals are on track to close and which are at risk will be welcomed by all sales teams.

Viewing the rest of this list, we see a variety of use cases that companies are focused on. Because companies can vary widely in how they sell, it is understandable that there is no silver bullet that all sales organizations can turn to for performance optimization. However, the chart *does* provide hope that regardless of the specific challenges a company faces, there are AI-for-Sales solutions coming to market to address key issues.

In benchmarking over one hundred AI-for-Sales implementation initiatives, a key success factor that needs to be taken into consideration is that the first sale that needs to be made with any of these solutions is the "internal" sale. To set the stage for sales professionals embracing new ways of selling and sales leaders managing their teams with AI, several questions, concerns, and outright resistance factors need to be proactively dealt with. Some of those issues include: Will AI replace sales jobs? Why should sales teams trust what AI is doing and the information and recommendations it is providing? What is the impact of AI going to be on the privacy of both sales professionals and customers? Failing to effectively address these types of questions before and during the implementation process can set the stage for problems with adoption.

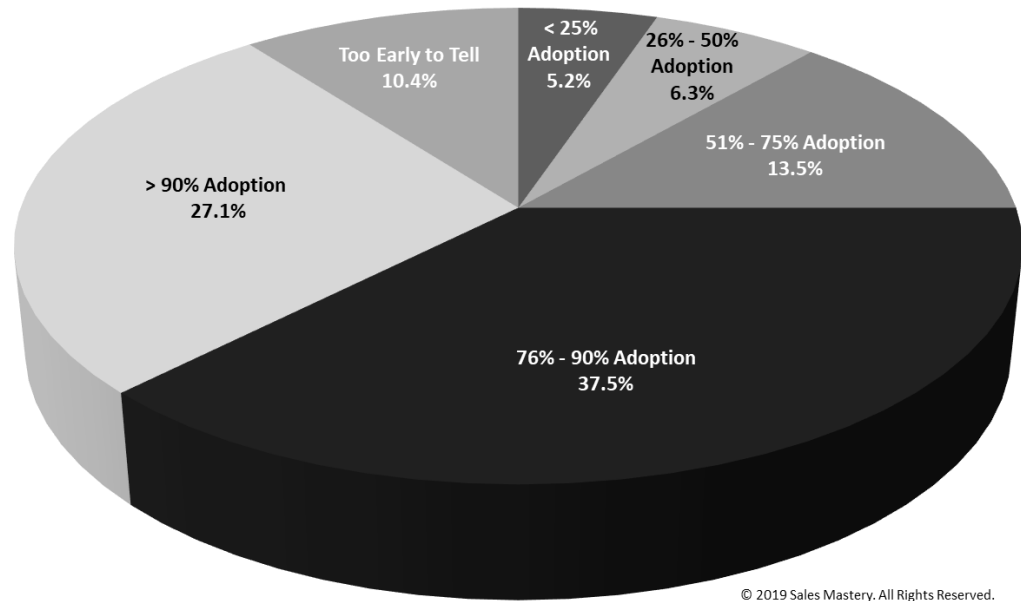
## AI-for-Sales Adoption Rates

With AI-for-Sales still an emerging technology, we were interested to see how quickly it was being integrated into the workflow of people within sales organizations. In this chart we see a breakdown of the adoption rates reported by the study participants.

By comparison, while these percentages are noticeably higher than expected for relatively new technology, they are at the same time, noticeably lower than the adoption rates of core CRM systems.

These figures make a case for a commitment to educate users on what AI can do for them prior to installing the tools, the need for adequate training during the implementation phase of the project, and following that up with ongoing support. Clearly, this requires appropriate levels of investment, but as you will see, the ROI being generated by implementing AI solutions within sales organizations can more than justify these dollars.

### AI-for-Sales Adoption Rate Across User Population



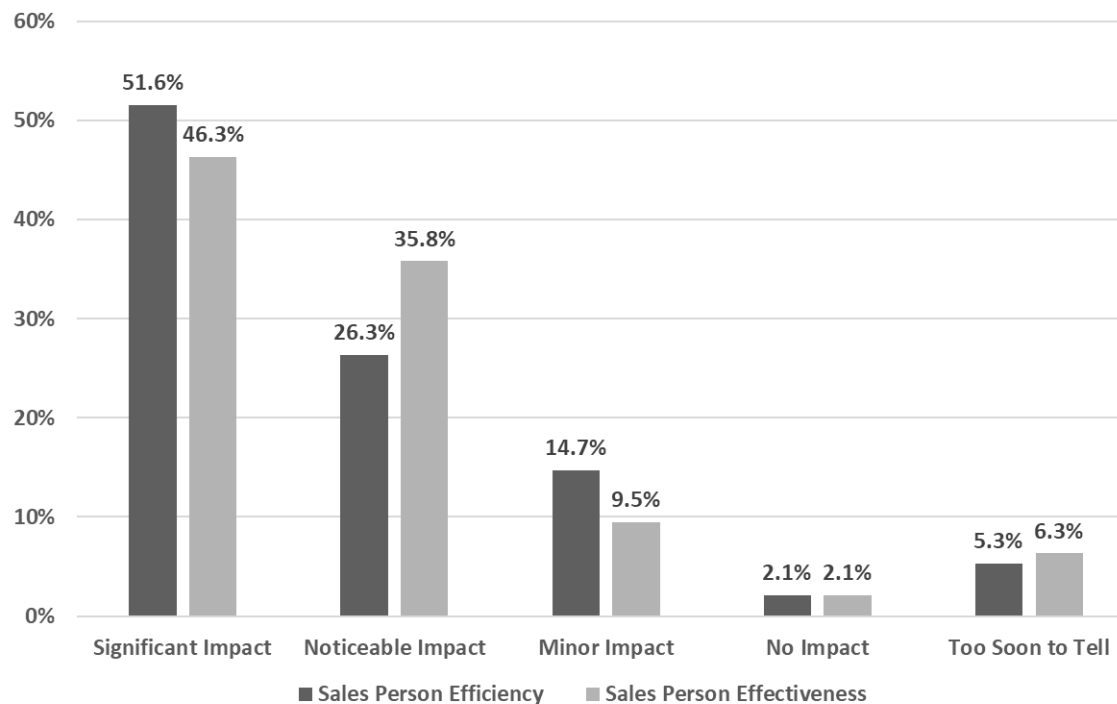
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## Impact of AI-for-Sales on Sales Person Performance

Delving deeper into the experiences of organizations that have implemented AI-for-Sales solutions, we next sought to gauge the outcomes these initiatives were generating, looking for both positive and negatives effects. The primary audience that companies are looking to augment/improve performance is their salespeople—both inside sales and field-based. The next chart shows the answers we received when we asked study participants to assess what, if any, impact AI was having on the efficiency and effectiveness of their sales professionals.

We have long advocated for the need to increase sales efficiency as very few organizations report that their salespeople have enough time to do what they were hired to do—engage and work with customers. But more time is only half of the sales optimization equation. Companies not only need to increase the quantity of time available for sales professionals to spend with customers, they also need to increase the quality and impact of those meetings. This requires that efficiency be coupled with effectiveness improvements.

### Impact of AI-for-Sales on Sales Person Performance



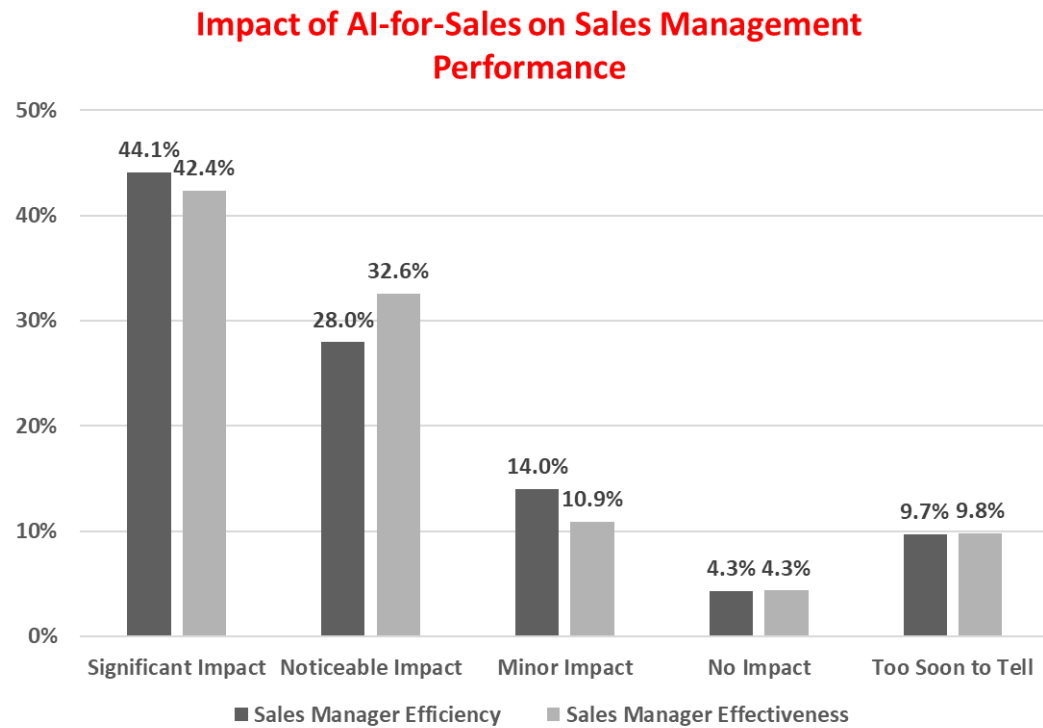
The chart above summarizes the experiences of the study participants in these two areas. The most encouraging news the study data provided was the high number of companies experiencing significant improvements in efficiency *and* effectiveness, along with the very *low* number of companies reporting no noticeable impact as a result of their use of AI-for-Sales.

In discussions with many of the solution providers themselves, as we sought to understand their long-term product roadmaps, the potential for ongoing increases in two areas clearly exist. AI-for-Sales solutions will have access to increased amounts of data, and with this comes the ability to evaluate the outcomes taken or the recommendations made. These solutions should continue to improve the quality of the work performed and augment the performance of salespeople.

## Impact of AI-for-Sales on Sales Management Performance

In the benchmarking efforts we have conducted, a secondary audience of AI-for-Sales users, sales management, continues to grow. This includes all hierarchy levels from frontline sales managers up to CSOs and CROs. We asked the study participants to assess the impact that AI was having on the people leading their sales teams. This chart shows that sales managers are also beneficiaries of AI-for-Sales implementations.

The trend is similar to that of sales professionals, as the number of companies reporting that AI is having a significant impact on sales managers is an order of magnitude more than companies reporting no impact. This could not be coming at a better time, especially for frontline sales managers. We continue to see the span of control increase in terms of the ratio of salespeople reporting to a single sales manager. At the same time, we are witnessing a decrease in the amount of time managers can devote to coaching and mentoring. There is a clear need to optimize the performance of sales managers which AI is showing the potential to improve.





## AI-for-Sales Operational Improvements Analysis

From the 30,000' view, our initial analysis of the study data demonstrated that early adopters of AI-for-Sales are seeing it have a positive impact on improving the sales performance of their organizations.

This then piqued our interest in seeing what specific operational improvements might emerge nearer ground level.

The next chart summarizes the input received when we asked for specific details on the improvements that were being achieved by the study participants.

Starting at the bottom of the chart, we see a low percentage of firms reporting that it is too early to assess what impact AI can have.

Looking at the rest of the chart, we start to gauge the wide range of impact AI is having on early adopter sales organizations. Of significant interest was the item that topped the list—increasing revenues. Over the years, when we asked sales executives to share the top benefits they saw from their core CRM investments, “increasing revenues” did not come up in the conversation very often. With AI-for-Sales we are seeing this as a key strength.

### Operational Improvements Resulting from AI-for-Sales Utilization



Scanning down the list, we see existing users are successfully leveraging AI to solve real problems for their sales organizations. All of these improvements equate to a hard dollar ROI. These initial implementation experiences clearly suggest AI initiatives are paying for themselves.

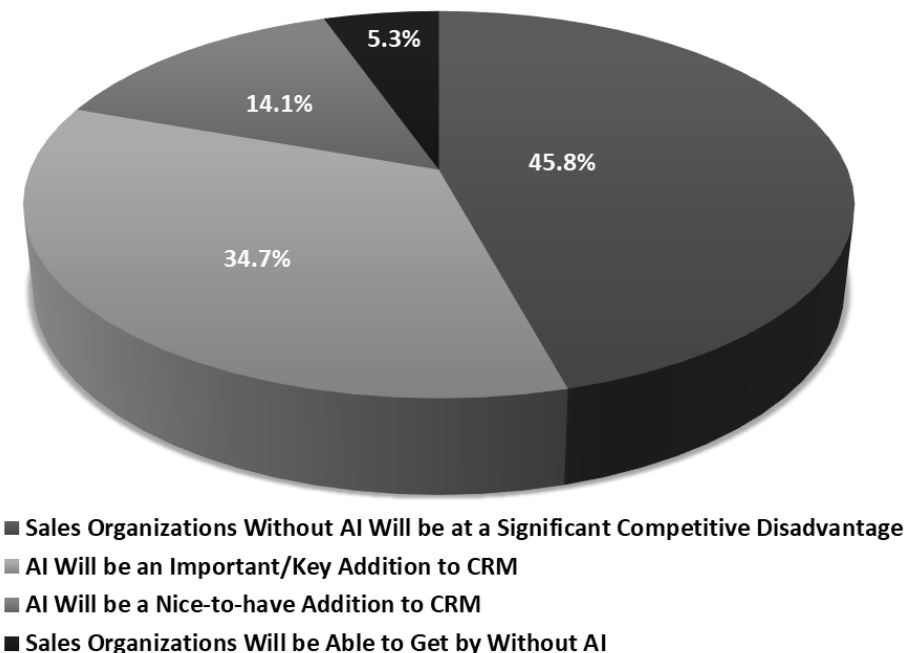
## Projected Impact of AI-for-Sales in Three Years

We wanted to expand the view of what AI-for-Sales is doing today and gain a perspective on the impact sales organization predicted it could have on global sales organizations. To start down this path, we asked study participants to provide their assessment of the role AI solutions will play three years from now based on their current understanding of AI-for-Sales.

The chart to the right summarizes their responses. Here we see that 45.8% of companies surveyed view AI as a game changer for sales organizations, and another 34.7% view it as a key enhancement to their CRM tech stack. On the other end of the spectrum, only 5.3% of survey participants stated that AI is not going to be needed to help optimize the sales and sales management performance of their teams.

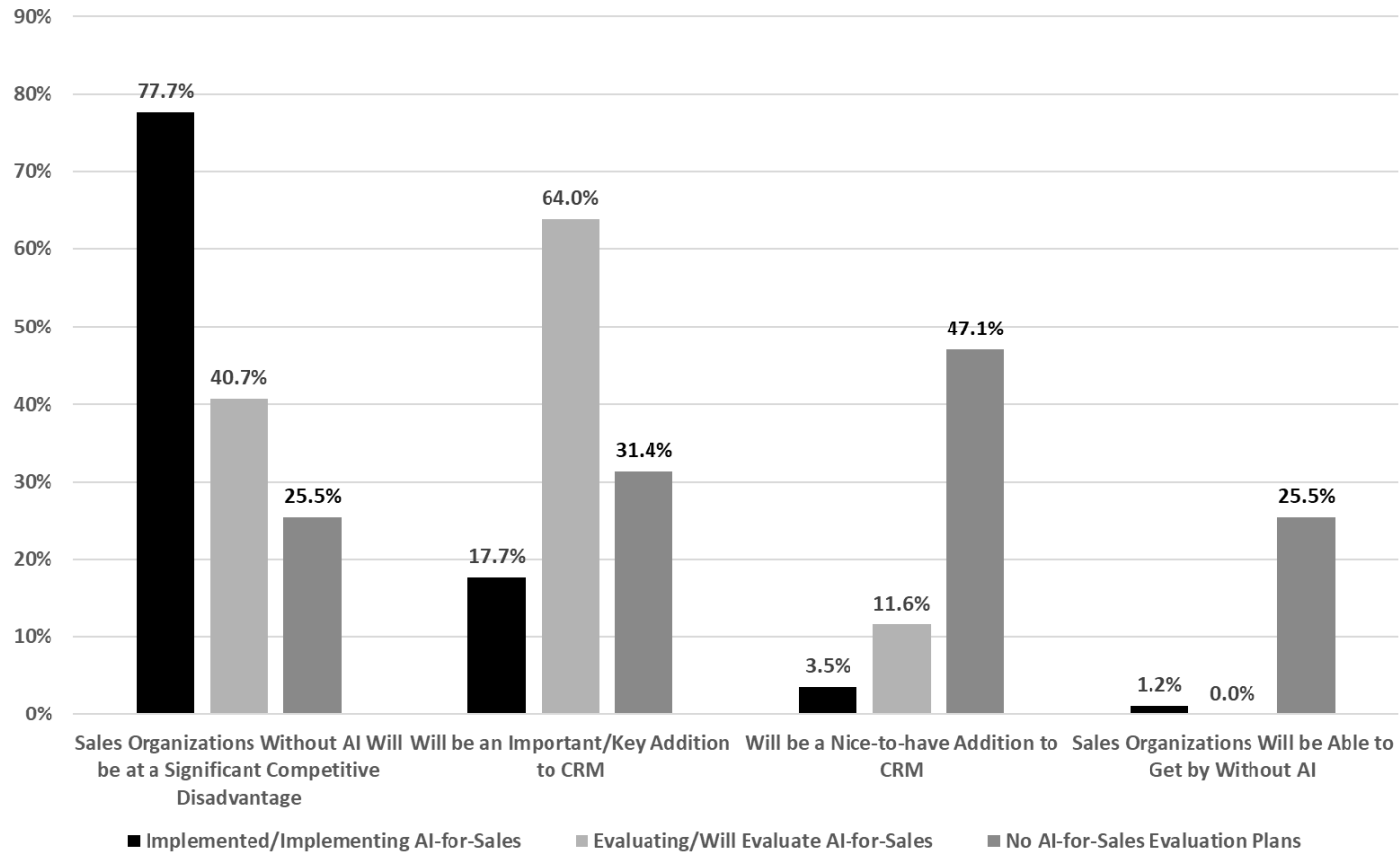
When we went a level deeper and segmented the responses based on a firm's level of experience with AI-for-Sales, (i.e., implemented/implementing, evaluating/plan to evaluate, or no evaluation plans) a clear difference of opinion emerged, as seen in the chart below.

**Impact of AI-for-Sales in Three Years - All Study Participants**



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### Impact of AI-for-Sales in Three Years by Usage Type



Those firms that have first-hand experience with AI to support various aspects of their Customer Lifecycle Management are extremely bullish on the impact it is and will have on sales success in the future. Those in the evaluation stage predominantly have a positive view toward AI which, of course, should be expected as they are committing time and resources to more thoroughly understand it.

Finally, the firms that have yet to see a reason for educating themselves on AI-for-Sales have much lower expectations on the value it could provide to their sales organization and may take their time to further investigate this aspect of sales enablement. Time will sort out what the reality is and whether there is a first-mover advantage or laggard penalty.

## Advice from Existing AI-for-Sales Users to Their Peers

We asked the firms that have implemented AI-for-Sales to share advice they would have for peers who have yet to do so, and we received a wealth of feedback. In reviewing their insights, several themes emerged. The following summarizes the top ten recommendations we received:

- ❖ **Do It or Get Left Behind:** This is by far the most repeated suggestion. A key driver behind this is that with machine learning, AI technology will contribute to these solutions and become more effective over time. This gives early adopters a competitive advantage over slow movers that may last for a long time.
- ❖ **Ensure You Have a Quality Data Structure:** To optimize a predictive model, the data being analyzed need to be broad and high quality. Data must be accurate, properly labeled, deduped, etc. Without this the full potential for AI will not be realized.
- ❖ **Do Not Research AI Technology Until You Have Done Your Prep Work:** The order of tasks suggested was to start by analyzing how you are currently selling and determine what aspects of the process need improvement. Once you know what the problems are, look for solutions to those challenges as opposed to becoming enamored by a solution and then going in search of a problem.
- ❖ **Develop a Long-term Vision AND a Phased Implementation Plan:** After completing your sales process analysis, you may find several issues you want to address. The advice here is to not to implement a lot of things at one time, but rather do so in phases to allow the sales force time to become effective with one or two aspects of AI before moving on to others.

- ❖ **Give Preference to Solutions That Do Multiple Things:** There was some debate as to whether to go with best in class point solutions or implement solutions that provided multiple capabilities. Simplifying things from the user's perspective received the most votes.
- ❖ **Call References and Get Details on Implementations, Not Pilot Programs:** Users noted that when they asked solution providers for references, they were often given names of peers who were actually in the pilot phase versus true implementation. The recommendation was to hold firm on talking to companies that have fully implemented these solutions.
- ❖ **Do Not Implement Without a Solid ROI Projection:** The promise of what AI could do down the road can be attractive, but to ensure end user adoption, the advice was to only implement solutions that have a current ROI for sales teams.
- ❖ **Invest in Training to Help Sales Professionals Fully Leverage AI:** While users reported relatively short installation times to get the technology up and running, getting users to fully understand all the intricacies of what some of these solutions can do will still require adequate training and ongoing support.
- ❖ **Get Ready for Some Sales Pushback:** Companies reported that AI was sometimes greeted with skepticism, if not outright resistance. Concerns over privacy, uncertainty about the accuracy of AI recommendations, fear that AI may replace people, etc. should be dealt with upfront to set the stage for success.
- ❖ **View AI-for-Sales as a Process, Not an Event:** AI is not a one and done event for sales. You will be enhancing the tools you implement and augmenting your tech stack on an ongoing basis. Set that expectation with both sales and executive management upfront.

## Our Final Thoughts

Where are we at the end of this process? We have been around the sales enablement space too long to not have a degree of skepticism about how and how fast AI will impact the roles of sales and sales management. But compared to previous studies we have conducted on emerging technology trends in sales, the initial study data are more positive than we have ever seen. Will we find that some solution claims are, in fact, too good to be true? Sure. Will some implementations encounter speed bumps, potholes, or even sinkholes as they travel down the AI highway? Undoubtedly. Will we see ongoing shakeups in the AI-for-Sales marketplace as vendors disappear, new players enter the space, and consolidation occurs via mergers and acquisitions? That is the nature of technology.

But the experiences of firms that have firsthand knowledge with these solutions, even at this nascent stage of applying AI to transform aspects of their Customer Lifecycle Management, cannot be ignored. The fact that sales is hard, and getting harder, is clear to most sales professionals. Because of that, leaders need to explore all valid avenues to surface and develop new ways of optimizing the performance of the entire sales organization; from the top down. While there are clearly improvements that can be made in people, process, technology, and knowledge, the technology advances appear to hold the most promise for delivering true innovative improvements to sales organizations.

Where from here? At our final data review roundtable, we asked the people who reviewed the study data what was top of mind for them. The comment that gained nods from everyone in the room was, *"I am left with the compelling need to know more!"* And so, we are formalizing plans for a series of mini-studies to look at more aspects of the impact AI could/will have on selling, buying, hiring, coaching, account management, etc. We also assembled a team to document case studies, both successes and failures, to surface the lessons companies all need to learn in order to understand the role that AI should, or should not, play going forward.

Advisory Services clients should feel free to set up a briefing with their Sales Mastery Analyst to discuss any questions they may have regarding this research report or to dive more deeply into the various AI-for-Sales technology options.

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## About Sales Mastery

Sales Mastery is headed by Jim Dickie and Barry Trailer, two serial entrepreneurs who, collectively, have over 60 years of hands-on experience in sales, sales management, and sales technology. Both have been in positions of managing sales organizations and have founded and led companies to successful buy-outs.

**THE POINT IS:** They have been in your shoes! They have felt selling pains and sales management challenges. In addition, through their research and benchmarking efforts over the past 20 years, they have gained knowledge and insights from thousands of CSOs, CEOs, and CMOs and sales teams who have successfully overcome seemingly insurmountable barriers and hurdles that all leaders face and have lived to tell the tale of what's needed to turn *how you sell* into a sustainable competitive advantage.

View [Jim Dickie](#) and [Barry Trailer's](#) bios on LinkedIn.