

Journal of Sales Transformation

2023 / ISSUE 9.3 / ISSN 2058-735X

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What are tomorrow's most important sales competencies?



We're entering a "brave new world of sales", fuelled by the convergence of evolving B2B buying behaviours and the availability of AI-based new technologies. Is change the only constant, or do some of the traditional attributes of a successful salesperson remain important?

I think it's clear that many relatively simple pre- and post-sales transactions are already being automated, with varying degrees of success and customer acceptance, and we have to assume that this trend will continue to accelerate and that the role of the traditional transactional salesperson will continue to decline.

But it also seems clear that the situation will be different when it comes to complex B2B buying journeys, particularly when the prospect's decision to purchase anything at all is discretionary rather than inevitable, and where their particular buying journey involves entering new territory and is therefore unfamiliar rather than something the prospect has successfully mastered dozens of times before.

Yes, of course, these prospects will want to do their own online research and evaluation – often guided (whether they

Enabled, not automated

It's hard – maybe impossible – to imagine fully automating such environments. Whenever situations are complex, confusing, or ambiguous, decision-makers are likely to be crying out for expert advice from people or entities they feel they can trust. This is where the future of B2B selling lies, with credible salespeople helping prospects make sense of their issues and of the options available to them.

In this brave new world, many of the traditional sales competencies will be no more than the basic minimum table stakes. Every salesperson will still need to be able to build rapport, to develop relationships, to communicate clearly and persuasively, to qualify accurately, to follow a well-structured yet flexible sales process, and so on.

But today's traditional competencies will not enable tomorrow's great salespeople to stand out from the crowd. What worked for them in the past may no longer be enough, so one of the most obvious conclusions is that every future successful salesperson needs to commit to being a lifelong learner and to always be open to new ideas. Anyone who stands still will fail.

I am convinced that other increasingly important personal attributes will include self-awareness and self-honesty, emotional intelligence, constructive scepticism, relentless curiosity, and critical thinking. This latter ability to make and communicate clear, reasoned judgements based on interpreting, understanding, applying, and synthesising evidence may be the most important of all – and it's one of many areas where AI has the potential to support, rather than supplant, the salesperson's talents.

Support, rather than supplant

Many of us (sometimes without knowing it) will already have found ourselves on the receiving end of innovative but lazy salespeople and marketers experimenting with ChatGPT to short-circuit the research and creative processes but then simply and thoughtlessly applying the outputs without subjecting them to any meaningful review or scrutiny. The AI-generated words may seem rhetorically sound (probably no more than that), but they are unlikely to be impactful, because every other mediocre salesperson or marketer could, and increasingly will, be doing the same.

The more effective salespeople will use these tools as a stimulant – rather than a replacement – for their own experience and thinking. A well-informed and growing minority already are. They are taking the results from these new

platforms as an input rather than an output and are continuing to polish the communication until it is both relevant to their specific audience and well-differentiated compared to what their prospect may be hearing from other sources.

Tune and enhance

This ability to intelligently and thoughtfully use and apply AI, tuned and enhanced by the salesperson's own emotional intelligence and situational understanding, will I believe turn out to be one of the most important future sales competencies.

Some of the traditional competencies I identified earlier will turn out to be even more vital than they are today. Relationship and rapport building have always been important but, given the number of stakeholders involved in tomorrow's significant buying decisions, these skills will need to be applied at the collective level as well as the individual level, with the goal of facilitating consensus across the entire stakeholder community.

Clear communication will also continue to be important, but salespeople will often need to clearly and persuasively articulate a differentiated and sometimes contrarian perspective in order to stand out from the crowd. Simply saying what everyone else is saying will not be enough, while delivering an over-polished and much-practised standard "pitch" rather than facilitating an interactive conversation will be an even more obvious route to failure.

Supported by systems

CRM systems will continue to have a key role to play in effective qualification and opportunity management, but they will be enhanced by using AI to guide the salesperson to follow a situationally relevant path rather than simply applying the same rigid criteria or implementing exactly the same process regardless of the customer situation. They will act as supporting skeletons rather than restrictive straightjackets.

And whilst it feels that it will be a long time before AI can ever ensure the "perfect" complex sale, it will make significant progress in identifying common patterns of success and failure in previous similar opportunities – highlighting, guiding, and reminding salespeople in what they need to know and do, and helping to eliminate the most common sources of error.

No reason to be fearful

There is no reason for smart, open-minded, and adaptable salespeople to be fearful of these changes. Guided by these new

possibilities, they will become even more effective, and they will make even fewer avoidable errors. They will spend their time more productively and differentiate themselves even more significantly from their less adaptable colleagues. They will enjoy being a salesperson even more than they do today.

However – and this might turn out to be an unfortunately common stumbling block – they will only achieve their full potential if they are supported by equally open-minded managers and leaders who "buy in" to the new mindset and do all they can to facilitate it.

And what of the salespeople, managers and leaders who push back against these trends, or are in denial that they are even happening? They may continue to appear to be successful in the short term, but the clock is ticking. They may – for a while – still be able to sell into industries and organisations that – for the moment – are lagging behind. But even these customers will ultimately either change or fade away.



About the author

Bob Apollo is the founder of UK-based Inflexion-Point Strategy Partners, the B2B sales effectiveness experts. Following a successful career spanning start-ups, scale-ups and corporates, Bob now spends his time as a coach and advisor to growth-phase technology-based businesses, equipping them to adopt the principles of Outcome-Centric Selling.

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realise it or not) by AI – but if they are trying to successfully navigate a complex decision environment, there is an obvious risk of being overwhelmed with information and confused about their choices.

Typically, these types of decisions also involve a large number of stakeholders and if they cannot reach a consensus about whether they need to act and what they need to do, there is a clear danger that their organisation's decision journey will splutter to a halt, and they will end up sticking with the status quo.