

# Collaborate to Accelerate

*The Modern Mandate for Sales and Marketing*



## INTRODUCTION

The alignment of sales and marketing is way behind schedule. It's disappointing, but true. For more than a decade, technology vendors have been buzzing about it. Yet, even today, as B2B organizations strive to align sales and marketing teams with smart technology, they can't quite manage it. In many ways, it's the proverbial wily coyote problem: No matter how many Acme gizmos they try, the roadrunner always gets away.

Still, B2B organizations remain hopeful that if they just keep at it, the next contraption, system, or process will finally bridge the sales-and-marketing gap. But somewhere along the way, they've forgotten their higher purpose. They've been so busy getting sales and marketing to line up that they've lost sight of the "why" – or, more precisely, "who" they're doing the "aligning" for.

You guessed it. Yep, **customers**.



To be sure, there are clear operational advantages to coordinating sales and marketing efforts. According to [Marketo](#), alignment can add 209 percent more value to marketing activities and improve sales closing attempts by 67 percent. But B2B organizations would do a better job at [accelerating sales](#) if both teams stayed unflinchingly focused on customers. In fact, I'd go as far as to say that the customer context should dictate how sellers and marketers cross-functionally collaborate and evolve their all-around *modus operandi*.

What I'm suggesting here goes beyond "aligning" B2B sales and marketing processes so they're more complementary. Rather, I'm proposing that B2B sellers and marketers observe a critical maxim of today's hyper-connected economy: **All things (and people) intersect at the point of the buyer**. This is also where sales and marketing teams collide – and precisely where they should collaborate.

Modern buyers demand more than a smooth handoff from one team to another. They expect consistent brand experiences. This is fast becoming table stakes for B2B organizations, and it's up to sellers and marketers to co-create these experiences.

For this to be the best of all possible collaborations, marketers should become more sales-savvy, and sellers need to develop marketing sensibilities. Each team needs to be equipped to step confidently [across the vocational divide](#) to make buyer interactions more seamless. It's this symbiotic partnership (and not mere "alignment") that builds valuable, long-lasting relationships and paves the way to sales acceleration.

This whitepaper outlines three customer-centric milestones that sales and marketing teams must tackle together to create a faster path from prospect to profitable relationship: identify the best win-wins, simplify the buying experience, and execute at buyer speed.

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## IDENTIFY THE BEST WIN-WINS

A prospect can look blazing hot from a seller's perspective – and appear positively permafrost to a marketer. This glaring discrepancy has emerged in high relief with the growing popularity of account-based marketing (ABM), which requires a cross-functional team (including sales) to identify highly prioritized accounts.

At the outset of an [ABM initiative](#), it isn't unusual for the account lists of marketers and sellers to clash. This disparity presents an opportunity for the two teams to compare their respective prioritization criteria – and to collaborate on the must-have's for “hot” prospects moving forward.

### B2B Account Prioritization Criteria

<b>Sales</b>	Budget Authority Need Timeline
<b>Marketing</b>	Persona & “best customer” profile Spend level vs. peer amount Propensity to buy Engagement level Business performance and vitality
<b>Other Considerations</b>	Cross-sell/adjacent space opportunity Strong collaboration between marketing and sales for the account Buyer interest and accessibility Brand offering fits the account's needs Acceptable level of win difficulty

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*When assessing account attractiveness, the ITSMA recommends assigning a relative weight of importance to each criterion. (The total of all percentage weights should be 100 percent.)*

By jointly identifying the most important accounts, sellers and marketers can focus their best efforts on the same prospect list. Is this bucket list of accounts considerably smaller than what each team would normally tackle independently? Yes, especially from a marketing perspective. But it's likely the ROI on this list will be far higher than that of a much larger segment with broader qualifying criteria.

Of course, this doesn't mean that when all boxes are checked for the top accounts (and the contacts within them), the work of the sales and marketing partnership is done. There will be other accounts that are highly attractive, but – because their composite prioritization scores are lower – they don't make the “top priority” list. Sellers and marketers may decide to segment these accounts and nurture them via customized emails, personalized web pages, sales decks, and digital experiences that are carefully tailored to fortify a budding relationship.

Because the B2B buying cycle is more likely to be lengthy than linear, it's important for sales and marketing teams to keep the buyer momentum rolling. One way to do this is to simplify the buying experience.

## SIMPLIFY THE BUYING EXPERIENCE

B2B buyers may be more empowered and autonomous than ever before, but this doesn't mean that they need assistance only at the end of the purchasing cycle. It may be quite the opposite.

According to [CEB](#), B2B customers are overwhelmed by an increasingly complicated buying process. Not only are product/service options on the rise, but the buyer evaluation time is climbing along with a cumulative buildup of stakeholders. Today, the number of professionals involved in a B2B solutions purchase is **6.8** (up from 5.4 only two years ago). This purchasing group usually includes people from a variety of roles, functions, and geographies, which typically results in a representation of divergent goals and priorities. If anything is clear from this muddle, it's a “new sales imperative” for B2B vendors: [Make buying easier](#).

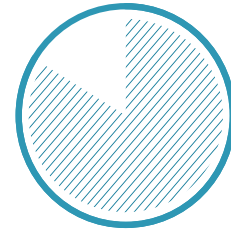
Sellers probably think they're already doing this. Thanks to the widely embraced shift from transactional to consultative selling, many B2B vendors are intent on educating buyers on all the options. In fact, **68 percent** of sellers agree that more information generally helps customers make better buying decisions. However, from a buyer's perspective, the receipt of this "comprehensive intelligence" only contributes to a mighty swell of content fatigue.

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B2B marketers have their own version of well-intended content inundation. It's mapped out in a buyer's journey – or, what CEB calls the "**purchase-from-us**" journey. On this path, the obstacles that suppliers immediately notice are those that stand in the way of a purchase from their brand. What about the purchasing barriers that have nothing to do with the supplier, per se? Well, buyers are often left to wrangle with those on their own.

This is a missed opportunity for B2B sellers and marketers alike. As Gartner Research Vice President Hank Barnes **notes**, both teams should work together "to unwrap complexity" for buyers. Teams that succeed in this regard enjoy ample rewards. In fact, CEB research shows that suppliers that make buying easy are **62 percent** likelier than other suppliers to win a high-quality sale (one in which a customer purchases a premium offering).

However, before B2B sellers can simplify things for buyers, they must first **understand the complexities** in the buyer's situation, as well as the supplier's part in it. Is the product or service in question part of a larger project?



**84%**

of customers report that the buying cycle took longer than expected.



Source: CEB, 2016

If so, maybe sellers can help buyers coordinate internally – or maybe this assistance is as fundamental as connecting the dots so the buyer understands how her piece fits into the whole initiative.

Sellers shouldn't be left to carry the burden of a B2B consensus sale on their own. Marketers should also stay in step with the evolving opportunity and offer support along the way. For example, marketers can collaborate with sellers to develop content that resonates with specific individuals within an account's evaluation group. This material differs from what marketing would generally consider "personalized" content – simply because tailoring information to fit too precisely to a specific role can end up reinforcing conflicting buying agendas within the group. However, **mapping individuals' language** – and identifying overlapping terminology among roles – can supply both teams with terminology that resonates with all decision makers and influencers.

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Another way B2B marketers can make buying easier is to arm internal champions with content that's customized to help internal champions sell within their company. [Marketo](#) does this particularly well. The firm's marketing team creates material that champions can use to educate and persuade members of their evaluation group early in the consensus process. For example, Marketo's "[The Definitive Guide to Marketing Automation](#)" is a 100-page educational toolkit covering everything to what marketing automation is to where the technology is headed. The guide, which is primarily vendor-agnostic, also features chapters designed to help champions "[mobilize](#)" the buying committee, including helpful how-to's for making a business case and a step-by-step process for selecting a marketing automation solution.

 **Sellers helping customers navigate through the purchase process are 62% more likely to close substantial deals.** 

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Source: CEB, 2016

The takeaway here is that marketers and sellers need to do more than connect prospects to their brand or offering. They should also [interconnect individuals](#) within the prospect's organization. Once this is accomplished, marketers and sellers have a great sounding board to test how "simple" their own offerings and internal processes actually are.

Sounds ideal, as far as win-win's go. Who wouldn't invest more effort in something that deepens a customer relationship, increases influence within an account, and – even more exciting – refines a product/service offering so that it's more appealing to a target market?

There's a significant wrinkle to this. B2B buyers are human beings, with evolving needs and shifting priorities. To dust off a well-worn metaphor, they're basically moving targets – regardless of the reality they're in, albeit online, offline (or both), virtual, augmented, and/or mixed.

Which brings us to the third area for sellers and marketers to tackle together...

## EXECUTE AT BUYER SPEED

Continuously engaging with prioritized accounts – sometimes while orchestrating their purchasing experience – is a tall order. Add to this B2B buyers' self-directed exploration and discovery, and an even more intimidating challenge surfaces for sales and marketing teams: To **sell and market at the speed of the customer**. This is difficult for several reasons.

- It takes more than one data source (and data type) to fully understand one buyer – let alone everyone in a prospect's B2B purchasing group.
- Much of B2B buyer behavior is incognito ("dark" or untracked activity).
- Connecting the dots between [online and offline buyer data](#), technology platforms, and customer-facing teams is easier said than done.
- Real-time, holistic buyer data isn't easily available (or accessible) to sellers and marketers.
- When customer data is available, some is presented out of context – and not immediately relevant (or actionable) to sellers and marketers.

It takes more than one team to deeply know one customer. If sellers and marketers are going to stay in step with buyers, they need the latest and greatest information about them, but they must also have an accurate, shared view of these customers. Sales and marketing teams that view this buyer snapshot should also have a [comprehensive understanding](#) of the key data points within it (which should, incidentally, follow a [standardized organizational data structure](#)). Using this shared insight, marketers and sellers can then work together to grow the customer relationship while keeping buyers moving toward a purchase – in effect, [accelerating sales](#).

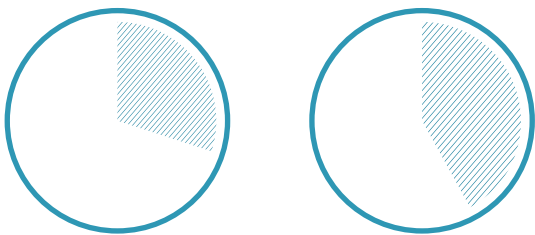
One way to ensure that sales and marketing teams are plugged in to the same buyer – as well as to the unique

experiential context of said buyer – is to merge their operations. Integrate CMO, [Scott Vaughan](#), is a [proponent](#) of this approach:

*By bringing [sales' and marketing's] two views together into one shared perspective, this unified team can define the performance data that matter, such as churn, lifetime value, and cost per acquisition. And, most importantly, get the insights to turn data into actionable insights.*

Vaughan doesn't advocate sales and marketing "alignment," but rather, the [integration](#) of their operations. In this way, he says, the two teams' data, intelligence, processes, and technologies can be easily synchronized to move at customer speed.

Vaughan isn't the only one talking about the integration of sales and marketing. Gartner Research VP [Todd Berkowitz](#) predicts that this year, the majority of sales development teams at B2B technology companies will [report to marketing](#), not sales. Further, as sales and marketing work together more closely, traditional marketing metrics (such as marketing-qualified leads or MQLs) will become [four-letter words](#). In the world of net-new accounts, Berkowitz says, marketing will join sales and knuckle down on driving opportunities, pipeline, and revenue.



30%

of B2B sellers and marketers say lead data is fully shared between their two teams.

42%

report that their company uses separate technology solutions to manage marketing and sales.

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*"2016 B2B Sales & Marketing Collaboration Study," The Marketing Advisory Network*

It may not happen as quickly as this year, but it's likely to happen eventually – as long as sellers and marketers hunger for customer intelligence. There will be plenty of details to iron out along the way: How much data can sales teams possible consume (and what's the saturation point on relevance)? How can brands make it easier for sales and marketing teams to understand – and act on – account and contact information? What would brands need to do with technology platforms, [master data](#), and account segmentation to empower sellers and marketers to accelerate sales?

These questions are by no means easy to answer. But sellers and marketers who have one or more customer-centric milestones under their belts will be the best equipped to explore – and to pursue – these inquiries.

## CONCLUSION

When sales and marketing terrains converge (at the point of the customer), past complaints and finger-pointing are cast in a humbling light. Indeed, something remarkable happens when the two teams christen "the customer" as their common ground. Rigid organizational territories flex, and familiar boundaries relax. Well-worn paths begin to shift.

Looking through customer lens, legacy irritations seem petty. Quickly, they're replaced by more urgent, in-the-moment questions: What do we (jointly and collectively) know about this buyer? How does she stack up to our best buyer profiles? Is her company on our hot list? Is this organization likely to buy from us? How can we best engage with this business?

So yes, sales and marketing "alignment" has taken longer than expected to take hold. But what many think is a dip (a la [Seth Godin](#)) might, in fact, be a cul-de-sac. Isn't it time to let go? We could, like a gadget-obsessed coyote, grab the latest doodad and tear after a rapidly dissolving (if not an increasingly abstract) goal.

Or we could stop trying to build bridges for outdated reasons...and start blazing a common trail that leads directly to customers.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Shelly ([@pigarose](#)) has 15+ years of experience delivering value and results through B2B social networking, public relations, corporate communications, analyst relations, and marketing programs for organizations ranging from global Fortune 200 companies to small, not-for-profit businesses. Shelly holds a B.A. in English from [Central College](#) and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Literary Theory from the [University of Nebraska-Lincoln](#).



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