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The 2021 Sales Imperative: Selling That Thrives on Change

A RICHARDSON SALES PERFORMANCE WHITE PAPER



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The 2021 Sales Imperative: Selling That Thrives on Change

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The future of selling once appeared to be a straight line across familiar terrain. Changes were going to be incremental, evenly spaced, and charted. Today, the map has changed. The global pandemic has jump-started the era of virtual selling. Buyers are more reluctant. The customer's needs are ever-changing. Discussions among stakeholders are fractious.

THE FUTURE OF SELLING

In response, sales professionals are trying to reorient themselves by taking full measure of the changes unfolding in the customer's world. Doing so is not easy, given that 90% of executives believe that recent circumstances will alter the fundamentals of their business over the next five years, according to research from **McKinsey**. These changes are prompting leaders to form an enterprise approach to change characterized by distributed decision making, greater use of data, and digital transformation.

Amid this upheaval, sales professionals are seeking ways to offer clear value to customers as uncertainty and external influences sway stakeholders. Navigating these changes has demanded more of the sales professional's time. Prospecting has become more intensive. Internal coordination among revenue teams is challenging. Channel management requires a more sophisticated approach. These characteristics of selling, while important,

have reduced the time sales professionals have in front of customers and have required greater agility while demanding a higher level of selling skills. Data from **Forrester** shows that sales professionals spend less than one-quarter of their time engaging directly with customers. Sales professionals need a new approach.

Here, we bring cohesiveness to a complicated and changing picture. First, we identify and explore the most pressing changes in the customer's world. Second, we examine how these changes will impact sales professionals. Third, we offer a map for sales professionals who want to develop the critical sales competencies required to navigate these changes and succeed.

90%


90% of executives believe that recent circumstances will alter the fundamentals of their business

- McKinsey

<25%

Sales professionals spend less than one-quarter of their time engaging directly with customers

- Forrester



“The future is no longer
what it used to be.”

- Paul Valéry



Learning How to Lift a Stone

The trend of increasing complexity and uncertainty is a challenge for many sales professionals because they have developed domain-specific skills, or skills that are relevant to a fixed range of selling scenarios. This is a problem because today, no two scenarios are the same. As a result, sales professionals need to become agile. Moreover, they need the kind of agility that welcomes change.

The concept behind this approach is what author Nassim Taleb calls “antifragility.” Something that is antifragile not only prevails during change, but it also benefits from it.

The modern sales professional is antifragile when uncertainty actually encourages them to go further in their investigation of customer challenges.

In contrast, domain-specific skills are fragile. As Taleb explains in his book *Antifragile*, this is akin to developing strength on a weight machine but being unable to lift a

stone. Antifragility is about being more than resilient to change — it is about using change to perform better than before.

The future of selling means using uncertainty to get stronger. Sales professionals need adaptive skills that they can adjust and alter across a range of selling conversations. Sales professionals can do so by developing a greater awareness of the ways in which their world and that of the customer has changed. This approach offers a considerable competitive advantage because the antifragile sales professional benefits from the one constant in sales: change.





"The resilient resists shocks
and stays the same; the
antifragile gets better."

- Nassim Taleb

01 The New Reality for Customers

- 1A Organizations Are Getting Flatter as an Enterprise Approach to Change Takes Hold
- 1B Stakeholders Require Connectivity and Immediacy as Information Multiplies
- 1C Businesses Are Pursuing Digital Transformation as Priorities Change

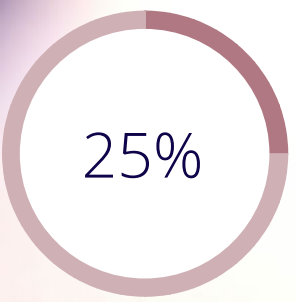


1A ORGANIZATIONS ARE GETTING FLATTER AS AN ENTERPRISE APPROACH TO CHANGE TAKES HOLD

Organizations have learned a painful lesson from the pandemic: **agility is necessary for long-term survival.**

Many businesses are becoming more agile by developing flatter organizational structures. Research from the **National Bureau of Economic Research** concluded that “the number of levels in the management hierarchy between division heads and CEOs has declined by 25 percent.” The authors of the study suggest that this change began as companies started to rely less on physical capital and more on human capital. The result is an environment in which more individuals possess decision-making power. Some, like leaders at **McKinsey**, refer to this new structure as a “network of teams.”

While the intention behind this change is to become more agile, there is often an unexpected side effect: decision making can slow.



The number of levels in the management hierarchy between division heads and CEOs has declined by 25 percent.

- National Bureau of Economic Research

A flat organization facilitates communication, but in doing so, it creates a moving consensus.

For sales professionals, this development presents new challenges. There is more work involved in driving consensus among a variety of stakeholders because one stakeholder’s opposition can more easily spread in a flat organization.

Despite these consequences, research from **PwC** shows that many businesses see this flattening as necessary to their evolution. Their survey found that 72% of respondents cited that “better resiliency and agility” will make their company stronger in the long run.

The trend of flattening organizations also presents unique opportunities for sales professionals to access more of the customer’s white space. As authority in a business becomes shared, so does the pain. This means that a conversation with one stakeholder may more easily reveal challenges experienced by other stakeholders who are not yet part of the sales conversation. This scenario gives the sales professional a valuable head start as they formulate insights that will need to resonate with stakeholders. Additionally, in a flat organization there tends to be a stronger emphasis on unity. Therefore, there is more value to a solution when it benefits more stakeholders and business units.

1B

STAKEHOLDERS REQUIRE CONNECTIVITY AND IMMEDIACY AS INFORMATION MULTIPLIES

Increasing information has added to the risk in decision making for stakeholders. This idea is counterintuitive. More information should generate more insights. Instead, more information often makes it easier to confirm the answers one already has, even if those answers are wrong. This phenomenon is called confirmation bias. Decision makers succumb to confirmation bias when they seek out information confirming their original hypothesis. Confirmation bias even leads one to discount or dismiss information that challenges a preconceived notion. The accessibility of data today has led to a rise in this effect.

Additionally, the volume of information has also introduced new risk. When stakeholders consider a solution, they face the challenge of parsing through this expanding data. Often, one piece of data leads to two. As a result, fractured data presents the risk of misunderstanding the scope and nature of a need. This development explains the customer's growing demand for subject matter experts (SMEs) who

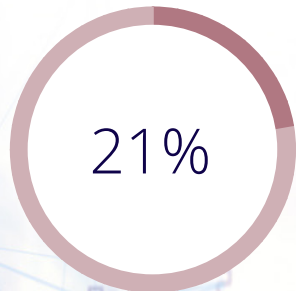
are seen as a resource for clarifying complex issues. The challenge, however, is that many customers seek out SMEs and other sources of information before the sales professional has an opportunity to demonstrate their value as a trusted advisor. Rising to the level of a trusted advisor means sharing the customer's sense of urgency throughout the life cycle. Today, the expectation is that the sales professional is available across all touchpoints at all times. The modern sales professional represents more than a product — they represent a partnership.

The customer's exhaustive pursuit of new information is due, in part, to the speed at which data becomes outdated. This trend is a characteristic of a global business environment. As one piece of information comes to light, another replaces it. This amount of information makes it difficult to identify core challenges and solutions. Doing so adds to the already lengthy buyer's journey. **PwC** shows that 63 percent of operational leaders state that understanding what customers value is a major challenge. Perhaps the reason for this challenge is the fact that the customer's value perception is constantly shifting. Moreover, only one-quarter of respondents "feel very confident that their operations are designed to give their customers value and a distinctive experience, now or even three years from now." Delivering a distinctive experience today means satisfying the customer's need

for meaningful virtual interactions. Customers seek a dialogue in which the sales professional's interpersonal skills are visible. Additionally, the customer's experience must be consistent with the messaging and value of digital assets they accessed before the conversation.

1C

BUSINESSES ARE PURSUING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AS PRIORITIES CHANGE



Only 21% of executives believe they have the resources to maintain growth

- McKinsey

In many cases, new information is so influential that it is prompting businesses to reconsider their model and formulate an enterprise approach to change in which many functions are impacted. The central part of this change is a commitment to digital transformation, which has been accelerated by the pandemic. It is not surprising to learn that “the spending on the technologies and services that enable digital transformation worldwide is expected to amount to 2.3 trillion U.S. dollars,” according to **Statista**.


During a digital transformation, the customer’s needs become complex and change fast. All business units are impacted. The customer must shift resources and revise priorities. These changes mean that sales professionals must engage in a deeper discovery. They must check and double-check assumptions. They must bring the stakeholders together and help them form a consensus about the path forward.

This approach means creating a buying vision by helping the customer to address a challenge they don’t know they have. Doing so is difficult for the sales professional because it requires them to cite the risk of inaction. They must help the customer acknowledge that even the status quo is a business decision that carries opportunity costs like any other initiative. Therefore, rather than sidestep the topic of risk, sales professionals must address it directly. This is where the concept of normalizing risk comes into play. Sales professionals must help acclimate

the customer to an environment in which a degree of risk is commonplace. Discussing concerns in an open manner makes the risks less abstract. Bringing clarity to these issues helps the customer develop more comfort with the decision to move forward.

However, normalizing risk among a group of stakeholders is challenging because each individual has a different sensitivity to risk and different beliefs about which risks are real. These differences are due to the uncharted nature of many digital transformation initiatives. As a result, each stakeholder is exercising greater scrutiny when evaluating solutions. Moreover, they are requiring others on the decision-making team to share the risk of committing to a solution. Individuals are fearful of shouldering the burden of an unfavorable outcome on their own. This diffusion of risk has slowed the buying process.

While each business is changing to a different degree, nearly all share one priority: flexibility. Leaders understand that the rate of change will continue to intensify. Therefore, they need solutions that are equally dynamic. Few believe they have those solutions. In fact, only 21% of executives believe they have the resources to maintain growth, according to **McKinsey**. Agile solutions and the equally adaptable people behind them will earn favorable consideration in an unpredictable and uncertain environment.

A wooden chair with a curved back and a flat seat is positioned on a sandy beach. The chair is made of dark wood and shows signs of wear. In the background, there is a dark, textured wall, possibly a rock face or a concrete wall, with some white patches. The ground is covered in sand and small pebbles. The overall mood is contemplative and somewhat somber.

“Most of our
assumptions have
outlived their
uselessness.”

- Marshall McLuhan

02 The New Reality for Sales Professionals

- 2A Developing Stakeholder Consensus Requires Agility Among All Sales Professionals
- 2B Authenticity and Transparency Are Crucial for Success
- 2C Sales Professionals Are Limited to Virtual Mediums



2A DEVELOPING STAKEHOLDER CONSENSUS REQUIRES AGILITY AMONG ALL SALES PROFESSIONALS

Sales professionals face a more complex route to the sale because buyer needs are changing fast. These changes are the result of evolving business fundamentals. The global pandemic has forced businesses to reprioritize revenue channels, revise budgets, and redeploy assets across divisions. These new characteristics have slowed the decision-making process for stakeholders who increasingly seek hyperspecialized solutions.

In response, sales professionals face the challenge of drawing a line through these scattered points to form a single constellation.

Uniting these disparate points is a challenge that draws on a host of selling skills. This development might explain why the capabilities found within inside sales and field sales are starting to overlap. Skills can no longer be divided between different specialized groups. Everyone in the sales organization needs a range of abilities that connects to every part of the buyer's journey because customers expect continuous, value-added interactions every step of the way. In fact, this expectation is present even after the sale. In response to this development, more sales teams are devoting training to post-sale growth opportunities via upsell and cross-sell campaigns.

The sum of these factors means that more employees are responsible for revenue generation, leading more organizations to form "revenue teams." As a result, selling is less of a baton pass from one sales professional to another. Instead it resembles a team on a field in which every player holds the ball several times through the game. Everyone on that team must be able to identify the origin of the buyer's motivation to seek a solution. They must be able to then identify the additional areas in the customer's business that have been impacted as a result of the initial pain point. Doing so demands the ability to have multiple conversations with different stakeholders that result in a consensus.

The need for these skills explains why agility is a key focus for selling organizations today. Success will mean being able to incorporate those capabilities into different conversations occurring throughout the buyer's journey. Moreover, sales professionals will need to understand how to apply the right capabilities to the right moment. For example, there is value in knowing when to engage the ROI conversation and how to contextualize the value of the solution relative to alternative options and even the status quo.

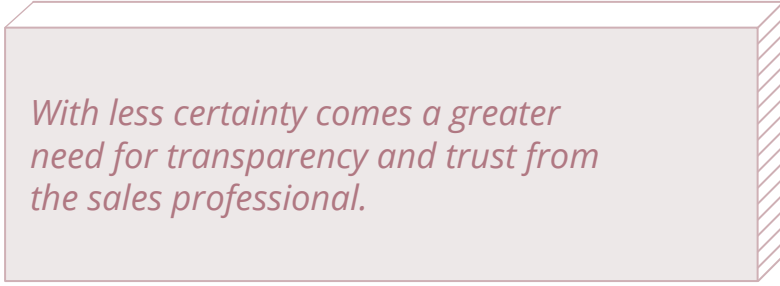


2B AUTHENTICITY AND TRANSPARENCY ARE CRUCIAL FOR SUCCESS

There is no point in the buying process in which the sales professional has the customer's undivided attention. This problem is more apparent today because customers are subject to an array of influences as they change the fundamentals of their business.

These influential factors include the emergence of digitally oriented and self-directed buying options, uncertainty stemming from the pandemic recovery timeline, and a need for solutions that can be adapted to address needs across business divisions. These influences are increasing as virtual selling introduces more distractions into the sales conversation.

These factors have also prompted stakeholders to explore a wider variety of solutions. To a degree, this characteristic of change is good; the customer is refreshing their perspective. However, reexamining each aspect of the business presents risks. Stakeholders can succumb to an unending process of research and review. This setting makes it difficult for stakeholders to build momentum toward a decision. Assumptions are subject to more questioning, and leaders become less certain of the path forward.



With less certainty comes a greater need for transparency and trust from the sales professional.

They must bring credibility to their solutions by displaying authenticity in both words and actions. This kind of open dialogue, which address the logic and emotion behind buying, helps the customer bring order and coherence to varied influences. Simply, customers need the solution and the people behind them. This pairing is critical in an environment in which agility drives success. Moreover, agility is so central to survival that the term “adaptive advantage” has come to replace “competitive advantage” in many conversations.

This environment offers sales professionals an opportunity to get in at the ground level of a business's redevelopment. However, the challenges in doing so are considerable. Sales professionals must uncover the new criteria stakeholders use to validate a solution. With this information, sales professionals can proactively co-create the buying vision with customers. The result is a process in which the sales professional can anticipate what the customers will need and when they will need it.

2C SALES PROFESSIONALS ARE LIMITED TO VIRTUAL MEDIUMS

Prospecting has always been a labor-intensive process. However, in the economic setting of today, it has also become a high-stakes endeavor because sales opportunities are more tenuous than they have ever been. Sales professionals need an incisive approach because, on average, businesses require “more than two years to reach the pre-peak level of investment” after an economic downturn, according to research from **Deloitte**. Moreover, the same body of research shows that the most recent economic recoveries required even longer periods to take shape. This data illustrates the need for more effective prospecting during a time when customers are less confident.

The result of these circumstances is that sales professionals must build a track record with customers in which gains are incremental. Deals must be qualified one inch at a time. Many sales leaders are learning that they need to refocus their team on the fundamentals of prospecting because outreach that is merely adequate is insufficient today. Value statements must be precise. Insights must resonate. Referrals must represent value.

Virtual prospecting is a challenge not only because of the absence of in-person interaction, but sales professionals also face the challenge of drafting messaging that can hit a moving target. The customer's challenges are not what they used to be. The current economic setting has shifted the customer's business; traditionally strong channels have weakened, while others that were small now play an out-sized role. Sales professionals cannot depend on content that was effective in the past. Therefore, some leaders are refining their approach by "pressure testing" insights with existing customers to ensure they speak to the top-of-mind concerns of prospects in the same industry.

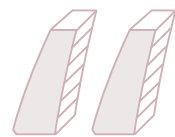
Once the selling conversation has started, the sales professional must adapt to the virtual setting. They must engage in a higher level of preparation by considering ways to build rapport from a distance by maintaining eye contact via the camera lens and seizing moments when the conversation can become more personal. They must favor "conversation mode," rather than "presentation mode" in which conversation is only one way. This approach creates a more engaging atmosphere, which is critical in a virtual environment in which the customer is exposed to more distractions.

The customer's attention is even shorter in a virtual environment. Therefore, sales professionals need to understand the customer's complete digital journey leading up to the virtual engagement because these early touchpoints indicate the customer's focus and what information they already know.

The Path Forward

These changes necessitate a new selling methodology that is characterized by proactive collaboration and a consultative approach.

This new selling approach is not merely a set of actions — it is also a mindset in which the sales professional has a genuine and authentic curiosity about the customer and their needs. When this curiosity is real, the sales professional is not discouraged by changes or the unexpected. Instead, upheaval only encourages them to explore further. This kind of sales professional is not anchored to preconceived notions or assumptions. Their curiosity propels them forward. As Nassim Taleb explains,

 *Curiosity is antifragile... and is magnified by attempts to satisfy it."*

At Richardson Sales Performance, we believe that the future of selling belongs to sales professionals who:

- 1 Engage with the buyer as a mutual business partner, bringing clarity to the business issue and insight into the best ways to address challenges and needs
- 2 Commit to a deeper discovery of customer needs by understanding the stakeholder's new set of priorities as they are in flux
- 3 Co-create a buying vision with the customer by accurately diagnosing the challenges and identifying the aspects of the solution that most directly connect to their definition of value
- 4 Gain access to a broader range of stakeholders, track a larger set of priorities that rise and fall, then drive consensus
- 5 Discuss risks in an open and transparent manner, which allows the customer to develop comfort with moving forward with a solution
- 6 Proactively guide the customer through the buying process by collaborating on an evaluation plan, co-creating the business case, providing proof of value, and driving consensus
- 7 Are part of revenue teams - from pre-sales SMEs to service and support teams - in which all members drive customer retention, value realization, and revenue goals



8

Can incorporate numerous capabilities into different conversations occurring throughout the buyer's journey

9

Possess a firm grasp on behavioral science concepts, enabling them to sell to both logic and emotion

10

Leverage behavioral science to foster trust, increase buyer ownership, and shape perception of needs

11

Can understand the customer's complete digital journey leading up to the virtual engagement and provide a customer experience that is consistent with the messaging of those materials



Modern upheavals are prompting sales professionals to seek new ways to offer clear value to customers as uncertainty and externalities create enormous influence on buying decisions. The most effective sales organizations are choosing to get ahead of those factors and become a guide to customers seeking ways to navigate the low-visibility terrain that will characterize business over the next several quarters.

The most pressing changes in the customer's and sales professional's world indicate that authenticity, curiosity, and collaboration will surface meaningful conversations that yield value in the form of not only a solution, but also a more impactful customer experience.





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Contact us to learn how we can build the capabilities of your salesforce to prepare them for a successful future in selling.

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