

Gartner for Sales

# 5 Ways the Future of B2B Buying Will Rewrite the Rules of Effective Selling

## Key findings

- Rapidly shifting buying dynamics, fueled by digital buying behavior, is reshaping the strategic focus of sales organizations. Few sales organizations are responding with appropriate urgency.
- Chief sales officers (CSOs) must engage in a fundamental mindset shift from leader of sellers to leader of selling, embracing digital-first go-to-market.
- Progressive sales organizations will rapidly innovate digital selling models, leveraging the associated analytics advantages to engage customers in a far more coordinated fashion through all routes to market.



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## Recommendations

To successfully navigate the evolution of B2B buying over the next five years, heads of sales should:

- Rapidly build digital sales experiences to support customer self-learning on the array of complex considerations associated with their products, services, and above all else, the customer's change journey.
- Shift organizational focus from sales professionals as the primary commercial channel toward digital sales channels to invest in developing rich and valuable customer decision support.
- Accelerate beyond foundational analytics capabilities (such as, clean data, integrated data markets) toward AI-powered insights, fueled by customer engagement data to provide next best action and coordinated proactive actions to better retain and grow customer accounts.
- Build ecosystems of support for customer Change Enablement, including guidance on key buying considerations, but also broader project/initiative guidance to help ensure decision complexity is minimized and customer decision confidence is maximized.
- Embrace a Sense Making sales approach among sales professionals, positioning their unique value-add to help guide customers to decision confidence, minimizing uncertainty over competing perspectives and alternate actions.

## Introduction

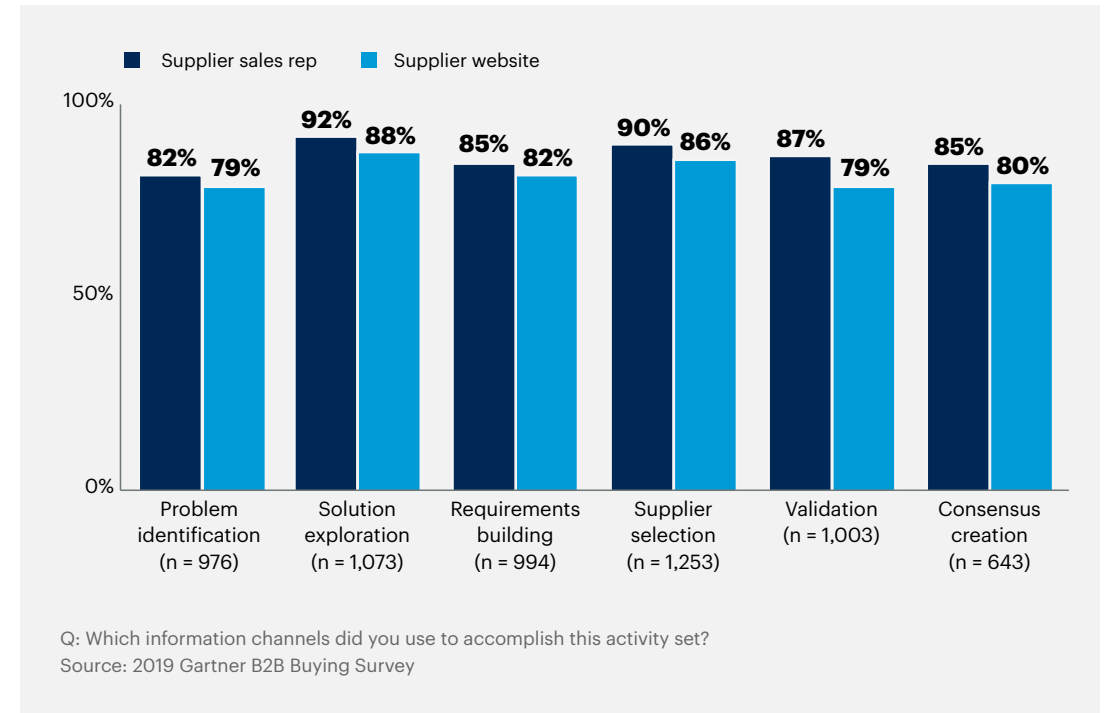
Seismic shifts in B2B buying will dramatically reconfigure B2B commerce over the next five years. The best B2B sales organizations will no longer be denominated in sales professionals — or at least not altogether — as boosting individual seller performance proves a weak, mismatched means to address the oncoming, fundamental shift in how buyers buy. Instead, CSOs must necessarily evolve their mindset from leading teams of individual sellers to leading the far broader effort of organizational selling, embracing digital routes to market above all else. This brief review of the top five customer buying trends will demonstrate why and examine the implications for sales leaders and their strategies.

The story of evolving buying dynamics has two independent but parallel themes — digital and difficulty — each with dramatic implications for sales organizations. Digitally enabled customers, facing dramatically more difficult considerations, are mismatched with today’s sales model, which spectacularly underserves customer’s most critical need: confidence in making the best business decisions possible.

### Digital Trend 1: B2B customers radically discount the perceived value of sellers

Gartner research has previously identified B2B buyers’ sustained reliance on digital channels throughout the purchase journey (such as supplier websites, third-party websites, social media). We’ve monitored the steady evolution of customer preferences’ shift from in-person sales interactions toward digital channels. A recent survey of customer stakeholders found near equal usage of a supplier’s websites versus sales reps to complete the most common buying jobs (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Proportion of Business Customers Using Sales Rep or Website Channels to Complete a Buying Job



Relatedly, B2B buyers report spending exceedingly little time with sales reps. Only 17% of the total purchase journey is spent in such interactions (see Figure 2). Considering the average deal involves multiple suppliers, any given sales rep has roughly 5% of a customer’s total purchase time. Sales leaders lament decreased customer access, but it should come as little surprise considering the improved quality (not to mention quantity) of information available through more objective digital channels. Customers perceive little distinct value (beyond their own learning) from sales rep interactions, resulting in only necessary access being granted.

Perhaps most troubling is a pronounced generational shift in skepticism of sales reps. Our research finds millennial business customers over twice as skeptical as baby boomers (see Figure 3), with 44% of millennials preferring no sales rep interaction in a B2B purchase setting. As baby boomers retire, and millennials (the first digitally native generation) mature into key decision-making positions, a digital-first buying posture will become the norm. Further, we expect the acute spike in digital buying during the COVID-19 pandemic to have sustained influence on customer comfort with digital learning and buying.

Figure 2. Distribution of Buying Groups’ Time by Key Buying Activities

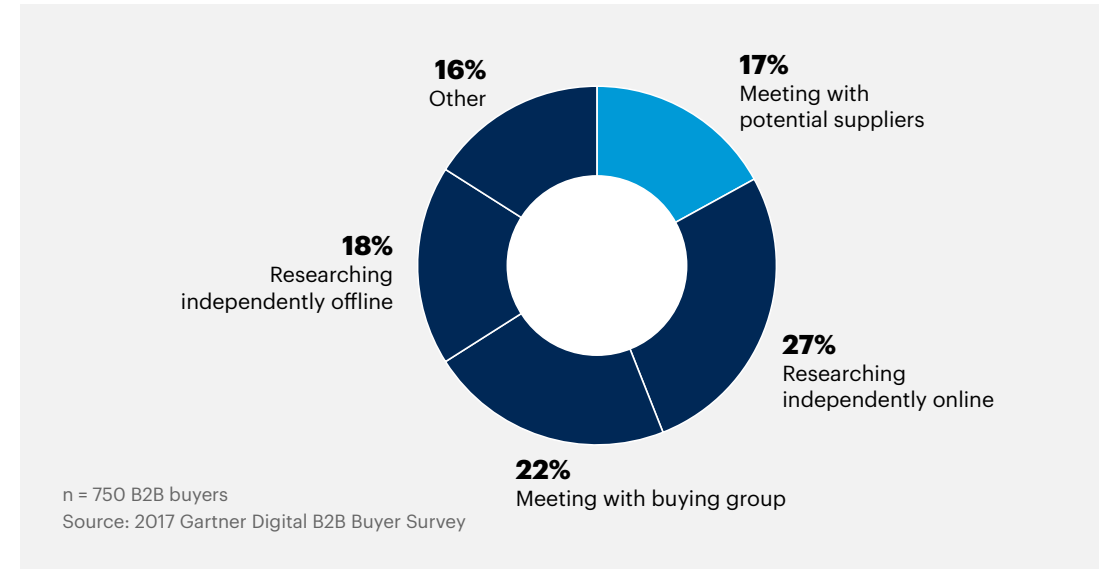
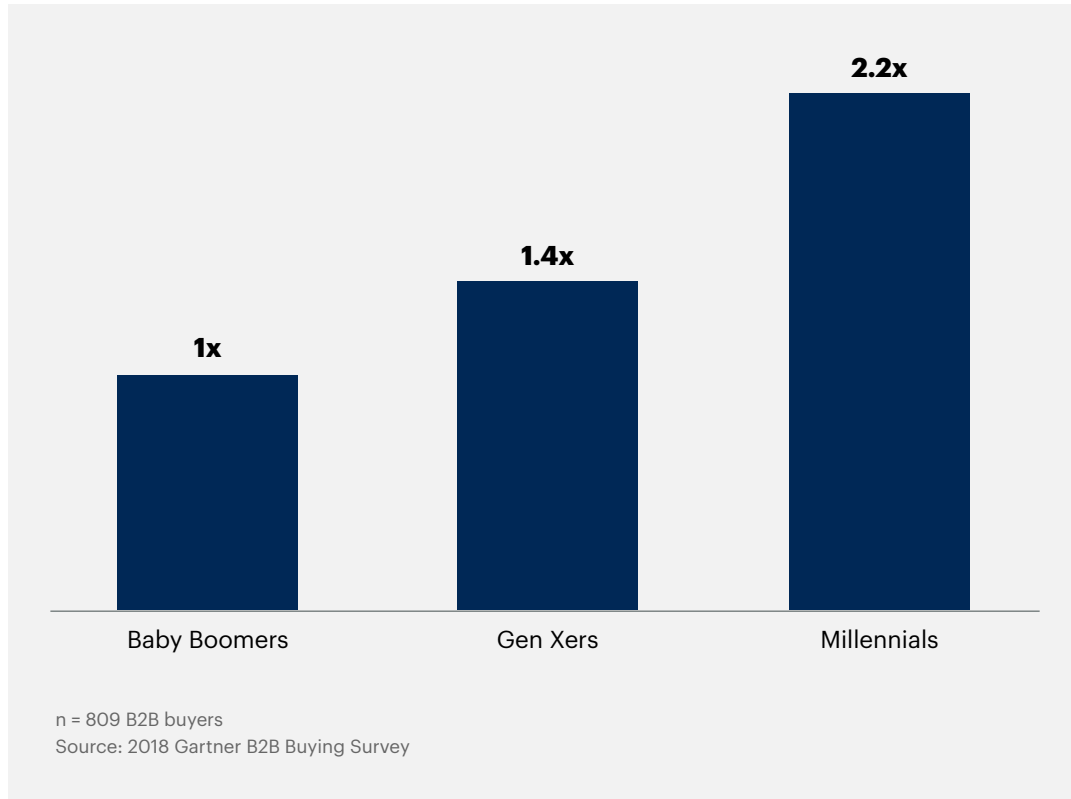


Figure 3. Indexed Percentage of Customers, by Generation, Who Report High Skepticism of Sales Rep Claims



Does this mark the beginning of the eventual “death of the sales rep?” No. Certainly not in the next five years (and beyond, for many sectors requiring detailed customer collaboration and co-created solutions). But it does signal drastic changes in the seller role. We are witnessing a decided end to the era where sales reps were the channel; now they are merely a channel to customers. Sales leaders reluctant to acknowledge customers’ digital-first proclivities will be outpaced by competitors delivering significant value through digital- and omnichannel sales models, engaging customers in digitally rich learning and discovery. This will be aided by — but far from wholly dependent upon — sales reps and specialists who will play a more prominent role navigating self-learning customers toward more confident decisions.

CSOs must embrace a new identity and organizational climate, shifting from the “leader of sellers” to the “leader of selling,” irrespective of channel. That mental shift is urgently required throughout all levels of sales leadership but must start with the CSO. The best work in digital selling is not happening within sales departments but rather in marketing. Progressive marketers have shifted from spec sheets and product overviews to digitally rich buyer enablement. They are helping customers manage the complexities of an end-to-end purchase decision and navigate the implications for their business. The small number of organizations that have intentionally merged their sales and marketing capabilities (as well as customer success management and support) have embraced a more seamless digital go-to-market model with far more intelligent and harmonized touchpoints. These organizations are poised to accelerate sales results over organizations hesitant to embrace a digital-first sales model.

## Digital Trend 2: Customers reward rich virtual buying experiences

As compared to B2C brands (admittedly, with far simpler products), B2B organizations have fallen woefully behind the seamless, easy and informative standard of B2C digital platforms. As more business customer learning and buying activity shifts online, invariable comparisons to digitally advanced online retail, travel and media companies will be unavoidable. “We’re different because we’re B2B” is no longer an acceptable excuse. CSOs failing to adjust will dangerously expose themselves to disruptive competitors able to innovate digital-first customer experiences from a blank slate.

This may feel like a distant issue, but conditions are ripening quickly for breakaway differentiation. Such transformative change takes time — especially for large organizations struggling to escape legacy in-person sales models. Unlike digitally native disruptors, traditional B2B organizations face years of necessary rewiring of legacy structures, processes, functional silos and leadership mindsets to make this work. That work needs to start now.

What will this new digital-first world of B2B customer experience look like? Glimmers of innovation exist. Highly complex interactions, which traditionally required live, in-person site visits, such as commercial real estate transactions, are moving into virtual reality. Customers can demo “fit for purpose” real estate space, digitally trialing their preferred configurations, and lease floors in a Manhattan skyscraper without a single handshake. Manufacturing sectors are developing digital innovation spaces, where customer and supplier experts can tour each other’s facilities to aid co-development efforts. Cloud vendors are developing online project

management tools for customers to use independently to organize an exploration and implementation, complete with integrated buying enablement. Examples are limited, but more exist everyday as smaller, nimbler suppliers seek to aggressively steal share from larger organizations.

This kind of innovation results from tremendous commitment and years of experimentation. Companies failing to embrace that kind of learning today will inevitably struggle tomorrow, as customer expectations are recalibrated by consumer brands already aggressively exploring new ways to exploit data availability, technological innovation and customer appetite for new-to-world experiences.

For most organizations, it starts with assessing — at a detailed level — how, where and what customers are learning, and the difficult decisions they must subsequently navigate in their purchase experiences. Isolating points of friction, gaps in information and opportunities to build greater customer confidence are key. The diversity of customer stakeholders involved, resources engaged and perspectives sought out, while dizzying, simultaneously highlight the opportunity suppliers have to meaningfully insert themselves into these decisions in novel ways. The company website — often forgotten by sales, nevertheless heavily trafficked by customers — is the place to start. Sales leaders thinking the website marketing’s domain, take heed. The company website, while rarely owned within sales, squarely sits within selling as a means of customer engagement. Sales leaders failing to shift significant focus, resources and political capital into creating rich digital experiences through the next five years risk alienating customers and losing business as a result.

### **Digital Trend 3: Customers' digital buying behavior allows more productive analytics and coordinated customer engagement**

Customers' increased digital buying behavior creates innumerable opportunities for analytics- and data-driven sales organizations. As customers engage online, they inevitably leave tracks — like footprints in the snow. Whether it's page views, downloads, shares or a wide range of similar activities, marketing organizations have long used these digital signals to better measure both depth of customer engagement and readiness to buy — albeit with varying degrees of success.

Only in the last several years have progressive sales organizations tapped customer data in a similar manner to analyze funnel trends, generate forecasts, qualify opportunities and proactively engage customers. There is much to be done. The vast majority of customer information flows through different systems, collected from different customer touchpoints. As a result, a relatively small number of organizations have established the capability to capture, organize, clean and query that data systematically. Poor data entry, incompatible systems and lack of data access prevent organizations from deploying even rudimentary machine learning or artificial intelligence (AI). Effective data analysis cannot be viewed as a foreign, abstract concept, and must be prioritized as a foundational growth capability.

The amount of available customer data is exploding and will continue to do so as increased digital activity and systems of record result in detailed customer behavior and product usage patterns. The next five years will see the application of high-end analytics quickly fall from differentiator to table stakes. Any company still lamenting poor data quality and unskilled analytics departments will struggle to justify how they failed to see value in customers' newly laid digital footprints.

Leading commercial organizations will aim to employ dynamic customer engagement models, fueled by data sources from all customer interactions, be it customer service, technical support, customer success, product interactions, sales and marketing to inform an enriched view of the customer organization. Powered with AI, these once disparate data points will inform nuanced recommendations and powerful next best actions, helping customers take better advantage of existing products or expand into new products to recognize even greater value. Highly tailored messages, contextualized account-based marketing content and timely seller recommendations will reach levels of remarkable consistency, helping penetrate large, diverse customer organizations in ways previously considered unthinkable. In this regard, digital selling reaches new heights of highly coordinated omnichannel engagement with customer accounts, leaving the legacy single-channel sales rep model as distant history.



## Difficulty Trend 1: Customers' struggle to change decreases their ability to buy

We have long reported the steady rise in the average number of individual stakeholders involved in a complex B2B purchase. Ten years ago that number was just over five; today, it's over 11, occasionally flexing up to nearly 20. We've also documented the complex, nonlinear path that most B2B purchases follow, as each stakeholder seeks to complete very different buying jobs spanning problem identification, solution exploration, requirements building and supplier selection (see Figure 4). Bottom line, B2B buying is hard. Unaddressed, customers' struggle to buy means suppliers failing to provide help (in the form of what we've come to call "Buyer Enablement") are unlikely to win large deals predictably or consistently.

Our most recent B2B buying research, however, suggests a far broader challenge. A recent survey of over 1,000 B2B buyer stakeholders found 93% of respondents identified their purchase decision as a result of a larger organizational initiative, with disruptive operational barriers, market considerations, and as nearly 50% told us, organizational structure implications. Put differently, successful B2B purchase decisions are effectively contingent on customers' ability to successfully navigate complex institutional change. Over 80% of customers voiced uncertainty in their own ability to manage such change, and their suppliers must share in that concern.

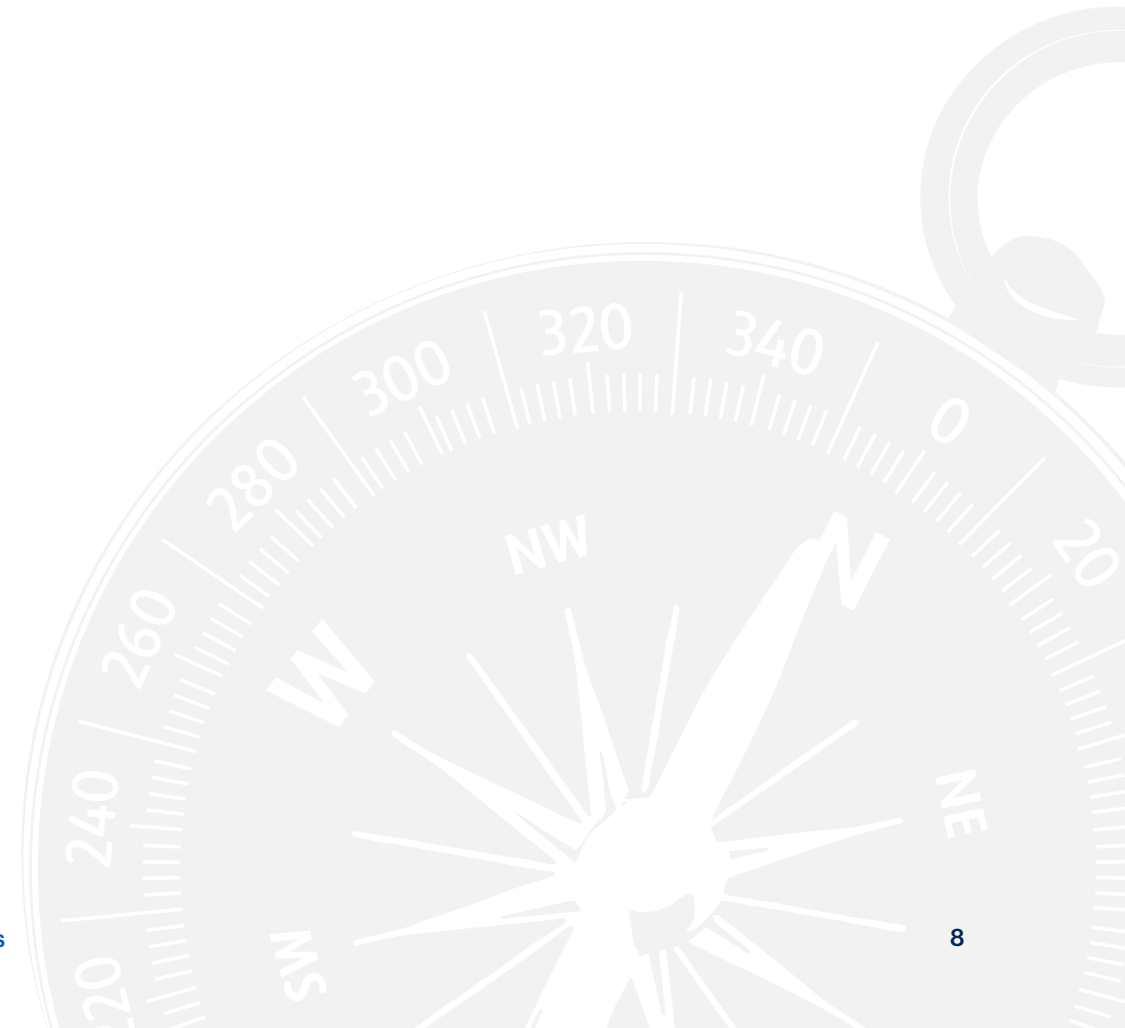
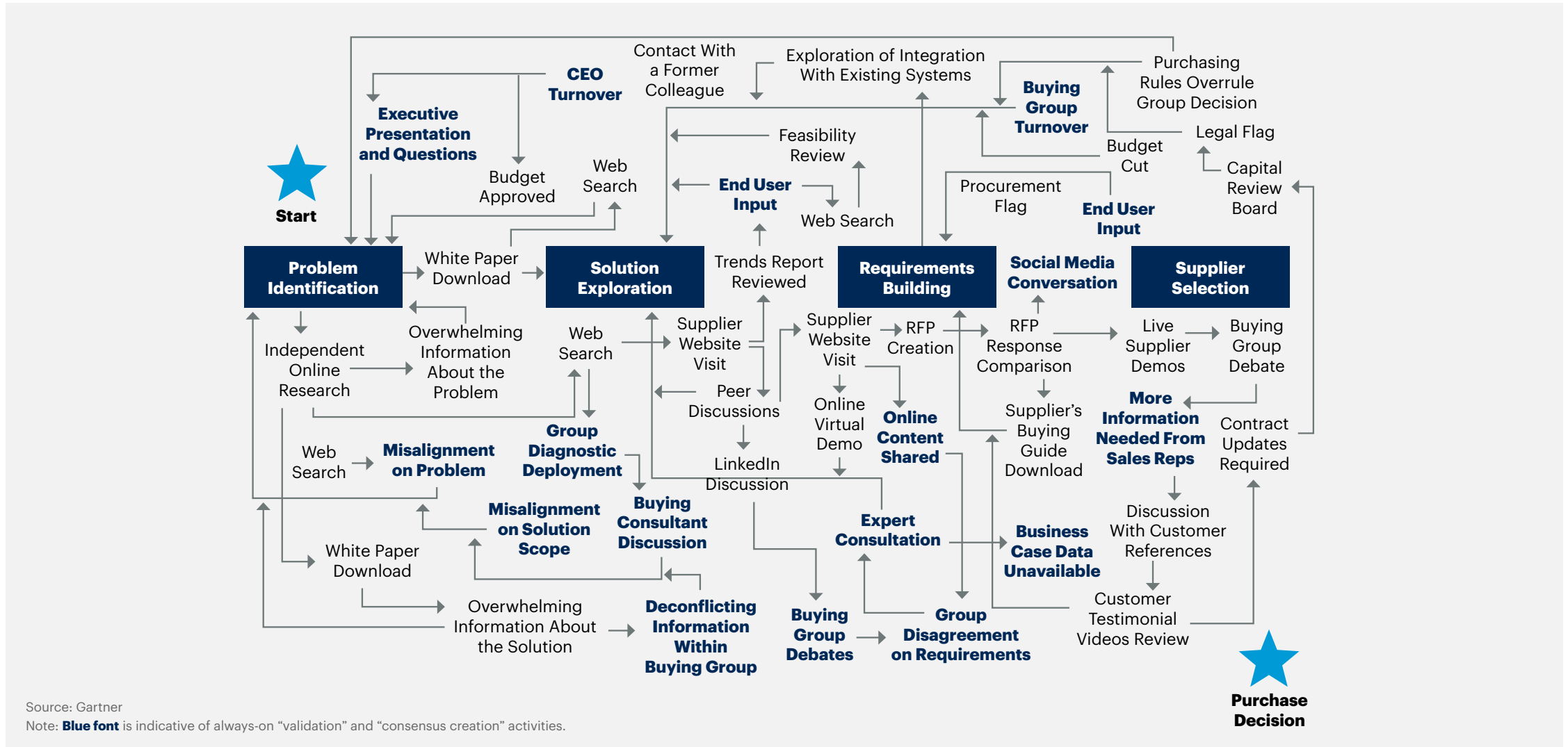




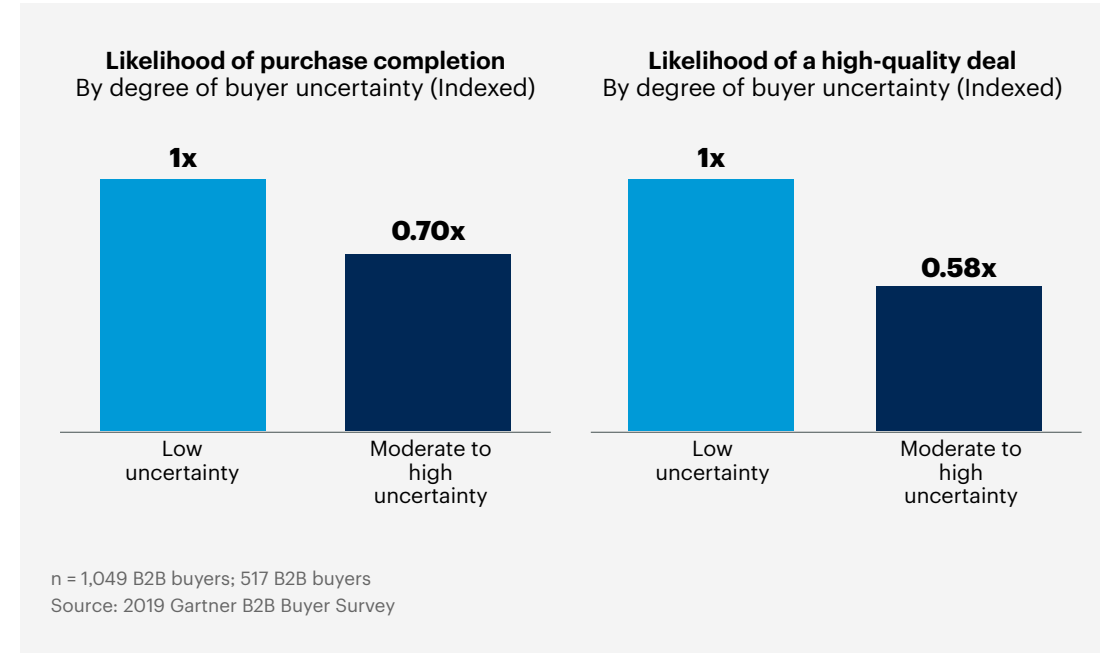
Figure 4. Illustrative Customer Buying Journey



Such high uncertainty matters tremendously, corresponding to a 30% reduction in customers' ability to reach a purchase decision at all, and a 42% reduction in the likelihood they purchase a more premium, more expensive, "high-quality deal" (see Figure 5). Most customers are naturally predisposed to maintain the status quo if for no other reason than a lack of confidence in their own ability to change.

Successful suppliers will have to find a way to both address customers' buying uncertainty and change uncertainty. We call this "Change Enablement" — providing customers a vision for change and a means for determining the key challenges to address as part of that change, coupled with a framework for prioritizing competing considerations. Change Enablement is Buyer Enablement writ large. It spans beyond the explicit purchase dynamics, addressing the broader scope of organizational change. Over the next five years, the best suppliers will support broader organizational change in addition to supporting purchasing decisions, because when customers' change uncertainty is left unresolved, large-scale solutions through complex buying decisions become less likely.

Figure 5. Impact of B2B Buyer Uncertainty on Purchase Outcomes

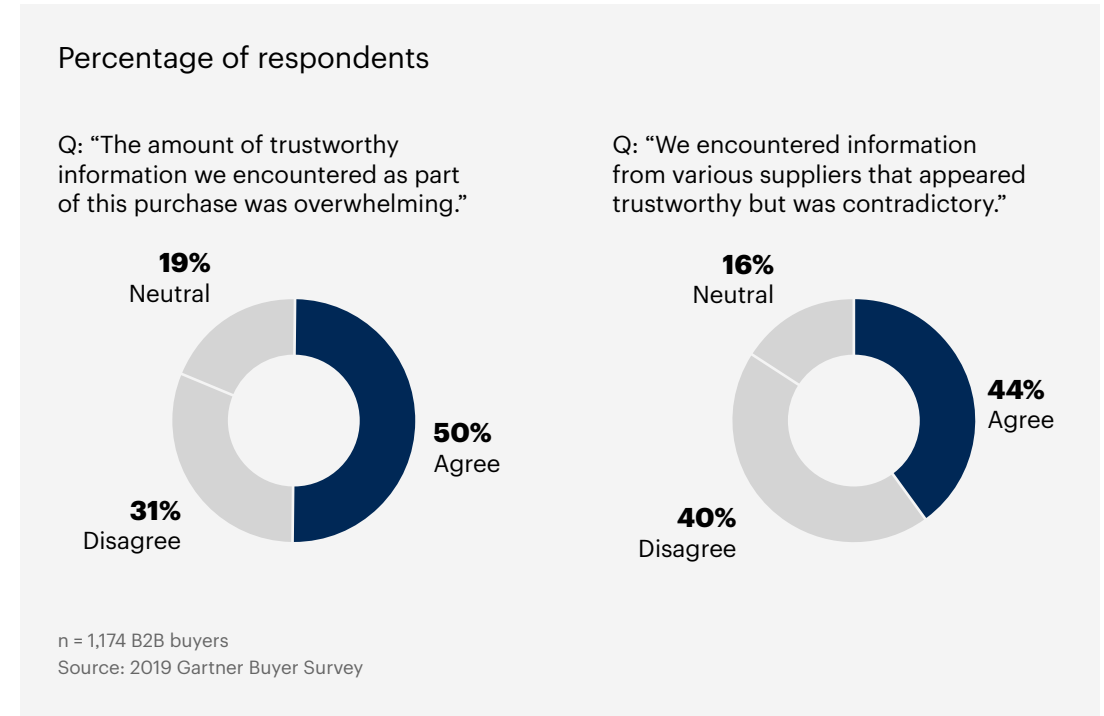


## Difficulty Trend 2: Customers become overwhelmed with high-quality information

High-quality supplier information no longer provides as clear differentiation as it did just a few short years ago. Our recent customer survey on information quality showed 89% of buyers felt the information they encountered in a recent purchase was generally of high quality, relevant and evidenced. In the race to deliver “market-leading thought leadership,” suppliers have effectively landed in a stalemate. Over the next five years, suppliers’ continued investment in data-backed thought leadership, improved research and expanded content distribution will see “really smart” supplier perspectives fall to “just average.”

But from a customer’s perspective this presents an equally tough challenge. Over half of all B2B buyers we surveyed reported feeling overwhelmed specifically by the volume of trustworthy information they encountered as part of their purchase journey. Further, nearly half found supplier information trustworthy, but simultaneously contradictory, leaving customers uncertain (see Figure 6). Contradictory information results in lower customer confidence, which can reduce the likelihood of a customer making a significant purchase up to nearly 160%, according to our research. This is the future of B2B buying decisions, brought to a near standstill, through the influx of thought leadership.

Figure 6. Customer Agreement/Disagreement With Information Challenges



Over the next five years, the best sales organizations will equip sellers to engage customers very differently with information. Sellers will pivot from being the source of information to helping customers make sense out of everything they're learning, irrespective of source. Our data shows this Sense Making approach dramatically outperforms more classic sales approaches, and we expect this performance gap to widen as customers continue to engage in more self-learning. Sense Making fills a critical need for customers, effectively focusing customers' attention on the most critical considerations for their organization.

The future of B2B commerce undoubtedly has room for in-person selling. If anything, customers need in-person support to make sense of all their self-learning. However, to ensure customer value, those in-person interventions must be recalibrated to address customers' toughest buying challenges, not exacerbate them with more or conflicting information. In a world increasingly characterized by high quantities of good information, the best sellers will necessarily evolve dramatically from providing more information to helping customers make sense of that info and make better decisions for their business.

## Conclusion

As B2B buying increasingly moves online, both the substance and the scope of seller behavior will have to adapt in order to stay relevant, focusing increasingly on Sense Making and Change Enablement.

Meanwhile, sales leaders will have to substantially rethink their role. Too many sales leaders today perceive themselves to be the leader of sellers rather than the leaders of selling. Undoubtedly, customers are migrating decisively from in-person channels to digital alternatives. Sales leaders must not cede their deep expertise in sales effectiveness to functions more classically owning these digital channels. Instead, websites and new digital channels must be purpose-built to drive sales performance, justified by a simple truth: customers learn and buy digitally. Ultimately, sales is about selling. Irrespective of whether the role of human involvement in sales decreases over time, selling must still happen one way or another; the channel (human versus digital) is merely the means, not the end.

No question, the future of sales is different. Change is coming to the function — change in which heads of sales are takers, not makers. But that doesn't mean leaders can't adapt in response, and the best ones have already begun.

## Recommended for you

[The Future of Sales Report](#)

[Transform Sales Operations for the Future](#)

[Sense Making: The High-Performing Sales Approach for the Information Era](#)

[Effective Remote Selling Framework](#)

[AI Use Case Prism for B2B Sales](#)

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