



## And now for the good news: Sales rules the B2B landscape

### AIDA is almost stuff of fairy tales now

In the beginning was the Word, declare the scriptures. But in the holy book of sales, in the beginning was Awareness. And with it, someone who went by the dark-sounding description of *Suspect*. You were considered a sales wizard if you could move him from Awareness to Interest and then on to Desire. Finally, abracadabra, Action. So, AIDA was the wand that changed the Suspect to Prospect and transformed him into a Customer. This was the famous ‘sales funnel’, the inside-out process on which CRM systems are supposed to capture data to let you know the progress or lack of it in the buyer journey from Awareness to Action

### 4E – The contemporary buying reality

The contemporary buying reality is very different say Frank V Cespedes and Tiffani Bova, in their article *What Salespeople Need to Know About the New B2B Landscape* published in the Aug 2015 issue of Harvard Business Review. The buyer no longer moves sequentially through a funnel but works through four parallel streams to decide on buying. **That brings us to Gartner Research’s 4 E model**

Activity	Buyer action	Resources Used
<u>E</u> xplore	Identifies a need or opportunity and looks for ways to address it	Self-directed search on Internet, Interactions with sellers
<u>E</u> valuate	Takes a closer look at options uncovered while exploring	Internet search, peer level checks and talking to sales reps
<u>E</u> ngage	Initiates further contact with providers to get closer to a buying decision	Contacts sellers. Receives & discusses proposals.
<u>E</u> xperience	Uses a solution and develops value perception basis that usage	Pilots, proof of concepts and the like

### THE MERCURI VIEW

Buying and selling are the yin-yang pair, integral to how mankind creates value for itself. With increasing levels of the buyer- awareness, the salesperson has had to evolve from being a order taker and/or a delivery boy to being a demonstrator of value, to now being challenged to earn his place as a consulting partner in the purchase process.

Mercuri’s Global Sales Excellence Survey 2017 tracked how buyers suffer a ‘choice overload’ as they find more and more information online about possible solutions to their problems. The best performing companies invested much more managerial time and resources in coaching and training their salespeople. And such salespeople clearly understood where their Customers were coming from, than their lesser performing peers.

Uncovering ‘real’ needs by scratching below the surface of what is being articulated by the Customer is a critical selling skill. Resolving the uncovered need by developing and delivering appropriate solutions calls for higher order selling skills, which are nurtured in a custom made ‘sales capability framework’.

As technology increasingly permeates the buying process, it raises the bar on sales competence, making the salesperson much more valuable than ever before. The sales community has to rise to the occasion. It can. It will, as it has always done.



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## So, what has changed?

Therefore, the authors conclude, the secret of effective selling could be:

- (i) Understand where the Customer is in the four activity streams
- (ii) Interact with Customer as appropriate to the stream he is in currently

## And the good news is - Sales force is more important than ever

No matter which path the Customers take or in what order, they want to interact with someone who can take them towards the purchase decision, champion their cause and make the purchase happen. “B2B buyers report that, compared to other sources of information, these interactions are the *most* influential in their decision-making process” say the authors. Research found things like references, in-person or virtual events, white paper, sales presentations and a range of other potential influencers rank well below ‘direct interactions’. Bottom line? Don’t be taken in by the hype. Digital hasn’t replaced salespeople. Their role in crafting solutions remains key in most B2B purchases.

## Why salespeople count more than ever before: Key Insights

The article highlights some interesting insights into why salespeople pack much more significant clout in the B2B buying journey

1. **Customer value resides in usage** - Most products and services bought by businesses are part of a ‘wider usage system’ for the buyer. So, Customer value resides in that usage and not just the individual product. Your suspects could turn into prospects simply when you help them articulate challenges in using the competitor’s product they now use.
2. **B2B buyers are typically required to justify purchase decisions to others** – Simply put, B2B purchase decisions have only grown more complex. The less than liberal capex flows, post the global financial crisis, have heightened this trend.

The article candidly says: “And you are naïve or spending too much time on your smartphone if you believe that a combination of economics, solution identification, product application, risk management, and political journey through the buyer’s organization is now handled predominantly online in most buying scenarios and without knowledgeable and savvy sales help”

3. **Core solution-selling and account management skills still matter** – Gartner research cited in the article also found that buyers valued interactions with sellers the most. And this was true of all buying streams. B2B buyers expected demos and presentations to be customized to their company needs. Little surprise that generic sales calls made on the heels of signing up for seller events or webinars are passe. Today’s buyer demands specific solutions tailored to his specific needs.



4. ***Buyer's online research seen more to complement and not replace interactions with salespeople***
  - Online research has only served to raise awareness of product and best practice alternatives available. Frequently the overload of information available online drives buyers to seek out expert advice for choosing solutions that fit their needs. The seller's expertise becomes even more valuable if the seller's experience includes work with a wide range of companies, regions or verticals

**Buying is now an on-going movie, not a selfie or snapshot in a funnel**

The authors contend that all talk about disintermediation of salespeople is specious. Such talk simply creates a smokescreen around the real issue. Which is, buying processes are changing rapidly, calling for corresponding changes in the sales tasks

**How have buying processes changed**

Sl. No	Changing trends in buying	What it could mean for sales
1	<b><i>Customer references now mean much more than sharing names of some satisfied clients</i></b> Buyers can get today online and connect with a large body of users to get unbiased opinions of products and services. This includes critical comments and suggestions. Also available are product review sites and service ratings	Accessing all possible information open to potential buyers and being well informed has become mandatory for B2B salespeople to be able to provide expert guidance to buyers in their purchase journey
2	<b><i>Digital collaterals play a vital role</i></b> Technical papers, insight documents, project experiences hosted on seller's website and often the website itself are seen to exert a major influence on the buyer	This calls for improved coordination between sales and marketing even as the two functions become increasingly interdependent but different in their perspectives and procedures
3	<b><i>Prospect touchpoints have increased</i></b> Websites, blogs and other digital media have increased visibility and transparency of selling organizations to prospects, disrupting the conventional inside-out funnel approach and dramatically raising the touch points – online, offline, marketing collateral etc.	Buyers today desire interactions with others in the purchase value chain, besides the salespersons. This can include professionals like product specialists, service experts, logistic providers, pre-and post-sales resources. So, today's salesperson is expected to coordinate these interactions with purpose and efficiency
3	<b><i>Buying process is now continuous and dynamic</i></b> The buyer's journey is no longer a sequential collection of static steps. The process is now more fluid and constantly changing even as it absorbs inputs from multiples sources. 'An on-going movie, not a selfie or snapshot in a funnel' as the authors frame it	The sales model and performance practices may often need to be reconfigured to deal with this new reality



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## Answers to the challenge: Blended strategy, cross functional coordination and organization-wide readiness

- **Blended strategy** – B2B sellers will be required to redraw their sales processes to match the new requirements under each buying stream. Debates on which is better could be a waste of time - Online Vs In person; Web Vs Face to face prospecting; Digital Vs Human. Current reality calls for an *and* approach not an *either or* one. Ideal solution could be a blend of both to arrive at the right mix
- **Cross functional coordination** – It is essential that all stakeholders contributing to the buyer experience work together cross functionally to make it memorable for the Customer

### Mercuri Insight

Every Customer Interaction presents a Sales Opportunity – in cementing an existing relationship or in forging a new one. The starting point is to empower the sales organization with the right knowledge and skills, followed by creating a ‘Customer Centric’ culture that shines across functional touchpoints.

As technology breaks barriers for Customers in accessing more functions within a providers Organization, Selling is too important to be left only to the Sales Function.

- **Organization wide readiness** – Sales force alone being ready to deal with the new purchasing reality isn’t enough. It is important that the organisation as a whole, shares a vision of how Customers buy with a clear grasp of the company’s strategy to serve its Customers

### Not the end of solution sales ...

Finally, the authors conclude, the evolving purchase reality is not the end of solution sales. Nor the beginning of the end. It is however, a signal to end the glib generalizations about sales and selling. And recognize B2B sales for the complex, ever changing and people intensive activity that it is.

You can read the Harvard Business Review article on *What Salespeople Need to Know About the New B2B Landscape* (Aug 05, 2015) by Frank V Cespedes and Tiffani Bova, [here](#)

**Author Information** – Frank V Cespedes is a Senior Lecturer at Harvard Business School and author of *Aligning Strategy and Sales* (Harvard Business Review Press) and Tiffani Bova is a Research Vice President and distinguished analyst at Gartner where she focuses on sales and go-to-market strategies



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### Key Words

Mercuri International  
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