Selling How Customers Actually Buy

Idea In Short

Most sales processes are built backward. They start from the seller's internal milestones, forecast categories and approval gates, then ask customers to move through stages designed for sales operations convenience rather than buyer reality. The fix is to rebuild the process around the actual sequence of decisions a buying group makes: problem framing, options research, consensus building and risk validation. Commercial leaders who do this see shorter cycles and fewer stalled deals, because sellers stop pushing customers toward the next CRM stage and start helping them resolve the next internal question. This requires mapping the customer's decision-making group, not just the org chart and redesigning stage-exit criteria around evidence of buyer progress rather than seller activity. The result is a sales process that mirrors the buying committee's own logic.

Sales leaders redesign their sales process more often than they redesign their understanding of how customers buy. A new CRM rollout, a change in sales leadership, or a fresh methodology training frequently triggers a rewrite of pipeline stages, yet the underlying assumption rarely changes: that the customer's decision unfolds in the same linear sequence as the seller's forecast categories. That assumption is wrong for most complex business purchases and it is the reason so many well-resourced sales organizations still watch deals stall in the middle of the pipeline. Building a process that reflects how customers actually buy requires starting with the buying group's own decision logic and then designing seller activity, content and stage gates around it.

The gap between pipeline stages and buyer decisions

A typical enterprise sales process moves through stages such as qualification, discovery, proposal, negotiation and close. Each stage exists because it is useful to the seller's forecast, not because it corresponds to a distinct moment in the customer's thinking. Buying groups, by contrast, work through a set of jobs that Gartner describes as problem identification, solution exploration, requirements building, supplier selection, validation and consensus creation and it found that these jobs do not happen in order.1 A buying committee can be validating a shortlisted vendor's technical fit while simultaneously reopening the requirements conversation because a new stakeholder joined late. When a seller's stage gates assume linear progress, every one of these normal loops looks like a stalled or regressing deal, which triggers premature escalation, discounting, or disengagement from the seller's side precisely when the customer needs steady support.

This mismatch compounds because sales operations teams often build stage-exit criteria around what the seller has done, a demo delivered, a proposal sent, a signature requested, rather than what the customer has resolved internally. Harvard Business Review's research on prescriptive selling found that customers face virtually infinite information, a growing number of stakeholders and an expanding array of options and that this abundance leaves buyers more paralyzed than empowered.2 A process built on seller milestones does nothing to reduce that paralysis. A process built on buyer milestones, such as whether the committee has agreed on evaluation criteria or whether the economic buyer has been briefed, gives sellers a way to diagnose exactly where the customer is stuck and what kind of help is needed next.

Mapping the buying committee, not just the org chart

Redesigning a sales process starts with mapping who actually participates in the decision and how. Forrester's research on B2B buying behavior identified three distinct buying scenarios: independent purchases made by one or two people, consensus purchases that involve a horizontal group across departments and committee purchases that move vertically through senior approval layers, each with materially different cycle lengths and interaction counts.3 Treating every opportunity as a committee sale when it is actually an independent purchase adds unnecessary steps and slows a deal that should move quickly. Treating a genuine committee sale as if a single champion can drive it through alone produces the opposite failure, a deal that appears to be progressing until it meets a stakeholder who was never engaged.

A practical redesign assigns each opportunity to one of these buying scenarios early, using signals such as deal size, number of departments affected and whether the purchase requires new budget or reallocated budget. From there, the process branches. An independent purchase might move through three stages with light-touch content. A committee purchase requires a stakeholder map that names the economic buyer, the technical evaluators, the end users and any internal skeptics, along with a plan for how each will be engaged and by whom. This mapping exercise, done consistently, turns account planning from a document that sits in a shared drive into a working model of the customer's internal decision structure.

As an illustrative scenario, consider a mid-sized industrial equipment supplier that historically ran every opportunity through the same six-stage process regardless of deal size. A regional sales leader began segmenting pipeline by buying scenario at the qualification stage and found that roughly a third of deals labeled as stalled were actually independent purchases being over-processed with unnecessary proposal reviews and executive sponsor calls the customer had not asked for. Removing those steps for the correct segment shortened cycle time for that cohort without any change to win rate, because the process finally matched the buyer's actual decision path.

Building stages around buyer jobs instead of seller activity

Once the buying scenario is identified, the next redesign task is to rewrite stage definitions and exit criteria around evidence of buyer progress. Instead of a stage called proposal that closes when a document is sent, a buyer-aligned stage might be called requirements confirmed and it closes only when the seller can point to a written or verbally confirmed set of evaluation criteria that the buying committee has agreed on internally. Instead of a stage called negotiation, a buyer-aligned equivalent might be internal consensus building, which closes when the champion has successfully briefed the remaining committee members and surfaced any objections, with the seller's role being to prepare the champion for that conversation rather than to run it.

This kind of redesign has to account for stakeholders who never appear on a stakeholder map drawn from the org chart alone. Research by Bain & Company and LinkedIn on buying groups found that purchase decisions rest on a committee of visible target buyers and hidden buyers in functions such as procurement, finance and IT and that these hidden buyers, who weigh brand reputation and risk as heavily as product fit, carry roughly half the influence over the outcome.4 A sales process that only tracks the visible champions and economic buyers will misjudge deal health, because the objection that kills a deal late often comes from a hidden buyer the seller never directly engaged.

Salesforce's research on buyer expectations reinforces why this matters commercially. Eighty-four percent of business buyers say they expect sales representatives to act as trusted advisors, yet a majority describe most sales interactions as transactional.5 A process built around seller activity milestones structurally produces transactional interactions, because it rewards moving the deal forward rather than resolving the customer's actual uncertainty. A process built around buyer jobs gives sellers a legitimate reason to slow down at the moments that matter, which is precisely what trusted-advisor behavior requires.

Designing content and channels for buyer, not seller, convenience

A sales process is only as good as the assets it equips sellers to use at each stage and those assets need to match how buyers actually engage across channels. McKinsey's B2B Pulse research found that business buyers increasingly want in-person, remote and digital self-service channels in roughly equal measure, a pattern researchers have called the rule of thirds and that belief in the effectiveness of this omnichannel approach rose sharply as buyers grew comfortable moving between channels mid-decision.6 A process that assumes every stage requires a live seller conversation ignores this reality and creates friction at exactly the moments when a buyer would rather self-serve, such as early requirements research, or when they need a quick answer that does not warrant scheduling a call.

The content implication is specific. Rather than a single deck used across every stage, a buyer-aligned process needs artifacts the champion can use without the seller present: a one-page business case template, a comparison framework for evaluating vendors against the committee's own criteria, a short video answering a technical objection that a stakeholder can watch on their own time. MIT Sloan Management Review's research on B2B customer experience found that corporate buyers now expect the same ease and personalization from business transactions that they experience on consumer sites and that few B2B vendors have adapted their digital experience accordingly.7 Building that expectation into the sales process means treating self-service content quality as a core deliverable of sales enablement, not an afterthought to seller-led selling.

Governing the redesign without losing forecast discipline

A legitimate concern among revenue operations leaders is that buyer-aligned stages are harder to forecast than activity-based ones, because they depend on qualitative judgment about whether a buying group has truly reached consensus. The answer is not to abandon forecast discipline but to redefine what counts as reliable evidence within each stage. A stage-exit checklist that requires a named artifact, a documented list of evaluation criteria signed off by the buyer, a stakeholder map with confirmed roles, a champion-delivered internal briefing summary, produces evidence that is at least as auditable as a logged call and considerably more predictive of whether the deal will actually close.

Sales leaders introducing this model should expect an adjustment period. Sellers accustomed to reporting activity will need coaching to gather and document buyer-side evidence instead and sales operations will need to rebuild CRM fields and reporting around the new stage definitions. The payoff shows up first in stalled-deal analysis, where a properly redesigned process makes it possible to say precisely which buyer job is unresolved rather than generically labeling a deal as slow. Over several quarters, that diagnostic clarity typically translates into shorter average cycle times and fewer surprise losses late in the pipeline, because the process was tracking the customer's real decision all along rather than a proxy for it.

- 1The B2B Buying Journey
- 2The New Sales Imperative
- 3There Is More Than One B2B Buyer's Journey
- 4Raising The Odds On A Deal
- 5State Of Sales
- 6McKinsey Research Confirms Omnichannel Is The Leading Approach To B2B Sales
- 7Why Customer Experience Matters For B2B

Summary

A sales process built around internal milestones creates friction because customers do not buy in stages that mirror a CRM pipeline. Buying groups move through problem framing, exploration, requirement setting, supplier evaluation and internal consensus, often out of order and simultaneously. Commercial leaders who redesign stage-exit criteria around evidence of buyer progress, rather than seller activity, shorten cycles and reduce stalled deals. That means mapping the buying committee itself, equipping sellers with tools buyers can use internally and building content that helps a champion sell the deal when the vendor is not in the room. The organizations that get this right treat the sales process as a shared operating model with the customer, not an internal script imposed on them.