TURNING B2B SALESPERSONS INTO STRATEGIC ADVISORS

BUILDING BUYER CONFIDENCE DURING MARKET UNCERTAINTY
SECTION 01

INTRODUCTION
B2B buyers crave elevated buying experiences – so much that they’ll pay more to get them. Yet many buyers still struggle to make purchases online through traditional suppliers, primarily due to a lack of accessible product information and little insight into how products will help their businesses grow.

Many businesses still aspire to deliver experiences modeled after Amazon Business. But the demand for seamless online buying experiences in B2B doesn’t mean suppliers have to mimic them to earn the trust of their buyers. Instead, B2B businesses need to do what Amazon can’t: maintain relationships through better use of their salespeople.

The idea that salespeople should be even more involved in the buying process contradicts the 2017 Forrester death of the B2B salesman hypothesis. Just three years ago, this headline set off alarm bells, but our survey of B2B buyers finds that reports of the B2B salesperson’s death have been grossly exaggerated. While Forrester predicted eCommerce would cause a widespread displacement of B2B salespeople by 2020, 94% of our 2020 survey respondents agree that B2B salespeople improve their buying experiences. This enthusiastic approval rating stands in stark contrast to predictions of the position’s impending demise.

There is no doubt that ecommerce is an important piece of the sales process, however it will never completely replace the salesperson in B2B. Optimizing online purchasing is a crucial part of B2B sales, but it can’t stand alone. B2B businesses should take caution before calling themselves a technology company. Instead, they should double down on their core business model and customer relationships.

B2B businesses need to approach their eCommerce strategy and digital portal much like a service-centered company would, providing both an online service and ongoing strategic support from a human being. To translate this to the B2B world: Your service is your customers’ ability to self serve via your portal, and your salespeople must evolve their roles to function as strategic advisors long after the initial sale is made. Move beyond transactions to inspire customer loyalty and help secure future purchases and revenue.

The following report, Debunking the Death of the B2B Salesperson, is based on a survey of 150 U.S. B2B buyers, and aims to uncover what the future holds for B2B salespeople as the industry increasingly becomes digitized.
KEY FINDINGS

The role of B2B salespeople remains crucial
Nearly all B2B buyers (94%) say salespeople generally improve their experience when making purchases.

Seamless eCommerce is non-negotiable for B2B buyers
Eighty-eight percent of buyers would turn to a competitor if a current supplier’s digital channel could not keep up with their needs.

Buyers don’t get all of the information they need online
On eCommerce sites, over half of B2B buyers report a lack of product information (52%) and difficulty comparing products and pricing (57%).

Salespeople provide stability during economic uncertainty
Although 81% of B2B buyers are worried about a recession in 2020, 92% say salespeople will help them weather a downturn.
SECTION 02

GROWING DIGITAL EXPECTATIONS IN B2B
SEAMLESS BUYING SWAYS B2B PURCHASERS

With eCommerce established as a norm among consumers, expectations of smooth digital transactions have infiltrated the B2B marketplace. Seamless online shopping experiences are now table stakes for B2B buyers, serving as a powerful deciding factor in where they purchase. Consistent with the 2019 report, most buyers (88%) would turn to a competitor if their current supplier’s digital channel could not keep up with their needs.

B2B buyers no longer view effective eCommerce channels as a “nice-to-have” component, but rather as a requirement. Eighty-one percent of buyers would choose a supplier with excellent eCommerce and customer portal capabilities even if the supplier’s product was moderately higher priced than a competitor’s. This figure grew from 74% in 2019, showing the expanding power of great buying experiences in B2B.

Most buyers would turn to a competitor if their current supplier’s digital channel could not keep up with their needs.
**ECOMMERCE IS CRUCIAL, BUT MANY SITES COME UP SHORT**

While eCommerce has become more commonplace in B2B purchasing, many businesses are failing to meet buyer expectations. B2B buyers are still unable to make fully informed purchase decisions on behalf of their businesses online. The issues begin in the research phase, when 59% have difficulty understanding product specs and 43% have trouble understanding how products would fit their business.

When B2B buyers move ahead with purchasing online, the pain points persist. They commonly experience a general lack of product information (52%) and an inability to find and compare products and pricing (57%). Today’s B2B eCommerce sites do not do enough to educate purchasers about products or help buyers make a selection.

This scarcity of product information doesn’t just prolong the purchasing process, it can lead to buyer uncertainty. A significant portion of B2B buyers feel uncomfortable making large purchases on behalf of their companies online. And the more they spend, the longer it takes B2B buyers to arrive at a purchasing decision.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Biggest buyer challenges</strong> when researching purchases for their businesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding product specifications/configurations</td>
<td><strong>59%</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding how products would fit their business</td>
<td><strong>43%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent product or service information across channels</td>
<td><strong>39%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding pricing</td>
<td><strong>34%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding product or service information that is up to date</td>
<td><strong>19%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inability to contact a human being</td>
<td><strong>17%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The channels they prefer to use don’t exist (e.g., mobile)</td>
<td><strong>15%</strong></td>
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</table>
Only 35% say they feel confident making purchases greater than $500,000 online. Providing clear, accurate product information online is necessary for B2B buyers to make purchases quickly and confidently.

Additionally, for purchases at each price point between $50,000 and $500,000, more than 75% of buyers say the involvement of salespeople increases their confidence. When making purchases above $150,000, over half of buyers state they prefer to make a purchase offline, indicating an opportunity for salespeople to provide value above what eCommerce platforms can feasibly deliver.

Rather than spending time providing product information that should easily be found on an existing site, salespeople should shift to delivering personalized context to explain how a product will fit within a customer’s business and support long-term company goals. Evaluated collectively, this data suggests that by advising buyers, salespeople can not only improve purchasing follow-through, but also increase the speed of recurring revenue.

Today’s B2B eCommerce sites are not doing enough to educate purchasers about their products and provide resources that help buyers.
Purchasing pain points in the ecommerce buying process

Finding and comparing products & pricing
- 57%
Lack of product information
- 52%
Delivery/fulfillment
- 37%
Working with sales representatives
- 27%

Lack of eCommerce channel
- 27%
Checkout
- 23%
Working with customer service
- 21%
I don’t currently experience pain points
- 5%

Buyer purchasing preferences by price range

- $50,000-$150,000
  - 69% Online
  - 28% Offline

- $150,000-$300,000
  - 42% Online
  - 55% Offline

- $300,000-$500,000
  - 31% Online
  - 63% Offline

- >$500,000
  - 35% Online
  - 55% Offline
Average time it takes to make a purchase decision by price range

- Purchases of $50,000-$150,000
- Purchases of $150,000-$300,000
- Purchases of $300,000-$500,000
- Purchases of >$500,000
SUPPLIERS CAN BEAT AMAZON, BUT NOT BY BECOMING THEM

B2B buyers are migrating to Amazon Business for purchases more than ever before. Amazon’s appeal lies in part with its ability to offer easier and more seamless online shopping experiences. The allure of a streamlined purchasing process is changing not only buyers’ current behavior, but also their future expectations.

And the influence of this eCommerce behemoth is only growing. Thirty-seven percent of B2B buyers say they make more purchases on Amazon Business now than in previous years – up from 30% in 2019. Amazon is everywhere, and the impact extends far beyond one company: This year, 85% of buyers say the rise of Amazon Business has changed their buying behaviors. This number stood at 75% in the 2019 report, indicating a rapidly expanding group of Amazon-influenced buyers.

Despite this change, suppliers don’t need to transform into a tech company to win. Forty-one percent of buyers still begin the purchasing process at a supplier’s catalog or website, a number that held steady from 2019. In fact, the number of buyers who

Impact Amazon Business has on buyers’ behaviors when making purchases for their company

- I make more purchases through Amazon Business: 37%
- I split my purchases between Amazon Business and independent suppliers: 37%
- The rise of Amazon Business has not changed my buying behaviors when making purchases: 15%
- I make more purchases from independent suppliers: 11%

Despite Amazon Business’s growing influence, suppliers don’t need to transform into a tech company to win.
started their purchase at Amazon Business decreased from 18% in 2018 to 11% in 2019. Buyers still look to purchase from suppliers first – but increasingly turn to options like Amazon Business when they encounter difficulties getting the information they need.

For businesses to meet buyer needs for more seamless online experiences, the solution is much simpler. They must provide customers with the ability to self serve via eCommerce or an online portal, and turn their salespeople into trusted advisors. They need to strategically and effectively use their sales staff as customer success managers in a way that can’t be replicated by faceless eCommerce players.

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Buyers who say the rise of Amazon Business has changed their buying behaviors

- **85%**
  - Buyers in 2020

- **75%**
  - Buyers in 2019
SECTION 03

THE STATE OF B2B SALES
SALESPEOPLE ARE HERE TO STAY

The idea that B2B salespeople would be widely displaced by 2020 has proven false. With the level of research and consideration invested in these purchases, even companies with robust eCommerce sites require boots on the ground to provide knowledgeable support. B2B buyers consider salespeople an immensely valuable part of their buying experiences and lean on them to find products that help deliver the outcomes they seek, making these relationships worth investing in for B2B organizations.

B2B buyers who wish they could interact with a salesperson more or less often

- **51%** More often
- **32%** As much as I want
- **17%** Less often

I feel it would be **impossible to complete orders** on behalf of my company without interacting with a salesperson

- **30%** Strongly agree
- **39%** Agree
- **27%** Disagree
- **4%** Strongly disagree

I feel **B2B salespeople generally improve the experience** when making purchases on behalf of my company

- **39%** Strongly agree
- **55%** Agree
- **6%** Disagree
- **0%** Strongly disagree
For B2B buyers, salespeople add value across the entire customer relationship. Almost all buyers (94%) report that salespeople generally improve their experience when making purchases on behalf of their companies – to the extent that 69% say they couldn’t complete these purchases without a salesperson.

While B2B buyers increasingly desire eCommerce options, 51% say they also want more time with salespeople. These two components of the sales process aren’t mutually exclusive, and companies have good reason to get salespeople more involved. Regardless of the price of purchase, respondents say salespeople increase their confidence in their purchase decisions. This effect makes both an immediate sale and recurring business with a customer more likely. A human element is integral to B2B buyers’ purchasing process and can be strengthened, but not replaced, by a well-executed eCommerce platform.

**Yes or No:** having a salesperson involved when making purchases at each of the following price points increases buyer confidence.

- **$50,000-$150,000**
  - Yes: 77%
  - No: 20%

- **$150,000-$300,000**
  - Yes: 82%
  - No: 15%

- **$300,000-$500,000**
  - Yes: 77%
  - No: 16%

- **>$500,000**
  - Yes: 76%
  - No: 15%
### SHIFT TO STRATEGIC SALES INVOLVEMENT

B2B buyers want salespeople to be involved beyond just a function of the transaction. They’re looking for input throughout the sales process, from researching new products and services (61%) to making a final purchase decision (34%). Buyers want salespeople to move away from transaction- and retention-focused relationships, and become a strategic part of their buying experiences – providing advice for how to make purchase decisions on behalf of their companies and ultimately grow their bottom line.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideal time for a salesperson to get involved in B2B buyer purchasing process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To provide me with information about new products and services</td>
<td><strong>61%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I first learn about the company and its products</td>
<td><strong>40%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When I’m making a final decision about what to purchase from the company</td>
<td><strong>34%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completes my orders and facilitates shipping and payments options</td>
<td><strong>29%</strong></td>
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<td>Gives product demos</td>
<td><strong>28%</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>When I’m a current customer looking to make repeat purchases, or for new products or services to purchase</td>
<td><strong>25%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommends products or services</td>
<td><strong>20%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers advice on how to help my business grow</td>
<td><strong>13%</strong></td>
</tr>
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</table>
WHAT MAKES A SUCCESSFUL SALESPERSON

B2B buyers’ current feelings and perceptions about sales experiences drive salespeople’s path forward. When describing their most recent positive experience with a salesperson, 71% said the salesperson deeply understood their own products and services.

When describing their most recent negative experience with a salesperson, buyers illustrated the desire for relationship development beyond the sale. Forty percent said the salesperson was too pushy and focused on making money, and 39% said the salesperson simply completed the transaction and nothing more.

Your salespeople have an opportunity to engage in valuable interactions long after the sale is made to drive customer loyalty. Salespeople lose by straying away from relationships and zeroing in on transactions. This tactic, paradoxically, damages customer ties and can negatively impact sales. Relationships are still important in 2020, and remembering this fact will set your sales team up for success.
### How B2B buyers describe positive experiences with salespeople

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deeply understood the products and services and explained the features to me</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided a seamless experience that added value to my online research in our sales conversation</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sought gaps in my business and offered advice for purchases that could help me be more strategic</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approached our relationship as a long-term partnership</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helped me make the purchases necessary to keep up with competitors</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided transparency around the products and services I was purchasing</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
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### How B2B buyers describe negative experiences with salespeople

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was too pushy and focused on making money</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simply completed the transaction and nothing more</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wasn’t informative about the products or services</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t understand my business</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offered no advice or strategy for my purchase</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had no idea about how I engaged with his/her company prior to our conversation</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not know anything about my company or purchase history</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failed to provide transparency around the products and services I was purchasing</td>
<td>11%</td>
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TURN YOUR ATTENTION TO RETENTION

B2B buyers want salespeople involved primarily in research, discovery and decision phases, and signaled they do not want salespeople involved in retention. This is likely due to companies approaching it incorrectly. A focus on transactions and a disjointed handoff to a customer service representative is enough to put off any buyer. B2B companies can change buyers’ opinions with a small shift in mindset.

Today, B2B buyers say that salespeople are typically most involved during the discovery and research phases, and less involved during retention phases – despite 43% of buyers stating they prefer to interact with a salesperson over digital channels during retention. And when describing their most recent positive experience with a salesperson, only 40% said the salesperson sought gaps in their business and offered advice for purchases that could help them be more strategic. These responses indicate that salespeople understand their own product offerings, but don’t engage with customers’ businesses enough to provide strategic guidance after the sale.
Salespeople’s heavy involvement during the beginning stages is likely another negative effect of sites’ limited product information. Not finding the information they need online, buyers approach salespeople for advice – pigeonholing their interactions into product explanations. Quality, online product content will free up salespeople to become experts for customers beyond the research phase. Trusting their sales representative as a partner, buyers would also seek their advice on how to grow, along with assistance for repeat purchases and new products.

An opportunity exists for B2B salespeople to serve in a more advisory role after the initial sale. When a transaction is complete, sales teams should take their value in the discovery phase and convert it into an enduring strategic relationship through which they can help customers achieve business goals. By maintaining this relationship with buyers and helping them understand how their businesses can grow with the help of their products and services, suppliers will enjoy long-term loyalty and recurring revenue.

When B2B buyers feel salespeople are most involved during the buying process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<td>When I’m a current customer looking to make repeat purchases, or for new products or services to purchase</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offers advice on how to help my business grow</td>
<td>10%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
SECTION 04

THE OUTCOMES MODEL IS THE FUTURE OF B2B
TRANSITIONING BEYOND TRANSACTIONS

Salespeople remain not only a fundamental part of the B2B sales process, but also a differentiator for suppliers. By continuing to provide value, they allow businesses to not just compete with Amazon and other competitors, but win. However, salespeople cannot serve a primarily transactional function. While B2B eCommerce sites must be robust and include information buyers want and need, salespeople must maintain the relationship throughout the buying process – particularly after the buyer has made an initial purchase.

B2B businesses will find success not by structuring their business based on the typical tech company model, but rather by adopting the outcomes model of service-based companies. This means focusing on business partnerships, providing ongoing, end-to-end solutions that drive results for customers. How? Your online portal is your service. Buyers should always be able to research products online and complete purchases through your portal via self-service. Your sales team will act as ongoing customer success managers well beyond the initial sale, offering personalized, strategic support that helps them achieve their desired outcomes.
Businesses can approach the shift toward an outcomes model in one of two ways:

**Broaden the role of salespeople.**
Your salespeople serve in a sales role before an initial purchase is made and in an ongoing support role after. Post-sale, the salesperson must shift to an advisory role.

**Create customer success management roles.**
Create a customer success manager role to take over the customer relationship after an initial sale is made, providing the customer with support and advice for growth moving forward.
LEARNING FROM LAST DECADE’S MISTAKES

Digital transformation was a key initiative for many businesses throughout the last decade. But despite the consistent economic growth of the 2010s, many of these transformations were a swing and a miss. As we head into the 2020s, businesses must reflect on these mistakes as they set priorities and plot out ways to materialize their sales ambitions.

In the 2010s, many companies’ digital transformations failed (some experts think as high as 70%) – including big names like GE, Ford, and Proctor and Gamble. What went wrong? They falsely believed that investing in technology was all they had to do. But the reality is that governance, training, process and optimization must complement any technology investment. Not all businesses are technology companies, and simply buying technology doesn’t mean you know how to use it, or have the right people and systems in place to use it effectively.

For businesses to survive economic uncertainty in 2020, they can’t invest in technology just for the sake of it. The aforementioned examples (and countless more) show the perils of ambitious, but ill-informed digital strategies. Instead, B2B companies must focus on ROI and determine the value technology provides. In the next decade, the role of the CIO will involve the return of governance on technology spend, steering companies toward solutions that efficiently deliver their desired outcomes.

Not all businesses are technology companies, and simply buying technology doesn’t mean you know how to use it.
SECTION 05

ECONOMIES OF SALE
NEW DECADE, NEW DOWNTURN?

Moving to an outcomes-based business model could have a more immediate impact than many businesses realize. As buyers tighten their wallets during a period of economic uncertainty, valuable and supportive salespeople can help suppliers protect market share. And economy-induced caution is no longer hypothetical – 82% of B2B buyers are concerned or very concerned about the possibility of a recession in 2020, and 47% say they plan to reduce their business purchases due to unpredictable global tariff laws.

By cultivating long-term customer relationships, your company can secure recurring revenue that helps you endure periods of stagnant or declining economic growth.

Eighty-two percent of B2B buyers are concerned or very concerned about the possibility of a recession in 2020.
QUELL CONCERNS BY GAINING BUYERS’ TRUST

For businesses to survive potentially changing economic conditions, they must instill confidence in their buyers. They can do this through the use of qualified salespeople via an outcomes-focused business model. Ninety-two percent of respondents say a qualified salesperson (who is able to provide real business value) will help them counter the effects of an economic downturn.

Improved website product information can supplement salespeople in providing relief during an economic decline. Thirty-two percent of B2B buyers said higher quality and more accurate information about what they’re buying would help, and 23% identified more confidence in their purchases as something that would help them fend off negative effects.

An informative and easy-to-understand eCommerce site clears the way for your salesperson to provide more value. Honing this two-pronged approach helps your business rise above competitors, allowing you to work with customers as not just a supplier, but a trusted advisor.
WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE THE B2B SALESPERSON IN 2020?

In 2020, suppliers need smooth, reliable eCommerce experiences. But technology alone won’t get you there. To deliver better customer experiences and retain clients amid economic uncertainty, you must shift to a business model focused on providing continuous support beyond the initial purchase. By elevating and evolving the role of your salespeople, you can serve as a trusted advisor in a way that large eCommerce platforms can’t, bringing B2B buyers the quality digital experiences (and business outcomes) they’ve been waiting for. The B2B salesperson isn’t dead – they just needed to evolve.

You must shift to a business model focused on providing continuous support beyond the initial purchase.
METHODOLOGY

The 2020 B2B Buyer Report explores the behaviors and desires of 150 U.S. B2B buyers with active roles in their company’s purchasing process. B2B organizations included have an approximate total annual revenue of more than $250 million, and the survey was conducted in November of 2019. Respondents and their companies are broken down as follows:

Biggest purchasing responsibilities

- I recommend products for purchase: 41%
- I decide which products to purchase: 40%
- I research and compare products: 11%
- I work with suppliers/sales reps to assemble orders: 8%

Industry

- 49% Manufacturing
- 32% Financial Services
- 19% Consumer Packaged Goods

Annual Company Revenue

- 45% More than $1 billion
- 35% $501 million-$1 billion
- 19% $251-$500 million

Age

- 49% 36-35 years
- 31% 18-35 years
- 19% 54-72 years
ABOUT AVIONOS

Avionos designs and implements digital commerce and marketing solutions that deliver measurable business outcomes for clients like Kellogg’s, Sysco, JLL and CSA Group. Our iterative approach quickly unlocks new revenue, transforms customer experiences and drives customer engagement. We’re ranked on the 2019 Inc. 5000 Fastest Growing Companies list, Crain’s 2018 and 2019 Best Places to Work in Chicago lists, included on Comparably’s 2018 Best Company Culture List and certified as a Great Place to Work.

Find out more at avionos.com