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# Research identifies three key sales competencies

✎ Dr Simon Kelly, Dr Paul Johnston & Stacey Danheiser



*As B2B buying behaviour evolves, how can sales organisations adapt?*

This is the third of a series of articles in which Dr Simon Kelly, Dr Paul Johnston and Stacey Danheiser explore customer value and differentiation. In this article they offer an early view into their latest research around the roles and competencies required by salespeople to help their organisations differentiate from their competitors and stand-out in a “sea of sameness”. The research will inform an upcoming book to be published as a follow-up to *Value-Ology: Aligning Sales and Marketing to Shape and Deliver Profitable Value Propositions*. (Kelly, Johnston, Danheiser 2017).

The research programme has centred around in-depth qualitative interviews with C-Level executives and sales and marketing leaders, asking them to consider competitive advantage, the roles of sales and marketing in creating differentiation, and the personal competencies required to help an organisation stand out. In addition, they have developed a survey questionnaire which was sent to a wider audience of sales and marketing professionals. Here they take a look at three competencies that came out of the first-cut analysis from the interviews as a preview to their upcoming book.

Today’s B2B buyers are more sophisticated than ever. A 2017 study by Forrester<sup>1</sup> found that 68% of B2B buyers prefer to conduct their own research online as their primary source of information. In today’s omnichannel world, customers can typically be 60% through the buying process before they contact a salesperson (CEB research).

A B2B Millennials report by Merit (2018) found that about 73% of 20–35-year-olds are now involved in making decisions related to new products and services at their companies. These “digital natives” grew up with the internet, and first turn to their laptops and smartphones to conduct generic searches before homing in on a particular brand. When, or if, they contact a salesperson for more information, they are already well versed on their buying criteria, how your product stacks up against your competition, and how your current customers have rated their experience working with your organisation.

Nevertheless, while your prospective buyers may have a pretty good idea about what they want before they engage with your company, Aberdeen Research Group (2019) found that 48% of buyers are open to engaging early with a sales rep who will challenge their thinking.

## Information overload

Although being able to access high-quality information is certainly helpful, on the flip side, B2B buying is reported as growing ever more complex. In a buyer enablement study<sup>2</sup>, Gartner (2019) found that 77% of B2B buyers surveyed rated their purchase decision as “extremely complex or difficult” due to the vast amount of information available and the growing number of people involved in the buying committee. And Demand Gen’s 2018 content preferences report found that 51% of B2B buyers admitted to feeling “overwhelmed” with the sheer amount of content available.

Now consider the feeling of information overload coupled with what our previous research found – that organisations are “swimming in a sea of sameness” by communicating the exact same thing, using the exact same words and promises to potential buyers. Vendors are adding to the complexity of an already complex purchase, rather than helping it along.

This suggests that today’s buyers are demanding a different experience, which means the sales experience has to change to meet these demands.

Our own research has similarly revealed that business leaders are increasingly aware that while being able to articulate what makes their solution different to prospective customers is “extremely important”, only 5% rate their organisations as “extremely effective” at differentiating itself from the competition.

## How can salespeople help their organisations stand out?

Some of the early findings from our depth interviews and survey suggest that there are certain competencies a modern salesperson must develop in order to help their organisations differentiate from the competition and effectively continue to grow and be successful. Here we share three notable competencies coming out of our depth interviews related to the evolving role of sales.

### 1: It’s all about execution

Either to buy themselves time, or as an instant answer to the open question “What are the top three responsibilities of a salesperson?” some interviewees jumped to: “It’s all about hitting the numbers”. This might seem trite, but we do live in a world where right now, according to the *2018-2019 Sales Performance report* (CSO Insights 2018)<sup>3</sup> only 53% of sales reps are meeting their quota.

Robson, President of a Global Telco took the execution role beyond just “hitting the numbers” as more aligned to the market goals of the company. The primary role of sales “is **basically to execute the go-to-market plan in the field – simple as that. Sales is the execution engine of the company to deliver the market plans that are set within marketing.**” Robson seems to suggest that marketing sets the go-to-market plan and the sales team executes this plan, though hopefully not absent of sales input.

Similarly, when we surveyed global sales and marketing leaders across a variety of industries, 80% agreed that “ability to execute” is a “very important” competency for today’s salespeople to possess.

From an execution standpoint, sales is seen to carry a joint responsibility with marketing, as Siobhan, Head of Strategic Marketing for a UK University put it: “**selling the whole scope of what the organisation has to offer**”. This view was expanded by other respondents who see that sales has a joint responsibility in creating awareness of the offer and its difference from competitors – setting the offer in the context of an individual customer being the challenge for sales.

### 2: Ability to “connect the dots” from customer needs to company solutions

By definition, here “connecting the dots” means having a solid understanding of what problems your customers are facing and what their needs are, and being able to translate that into how your solution can *uniquely* solve their problem – 88% of our survey respondents agreed that this is a “very important”

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competency for sales professionals to develop.

As a salesperson, this means becoming an expert in several distinct areas: your industry, your product/solution, your competition, and your customer. As James, a Regional Sales Manager at a mid-size Manufacturing Company put it, our sales team needs to display a balance of “**technical training, competitor knowledge, application knowledge and, most importantly, good intuition on when to deploy that knowledge.**”

Connecting the dots involves a mix of entrepreneurial and imaginative flair and this is achieved using a facilitative style early in the sales interaction, as David who worked in vehicle technology solutions explained: “**I’ll have flipchart at the front of the room, and I want [my customer] to tell me everything they want, everything they’ve seen in the past, anything they like. All the things they’ve perhaps moaned about behind the scenes, I want to know all of that, all the bits they really like and then basically from that, I will get them to draw it all together – we’ll get the whole thing connected.**”

A 2019 B2B buyers survey showed that a prerequisite for “connecting the dots” is being able to demonstrate knowledge of buyers and their needs. 97% of respondents agreed that it is important for sales reps to demonstrate a stronger knowledge of their needs and 95% said that sales teams need to have more insights about their company and needs. This level of understanding can be one thing that sets winning vendors apart from the others, and essential if a salesperson is to even begin to “connect the dots”.

### 3: Balanced advocacy

We hear a lot about the role of the salesperson as the customer advocate. This can come in a number of forms: knowing what the customer wants and advocating for that across the business and taking responsibility for customer satisfaction.

The customer satisfaction element was something that Joseph, Vice President of Marketing, with a long track record in sales, called out: “**You can’t be a successful salesperson and ignore customer satisfaction. You’ve got to sell them something that’s working and meets the customer’s needs. If something is not working, you will often be the point person for helping the customer figure it out.... What I’ve seen over and over again: the best salespeople are great customer advocates too.**”

Joseph recognised that the salesperson does run the risk of “getting in too deep” and there’s a line between advocacy and “wasting too much time” away from the sales numbers. In an environment where organisations are increasingly trying to gain advantage by superior customer service, this can be an increasing burden on salespeople who will have to balance the advocacy role with selling. We’re sure this is familiar territory to many readers.

On the broader point of being the customer champion for all their needs, it was interesting to see leaders like Kirk, Vice

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*Both sides need to take responsibility for the welfare of the relationship.*

President for a product line in Technology, with a long sales career background, stressing balanced advocacy as a key facet of the sales role: **“So, first and foremost, there should be balanced advocacy for your company. So, I definitely see sales organisations and sales professionals who forget that, they do get a cheque from the current company.”**

Kirk goes on to declare himself as a huge believer in customer experience, and as someone we have worked with, we would certainly vouch for that. He added: **“Customers hold us accountable. We should hold them accountable as part of the relationship as well.”**

Successful collaborative working relies on candid communication between the supplier and the buyer and an open-minded attitude to joint responsibilities. Both sides need to take responsibility for the welfare of the relationship.

The implication for sales competencies would seem to be the ability to achieve this balanced advocacy. While sales and marketing have to be the voice of the customer to prevent inside-out product obsession, this has to be tempered with commercial realism. In their book *The 12 Powers of a Marketing Leader* Barta and Barwise (2017) make a similar call for marketers to focus on issues that are important for customers and for their own business, in what they call the “Value Creation Zone” or V-Zone. Kirk and other sales leaders seem to recognise that advocacy should be focused in a Sales Advocacy (A) zone where there is potential return for the customer and their own company.

### In summary

Here we have been only been able to scratch the surface of the rich insight we are seeing come out of the in-depth interviews with leaders from the C-Suite, sales, and marketing. We are starting to see more emphasis being placed on developing a new set of skills and competencies that span beyond the traditional and more ingrained sales competencies such as relationship building, presentation skills, opportunity identification and closing.

One thing is certain, as B2B buying behaviour continues

to evolve in more sophisticated ways, so too will the sales approach need to adapt. It is encouraging to see that some of the competencies leaders are talking about call for closer cohesion with marketing, orchestrating other players in the broader organisation, and providing better and more balanced feedback to the organisation about what’s happening in the market. If these competencies are honed, they just may help you stand out.

If you’d like to contribute to this research, please contact Dr Simon Kelly at [simon.kelly@york.ac.uk](mailto:simon.kelly@york.ac.uk).

<sup>1</sup> “The Ways And Means Of B2B Buyer Journey Maps, Forrester”, 2017, <https://go.forrester.com/blogs/the-ways-and-means-of-b2b-buyer-journey-maps-were-going-deep-at-forresters-b2b-forum/>.

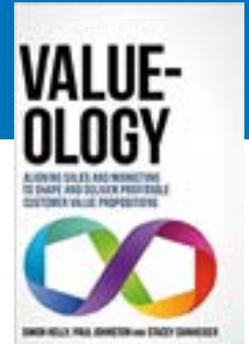
<sup>2</sup> The New B2B Buying Journey, Gartner, 2019, <https://www.gartner.com/en/sales-service/insights/b2b-buying-journey>.

<sup>3</sup> Selling in the Age of Ceaseless Change: The 2018-2019 Sales Performance Report, CSO Insights, 2018, <https://www.csainsights.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2018/12/2018-2019-Sales-Performance-Report.pdf>



### About the author

**Dr Paul Johnston** is co-author of *Value-Ology* and a former lecturer at Sheffield Business School. His research specialism is B2B marketing management. Prior to this, he spent 20 years in the gambling and electronic games industry with board-level roles in competitive strategy, key account management, marketing research and product innovation roles.



### About the author

**Dr Simon Kelly** is a Lecturer in Sales and Marketing at York University. He has 35 years’ experience in the ICT industry in customer service, sales and marketing. He was Marketing Director for BT Major Business where he pioneered the move from “product push” to “value-based” selling and marketing. He led a canon of knowledge for the Chartered Institute of Marketing on best-practice B2B marketing. Now a “pracademic”, he has developed innovative marketing and sales skills modules for Sheffield Business School. He is President of SHAKE Marketing Group, based in London.



### About the author

**Stacey Danheiser** is co-author of *Value-ology* and President of SHAKE Marketing Group, based in Denver, Colorado. She works with B2B clients to implement integrated marketing strategies and teach them about customer-centricity. Prior to starting her own consultancy, she spent 15 years as a marketing and sales enablement leader at large firms across cable, telecommunications, financial services and banking sectors.