

AMERICAN MARKETER

Business at its best

MARKETING

5 trends that will affect sales craft in 2021

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Innovation is key for marketers to avoid being disrupted in business. Image credit: Chief Outsiders

By [Don Lee](#)

COVID is accelerating the transition online even for business-to-business enterprises which means that CEOs need to ensure their sales teams have the digital skills and the tools of engagement to win buyers, all without straying from the timeless principles that still apply.

It has been a while since anyone argued that "dialing for dollars" is still the best way to boost sales, but there are some holdovers who think that while digital has its place, the real work is still grounded in "boozing and schmoozing."

But over the past year, COVID-19 sped up the migration towards a digital approach, with more consumers working remote and relying exclusively on online methods to make buying decisions.

For some, it is a whole new world, but that does not have to be a threat. There are amazing tools available for those willing to learn a better way to apply what they already know.

The future looks bright given what technology offers today, provided, of course, that CEOs, chief sales officers (CSOs) and their staff embrace this new platform along with its new rules.

1. Lean into the digital transformation

Even before the pandemic shoved everyone on to one never-ending Zoom call, it was evermore clearer buyers were doing their initial research online, not just for business-to-consumer companies, but B2B as well.

For example, one popular [Google report](#) claims 63 percent of shopping occasions begin online. This means that a great Web site is not a luxury, but a necessity, although it has been the new first impression for some time now.

In fact, businesses should test sample home pages with real customers to discern the best version that is how important it is.

But COVID-19 is accelerating B2B's merging with B2C standards, as few consumers are eager to build relationships face to face at the moment. And if anyone is concerned that this is a momentary shift, they should know that many of their peers are not treating it as such.

A recent [Forrester report](#) predicts that in 2021, B2B sellers and sales leaders will continue to evolve their methods and strategies in the face of pandemic-related challenges: 40 percent of B2B reps plan to modify their tactics to adapt to remote selling activities, and 57 percent of B2B sales leaders plan to make deeper investments in tools with

AI and automation.

B2B enterprises might feel as if Web site chatbots and calls to action are pushy, but that is precisely the engagement buyers expect. They want third-party validation and a message that is comprehensive and compelling.

The soft-sell tactics that might be smart in person will only get drowned out online, where the struggle is to be seen and, most importantly, comprehended.

Digital has been the tip of the spear for some time, and the pandemic made this fact impossible to ignore.

In fact, a recent [Gartner study](#) claims that over the next five years, an even greater rise in digital interactions between buyers and suppliers will break traditional sales models. They predict that by 2025, 80 percent of B2B sales interactions between suppliers and buyers will occur in digital channels.

2. Create a digital customer experience

Plenty of companies use CRM tools as a data repository, but that is not the kind of technology we are talking about here.

Gartner defined three key areas of technology that no sales professional should ignore: hyper-automation, digital scalability and AI.

"Hyper-automation" refers to the effective combination of complementary sets of tools that can integrate functional and process silos to automate and assist business processes.

In short, this is moving more customer interactions online into a digital channel. Chatbots have proven quite effective and customers are growing fonder of these instant, if automated, exchanges early in their buying process.

"Digital scalability" is the concept of using technology to cope with the increasing volume of customer interactions and sales work.

The demands for swift and accurate targeting and contact are only growing, but there is technology out there today to help.

If hyper-automation helps with tasks, digital scalability is the application of that automation to speed up the entire process across the entire sales operation.

Gartner admits that "AI" is only a concise, catch-all term that denotes the shift from highly analog decision making to automated, algorithm-based decision making. This means that decisions that might once have been based solely on hard-won experience are grounded in data and analytics.

In fact, salespeople can use engagement tools that target the best day and time to call someone in each industry. That kind of intelligence might have been almost impossible to get without weeks or even years of trial and error.

But for all the promise of these technologies, it still requires an investment of time and resources, along with a willingness for staff to build these digital skills.

This is not simply about knowing a piece of software, but a fundamental shift in the approach, one that centers the process on the digital experience, tapping social influencers for third-party validation and sharing articles of interest. It is about building these connections digitally now.

3. Reinvent sales and marketing

Marketing professionals have long understood that they need to be omnichannel, but now companies need an omnichannel salesforce as well.

Sales and marketing need to work hand in hand, becoming a single discipline, known in some circles as "smarketing."

Marketing is integral in helping the salespeople pick the right part of the pond to fish, the right bait, and even the right gadget to help track the fish that one cannot see.

Marketers have long understood the power of data and analytics and already revolutionized their discipline because of them. Now salespeople have new tech to revolutionize their craft as well.

There are systems to track calls, and automate a playbook for following up on leads, and real-time visibility in the sales pipe.

There is even conversational analytics that can vet a sales call that was recorded and determine its effectiveness. That salesperson veered off script too much, or did not let the customer speak, or a recording of a leading salesperson could be a model for others to follow.

What this tech does is add the same layer of rigor that has been the standard for marketers for years, and it allows the entire marketing-to-sales process to be closely monitored and refined at every step along the way.

4. Develop a strategy before execution

That is not to say that these great new tools replace what marketers do.

A company can have all this tech, but if the branding, messaging, and positioning has not been properly developed, all they do is get the company to that next "no" faster.

Initially, businesses need to focus on branding, on the value proposition, on making sure that it is all supported by robust market insight.

Number one is still knowing what the customer's pain points are and then communicating the value to the end user.

Then it is time to build a great Web site with a call to action and continue to build content out such as eBooks and third-party validation.

All technology does is add speed, rigor and visibility to the process, which allows businesses to get smarter because it becomes a virtuous feedback loop.

5. Stay close to your principles

In some ways, this revolution is nothing more but a new way to do what salespeople have done since the first man convinced the guy in the cave next door that he could use a wheel, too.

Building trust, nurturing relationships, delivering value, communicating a value proposition that resonates: these are still happening with a chatbot, a Twitter feed, digital ads or emails. And as much as these tools speed up a process, that still means a salesperson needs to be pushing that process along, day in and day out.

The "hustle" has been transformed, not eradicated.

There are a lot of second- and third-generation companies that do not appreciate what it takes to build the top of the funnel. There might be more smarts, or better technology, but there is not the momentum that created the founder's exponential growth.

One company was debating whether to invest \$10,000 on an industry conference, and while some junior folks were planning several meetings to discuss the ROI, the 74-year-old founder decided to do it after a single afternoon's consideration. It was a risk, but that veteran was willing to take it. And then they used all the data analytics available to make the most of that conference.

That is the best approach of all, to keep the old school values of decisiveness, ambition and a little intuition, and apply them with the most innovative technology available.

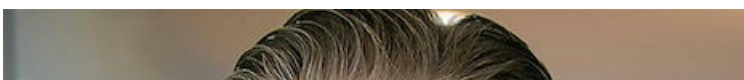
Get that additional speed, rigor and visibility without ever forgetting the goal is a business that performs so well that it is still around for that next revolution.

OVER THE PAST YEAR, COVID-19 sped up the migration towards a digital approach, with more consumers working remote and relying exclusively on online methods to make buying decisions.

Most CEOs would nod that the digital revolution is underway, but plenty have not fully understood what this means for their sales and marketing efforts.

For some, it is a whole new world, but that does not have to be a threat. There are amazing tools available for those who are willing to learn a modern way to apply what they already know.

If executives embrace this new platform and ensure that their teams have the digital skills to win online buyers, then the future will be bright.





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