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Selling in the Vuca vortex

The sales playbook is changing, and will change again, write **Ben Laker & Claire Edmunds**

The pace of technological advancement and the impact of globalization are having unforeseen, often disorienting, effects. Their ultimate consequences are profound. The world's largest accommodation provider owns no property. The world's largest taxi firm owns no cars. The world's most popular media company owns no content. Every industry is mutating and business roles are being reconsidered, reconstructed and repurposed, reveals research from Clarify.

Take, for example, the UK. Since the steam-powered train revolutionized global transport, Britons have tended to play by the rules when it comes to innovation. In a digitally disruptive

The only solution is for every business to behave like a software business

world, that needs to drastically change, fast. Findings from Clarify's research suggest that 68% of businesses across post-Brexit Britain are falling behind their European counterparts, and 23% of these businesses will die within the next 24 months if nothing changes.

To help these organizations, the UK must create an environment in which innovation is prioritized, particularly as its economy is now among the worst performers in the European Union. With Q1 2017 growth of just 0.2%, the UK is already falling behind, and, given that big City banks are set to move 9,000 jobs to Frankfurt and Dublin, its future looks bleaker still.

Against this backdrop of gloom, traditional buyers are being replaced with line-of-business stakeholders. And traditional types of deals – and how you win those deals – are changing

with them. Some 85% of B2B customers now start their purchasing process via referral, with peer recommendations influencing more than 92% of buying decisions. This represents a great disintermediation of salespeople from buyers.

The dramatic rise of 'decisions pending' deals that are clogged up in purchasing pipelines across the world exacerbates the breakdown of traditional dealmaking. These 'Schrodinger's Deals' – neither alive nor dead, simply awaiting a decision – are now responsible for more than 27% of opportunities forecast and pursued by salespeople. They have a notional value of a cool \$20tn globally, meaning that there is often more money to be made in unlocking frozen decisions than making new sales approaches.

The only solution to this radically changed sales landscape, says Clarify, is for every business to behave like a software business; this is the only way to survive and prosper.

The challenge foreseen by the research study is that board members of these businesses are not technology experts. They need help to understand what is worth placing a bet on, and this information must come from the tech world, where they understand the art of the possible.

The delivery of this message is the core responsibility for tech sales leaders: they have a duty to communicate what their organizations can offer other businesses – who often have no knowledge of their product. In a world in which change happens so fast, it's therefore *how* you sell this message that matters most.

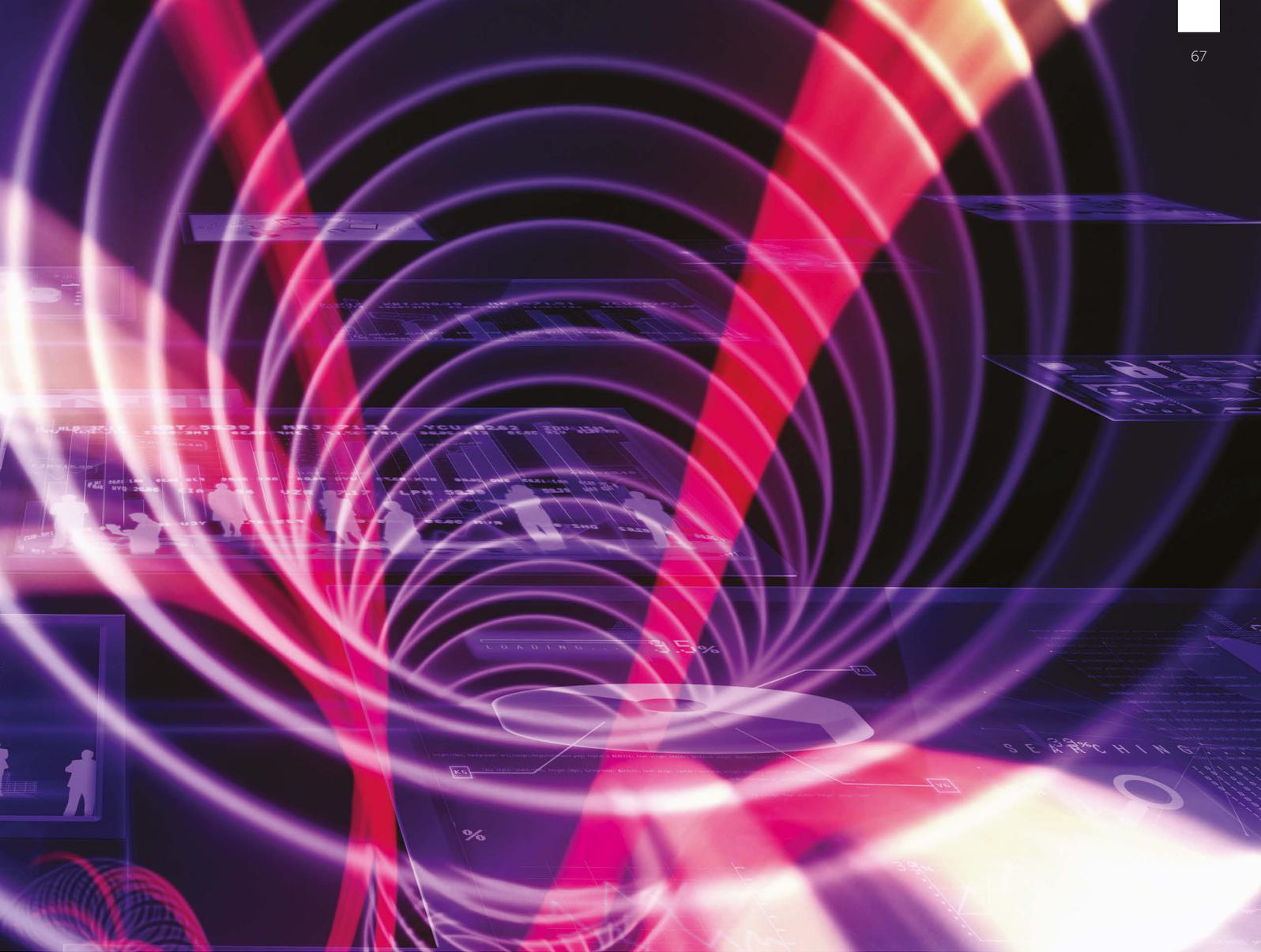
The sales leader of today

The modern salesperson has a big task on their hands. Not only must they deal with their own triad of challenges – the pace of change, the move from player

to manager, and the necessary skill shift – but they must also navigate more internal politics than ever before.

Following the 2008 financial crisis, sales leaders sought to trim costs and preserve profit. With those cuts made, there's little fat left to trim from the bottom line anymore. Now profit needs to be created by lifting the top line. This makes the business process of selling mission-critical. The relationships between senior executives and sales leaders must be nurtured into trusted and credible partnerships to help them invest in long-term sales planning while delivering world-class sales performance in the shorter term. However, Clarify's research identifies a major threat; an emerging deficit in consultative salespeople able to execute the transformation message.

Author of *SPIN-Selling*, Neil Rackham, also recognizes the shift from transactional to consultative sales due to increased automated sales and the



need to educate these new buyers about the possible uses of new software. This dichotomy of sales behaviour is forcing sales leaders to reevaluate their team structure. Clearly, sales is changing dramatically. And by extension, the salesperson must change dramatically with it.

The sales leader of the future

The modern sales leader doesn't only take one form. There is the Coach, the Follow Me and the Spreadsheet Jockey. There is the Political Animal, the Entrepreneur, the General Manager and the Fixer. All these sales leader 'types' have strengths and weaknesses. The Coach, for example, creates a learning environment, and is best suited to a changing atmosphere where he can help others to adapt. The Spreadsheet Jockey, in contrast, is a high-detail, analytically minded individual who is brilliant in front of a sheet of numbers but less competent in front of a client.

Clarify's research finds no silver bullet. The optimum sales leader combination depends on factors that include the maturity of the market, the level of disruption the product/service brings, the size of the deals and who needs to be sold to. Selling into a mature market – when the value delivered by the product

The Spreadsheet Jockey is brilliant in front of a table of numbers but less competent in front of a client

is well understood – sales cycles are relatively short. This scenario is perfect for a Spreadsheet Jockey. They can easily track and manage their team based on outputs (value and number of deals), as focused activity is the core driver behind success. Conversely, when the value of the product/service is not widely known

by the market, a different set of sales coaching and management skills are required to drive success – this is where the Follow Me sales manager excels, as her best skills are developing and evolving a successful sales process.

The key takeaway is that current selling playbooks will last two or three years at the most. As a result, sales leaders, regardless of type, must challenge and transform the structure of sales to generate scalable and predictable pipelines, improve win rates and drive profitable growth. This must occur hand-in-glove with building enterprise in new and existing markets. Failure to do so will lead to millions of B2B sales job losses.

The lasting message from Clarify is a call to action: now is time to sell big, sell global and stay relevant. Your sales function depends on it. ●

— Dr Ben Laker is co-author of *The Salesperson's Secret Code*. Claire Edmunds is chief executive and founder of Clarify, a specialist business development firm