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**Business-to-Business Selling in the Post Covid-19 Era:
Developing an Adaptive and Hybrid Salesforce**

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Abstract

As firms are coming to terms with the reality that the Covid pandemic has irrevocably changed how salespeople will interact with their customers, three realities confront business-to-business sales organizations. The first and most striking aspect has been how the customer has taken control of the sales conversation, forcing the sales organization to become truly customer-centric. Second, the traditional sales process has changed (and continues to change) rapidly due to the pandemic, and sales organizations need to become more flexible in the way they have to adapt to these changes. Third, sales organizations have had to fast track their digital transformation initiatives to help their salespeople be effective and meet the customers' increasingly complex demands. Researchers have recently suggested that firms need to develop an adaptive salesforce to better address disruptions like Covid-19 and prepare for the future. Based on interviews with experts and sales executives, we provide evidence of how firms deal with the three interconnected realities identified above and offer glimpses of some best practices. We also provide some recommendations for managers to deal with these three realities.

Keywords: Digital transformation, adaptive sales force, sales conversation, COVID pandemic

The CHANGING SALES LANDSCAPE

The Covid-19 crisis has caused a significant disruption in industries and has changed business processes. There were expectations of a temporary disruption, followed by a return to normal. However, months into the pandemic, there are expectations that governments' travel and distancing restriction will last for the near future. In a recent survey of 3,600 business to business (business-to-business) decision makers across 11 countries, 12 sectors, by the consulting firm McKinsey (2020), the Covid pandemic has led to an acceleration of digital transformation trends in business-to-business organizations that includes omni-channel selling, inside sales, tech-enabled sales, and e-commerce. Furthermore, this study also states that these changes are likely to be in place for the near future (12+ months)

The gist of this is that sales organizations have changed the way that they function. In a survey of business-to-business customers in Italy, Guenzi (2020) suggests that customers increasingly are rethinking the way they need to interact with their suppliers. For example, Ray et al. (2020) indicate that customers increasingly prefer non-face to face communication with the supplier organization, including completely bypassing, even remote human interactions. For instance, when given a choice, B2B customers chose technology-enabled self-service compared to traditional interactions with salespeople. In instances where self-service did not meet their requirements, they preferred digital means of communication with the sales organization with live chats, email from sales reps, and texts from sales reps being preferred (and in that order). This change in behaviors of business-to-business customers is forcing sales organizations to not only rethink how they engage with their customers (and prospects), reconsider their go-to-market strategies, and consequently allocate the right resources to help drive sales revenue.

Recent work prior to the Covid pandemic, had focused on how advances in digital technologies and changing behaviors of customers are forcing sales organizations to consider

engaging in digital transformation initiatives (Syam and Sharma 2018; Guenzi and Habel, 2020) and, more recently, how Artificial Intelligence (AI) can help create value during the sales process (Passchen, Wilson, and Ferreira, 2020). The traditional sales literature has also focused on how digital tools like CRM (Nelson, Walsh, and Cui 2020; Ogilvie et al., 2018) and social media usage (Ancillai et al. 2019; Guenzi and Habel, 2020) play an essential role in helping drive sales force performance. However, research on the impact of CRM and social media by salespeople still points out to difficulties organizations have in getting their sales force to realize the true potential of these technologies. While most business-to-business organizations have usually taken a more cautious approach towards deploying digital technologies, the Covid pandemic is forcing the hands of these organizations to either adapt quickly or run the risk of being left behind.

Thus, this paper focuses on understanding how sales organizations are reacting to the exogenous shock of the pandemic that has changed customers' behaviors and the increasing reliance on digital technologies to drive sales force effectiveness. Specifically, our focus is on how many of these changes will remain and become part of the sales approach after the pandemic. We also focus on the impact these changes have on how organizations need to change existing internal processes and organizational structures and engage in cross-functional coordination to help boost the sales organization's performance.

State of the Research on Sales Practices

The Covid-19 pandemic has radically changed the business landscape in which buyers and sellers operate today. Both buying organizations and sales organizations continue to deal with the consequences of the pandemic daily and with no clear idea about when the crisis is going to end, buyer-seller relationships are at an impasse today. In the business-to-business space, sales organizations were mostly concerned with dealing with the digital transformation that shaped the behaviors of their business-to-business buyers and their own sales practices

(Guenzi and Habel 2020). Guenzi (2020) finds that most business-to-business sales organizations were beginning to implement digitization of their sales force, but none of the firms are ready to deal with the turbulence created by the pandemic.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has led to uncertainty, the changing dynamic of the buying and selling process was not exactly unexpected by sales leaders. The last two decades has witnessed how advances in technology has shaped and business-to-business sales practices. In addition, the recession triggered by the financial crisis of 2008 led to a significant change in how business-to-business buying firms decided to harness technology to make procurement a strategic function and shaped sales strategies and sales practices (Paesbrugghe et al. 2017; 2018). From their interactions with business-to-business sales leaders in India, Guda (2020) and Singh (2020) suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to serve as a catalyst for many digital transformation initiatives that were already being discussed (or implemented) in sales organizations. This feeling was echoed by Guenzi (2020) based on the results from his survey amongst salespeople in Italy.

Thus, it is clear that, in the wake of this unprecedented global crisis, firms have had to become resilient, and their salespeople more agile and nimble, i.e., become more flexible and adaptive (Sharma, Rangarajan, and Paesbrugghe 2020). In particular, Sharma, Rangarajan and Paesbrugghe (2020) suggest that firms need to develop a salesforce that focuses on three areas of adaptability and flexibility—functional, scale, and technology. Functional adaptability refers to the flexibility of the functions that the salesforce performs. Scale adaptability refers to the flexibility in the sales functions that can be rapidly insourced or outsourced. Technology adaptiveness refers to the flexibility of salespeople’s adoption of technology most relevant to the customer. While this is a useful first step, this study focuses on how sales organizations need to change to address the pandemic's long-term effects.

WHAT ARE BUSINESSES DOING

To help understand how sales organizations were dealing with the challenges of pandemic and beyond, we conducted semi-structured interviews with business-to-business sales executives from multiple industries to understand how they are adapting their sales process during this crisis. We obtained inputs from 18 marketing and sales executives active in an international context with respondents from the US and Europe (see Table 1). Our interviews were usually one hour long and done through video conferencing. The main findings from the interviews were compiled to identify key topics listed below.

Changes in the customer behavior and need for more customer centric sales approaches

One of our research's primary findings, echoed by all the interviewees, was how customers' buying behaviors were being shaped by the pandemic and increased reliance by customers on digital tools to interact with their suppliers. We highlight some key topics here:

Customers move to shut down face-to-face interactions: According to our interviewees, all customers were forced to stop face-to-face interactions with their suppliers for both critical and non-critical items. This was followed by customers interacting with their suppliers using digital tools like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Hangouts, CISCO WebEx, etc.

Interestingly, while customers were used to having internal meetings on these technology platforms, there was a period of adjustment when interacting with their suppliers through these platforms. Furthermore, customers' purchasing function was not set up to have digital interactions with their suppliers, leading to delays in complex purchase decisions for critical items.

“Covid hit us, and our customers asked our salespeople to stop site visits and do everything virtually. We were asked to join Zoom, Teams, Google Meet, Facebook rooms, and WebEx sessions by different customers. Our salespeople overnight had to learn to navigate the different platforms that our customers preferred”- Global Sales Manager- Financial Services.

“A couple of months into Covid, our customers realized that they could become more efficient by having the whole decision-making unit involved in a sales call at the same time. The problem with this was- a chaotic sales call with too many stakeholders in the “virtual

meeting” and not too many important decisions taken”- Global Key Account Manager- Specialty Chemicals

Customers Using More Digital Technologies to control the buying process: A trend that executives noticed involved customers turning to self-service focused e-commerce solutions like EDI (electronic data interchange) when dealing with repeat purchases that involved easy to evaluate offerings. Additionally, the customers were increasingly doing online research about their suppliers and their offerings, including website visits, social media interactions, and attending webinars hosted by competing suppliers.

“A month into Covid, we saw a spike in online orders placed from our e-commerce site. While we did have some customers order online before Covid, it was nothing compared to the number of orders that were placed online after Covid. It was interesting to see some of our customers even order products that they normally would never buy online”- District Manager- Distributor, Industrial Products

“Covid meant no more visiting customers or prospects’ premises. However, our e-commerce team noticed that there was a lot more traffic to our website and using cookies, we were able to see how the customers/prospects engaged on our website, and then passed them on as leads to our salesforce”- Regional Sales Manager- Construction Equipment

“A lot of our customers really missed the interactions with their salespeople and were becoming active on social media. We realized that this was a great opportunity and encouraged our salespeople to become proactive on social media and post content-relevant off course- to help our customers, while putting a human face behind our social media posts”- Sales Director UK/Ireland- Medical Devices

Customers Demand More Novel, Personalized Content: All participants in our study suggested that while there was increased activity from the customers when it came to looking for content from their suppliers, there was a growing consensus that the customers were a) feeling overwhelmed with the amount of information now available to them, b) complained about the lack of customized/tailored information that they could process immediately and put it to use, and c) underwhelmed with novel insights being generated by their suppliers. Some customers on other extremes ended up contacting salespeople to address non-critical issues, yet expecting a quick response from their sales contacts.

“After attending a couple of our webinars, we had some of our customers reach out to the sales reps and complain to them about the very general nature of our webinars and asked to be only invited to a webinar- where insights either critical to their function or their industry was being presented”- EVP Global Accounts- Label Manufacturer

“Some of the R&D experts in our customers’ organization had time to attend our webinars, owing to a lot of their internal projects put on hold. While this was a good thing, what we did not realize that when these people had questions, they reached out to our salespeople asking for clarifications on topics that would not be decided for months or maybe years. This really put a lot of stress on our salespeople”- Global KAM- Specialty Chemicals

“One of the webinars our marketing team had hosted talked about some new insights into how we had helped a customer maintain their business continuity during difficult times. We were pleasantly surprised when this led to a call from a prospect we had tried to get into for years, and three months down the line, we have a pilot order for one of our products. Who would have thought that a webinar would get us a foot in the door, when years of sales visits had yielded nothing”- VP Food and Beverage- Packaging

Changes in the traditional sales process

Our first finding was that customers are changing the way they interact with their suppliers and how technology was playing a critical role in the same. To understand how these changes in customer behavior translated to changes in the sales process, we asked our study participants to elaborate on the finding. In particular, we wanted to explore how technology adaptability and a hybrid salesforce would change the traditional face-to-face business-to-business sales process. We assumed that an adaptable salesforce using different technologies would lead to different value creation opportunities during the sales process, especially during the current and post Covid-19 era. Specifically, we wanted to understand how the sales force needs to adapt to bring value-added contributions at each sales process stage. To help us understand how the sales process was changing, we used the traditional business-to-business sales process suggested by Dubinsky et al. (1981) and asked our participants to elaborate on how Covid-19 would affect current and future sales processes. A summary of our key findings are available in Table 2, and we illustrate how the sales process is changing in the following section.

----Insert Table 2 about Here ----

Prospecting/Pre-Approach: The hybrid and agile salesforce may both engage in finding potential customers, which traditionally have relied heavily on sales professionals and their lead generation teams (Thaichon et al. 2018). As suggested by one of our participants, using a hybrid sales approach would include an inside sales force and a field sales force to reach prospects and customers (Thaichon et al. 2018). In addition, the use of marketing automation and account-based marketing tools with other inbound marketing initiatives like using social media, websites, white papers, and blogs to generate leads would be an optimal use of resources given the moves by customers to rely on digital tools to do their primary research. However, a feeling echoed by more traditional business-to-business companies was that traditional lead generation techniques like trade fairs, exhibitions, while a no-go during the pandemic, would likely see a return to some old practices after the pandemic. However, the pandemic had irrevocably changed how lead generation worked in organizations.

“In our organization, we are increasingly moving towards our marketing organization becoming more involved in demand generation and even initial qualification of the needs. The marketing team then passes on these qualified leads to our field sales force”- Global KAM, Specialty Chemicals.

“Our field salespeople are people with a lot of experience and so have become too expensive and specialized for them to be looking at prospecting and pre-approach. So, we have moved to have an inside sales force who are tasked with following up on leads from our marketing initiatives as well as do cold calling to get and prospect leads. In some instances, our inside sales reps are also responsible for doing product presentation and maybe even close deals- especially for smaller orders”- Global Business Unit Director, Specialty Chemicals

“In our organization, some of our inside sales specialists are also trained on the more innovative marketing automation tools to help them get a better reach to prospects as well as work on person-driven marketing collateral. This helps them when we transition them into more customer facing sales roles”- Project Director- Products and Innovation at a Global Hardware and Software Vendor operating in CPG space.

“Before the pandemic, we used traditional methods to gain leads, marketing would attend fairs and exhibitions and the contacts would be passed on to the sales organization. Covid has changed that. No more budgets for fairs and travels. We were already beginning to look at using technology like search engine optimization, inbound/outbound marketing campaign before Covid. After Covid, I do expect that we will still do fairs and exhibitions, but with drastically reduced budgets that will be put to use on marketing-technology driven campaigns”- Global Marketing Manager, Connectivity Devices

“The previous company I used to work for used to insist that salespeople do a lot of pre-call planning preparation that involved doing research about the people they were calling and about the company itself. This was done based on experiences, talking to other sales reps from competition, other suppliers, reading annual reports etc. In my current company, we also use more sophisticated social listening tools, access social media, use more sales engagement tools like SalesLoft that gets data from ZoomInfo and once the call is finished, it is updated in Salesforce. This is the future of sales”- Inside Sales Manager, Employee Services Firm

Approach: The business-to-business sales teams may need to be equipped with more technology-enabled capabilities to enhance their selling approach and decision-making during such a crisis. Various reasons emerged from the interviews as to why business-to-business salespeople need to be more adaptive to technology while remaining agile vis-a-vis a blended sales process. The Covid-19 pandemic has made it impossible for salespeople to visit their prospects/customers, making it critical for traditional field sales forces to be trained to migrate to the use of technology for sales. For example, social media and other media platforms would be even more critical for business-to-business salespeople to communicate with their customers. Field sales force would need to be trained like inside salespeople. This would ensure that salespeople adapt to the new normal and remain effective even during difficult times. From a sales manager’s perspective, having traditional inside salespeople train their field counterparts makes smart use of resources and empowers teamwork.

“Ever before the Covid-pandemic, we were beginning to question the necessity to do face to face visits of prospects all the time. We were looking into virtual meetings where with the willing customer; we would propose WebEx meetings to mutually increase our efficiencies. The pandemic has only made it easier as a lot of our customers now are getting more comfortable using digital meeting platforms”- VP Global Marketing, Equipment Manufacturer.

“What the pandemic has made us question is whether we need to visit our customers as much as we used to before or can we go for a blended approach of face to face visits combined with meetings on Zooms/Teams. This could mean more productivity gains and I think once Covid is over, we will go back to reduced face to face visits combined with calls over digital medium”- Sales Director, UK/ Ireland- Medical Devices

Presentation/Objection Handling/Close: Field salespeople might be ideal candidates for sales enablement initiatives, which can help salespeople carry their meetings with digital means

and help provide customized presentations matched to the specific decision-making unit member in the customer's organization. With recent work by Toman, Dixon, and Gomez (2017) suggesting that the number of people involved in a customer's decision-making unit to be around 6.8 individuals, it has become increasingly difficult for salespeople to not only understand the needs of the customers but also provide a customized solution to every member of the decision-making unit at the customer. With sales enablement platforms now making it possible for marketing to customize content for each member in the decision-making unit, and deal with complex buying situations.

“We sell digital printing presses- anywhere between 500,000 to 1,000,000 USD. Our sales cycles are long, complex, and with many decision makers. Each decision maker has their own set of needs and standards. To help our salespeople deal with this complexity, we have invested in a new sales enablement platform- that will help our marketing team not only push content on our website and social media sites, but also use the same content, but personalized per member of the customer's decision making unit to help our salespeople customize their message per customer/per decision making unit member”- VP Marketing, Equipment Manufacturer

Plouffe et al. (2016) and Kalra et al. (2017) suggest that for salespeople to be successful, they need to influence their internal colleagues to help their customers. Under the current circumstances, it becomes imperative for salespeople to use digital tools to interact with their customers. Our research's respondents highlighted the use of enterprise social media tools like Microsoft Teams, Slack, Chatter, etc. to bring different internal functions together. While this serves to help salespeople communicate with their colleagues, sales organizations must create clear rules for sharing information with the appropriate profiles within the organization to prevent an overload of information that could overwhelm both salespeople and other non-customer facing roles. Similarly, care should be taken to ensure that using these new tools (or cannot use these new tools) should not place an additional workload on employees and create anxiety leading to technostress (Guenzi 2020). Similarly, there could be a tendency for salespeople to get distracted by the use of enterprise social media, and so care should be taken to make sure that this does not happen.

“Selling in our organization is a team sport. Our salespeople need the support of their internal colleagues to follow up on questions, objections from customers. We were always considering using platforms like Slack, Yammer before the pandemic with limited success, but all that changed the moment we all had to work from home. Microsoft Teams became our default option to connect internally. We created separate channels so that only people who absolutely were involved in a deal or for a customer were invited. This was done to avoid confusion and distraction amongst everyone”- Global Sales Manager, Fashion Merchandise.

Our findings also suggested that there was still a lot of hesitation among both salespeople and customers to commit to the final selling step. However, given the pandemic restrictions, customers were willing to make exceptions and chose to either place orders through e-commerce platforms or, in some instances, even sign contracts remotely using applications like DocuSign, etc.

Follow up: Following up after receiving an order creates opportunities for cross selling, upselling, and understanding its new needs. Technology adaptation can help business-to-business salespeople move to more automated systems for order processing and follow-up, easing their work during a crisis. These free up salespeople time from some manual tasks and focus on value-added activities during follow up. Furthermore, a recurring theme from our interviews with business-to-business salespeople was on the importance for salespeople to reach out to their customers and ensure them of the relationship's continuity and, more critically, remind customers of their value that has been delivered since the sale. While the expectation is for salespeople or account managers to do the same, Hochstein et al. (2020) suggest that either salespeople might not have the time to reach out to all of their customers or even if they can reach out to their customers, might not have access to customer pertinent information to help highlight the value that the customer has received as part of the sales agreement. The customer success manager then takes over the relationship, including onboarding the customer, educating the customer when necessary, liaising internally with the sales organization, and the customer's organization to ensure value delivery and value realization (Gelb et. al 2020). While this customer success role is prevalent in companies that

deploy a subscription-based model, sales organizations need to consider this practice to help salespeople.

Our findings also show the need to identify specific account-based marketing initiatives within their organization, where marketing works closely with salespeople to help identify relevant content that would be appreciated by specific members of the customer's decision-making unit and automate the content delivery process, that in situations, can replace a physical visit by the salespeople to the customer, thereby increasing sales efficiency.

“What we realize is that a lot of the value creation in this regard occurs after the sale of the product and actually requires proactive follow up with our customers- that our salespeople today are not equipped to deal- both in terms of knowledge as well as time. Therefore, we are looking into creating a new customer success department by copying from more the “born-in-the-cloud” subscription-based service models. We had to convince our top management, but are starting a pilot project on customer success management”- VP of Digital transformation at an Industrial Manufacturer

“At our organization, we are beginning to see a lot more involvement of marketing in both the demand generation phase, but also when it comes to helping our key accounts provide cutting edge, relevant information during the after sales servicing the customer using account-based marketing initiatives”- Global KAM, Specialty Chemicals.

Digital Transformation is Ubiquitous

One of our research's recurring findings was that the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for digital transformation initiatives within their organizations. Following Guenzi and Habel (2020, p.2), we define digital transformation as “the process of using digital technologies to create new—or modify existing—business processes, culture, and customer experiences to meet changing business and market requirements.” As Singh, Klarnar, and Hess (2020) elaborate, digital transformation transcends mere digitalization of resources and encompasses the use of digital technologies to engender major business improvements that culminate in revised on new business models. Thus, digital transformation enables organizations to improve their operations and competencies and value creation and delivery

(Singh, Klarner, and Hess 2020). Our study's participants systematically pointed out to three themes about digital transformation that they felt were key for the successful implementation of the same: Process, People, and Performance (3Ps). While some changes to sales process changes have already been discussed before, we discuss key findings pertaining to people and performance.

People: One of the significant shifts that occurred due to the Covid-19 pandemic that our interviewees felt would influence the sales organization had to do with the idea of work from home (WFH). High-technology firms like Google, Facebook announcing that WFH would be in place beyond the pandemic, more traditional companies like Siemens are also considering WFH policies (Kelly 2020). While salespeople were used to remote working even before the pandemic, the conditions specific to the pandemic including customers' preferring virtual meetings, internal colleagues facing challenges associated with technological infrastructure issues of WFH, the levels of distraction at home because of other family members also stuck at home, could lead to increased levels of stress that needs to be managed. Additionally, more customers' preferring self-service options from their suppliers could increase job insecurity among salespeople. Another issue that salespeople face is the increased amount of customer calls (and emails), the potential of work overload becomes important.

“When the customers' moved to online, virtual calls due to WFH situations for them, we started to get an increased volume of non-urgent requests/calls from customers just because the projects they were working on was put on hold and they had to keep themselves occupied. They did this by reaching out to their supplier salespeople to enquire about innovations that we knew realistically had no chance of being sold before 2 years”- Global KAM, Specialty Chemicals

“Once the pandemic hit, a month after WFH became the norm, our organization decided to do periodic Pulse surveys that were anonymous and used to gauge the mood of our frontline staff. Pretty soon, we saw recurring themes of work overload/fatigue amongst our frontline folks, increased anxiety levels of what would happen to their jobs if the pandemic continued, what would their job look like post the pandemic, and would they be ready to deal with this change”- Senior Vice President Sales and Services, Maritime Machinery.

Performance

One of the outcomes of the pandemic was the decision by customers to postpone non-essential purchases. There was a slowing down of sales, with many orders being canceled or postponed. In addition, there were special requests from customers for increased flexibility in order sizes or in payment/delivery terms in the instances where orders were coming in. This meant that the traditional ways of measuring salesperson performance using lag indicators like revenues, margins, orders in the pipeline, would no longer suffice. This was already a topic that companies that were into digital transformation were considering--the move from outcome-based performance measures to more activity-based performance measures.

There was also awareness amongst our interviewees that since the sales process was changing to keep pace with the customer changes, a digital transformation would involve building new capabilities and upskilling existing salespeople, including sales managers. Consequently, some of the companies we spoke to were putting practices into place to use the pandemic time to evaluate salespeople on the skills/capabilities they could develop during the pandemic, which would help the sales organization ramp up the pandemic is done. Similarly, sales managers were viewed as key to the success of digital transformation success, and so some companies were revamping their performance metrics to look at sales manager coaching as one of the key areas for improvement. However, almost all interviewees agreed that salespeople's targets for 2020 were softened (wherever applicable).

“We quickly realized that this year was going to be a difficult one for our sales organization, so we decided to lower our expectations about the actual revenues, but instead had our salespeople evaluated on activities like- how many new prospects they were contacting, how they were updating the information on their CRM systems, how they were using the time to develop new skills that could be used when the economy opened up again. We also specifically rolled out a training program on how our salespeople can sell virtually and are now in the process of measuring its impact”- VP Global Marketing, Equipment Manufacturer.

“Our sales managers are key to make sure that our salespeople and sales organization tide over these difficult times. We are investing in new training modules to help our sales managers become better at coaching. One of the key initiatives supported by top management is to upskill our current managers and prepare them to be held more accountable for the

performance of their sales teams once the pandemic shows signs of going away”- Sales Enablement Leader, Equipment Manufacturer.

TIPS FOR MANAGERS

Based on the three main topics that emerged from our interviews, we also asked the interviewees how they were dealing with the various issues facing their sales organizations. Based on their responses, we compiled and grouped them into five main categories: a) customer support through the change, b) dealing with change resistance by salespeople and customers, c) impact of technology, d) training and development of salespeople, e) linking business-to-business sales knowledge and management strategies.

Customer support through the change

During times of change, salespeople should be encouraged to become more proactive in reaching out to their customers, discuss already realized value, and identify future areas of value creation to enable continued interest on the part of the customer. Sales organizations in companies are transitioning to new business models, or subscription-based models will need support that typical salespeople cannot provide. The use of new frontline functions like customer success managers will need to be considered to help the customer navigate the change.

Dealing with change resistance by salespeople and customers

Sales managers are well advised to deal with salesperson resistance to change for the new initiatives brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. When dealing with this issue, sales managers need to be proactive in their communications and prepare the salespeople for the upcoming change, provide the necessary support for the salespeople to cope with this change, clearly outline the benefits to the salespeople about the change, and most importantly how to manage this change. Doing this can help in the transition process. Sales managers should also be prepared to coach and back their salespeople when dealing with customers who

demonstrate change resistance. Under these circumstances, sales managers have to give clear guidance to salespeople to help them help their customers to navigate the change, including effective communication and support. If this involves having to reconsider salesperson KPI setting and evaluations, this has to be considered, keeping in mind the customer's importance.

Impact of technology

It is critical that sales managers realize that while technology can enable the sales process, it can only be successful if the underlying changes to the way customers interact with the salesperson are understood and accounted for. Failure to do so would result in productivity decreases and might lead to salesperson stress and turnover. The use of technology platforms to onboard new salespeople, retrain existing salespeople, engage in peer to peer coaching should be considered to tap into the technology's ability to customize each individual's approach salesperson's learning ability and comfort with new technologies.

Training and development of salespeople

From our findings, field salespeople must be trained on selling digitally. Sales managers should turn to techniques used by inside salespeople to enhance the sales process. The use of social media and social networks will become critical in the new way of selling, and so sales managers will need to get their salespeople up to speed with the use of social selling techniques. Salespeople should be encouraged to become "thought-leaders" by creating content contributing to their own personal brand that can prove beneficial to the customers. Salespeople that are not familiar with thought leadership need support from their sales managers and their marketing counterparts.

Linking business-to-business sales knowledge and management strategies

As customers continue to become demanding, prefer doing their research online, spend more on ecommerce initiatives, sales organizations will need to rethink the way they reach out to their customers, including a hybrid sales organizations, considering more

ecommerce and m-commerce solutions to not only offer more convenience for the customers but ease the workload on salespeople. The importance of customizing marketing collateral to be used with specific personas in the customer's decision-making units should be part of sales enablement efforts. A streamlined knowledge management approach here will be critical for the success of such initiatives. The importance of using lead indicators to measure the success of these change strategies is going to be critical for the continued success of new digital transformation initiatives.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Covid -19 can be considered as a rare event that has disrupted business and their traditional processes. We hope that business would be more prepared for such exogenous shocks in the future with more robust processes, planning, and mitigations in the future. This article intends to specifically help business-to-business salespeople and organizations on the need to alter their business-to-business sales process, enabling them to create strategic advantage during a pandemic such as Covid-19. A key aspect of sustaining and enhancing business-to-business sales during such times is orchestrating a more adaptive and hybrid salesforce to support customers as well as create new opportunities. Our study shows how each step in the B2b sales funnel needs to re-adapt itself during such a crisis as Covid-19. We provide insights as to why this change is necessary and critical for business-to-business salespeople to survive, grow, and remain sustainable.

Our findings clarify the value-add contributions of an adaptive and hybrid sales force and what changes need to happen at each stage of the sales funnel, in addition to clarifying the decision that has to be relooked for each step in the business-to-business sales funnel. We hope that our article provides a comprehensive perspective on improving the sales process and complementing articles in this new area of business-to-business sales research (Hartmann, Nathaniel, and Bruno Lussier, 2020; Sharma, Rangarajan & Paesbrugghe 2020),

which can augment a need or even replace well defined and traditional tasks in the business-to-business sales process. We observe that business-to-business sales process issues represent an area ripe for additional research mostly post Covid-19 and that a more in-depth knowledge in the domain will help us provide better insights for managers, firms and practitioners to enhance business-to-business performance. We hope our research stimulates more research in the future that focuses on changes in the business-to-business sales process and sales performance in the new normal.

Table 1: Profile of Respondents

Title	Experience (in years)	Industry	Company Turnover
Sales Director- UK/Ireland	15	Medical Devices	1.4 Billion USD
EVP Global Accounts	35	Label Manufacturer	2.1 Billion USD
Global KAM	20	Specialty Chemicals	10 Billion USD
VP Food and Beverage	24	Packaging	9.3 Billion USD
Senior VP of Sales and Services	30	Maritime	4 Billion USD
Global Key Account Manager	16	Food Ingredients	Unavailable (Family company)
Global Business Unit Director	18	Special Chemicals	Unavailable (Family company)
Global Sales Manager	14	Financial Services	12 Billion USD
Global Marketing Manager	25	Connectivity Devices	1.1 Billion USD
Global Sales Manager	25	Fashion Merchandise	Unavailable (Family company)
VP Global Marketing	22	Equipment Manufacturer	600 Million USD
Project Director	25	Hardware/Software	300 Million USD
VP Global Marketing	25	Equipment Manufacturer	5 Billion USD
VP Digital Transformation	23	Industrial Manufacturer	3.5 Billion USD
Sales Enablement Leader	35	Equipment Manufacturer	6.5 Billion USD
Regional Sales Manager	7	Construction Equipment	6.1 Billion USD
District Manager	15	Distributor, Industrial Products	6 Billion USD
Inside Sales Manager	7	Employee Services Firm	Unavailable

Table 2: Selling Process and Covid-19 for business-to-business Salespeople			
Stage of the business-to-business Sales Process	Sales Process& Task Pre Covid-19	Value-Add to Sales Process & Task During Covid-19	Sales Process & Task Post Covi-19
1) Prospecting	Fairs, Exhibitions, Referrals, Lists, SEO, Webinars, Cold calling, Inbound Marketing, Outbound Marketing, Sales Visits	SEO, Webinars, Referrals, Inbound Marketing, Outbound Marketing	Fairs, Exhibitions, Referrals, Lists, SEO, Webinars, Cold calling, Inbound Marketing, Outbound Marketing, Sales Visits
2) Pre-Approach	Company Reports, Previous relationship with the customer, Talk to salespeople of complementary suppliers, annual reports of customers	All of the same, social media research, social listening, sales engagement tools like calendly, zoom, inside salespeople, Chilipiper, Outreach	Company Reports, social media research, social listening, annual report of customers, sales engagement tools like calendly, zoom, outreach, Chilipiper
3) Approach	Face to face visits, using digital tools like Zoom, Teams	Digital Means to reach out to the customer	Return to normal, but increased use of digital technologies
4) Presentation	Brochures, PowerPoints, Printouts, Handouts	Digital presentation using videoconferencing, Google docs for co-creation with the customer, persona-driven content	More use of sales enablement tools to customize content
5) Overcoming Objections	Referrals, Used case studies	referrals, used case studies, white papers, storytelling with customer testimonials on social media	Referrals, used case studies, white papers, storytelling with customer testimonials on social media
6) Close	Face to face	Digitally for smaller deals with e-signature software	Face to face for big deals, digital for small deals
7) Follow up	Face to face, calls	Calls, account-Based marketing	Calls, account-based marketing

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