

# **How COVID-19 Is Accelerating Change in the B2B Sales Organization**

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With all the disruptions that the Coronavirus pandemic has ushered into our lives in the past several months—the quarantines, the social distancing, the masks—we’re only just beginning to focus on the long-term ramifications. While our lives will get back to normal someday, some changes may be permanent.

For businesses generally and sales organizations specifically, COVID-19 is turning out to be one giant wake-up call. Only a few months ago, digital technologies, virtual sales techniques and flexible/remote work patterns were considered competitive advantages. Now, they are essential.

We’re witnessing a new era in sales. Although we were destined to reach this point, COVID-19 has accelerated our transition. Call it what you want—the New Normal,

the Next Normal—we won't be turning back.

## **“If It Ain't Broke” No Longer Applies**

For B2B sales organizations, the writing has been on the wall for some time. In 2015, Forrester predicted that a million B2B sales reps would lose their jobs by 2020. Their forecast was based in large part on a growing disconnect between traditional sales methods and buyers' demands for a more responsive, transparent and flexible customer experience. Eighty percent of B2B buyers admit they've dropped vendors that didn't meet their expectations.

Our buyers and decision-makers—73% of whom are between the ages of 20 and 35—transitioned faster than our B2B sales organizations. Millennials are digital and social media savvy. They prefer virtual, self-serve sales platforms, and they expect the flexibility to choose for themselves.

Unfortunately, it took a pandemic to help sales organizations catch up.

## **COVID-19 and Lessons Learned**

The pandemic has meant far more than temporary layoffs and shuttered buildings. McKinsey & Company launched B2B Decision Maker Pulse to monitor the attitudes and actions of business leaders around the world. Here's some of what they've learned:

- **Digital Reigns Supreme:** The preference for digital sales interactions outstrips traditional sales by a factor of two.
- **The Mobile Rush Is On:** Orders for mobile apps are up 250%.
- **Remote Working Is Effective:** During the pandemic, 96% of B2B companies shifted to remote selling strategies, and 65% think it is just as effective as traditional sales...and maybe better.
- **Self-Service Skyrockets:** E-commerce revenue has grown by almost 30%.
- **Budgets Are In Flux:** The shift is on. Half of B2B businesses have cut their budgets. They are looking for the best deals and redistributing funds to essential functions.

Companies are discovering that they can work more efficiently, that inside sales works, and that employees can work effectively remotely when necessary. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned is that the customer is more than ready for these

changes.

## **The New Sales Organization Takes Shape**

For sales organizations, there's no going back. COVID-19 has ushered in the digital era that changes the dynamic for buyers, sales reps and managers.

**The pivot to remote is real.** More and more employees will exchange commuting and stress for home offices and flexible hours. The tools, technology and bandwidth exist for sales managers to monitor sales progress, mentor reps one-on-one and hold sales meetings online. Employees also have access to more digital resources, including sales tools and online workshops and training.

**Remote selling becomes the norm.** In recent years, inside sales has been growing 15 times faster than outside sales. Expect the trend to continue, with companies expanding the size of their telesales and inside sales force. Some field reps will transition; others will adopt a hybrid selling style, making more phone calls and fewer face-to-face visits.

Expect too for the role of the inside sales rep to expand. In addition to qualifying and nurturing leads, they will work with buyers throughout the journey and close more deals. To support them, marketing will need to develop a wide range of new digital content and resources—more online demos, virtual sales presentations, webinars, podcasts and video.

Remote selling will give buyers more self-service and e-commerce options. While mostly limited to B2C business and smaller, simpler B2B transactions in the past, e-commerce will become more versatile and sophisticated.

**Tech-enabled tools will make the new sales organization smarter.** CRM, big data, account-based marketing and AI-enhanced systems have been trending for the last several years. But in this digital, remote, virtual environment, sales reps and managers alike will depend on access to smart tools to collect, monitor and analyze data.

Cutting-edge communication with customers, prospects and other employees is critical in the new sales organization. And interdepartmental alignment of goals, messaging and strategies will become the norm.

**Customers finally get the experience they want.** The new sales organization

will be equipped to deliver a customer experience that embraces targeted messaging, greater purchasing flexibility and options, pricing transparency and added value. The customer really will be king.

**Finally, expect greater efficiency and cost-effective sales organizations.**

We already know that inside sales can lower the cost of sales anywhere from 40% to 90% over outside sales. The pandemic caused companies to cut and redistribute budgets, and this will probably continue—or at least lead to greater scrutiny of dollars spent and return on investment.

Today, midway through 2020, B2B sales organizations may seemingly stand at a crossroads. They can return to their old selling strategies and be left behind. Or, they can acknowledge that the last six months have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform into the digital, remote, virtual selling organizations of the future. The decision going forward is yours.

**However, the Human Touch is still needed.** In exchange for more freedom and more flexibility you need to fight to retain company culture, teamwork, and friendly competition. No matter what, there is no substitute for human interaction. I do not think we want to have a world where everyone is working remotely and only gets to know each other through a computer screen. We need as a society to find the right balance or it may be to our demise.

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