SERVICE IS THE NEW SALES
The through line for B2B growth
Today’s global B2B marketplace is filled with extraordinary pressure and competition.

Forty-four percent of B2B buyers have switched sellers in the past 12 months. But there is a path to B2B relationship success. Our new global research suggests that the strongest, most differentiated B2B relationships are driven by experiences that connect human and digital means to provide a deeper, more personalized level of service.

*Accenture 2018 Pulse Research*
The research identified a rift between buyers’ expectations and average seller experiences, underpinning an unprecedented seller-switching trend.

To survive in the digital ecosystem, some B2B sellers have focused on digital upgrades only to find themselves disconnected from meaningful dialogue with long-time customers. Other sellers remained doggedly focused on organic 1:1 sales cycles, disregarding digital tools critical to modern commerce. Both scenarios create a buyer-seller service rift that compromises even the best B2B relationships.

The challenge:

A rising rift

62% of buyers who make weekly B2B purchases have switched sellers in the past year.

36% plan to switch in the coming 12 months. That means:

80% of frequent buyers will have switched in a 24-month period, highlighting a buyer trend toward exploring options and embracing change.
Why buyers leave

This disconnect means buyers are finding procurement loopholes and welcoming new disruptors in order to best serve their needs. When asked why they switched or plan to switch sellers, one in four buyers pointed to uncompetitive pricing, long lead times for delivery and fulfillment, or missed delivery dates (see Figure 1). One in five buyers highlighted a lack of integration between sales channels and poor commerce functionality as key reasons to switch.
What buyers want

Among those same buyers, half have increased their average number of items per purchase and grown average purchase values with sellers who meet their needs and help them succeed. The majority of buyers (91%) are more likely to shop with sellers that recognize, remember, and provide relevant offers. When asked what they want from their sellers, buyers’ preferences bridge the digital-analog divide to describe a service-oriented, channel agnostic relationship: competitive pricing, flexibility, responsiveness, value, and ease (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Top 10 factors of importance to buyers
The opportunity:

Connected experiences, better service

A promised land of buyer and seller success emerges for B2B sellers committed to an elevated service standard, hyper-focused on buyer needs, personal relationships, and intelligent interactions.

The leaders in our research have embraced relationship-based success and multiplied it through digital enablement—they know that customer-centric service experiences, rather than a narrow focus on sales objectives or revenue numbers, lead to mutual success.
Our global survey of 748 B2B buyers and 1,499 B2B sellers shows that B2B leaders are already benefiting from a service-over-sales approach:

- **90%** say they have gained a greater share of their customers’ wallets
- **96%** report higher profitability
- **97%** say they have gained greater market share
- **95%** have seen more sales from initial website clicks

Modern service experiences that blend digital innovation with human virtues can drive powerful bottom line outcomes. In this report, we will explore today’s gaps between buyers’ expectations and sellers’ experiences and provide practical strategies—sourced from leaders themselves—to overcome the B2B rift.

To discern the leaders from the laggards, we weighted responses to 12 questions from the sellers’ survey across three key pillars of B2B transformation: organizational strategy, activities, and infrastructure.

To give a robust and accurate picture of the global state of buyer-seller relationships, greatest weighting was given to questions reflecting the objective and measurable elements of B2B sales and service.
Leaders from our research are significantly more likely to name “customer experience” as a priority strategic business initiative.

But to create an experience that meets and exceeds customer needs, you must know your customer first. Customer data is the essential thread in the buyer-seller relationship fabric and best-in-class customer experiences. Leaders are more likely to recognize the barriers to customer relationships that stem from technology failure or inadequacy, and are more likely to eliminate those road blocks.

Step 1: Leverage technology to unlock powerful data

Service is the new sales
Leaders invest in data

Technology is most effective where it makes brands more human. Sellers who adopt a service mindset are more likely (51%) than laggards (32%) to employ new technology platforms to overcome service barriers. They’re also twice as likely to have centralized and regularly updated data sets (see Figure 3) that inform all service channels and conversations, personalizing offerings and improving engagement.

Leaders are twice as likely to track buyers’ past purchase history or browsed items, and more likely to make personalized offers, based on the sum of all behaviors. They also more frequently invest in social media measurement and analyze sentiment, so they understand how products and services are resonating in market.

Figure 3: Quality of customer data records
Step 1: Leverage technology to unlock powerful data

Leaders focus on personalization

Eighty-nine percent of leading organizations can track buyer activity across channels, and 47% said they apply cross-channel activity tracking as a core success metric for online engagement. Notably, they also consistently offer greater personalization throughout the entire purchasing journey (see Figure 4), when compared to laggards.

Figure 4. The gap between leaders and laggards in end-to-end personalization
Leading organizations are also four times more likely to implement emerging technologies such as machine learning, chatbots, or augmented reality in the service of customers. When it comes to evaluating their own customer experiences, leaders are less likely than laggards to say they’ve cracked the code on perfect service experiences—likely because they’re using connected data sets and technologies to capture and address buyers’ pain points. They’re strategically focused on future improvements.

**How do you measure up?**

Have you made the right bets on your technology tools and platforms?

Is your data centralized, dynamic, and accessible to all within your organization?

Are you using data insights from all platforms and touchpoints to better serve customers?

**Step 1: Leverage technology to unlock powerful data**

**Service is the new sales**
Digital solutions will never replace the value of human interaction, particularly in B2B commerce. With so much focus on scaling up digital platforms, it’s possible that the high-touch, relationship-driven side of the business has taken a back seat.

In fact, the laggard organizations in our research were more likely to invest in sales plays that had no salesperson support (62% vs. 48%).

Laggards also tend to prioritize digital sales channels, such as websites and online catalogues, over options with a truly human touch. Leaders place high levels of importance on service channels that offer a two-way dialogue with customers, through digital tools, such as chatbots and augmented reality, and with traditional field sales reps and call-center teams.

Step 2:
Create a digital-human dream team
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Human interaction drives complex purchases

Leaders are three times more likely than laggards to invest in click-to-chat access to expert sales reps, and twice as likely to empower their sales force with interactive configuration and negotiation interfaces for customer engagement.

Our buyer insights revealed high demand for knowledgeable, sector-educated salespeople, despite the self-service capabilities offered by today’s technology (See Figure 5). B2B buyers still want and need to interact with smart salespeople to help navigate organizational challenges or complex purchases, and ensure quality service at every stage of the journey. A service-oriented organization will fortify their sales force with the digital tools, organizational support, and data-driven insights needed to serve their buyers at a higher level.

Figure 5. Measuring buyers’ need for human support
How do you measure up?

Are you confident in your buyers’ service experience across all channels?

Is there a clear method for buyers to start a purchase in one channel, then move to another?

Is there a vehicle for your customers and employees to participate in service evolution or innovation?

Leaders are twice as likely to be focused on connected experiences that drive direct-to-buyer relationships and twice as likely to understand the potential for higher lifetime value in satisfied customers. They are also twice as likely as the average seller to proactively drive enhanced service initiatives through employee, supplier, and customer innovation programs, and with dedicated technology labs or design studios.
Step 3:
Rewire for a connected organization

In many cases, uniting digital tools and human talent to serve customers requires some level of internal re-org and breakdown of silos to instill a pervasive customer service mindset.

Our research also shows that leaders are more likely to see the service commitment as an ongoing work-in-progress rather than a “one-and-done” effort. They readily embrace service as an organizational priority—70% say it has been of high or top importance in their organization for the last three years.

The road map to service success is as much about organizational evolution as it is digital investment, and the most successful efforts begin at the very top with leadership support and buy-in. Sixty-nine percent of laggard sellers identify “cultural resistance to change at the board level” as their primary challenge, while leaders are over four times more likely to have complete senior stakeholder buy-in for digitally-enabled customer service efforts. It’s three times more likely for senior leaders inside excelling organizations to see major potential upside—sales growth of 10% or more—stemming from digital service transformation investments.
Building a model that prioritizes the service capabilities of your business requires upskilling and augmentation of the workforce. Leaders are ahead of the curve, hiring talent to develop capabilities, as well as acquiring competitive or complementary talent to support new offerings. To make the most of their talented workforce, leaders are more likely to launch employee innovation programs—inecentivizing employees to share ideas that drive value for a monetary reward.

With the correct skills in place, leaders are also embracing more modern, collaborative team structures. Leaders are more than twice as likely as laggards to have fully integrated marketing functions across channels (48% compared with just 19%) and are more likely to have partially or fully integrated their sales and marketing teams to collaborate on most objectives.

How do you measure up?

- Do you have a road map for making service excellence a central focus of your business over the coming years?
- Do you have the right people to support your buyers throughout their purchase journey?
- What cross-departmental integration opportunities would optimally support customer service?
There has never been a more important time for B2B sellers to commit to their buyers and adopt business practices that bring mutual success and drive the bottom line. Despite continually rising customer expectations, a service mindset focuses B2B sellers on building a better future for the buyers they serve.

Today’s buyers are more prepared than ever to switch sellers and secure the service they need—whether they want better prices, faster delivery, personalization, flexible channels, or consistent dialogue. To stand out and earn buyer loyalty, sellers must become obsessed with helping their buyers succeed. Our leaders are no longer just purveyors of goods or services—they are key players in their buyers’ success. In those service-focused relationships, communication is seamless, sales cycles are accelerated, and the ability to scale and deploy resources more efficiently is finally possible. An agile, personalized buyer-seller relationship that is continuously nurtured will result in faster sales and increased growth—and long-term shared success.

It takes investment and commitment to rewire business and create lasting connections with your buyers, but the mutual opportunity for growth and success can’t be ignored.
About the research

Accenture Interactive interviewed 748 buyers and 1,499 sellers across 10 countries, 16 industries, and more than 20 roles in March 2019. Countries included Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, the UK, and the U.S. We grouped industries together under seven key industry sectors: products; transportation/transit, logistics, utilities and infrastructure; automotive, aerospace and defense; chemicals, materials and industrial equipment; technology and electronics; life sciences; communications, media and entertainment.

All respondents were either directly involved in, or had oversight of their firm’s buying or selling strategy and processes. Around a quarter were from the C-suite, while the rest were manager-level and above. All firms included in the survey report had annual revenues of at least $25 million a year, up to more than $5 billion a year, for the largest sellers.

In addition, Accenture Interactive conducted in-depth interviews with five experts and business leaders to get their perspectives on service-driven B2B experience.
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