

Getting sales in line with customer values

Findings from the 2020 Global
Buyer Values Study for Chemicals





About this report

The Accenture 2020 Global Buyer Values Study for Chemicals assessed and compared the perspectives of chemical companies (sellers), their customers (buyers, including converters and manufacturers), retailers and end consumers. The study identified areas where seller and buyer perspectives are aligned and where they differ, and where sellers have an opportunity to do a better job of meeting buyers' needs. This is the sixth in a series of reports that explore the study's findings, along with potential actions that chemical companies can take to drive growth and competitiveness through customer centricity.

For chemical companies, the B2B sales function has long taken a more or less unchanged approach to customers.

Salespeople help buyers through various transactions, make presentations, offer product samples, provide technical advice and, over time, build one-to-one relationships with each customer. But B2B sales is being disrupted across industries—including chemicals—by new channels, innovative and differentiating service models, and data and analytics. And that means that chemical companies need to reassess how their sales function operates so it remains valuable to customers.

Much of this change is due to the growing role of digital technology in B2B sales. The use of technology has certainly been

accelerated by COVID-19, which essentially “shocked” the sales function into becoming more digital. In reality, however, this disruption has been underway for some time, as chemical companies and their customers see technology as a way to make sales more efficient.

The question is, how should chemical companies reshape their B2B sales to take advantage of digital technology? Or more to the point, what do their customers want out of a transformed, digitally enabled sales function? And, how do those needs vary for converters (who transform chemical products for manufacturing segments

and end-use markets) and manufacturers (who produce finished products for industrial sectors and consumers)?

Accenture’s Global Buyer Values Study for Chemicals provides some answers to these questions and points to opportunities for improvement as chemical companies rethink traditional B2B sales processes.

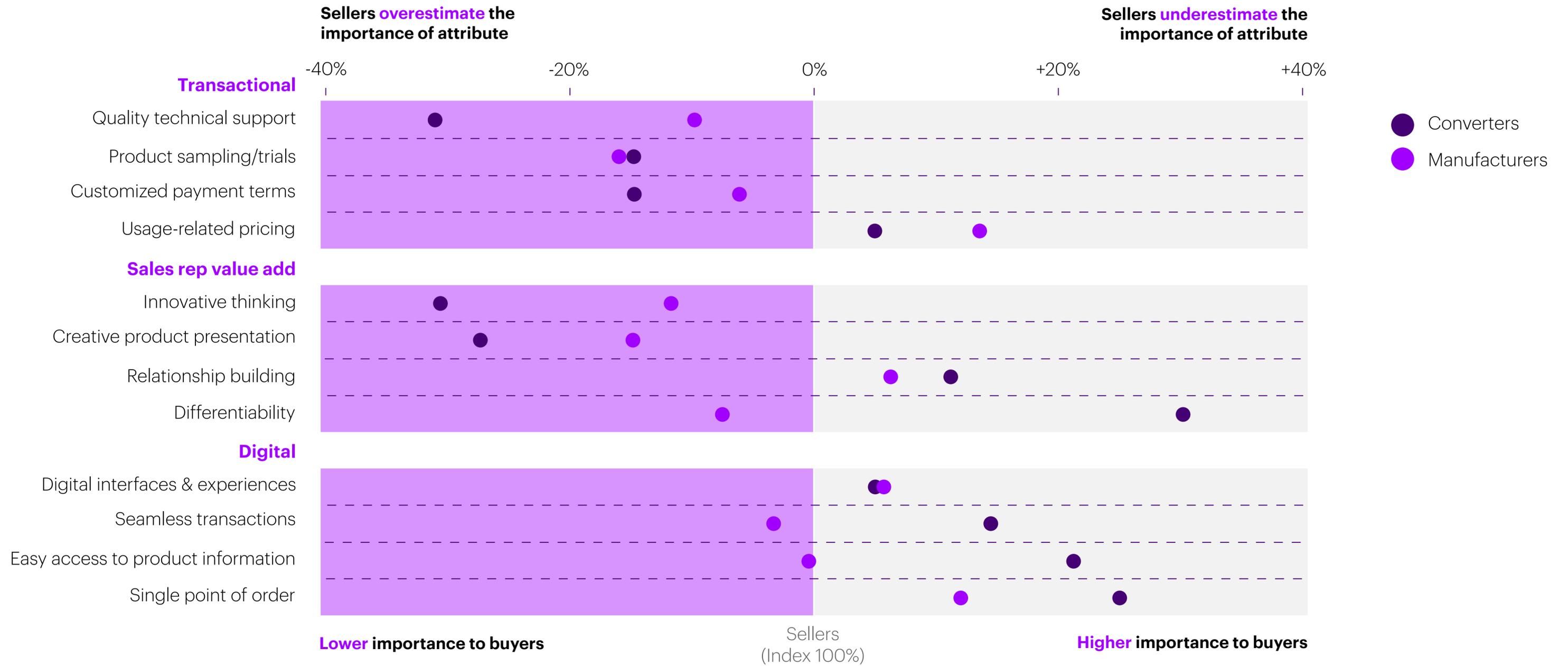
The study found that customers seem ready to move beyond many of the tried-and-true sales practices.

When comparing the perceptions of buyers and sellers (Figure 1), it is clear that sellers overestimate the importance that buyers place on most traditional transactional activities, such as technical support, product trials and setting customized payment terms, especially when it comes to converters.

They also overestimate the importance of what sales reps bring to the table, including innovative thinking and creative product presentations. The skepticism of customers regarding the value add of the traditional sales function is surprising. It points to the fundamental challenge of how sales reps can stay relevant amidst an increasingly complex pattern of relationships and touchpoints, where customers have become much more competent through new research and comparison tools.

On the other hand, sellers don't seem to fully appreciate how important relationship building is to customers—a sign that the human element of the sales process is still important. They also underestimate buyers' interest in usage-related pricing, which is perhaps confirmation that buyers want more than customized payment terms. And when it comes to converters, sellers underestimate the importance they place on being able to identify or shape products that help them differentiate their own products in the market.

Figure 1: Perception gaps between sellers and buyers for sales attributes – By buyer type



Source: Accenture 2020 Global Buyer Values Study

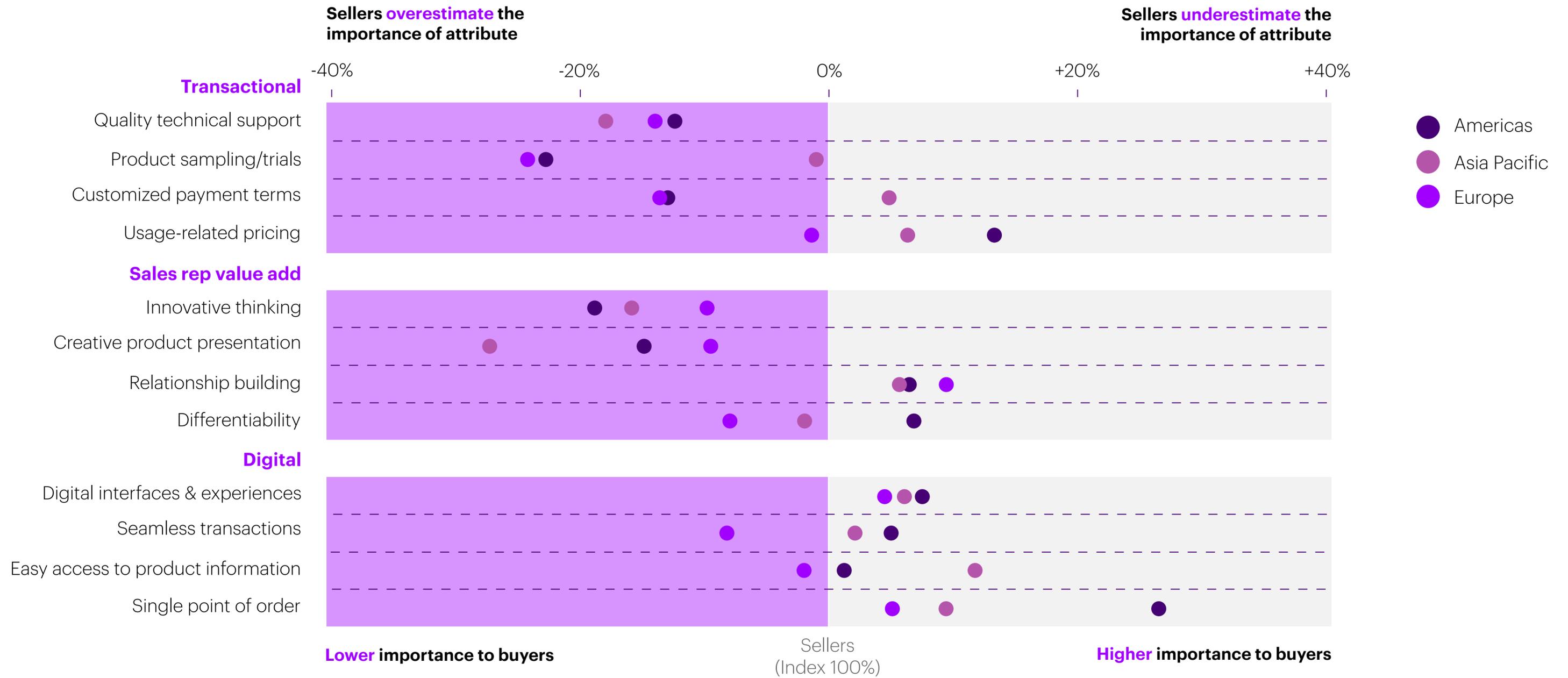
Looking specifically at technology's potential impact on sales, the study found that customers are more open to digital interfaces and experiences than sellers think.

Many are also interested in the capabilities enabled by digital technologies, such as seamless transactions, easy access to product information and having a single point of ordering.

These perceptions vary somewhat by region (Figure 2). In Europe and the Americas, product sampling and customized payment terms are much less important for buyers than sellers think. In the Asia Pacific (APAC) region, on the other hand, the views of chemical companies and their customers are fairly well aligned for these factors. With the digital-related attributes, European seller and buyer views are somewhat more closely aligned than those of respondents from APAC or the Americas. Notably, sellers significantly underestimate the importance of a single point of ordering for buyers in the Americas, which points to a large opportunity for chemical companies to meet an unmet customer need.

Customers are more open to digital interfaces and experiences than sellers think

Figure 2: Perception gaps between sellers and buyers for sales attributes – By region



Source: Accenture 2020 Global Buyer Values Study

Moving from insight to action

Chemical companies can use these findings to help guide their efforts as they reinvent their B2B sales function. The research suggests that they should consider the following:

Refocus the salesforce: Chemical companies can help sales reps build the skills needed for more complex, consultative selling—for example, bringing R&D into the sales process and supporting customers on new types of projects, packages and solutions. This approach will be especially important for companies serving converters given that buyer group’s interest in offerings that help them differentiate their own products.

Reprioritize sales activities: Sellers have an opportunity to invest less time and effort in traditional transactional activities, such as live tech support and product demonstrations, and instead focus on activities such as relationship building and acquiring new customers. They can shift traditional sales rep activities that buyers don’t value to low-touch online channels to increase efficiency and manage costs. And they can rethink the commercial aspects of sales and shift their focus from flexible payment terms to the usage-based pricing models that customers seem to want.

Sellers have an opportunity to invest less time and effort in traditional transactional activities

Equip salespeople for the digital age:

In spite of the growing importance of electronic sales interactions, salespeople still play an important role—not only in selling products, but also in helping their companies develop critical insights into customers and markets. Chemical companies can help salespeople thrive by giving them the digital tools and data needed to effectively guide customers and rapidly make decisions to streamline interactions, which in turn can help them to build relationships and trust.

Use technology to meet B2B customers' changing needs:

Companies can take advantage of the fact that buyers are open to more digital interactions in several ways. For example, they can provide more transactional sales activities through online channels, and they can automate administrative and reporting tasks to free up sales reps' time for more value-adding, relationship-building work. In addition, the use of sophisticated analytics can help the entire sales team take a more data-driven approach to understanding customer needs.

When reimagining the sales function, it is important to remember that buyers value both digital and human-based interactions, depending on the activity involved. As a result, sellers should find the right “division of labor” between the two, and make sure that people and technology can work in concert.

That may mean, for example, designing interactions that work across live-rep and electronic channels; offering webchats with reps and real-time online discussions with product specialists; providing sales staff with bespoke recommendations for their interactions based on customer analytics; and offering virtual product demos that include seamless follow-up with sales reps.

Altogether, these types of changes can bring significant benefits to sellers and buyers alike. They can help B2B sales stay aligned with customer preferences, streamline interactions for customers, reduce workloads for the salesforce and, ultimately, help sellers provide more value to their customers.

This report covers only a portion of the extensive findings in Accenture's 2020 Global Buyer Values Study for Chemicals, which can be used to provide an in-depth understanding of a range of factors affecting customer centricity—for specific companies, as well as the industry as a whole. The next report in this series looks at what the research means for the supply chain function of chemical companies.

References

All data points included in this report are from the Accenture 2020 Global Buyer Values Study.

About the research

The Accenture Global Buyer Values Study was conducted in March-April 2020. The methodology involved a preference analytics tool developed by [TrueChoice Solutions](#) and a standard survey. With a total of 2205 participants, respondents included: 345 materials suppliers (approximately 100 of which were chemical companies); 760 industrial buyers (converters and manufacturers across 15 sectors); 100 retailers; and 1,000 consumers. The following three regions and 12 countries were represented in the study: Americas (Brazil, Canada and the United States); Asia Pacific (China, India, Japan and South Korea); and Europe (France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom).

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