



accenturestrategy

Selling in the Age of Distraction

Jason Angelos, Gregory Solomon
and Berkeley Warburton

High performance. Delivered.

Strategy | Consulting | Digital | Technology | Operations

Over the years, companies have spent billions to bolster the performance of their sales forces.

For business-to-business (B2B) enterprises, in particular, the primary focus of these investments has been sales productivity and the notion that giving sales reps more time to sell will translate into better sales performance. Unfortunately, most companies are still waiting for the pay off as the era of productivity has given rise to the age of distraction.

One of the consequences of living in the digital age is that all of us are inundated with information. The digital disruption extends to sales with an information free-for-all in which all parties in the customer buying process are bombarded with competing choices, demands and data. Accenture Strategy's research suggests that many sales enablement programs intended to boost productivity have instead contributed to diversions that pull sellers off course.

What can Chief Sales Officers (CSOs) do to drive sales performance in this "age of distraction"? A shift to Outcome Selling can help their teams regain their focus—and their sales momentum.

Time is not the enemy

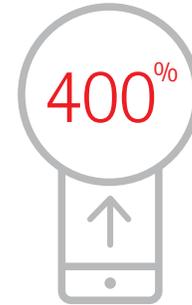
The days of finding natural-born sellers and simply putting them in the right place at the right time have passed.

That's because the right time and place are more elusive than ever. Digital has killed the traditional sales and marketing funnel. Accenture Strategy's **Non-Stop Customer Research** reveals that customers today enter and exit an "always-on" sales process whenever, wherever and as often as they want.¹ In addition, they've become more demanding. Their actions are more impulsive, disjointed and less predictable.

In response, B2B companies have changed their solution offers and commercial propositions. They still offer distinct products and services, but also strive to sell the experiences and outcomes that customers crave. That's no easy task. The shift to Outcome Selling places increased emphasis on post-sales interactions and services to deliver the expectations of the initial sale. What's more, customers' demands for personalized experiences and complex solutions make it hard for sales teams to isolate "moments of truth" where they can best advise and influence buying decisions. In the land of evergreen customer relationships, the deal is never done.

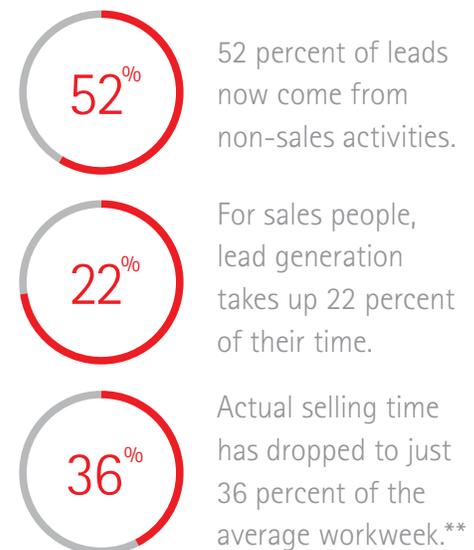
Too much. Not enough.

Investments aimed at improving sales productivity have, in many cases, achieved the opposite.



Companies have applied digital solutions to make sales teams more agile and responsive. Mobile device usage among sales reps is up by more than 400 percent over the past three years. But many of these mobile devices do not provide real-time access to sales and customer data.*

Companies have long deployed solutions aimed at improving the quality of sales leads.



* Accenture 2015 CSO Sales Performance Optimization study.

** 2015 CSO Insights; Accenture analysis

The bottom line is that every participant in the customer buying process—from sales agents to sales leaders to end customers—now contends with different and growing sources of distraction.

For sales teams, distraction is an unintended consequence of sales productivity investments. Companies have spent billions on CRM systems and performance management solutions aimed at improving sales performance. Yet, 55 percent of sales reps found the usage of their company's sales tools to be more of an obstacle than a facilitator of sales performance. Further, 59 percent reported that they had too many sales tools.² Agents are simply awash in more product data, competitor data and customer data than they now can effectively absorb or use. And they are drowning in low-quality leads (often from outside the sales organization) that either lack context or are simply too difficult to act upon.

Adding to the complexity is the fact that sales teams are often asked to satisfy contrary goals. Should they focus on unit volume or profitability? Products or services? Recurring revenue or net adds? Core sales plans or targeted, product-based promotions? Understandably, competing objectives and management directives are, themselves, major sources of distraction.

Sales productivity
over the past 5 years

from 41%



to 36%

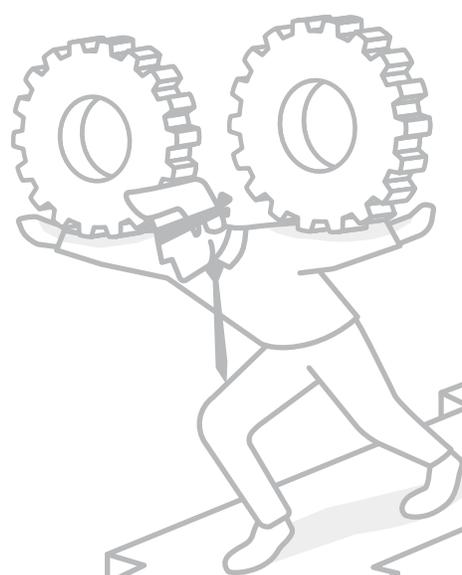
Source: Accenture 2015 CSO Sales
Performance Optimization study.

CSOs, much like the sales teams they direct, are juggling multiple selling imperatives. On the one hand, they are expected to drive growth by selling experiences, outcomes and strategic solutions in as-a-service models. On the other, they need to sustain the momentum of selling legacy offers to current clients, through existing distribution models. Company leaders expect the CSO to accomplish both. It's a tall order, and one that fractures their focus.

Many CSOs believe that the secret to balancing the immediate and long-term sales requirements lies in providing their reps with more time to sell. But, as we've noted, many tools deployed for this purpose aren't paying off. When sellers have more time, it's often consumed with unproductive administration—not with more sales. The situation is particularly acute for mediocre sellers (i.e., the "frozen middle").

Complicating and compounding everything is the fact that the people sellers are trying to reach—the customers—are inundated by product information, promotions and selling messages. B2B customers have adopted consumer-like behavior. They now conduct product research online and often make purchasing decisions without a sales rep's involvement. Those B2B customers who engage with sales agents are already 57 percent of the way through the buying process before their first contact.³ That fundamentally changes the type and tenor of the interactions that sellers use to engage with customers.

CSOs must ask: Are we truly providing our sales reps more time to sell? And how do we better influence what sellers do with the additional time?



The high cost of distraction

The costs associated with these combined seller attention deficits are piling up. Distraction contributes directly or indirectly to:

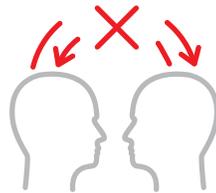
Productivity decline



14%

Amount by which distraction has reduced sellers' performance since 2011.⁴

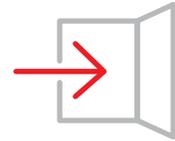
Sales talent impacts



20%

Annual level of sales rep attrition in some industries, including High Tech. The expectation gap between management and sellers is a contributing factor.⁶

The switching economy



64%

Percentage of customers who switched at least one of their providers last year.¹⁰

SALES OPPORTUNITY COSTS



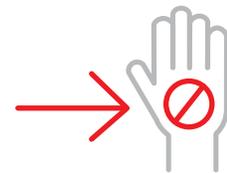
15%

Amount of territories and customers left uncovered at any given time due to sales talent attrition and learning "ramp-up time".⁵



57%

Percentage of CSOs who admit they need to do a better job of hiring reps who succeed.⁷



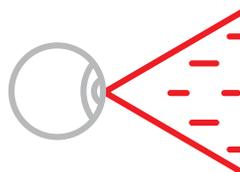
81%

Percentage of customers who switched who believe the incumbent providers could have done something to prevent them from leaving.¹¹



6 months

The onboarding process for new hires.⁸



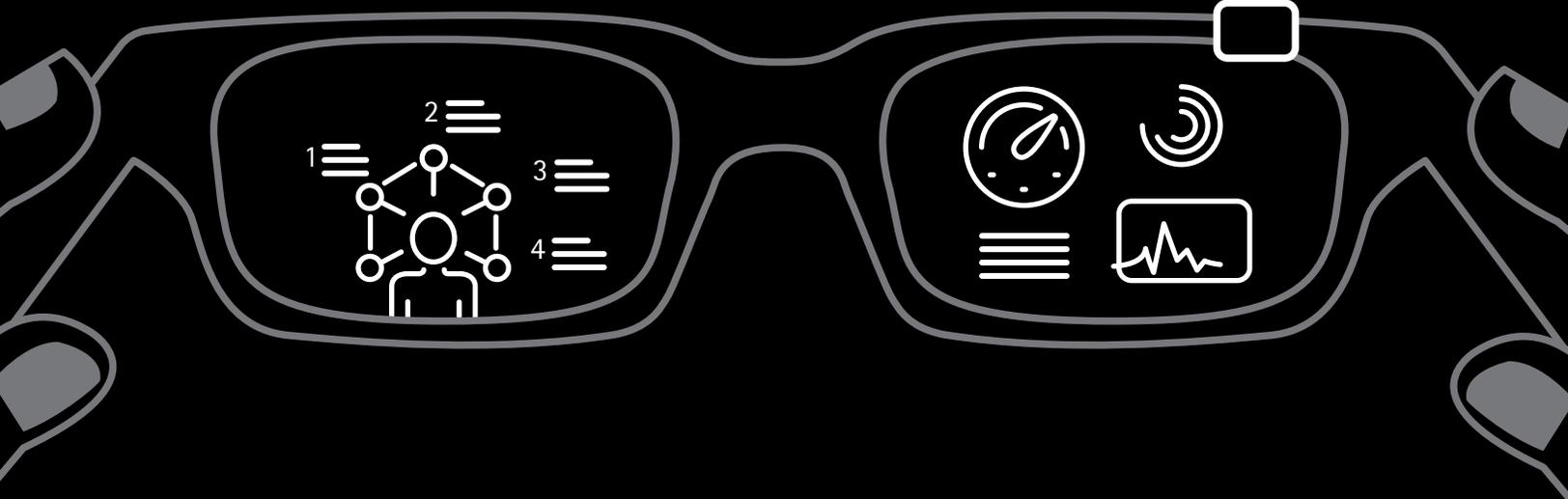
9 months

Time-to-proficiency for new hires.⁹

Pivoting from productivity to outcomes

B2B companies that are able to boost sales performance by even small amounts can achieve great outcomes.

We found that for one \$10 billion company, a 4 percent improvement in the performance of the “frozen middle” translates to a \$340 million improvement in revenue.¹² At Accenture, we believe CSOs can achieve—and exceed—this level of sales performance improvement by transitioning from the obsession with giving sellers more selling time to an approach featuring insight-driven, active sales management interventions.



The key to this shift is Outcome Selling, which guides sellers to deliver the outcomes their organizations want and the experiences their customers demand. Outcome Selling embraces the complex reality of today's selling environment. And it recognizes that the path to incremental growth is not paved by more available selling time. Outcome Selling is fundamentally about cutting through the "noise" of distraction and zeroing in on the insights and actions that matter most. Three types of insights deserve attention:

Connected customer insights. While B2B companies value customer insights, most either admire them in the rear-view mirror or limit their application to planning exercises disconnected from day-to-day sales execution. It's time for organizations to crush the silos that slow efforts to capture and share customer insights across touch points—from call centers, kiosks and social media networks to sales and post-sales service channels. It also requires pushing past static profiles to understand customer behaviors and preferences and identify the best opportunities for sellers to advise and influence customers.

High-performance seller insights. CSOs need to know what differentiates the top sellers in their own organizations and in the organizations of their channel partners. To help maximize the impact of talent management programs and help position the right talent with the right opportunities, CSOs must understand as much about their high-performing sellers as they attempt to know about their customers. What characteristics do they have? What skills have they mastered? What behaviors do they consistently demonstrate?

Predictive insights. To help sellers deliver the experiences customers want and the offers they find most meaningful, organizations must build predictive sales insights and an execution model to deliver them. Central to this vision is a sales intelligence hub that analyzes customer insights for causation and propensity and helps deliver forward-looking recommendations to sales reps. The blueprint calls for next-generation analytic tools and data methods, predictive analysis, and detailed sales execution guidance for reps. Companies have the opportunity to replicate at scale, and with greater consistency and more reliable insight, the natural inclinations of the best front-line sales managers and coaches.

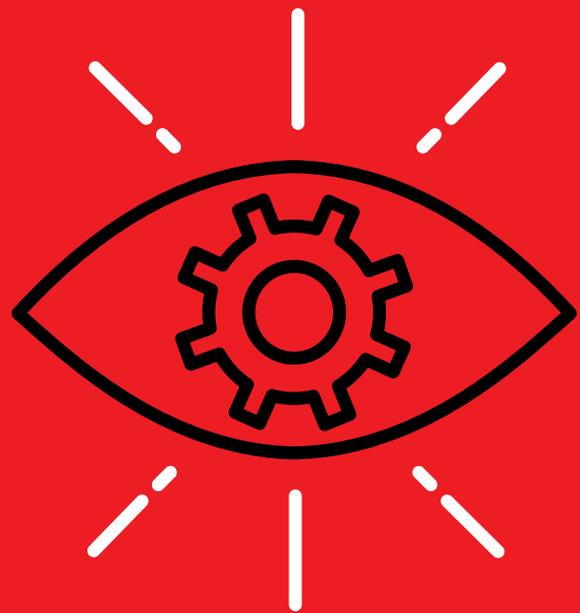
With a connected understanding of customers' propensity to purchase and sellers' behaviors, along with the power of predictive insights, sales leaders will be able to cut through the distraction of today's selling environment and focus on active sales management techniques that bring the principles of Outcome Selling to life. Our research has revealed, for example, that when CSOs fully utilize one-on-one coaching and a rigorous sales process—the cornerstones of active sales management—sellers perform 10 percent better than the peer average.¹³

The opportunities associated with Outcome Selling extend beyond sales process discipline and organic sales coaching methods. Realizing its full potential requires that companies have the ability to translate insights into action and a sales operating model that is up to the task. Tomorrow's winners will connect customer and sales intelligence with active sales management and orchestration techniques to put predictive insights into the hands of sellers when they need them. It's not about giving sellers more time. It's about telling them what to do and equipping them with the insights and connections to succeed.

Stop the noise

Companies need to temper their obsession with giving sellers more time, as well as their tendency to overload their teams with disconnected data and purported enablement tools.

What's needed is a laser focus on outcomes, a more connected understanding of the customer, and a contemporary sales operating model that translates predictive insights into winning sales actions. When CSOs cut through the noise with targeted insights and action, they can shape not only their sellers' behaviors, but also the experiences their customers demand and deserve.



Join the conversation

 @AccentureStrat

Contact the Authors

Jason Angelos

jason.angelos@accenture.com

Gregory Solomon

gregory.s.solomon@accenture.com

Berkeley Warburton

berkeley.warburton@accenture.com

Notes

1. Accenture Strategy Non-Stop Customer Research, 2015.
2. Accenture Interactive, "Empowering Your Sales Force; It's Not Just Automation. It's Personal." 2016.
3. Accenture 2015 CSO Insights Sales Performance Optimization study.
4. Accenture analysis.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Accenture 2015 CSO Insights Sales Performance Optimization study.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Accenture Global Consumer Pulse Research, 2015.
11. Ibid.
12. Accenture analysis.
13. Accenture 2016 CSO Insights Sales Performance Optimization study.

About Accenture

Accenture is a leading global professional services company, providing a broad range of services and solutions in strategy, consulting, digital, technology and operations. Combining unmatched experience and specialized skills across more than 40 industries and all business functions—underpinned by the world's largest delivery network—Accenture works at the intersection of business and technology to help clients improve their performance and create sustainable value for their stakeholders. With more than 375,000 people serving clients in more than 120 countries, Accenture drives innovation to improve the way the world works and lives. Visit us at www.accenture.com.

About Accenture Strategy

Accenture Strategy operates at the intersection of business and technology. We bring together our capabilities in business, technology, operations and function strategy to help our clients envision and execute industry-specific strategies that support enterprise-wide transformation. Our focus on issues related to digital disruption, competitiveness, global operating models, talent and leadership helps drive both efficiencies and growth. For more information, follow @AccentureStrat or visit www.accenture.com/strategy.

Copyright © 2016 Accenture
All rights reserved.

Accenture, its logo, and
High Performance Delivered are
trademarks of Accenture.