



GETTING SALES AND MARKETING READY FOR TODAY'S BUYERS

TIME TO RETHINK YOUR SALES
AND MARKETING APPROACHES?

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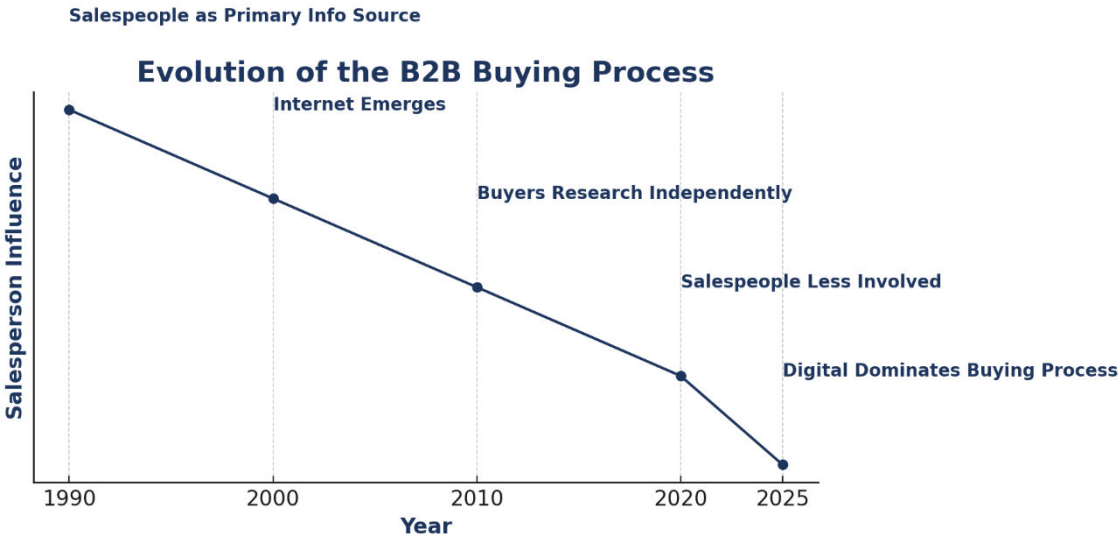
Introduction

My first job after business school was as a sales representative for a chemical company. I learned much from that experience, including the importance of the salesperson in the selling process. My customers relied on me for technical and other advice to help them make purchasing decisions. I later worked for two other BtoB companies where salesmen, especially the good ones, played essential roles in helping customers make purchase decisions about technically complex products and services. Beyond receiving promotional materials and technical and other information, the marketing department was largely invisible to me in my sales role.

Things have changed. Salespeople are now one of several information sources for buyers, not the primary one. The relative importance of sales and marketing has changed, with marketing becoming more important. The sales process has changed for BtoB companies, affecting the jobs of your sales and marketing teams.

Salespeople used to be the internet.

To better understand the present situation, let's go back in time. Before the advent of the Internet, the salesperson had an important role in the BtoB buying process. Yes, I used the term "buying" because effective sales representatives were seen as trustworthy sources of information that helped inform the customers' buying process. The salesperson provided much of the information buyers needed to decide, so they were viewed as useful information sources. The company brochure (likely a hard copy mailed out or delivered in person), the salesperson, past experiences, and other users informed the customers' buying process. A professional salesperson with a consultative approach was viewed as a great help in the buying process. But things changed, which the graphic below illustrates!



The internet **opened a window** into the world of information options for the buyer. Information about almost any product or service was readily available, and learning about options in other parts of the globe became easier. The salesperson became one of several information sources customers used, not the primary one.

Other departments, including supply chain teams and regulatory offices, gained more influence in the buying process. While in the past, a small group of people may have made the decision, in the present, many more individuals and departments have become involved.

Given these dynamics, the salesperson's traditional role of being the chief source of information for the buyer is changing. How are these changes affecting and likely to affect the buying process more broadly and a company's marketing efforts more specifically?

The Buying Process Now

Where Does the Salesperson Fit? What Does Marketing Do?

According to a recent Gartner study, only 17% of a BtoB buyer's time is spent with a salesperson or salespeople, which is quite low. While the sales representative's role is still important to a successful deal, buyers spend 83% of their time doing independent research. This is where marketing comes in.

B2B Buyer Time Spent with Salespeople (Gartner)

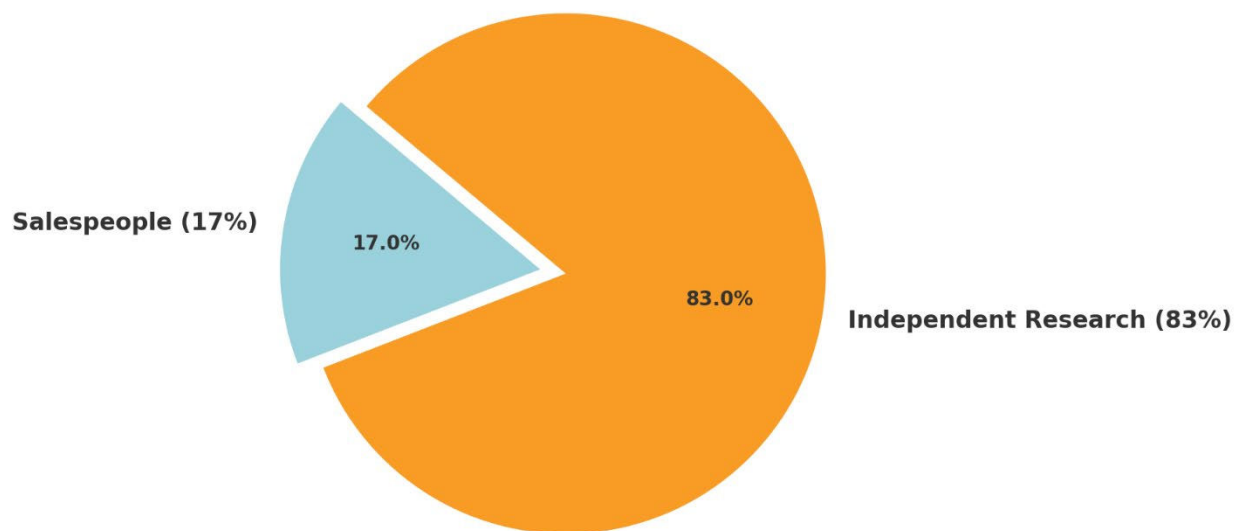


Figure 1

These changes in the buying process make it ever more important that the sales and especially marketing teams pay close attention to the following:

- **Website:** Buyers will spend time on your website. It must be informative, easy to use, up-to-date, and easy to find. Good SEO is critical if a prospective buyer is to find you. If you are a distributor, include links to the OEM sites you represent. Our research shows that customers use distributors and OEM sites more frequently during the buying process.
- **Social media:** It is important to be active on social media where your customers hang out. While I do not expect customers to buy or not buy based on social media comments, being positively present on social media is a reputation-builder. Also, 75% of BtoB buyers use social media to inform purchasing decisions.ⁱ It is ever more important for salespeople to be active on social media.

- **Salesperson:** Buyers want their salesperson to help them through the buying process, even if they want to spend less time with the person. The time spent must be as productive as possible. There are three important practices that today's salespeople need to follow:
 - **Be Responsive:** Speaking from personal experience, I am much more likely to buy if the salesperson is responsive to my information requests. Surprisingly, this is a shortcoming of many salespeople with whom I interact. I hear this complaint from others as well.
 - **Be Knowledgeable:** Having sufficient product knowledge is critical. Let me illustrate. I recently purchased a new RV. Any RV is complicated, and this one is no different. The salesperson I worked with was quite responsive, but her product knowledge was not what I had expected. Her responsiveness and informative OEM website helped me get answers and decide to purchase.
 - **Be a Consultant:** Yes, a consultant! According to the Oxford Languages, a consultant is "someone who provides expert advice professionally." I like to think of the salesperson today as a "translator/synthesizer" who can help the customer better understand product information and how it might be valuable to them. In an environment where the buyer may wish to spend as little time as possible with you, quickly establishing yourself as knowledgeable and trustworthy is critical.

When a salesperson meets with a buyer, they have gone through about 70% of the buying processⁱⁱ. Also, a buyer is much more likely to initiate contact with a seller (83% of the time, the buyer initiates the callⁱⁱⁱ). A salesperson's initial meeting with a customer is critical to a successful outcome, given that they are already far along in their decision-making. It is not all gloomy for the salesperson. Gartner research shows that when a salesperson is involved in the deal, the transaction is 1.8 times more likely to be high-quality than if the buyer does everything independently^{iv}! Humans are still needed.

What is Independent Research?

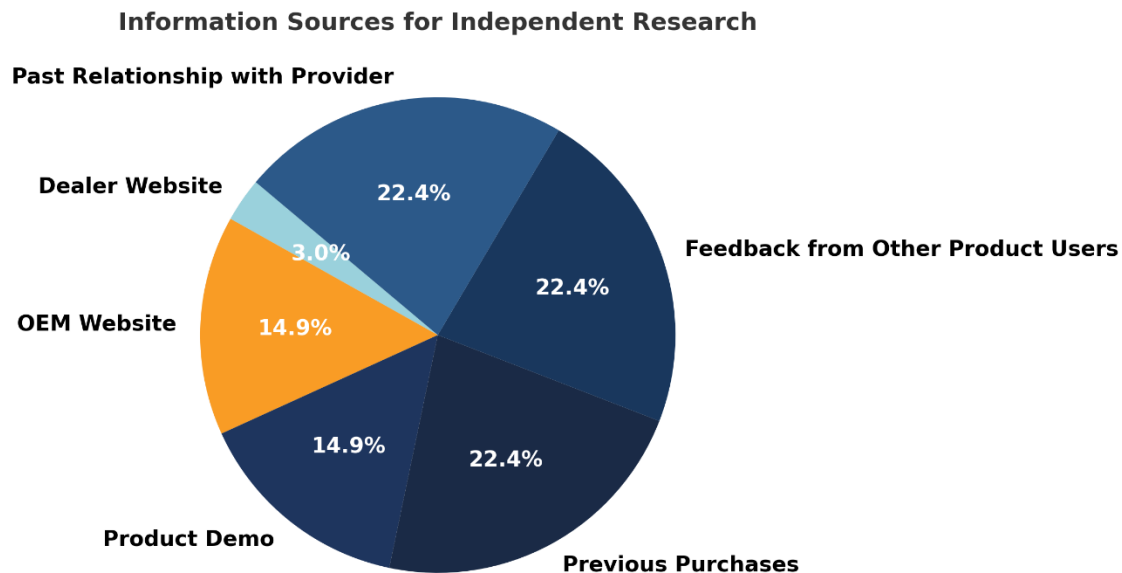
Marketers, where are your customers going for additional information?

While buyers may want to spend less time with a salesperson than in the past, they seek information through their research. Where do buyers go to conduct their Independent Research? Here are some of the places:

- Vendor websites, including both OEM and distributor websites.
- Previous experience with a vendor counts a lot.
- Buyers also rely on colleagues for recommendations.
- Relevant social media sites.

Here is what we have learned from a recent client research project.

We interviewed 47 current and former customers in one business segment, asking about their information sources when purchasing a new product. The chart below outlines what sources these customers used to purchase construction equipment.



Notably, 55% of the buyers' information sources were external to the dealer or OEM (Feedback from Other Users, Past Relationship with Provider, Previous Purchases). Creating a great customer experience is essential to influencing the sales process. To illustrate, our **internal** research emphasizes the importance of customer experience to both referral activity and individual experience. In our transactional survey process, we asked respondents if they had referred a product or service to someone else in the past six months. Thirty-five percent of all respondents indicated they had given a referral. Among these active referrers, over 91% were Promoter customers (gave a 9 or 10 on the NPS or “**likelihood to recommend**” question.)

Implications for Sales and Marketing Teams

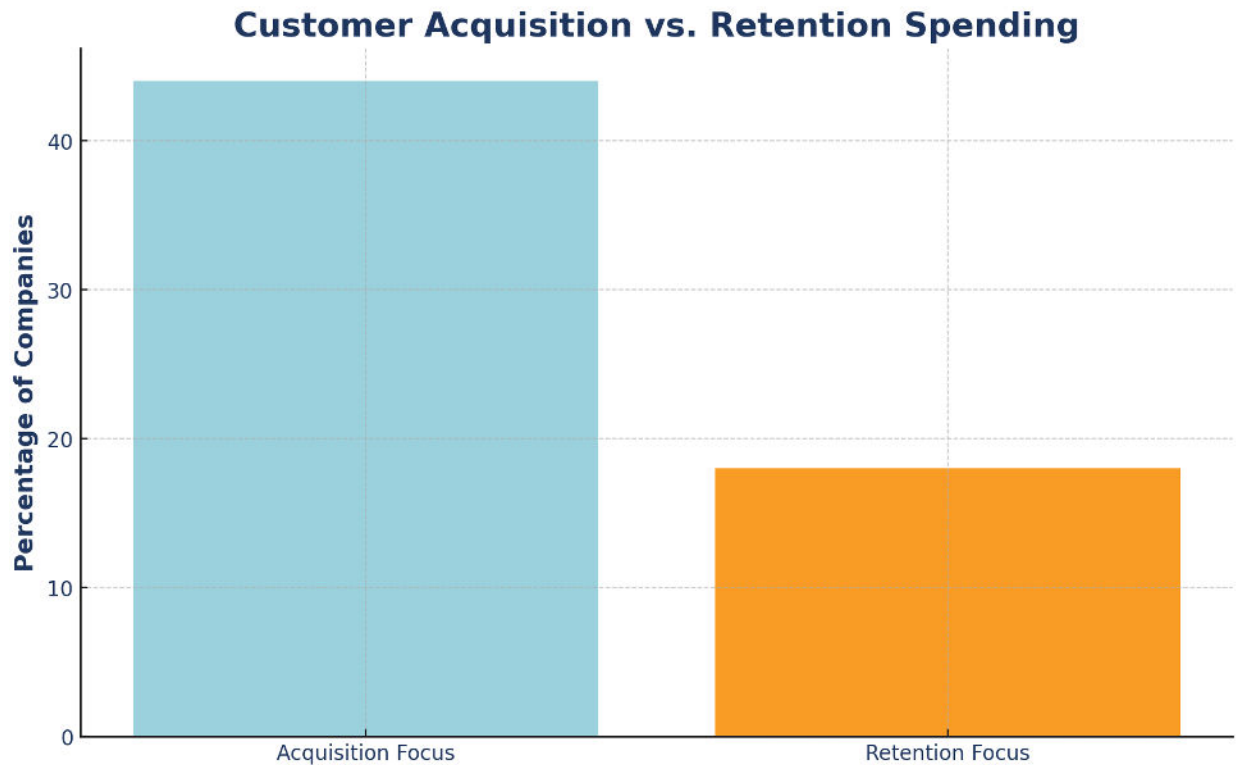
For both sales and marketing teams, there are some profound implications.

Sales:

- Customers connect with the salesperson late in the buying process, perhaps when a decision is mostly made. An ongoing plan to stay in touch with existing and prospective customers is critical. You never know where a new sales opportunity might arise, and getting in as early as possible is critical.
- The salesperson must be a consultant/facilitator/explainer for a buyer. Remember, when the salesperson gets involved, the buyer already has much information, some of which may be conflicting. The salesperson can help the customer sort this out.
- Salespeople and marketers cannot easily change a customer's mind about a bad experience or a series of bad experiences. However, marketers can and should work with others in their organization to ensure the best customer experience. Great customer experience is the single best way to influence the customer referral network that likely already exists in your company.
- There is marketing and sales "gold" by focusing on customer retention! Why? The first reason is that customers who continue to buy from you are more profitable. Sales expenses are lower because it costs less to serve existing customers. The customer lifetime value (CLV) is greater because they return. And, to put more icing on the cake, happy customers tell others.

Marketing:

Companies spend significant sums on customer acquisition strategies but less on retention strategies. For example, a study conducted for Forbes Insights (Retentionomics: The Path to Profitable Growth) found that 44% of companies focus more on customer acquisition vs. 18% of companies that focus more on customer retention.



While this study was conducted with B-to-C companies and agencies, I suspect the numbers are even more skewed toward acquisition in the B-to-B arena. Moreover, according to Forrester, the customer retention rate for B-to-B companies ranges from 76 to 81%, which means around 20% of customers leave each year.

Things to consider:

- Redefine the role of marketing.** Marketing teams need to focus on both customer acquisition and retention. Given the impact satisfied customers can have on the changing buying process, more attention must be paid to identifying and cultivating them. This starts with a very basic step—when new customers sign up, discover what influenced their decision. Was it primarily the result of a promotional campaign or a referral from someone else?
- Customer Experience is key to retention.** Make it great! The adage that the sales department makes the first sale, but service makes future sales is true. An effective CX program makes it easier for customers to do business with you. While CX may not fall under the purview of marketers, you need to work closely with those leading the CX charge to ensure great customer experiences.

Conclusion

This is a call to action for both salespeople and marketers. Marketers cannot easily change a customer’s mind about a bad experience or a series of bad experiences. However, marketers can and should work with others in their organization to ensure the best customer experience. Great customer experience is the single best way to influence the customer referral network that likely already exists in your company.

Marketers need to conceive of their jobs differently. Yes, effective promotional efforts are critical. However, managing a network of happy customers who play an important role in the buying process by talking to others makes your marketing role much easier and more effective.

There is marketing “gold” by rebalancing to increase the focus on customer retention! Why? Customers who continue to buy from you are more profitable. Sales expenses are lower because it costs less to serve existing customers. The customer lifetime value (CLV) is greater because they keep coming back. And, to put more icing on the cake, happy customers tell others.

If you work in marketing or sales, please email me and let me know how you are changing to prepare for your buyers. Also, please let me know how you show love and attention to your loyal customers. I am anxious to hear your ideas.

ⁱ “Social Selling Statistics for 2025: Learn Stats to Help You Sell Through Social,” Optimonster, December 2024.

ⁱⁱ “Out of Sight, Almost Out of Time, Why Buying Cycles are Usually Over Long Before You Ever Know About Them,” 6Sense, 2023 (<https://6sense.com/report/buyer-experience-2023>)

ⁱⁱⁱ “Don’t Call Us, We’ll Call You: What Research Says About When BtoB Buyers Reach Out to Sellers,” 6Sense research, January 8, 2024.

^{iv} “Gartner BtoB Buying Report,” 2023