



IMPLICATIONS

FOR B2B SELLING

IN THE AGE OF

AI

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

“The factory of the future will have only two employees, a man and a dog. The man will be there to feed the dog. The dog will be there to keep the man from touching the equipment.”

-Warren Bennis

Will Artificial Intelligence really displace the human sales force? While much is being written on Artificial Intelligence (AI), many wide-ranging conceptions exist of the impact on the sales process, the sales force, and customers, as well. Every C-level executive is contemplating what this means to their business approach and ability to serve the customer. For many, questions remain regarding:

- What is AI?
- How does it affect the buying and selling processes?
- How to prepare for this shift?

WHAT IS AI?

Artificial Intelligence can have wide ranging definitions. In essence, it involves a machine/software working and reacting like a knowledgeable human. It also encompasses any device that perceives the environment and acts to reach a goal that generally includes learning, planning, and problem solving.

The power of AI comes from reducing the menial, tedious, and repetitive tasks for the sales representative (and customer). As a consumer, imagine reducing wait time or accessing more medical solutions by walking into your doctor's office and interfacing with AI that can help troubleshoot your medical situation, seamlessly gather your medical history, ascertain

the pervasiveness of the flu outbreak from where you just traveled, and hand over the data and a potential solution to your medical care provider. That's the power of AI.

BUYER-SELLER INTERFACE

In a B2B setting, AI will review customer websites, blogs, PR statements, financial reports, social media contributions from potential decision makers, determine price elasticity segmented by the sales representative that is assigned to the opportunity based on their past discounting habits, and assign a probability of winning an opportunity. When reps conduct meetings, AI will join the meeting as a silent participant to record, transcribe, and analyze the sales

conversation—how much the rep talked, who brought up price, when a competitor's name was mentioned, if an unprofessional speaking manner was used, hesitations in speech, how and when commitments were sought, and then provide a full report to the sales rep, sales manager and/or VP of Sales. The firm, looking at aggregated data, can see which techniques, content, and processes work best for winning deals, depending on a myriad of factors, and make predictions for future success (sales AI vendors often refer to this as “game film” analysis or “conversation intelligence”).

Note that sellers do not live in a vacuum—it would be naïve to think that only salespeople will benefit from technological advances. The buyer's AI will allow more independence from sellers. Corporate buyers will also likely leverage AI in their problem-identification and solving, research, and decision processes. In fact, buyer research portals or AI-powered buyer/seller exchanges could radically impact how both buying and selling are conducted.

FOR EXAMPLE, A PROSPECT MAY RELY ON AI TO:

1. IDENTIFY PROBLEMS (TECHNOLOGY DIAGNOSED)
2. IDENTIFY POSSIBLE VENDORS
3. REDUCE THE POTENTIAL VENDOR LIST BASED ON VARIOUS ENVIRONMENTAL EVALUATIONS
4. FIND WHAT OTHERS ACTUALLY BOUGHT AND WHY THEY PURCHASED A PARTICULAR SOLUTION
5. DETERMINE ROI EXPECTATIONS
6. EVALUATE FINANCIAL OPTIONS FOR LARGE OR COMPLEX PURCHASES
7. LEARN THE ACTUAL PURCHASE PRICE OTHERS RECEIVED
8. ASSESS DELIVERY AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES (POTENTIAL CHALLENGES)

PREPARING FOR CHANGE

While some sales roles—particularly transactional sellers—may be displaced or disrupted by AI and machine learning capabilities, salespeople involved in B2B enterprise-wide, complex selling at senior levels, should be more concerned about being replaced by another salesperson who leverages AI well to serve buyers better and increase their own efficiency and effectiveness. Progressive salespeople and their managers will be able to leverage AI to gain efficiency and increase sales effectiveness, by automating tasks that they manually perform today.

Equally, if not more important, salespeople who want to avoid displacement by either technology or other better-enabled sales professionals, would be wise to develop deeper interpersonal and cognitive skills. Whether the salesperson recently graduated from college, or has been in the profession 20 years, the adept blending of these skills with sales and AI skills will enable the following:

1. CONNECTING THE DOTS

More data is here to stay: finding and analyzing it won't be the challenge. The new salesperson will need to discover the “magic” that makes the next step plausible. Predictive analysis will help, but just like “Vegas Odds” constantly changing for sporting events, the rep will need to use good judgment, take calculated risks, and make informed decisions on their own at the deal table.

2. CREATIVITY/IDEATION

Could AI have suggested/predicted the creation of the iPad? New ideas, new content, and new approaches to customers is likely the domain of human beings. AI cannot yet perform a brainstorming session that mimics humans, so explosions of innovativeness are still needed from salespeople and senior management.

3. ADAPTABILITY

The future will change at an accelerated pace. The most effective salespeople will be the ones who walk into a tranquil setting, a field of landmines, or face an aggressive competitor and adjust the plan and course to obtain the best outcome. The more fixated salesperson will not perform well if they can't turn on a dime and make decisions, which are then pushed down to lower levels in the organization.

4. IMPROVISATION

Atypical decision-making and other procurement shifts will require a level of adaptability not seen before as reps attempt to run the gauntlet of customer decision-making complexities and the internal workings of their own selling organization. It is vital that sales organizations find agile talent with extemporaneous skills to match. Even with AI's help, the level of improvisational thinking on the part of the salesperson will continue to grow.

THE MERGER OF AI, SALES METHODOLOGY AND HUMAN DIFFERENTIATORS

“Human differentiators” (often displayed by elite B2B sales professionals), include skills such as empathy, listening, critical thinking, problem solving and more. The value of these human differentiators rises further when used in combination with known best-practice sales methodologies.

Lastly, when the salesperson acts in a buyer-centric, consultative manner, adapting their approach based on the buyers’ current situation and thinking, and focuses on producing outcomes that are critical for the decision makers, the chance of success is radically improved.

Below is one possible example of how these three elements might converge:

	POSSIBLE AI SUPPORT	EXAMPLE OF HUMAN DIFFERENTIATORS
PROSPECTING	Finding Trigger Events, identifying problems they can solve, and recommending accounts to approach. Researching companies and contacts. Identifying mutual contacts for introductions. Highlighting potential growth opportunities in current accounts. Providing guided selling advice. Recommending proof points/cases.	Showing respect by being prepared. Demonstrating empathy and value to buyers by tailoring to what matters to them, rather than product-pitching. Capitalizing on relationships to gain entrance to new contacts. Using data to connect dots and share pertinent insights. Listening actively and adapting approaches based on buyer reaction.
SALES CALL PLANNING	Sharing personality profiles of meeting attendees. Analyzing objectives/past calls to suggest the best approach for the next meeting. Guided selling, reminding to plan calls in advance.	Interpreting the AI advice and deciding how to adjust the sales approach based on the people attending the meeting.
DISCOVERY	Needs analysis support via recommending questions to ask based on public company information and meeting attendees. Real-time analysis of conversation and guided selling suggestions.	Demonstrating a consultative approach by understanding buyer’s situation, perspective, wants and needs. Questioning to connect the dots about their current state and desired future state. Listening closely to tailor and adapt the approach based on what is learned.
OPPORTUNITY QUALIFICATION	Buyer intent assessment. Guided selling to ensure qualification criteria are captured. Predictive scoring of opportunity validity and likelihood to close or identifying potential hurdles and recommendations to address them.	Paying attention to the buyer personal needs relative to their success at work or political ramifications. Judgment on when to seek additional decision makers. Deciphering the buying process exit criteria that matter to each buyer. Using judgment on when to proceed with deals where some qualification criteria are elusive.
OPPORTUNITY MANAGEMENT	Persona/GEO-based prescriptions. Interactive, intelligent sales playbooks and guided selling advice. Predicting behavior based on past behavior.	Empathy to focus on individualized decision and exit criteria. Problem-solving, critical thinking and consulting skills to lead ideation sessions to co-create the most viable solution. Decision-making to determine when to pull back or push forward, based on what you learn from decision makers. Judgment of when to ask for the next commitment to move forward.
VALUE CREATION	Value/pricing analysis. ROI calculators. Predicting or documenting what’s important to each buyer based on their decision criteria and guiding you to ensure personalized communication of value to each.	Turn data to insight. Recommending solutions to reduce risk, solve problems, close gaps and achieve desired outcomes. The ability to communicate value in the terms that matter to each buyer, and the judgment to know how to personalize the value by buyer.

CONCLUSION

The Gutenberg Press revolutionized the world, as it helped take information housed exclusively in monasteries to public material that others could access. The result was an explosion of knowledge, which led to the Renaissance, and eventually to the birth of the scientific method. The Artificial Intelligence progression might be looked upon in a similar way: the period when nearly all things professional and personal are transformed.

Yet, until machines are selling to and buying from other machines, the salesperson of the future has the greatest chance of success by leveraging the technology available at the time, while elevating the focus on the buyer and “human differentiators.” Prepare now to capitalize on this inevitable future, and your sales force will deliver the best possible results, even in uncertain times. ▲



Mike Kunkle
Digital Transformation, Inc.



Rob Peterson, Ph.D.
Northern Illinois University