b2b Insights

Accelerating B2B Sales with Digital B2B Commerce

Sales Leaders Reveal Challenges and Opportunities in the Digital B2B Buying Experience

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Executive Summary

This report presents key findings from a survey of B2B sales leaders regarding current digital B2B buying experiences and their organizations' digital capabilities. The respondents represent a diverse range of B2B companies across various industries and revenue brackets.

While there is a growing demand for more digital tools in B2B sales, many sellers are unprepared for this shift, with only 20% feeling very prepared for the future of digital B2B sales. The survey reveals that many digital sales platforms lack critical capabilities, with challenges in automation, system integration, and personalization. Looking to the future, innovative technologies like AI are expected to significantly impact the future of digital B2B sales.

Overall, the report highlights the need for B2B companies to invest in digital transformation, improve system integration, and leverage innovative technologies to enhance their digital sales capabilities and meet evolving customer expectations.

About the Respondents

The WBR Insights research team surveyed 100 B2B leaders to generate the results featured in this report.
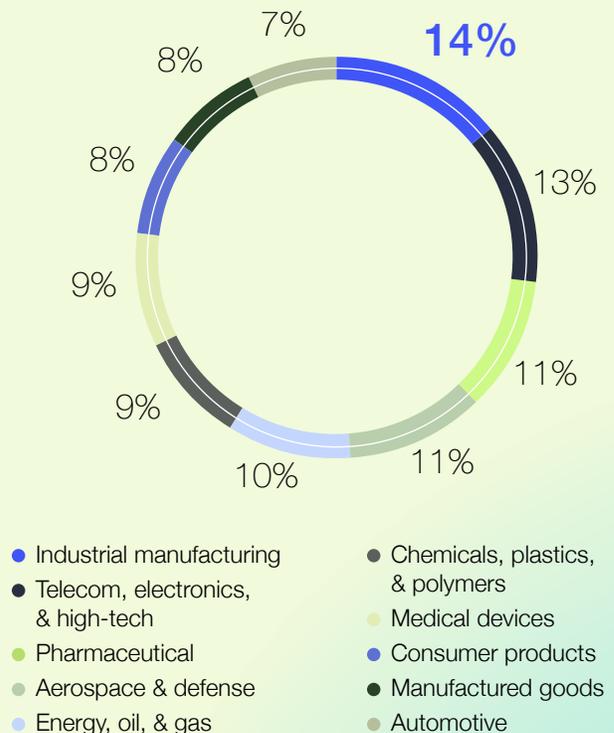
The survey respondents represent a diverse range of B2B companies, with 51% being manufacturers, 19% distributors, and 30% both manufacturers and distributors.

What type of company do you represent?

19%

51%

30%

- B2B manufacturer
- Both B2B manufacturer and distributor
- B2B distributor
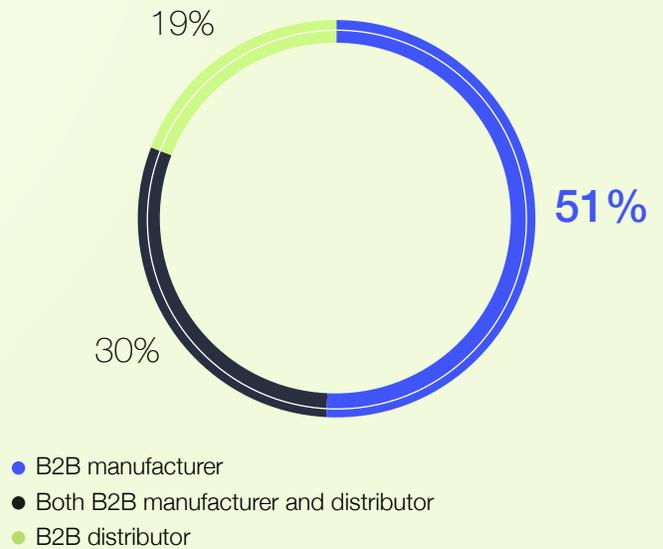
These companies operate across various verticals, including industrial manufacturing (14%), telecom, electronics, and high-tech (13%), pharmaceuticals (11%), aerospace and defense (11%), and energy, oil, and gas (10%), among others.

In which vertical does your company operate?

7%

8%

14%

8%

13%

9%

11%

9%

11%

10%

- Industrial manufacturing
- Telecom, electronics, & high-tech
- Pharmaceutical
- Aerospace & defense
- Energy, oil, & gas
- Chemicals, plastics, & polymers
- Medical devices
- Consumer products
- Manufactured goods
- Automotive

About the Respondents

In terms of annual revenue, 32% of the companies generate between $125 million and $500 million, 15% between $500 million and $750 million, 20% between $750 million and $1 billion, and 33% over $1 billion.

What is your company's annual revenue?

32%	15%	20%	33%

$125 million to $500 million $500 million to $750 million $750 million to $1 billion   More than $1 billion
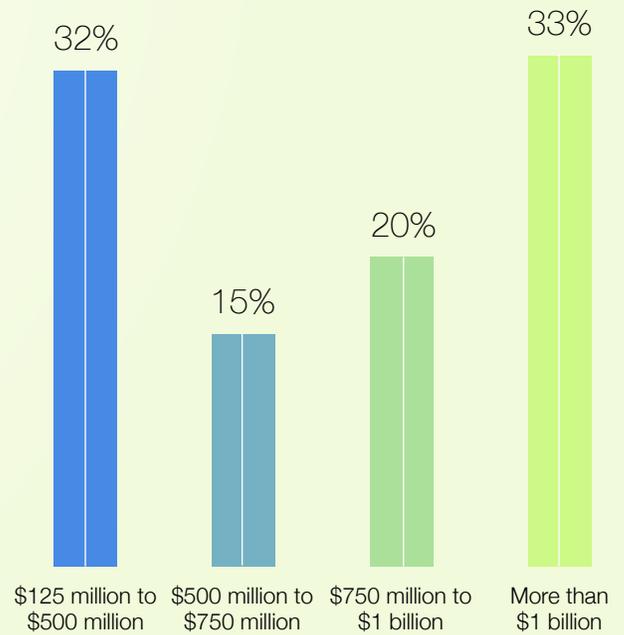
The respondents hold diverse roles within their organizations, with 24% in sales, 23% in marketing, 21% in business development, 20% in digital, and 12% in eCommerce.
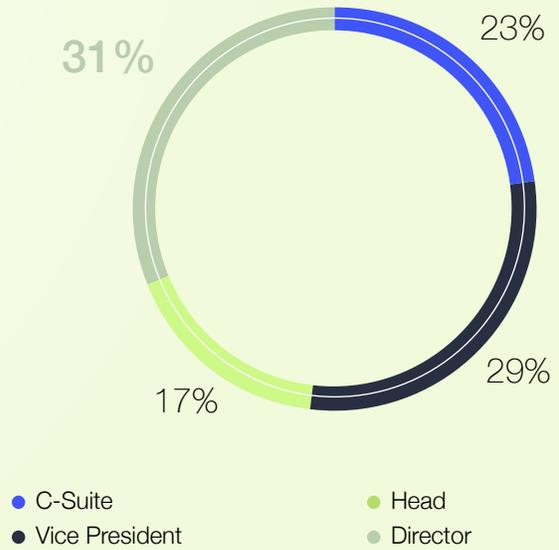
What is your role?

12%

24%

20%

23%

21%

- Sales
- Marketing
- Business Development
- Digital
- eCommerce
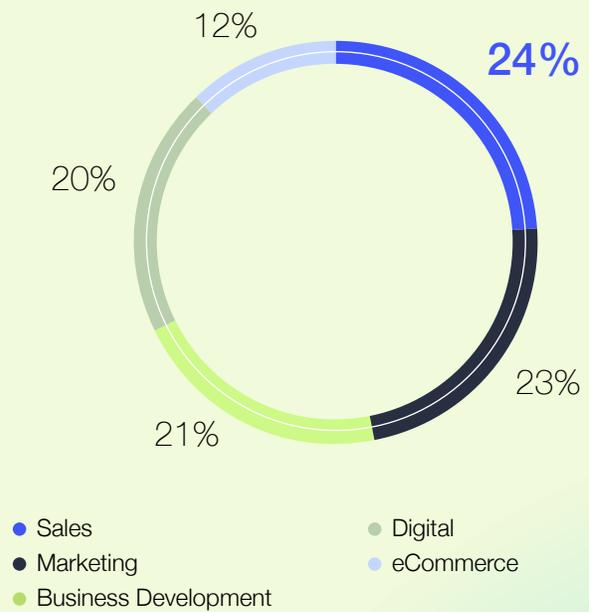
About the Respondents

The seniority of respondents is distributed across C-suite (23%), vice president (29%), department head (17%), and director (31%) levels.

What is your seniority?

31%

23%

29%

17%

- C-Suite
- Vice President
- Head
- Director

For B2B sales, the companies employ multiple sales channels, including distributor reseller networks (86%), online marketplaces (56%), eCommerce platforms (54%), direct sales teams (53%), and eProcurement (48%).

Which of the following sales channels do you currently use for B2B sales?

Distributor and reseller networks
86%

Online marketplaces
56%

eCommerce platforms
54%

Direct sales teams
53%

eProcurement
48%
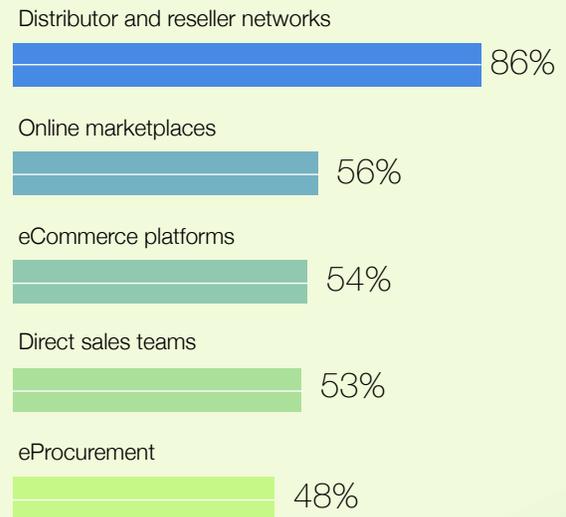
Key Insights

Among the respondents:

Digital Sales Growth:

73% of respondents reported an increase in demand for digital B2B sales processes over the past three years, with 14% noting a significant increase.

Lost Sales Due to Poor Digital Experience:

On average, companies estimate that 20.9% of potential sales are lost due to negative customer experiences in the digital sales process, underscoring the importance of improving digital platforms.

Preparedness for Digital Future:

Only 20% of organizations feel very prepared for the future of digital B2B sales, while 41% feel somewhat prepared. This indicates a significant gap in readiness for many companies.

Emerging Technologies:

AI is the most impactful emerging technology for B2B sales, with 64% of respondents viewing it as very significant.

Integration Challenges:

75% of respondents reported that the integrations between their back-office systems (e.g., ERP platforms) and front-office systems (e.g., eCommerce website) are only somewhat effective, highlighting a major area for improvement.

Current Platform Features:

The most common features in current digital B2B sales platforms include automated volume/quantity price breaks (51%), integrated customer support tools (51%), and company profiles to represent multiple unique buyers (49%).

Automation Levels:

50% have integrated automation technology into most of the touchpoints in their buying experiences, but 47% say manual processes are still prevalent in theirs.

Future Focus Areas:

Key areas of focus for improving digital B2B buying experiences in the next 12 months include personalization, integration with third-party systems, improved analytics, and enhanced self-service options.
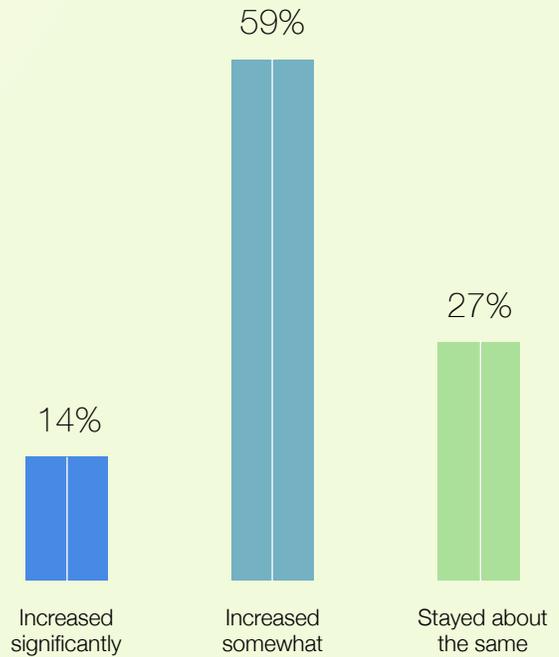
Many Sellers Aren't Prepared for Increasing Digital Sales

The digital transformation of B2B sales has been accelerating in recent years, presenting both opportunities and challenges for organizations. While the demand for digital B2B sales processes has increased, many sellers find themselves unprepared for this shift, struggling to adapt their systems and processes to meet evolving customer expectations.

A significant majority of B2B sales leaders (73%) report an increase in demand for digital B2B sales processes over the past three years, with 14% noting a substantial increase.

The future of digital B2B sales will likely be characterized by digital-first omnichannel buying, self-service, automation, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into sales channels, and a renewed focus on buyer-centric experiences. The noted increase in digital sales underscores the growing importance of digital channels in B2B transactions, as well as B2B organizations' focus on this area. However, it also highlights the need for companies to invest in robust digital sales capabilities to remain competitive.

How has demand for digital B2B sales processes changed among your customers over the past three years?

Increased significantly	Increased somewhat	Stayed about the same
14%	59%	27%

Many Sellers Aren't Prepared for Increasing Digital Sales

Despite this growing demand, only 20% of respondents feel very prepared for the future of digital B2B sales, while 41% feel only somewhat prepared. This lack of readiness suggests that many organizations may be at risk of falling behind in areas like technology adoption, omnichannel sales strategies, and automation.

Companies that fail to adapt to customers' needs quickly may lose market share to competitors who can provide not only excellent products and services but also seamless and efficient buying experiences.

In your view, how prepared is your organization for the future of B2B sales?

10%

20%

29%

41%
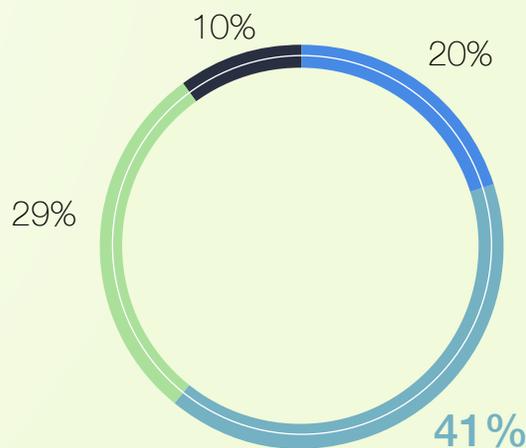
- Very prepared
- Somewhat prepared
- Not very prepared
- Not prepared at all

Many Sellers Aren't Prepared for Increasing Digital Sales

B2B companies must be able to link their back- and front-office functions to create a seamless and efficient operation. By integrating these functions, they can ensure that customer data is consistently updated and accessible across all departments.

Integration can also help minimize errors, reduce response times, and enhance communication, leading to a more personalized and responsive service.

Currently, integration between back-office and front-office systems remains a challenge, with 75% of respondents reporting that their integration is only somewhat effective. Only 11% consider their integrations very effective. This disconnect can lead to inefficiencies, data inconsistencies, and a fragmented customer experience.

Improving system integration should be a priority for B2B companies looking to enhance their digital sales capabilities and provide a more cohesive buying journey. This will be critical to not only improve customer loyalty and satisfaction but also to reduce lost sales due to negative customer experiences.

On average, the respondents say about 21% of potential sales are lost due to negative customer experiences in the digital sales process. This significant loss of revenue highlights the critical importance of optimizing the digital buying experience. Companies that can identify and address pain points in their digital sales process stand to gain a substantial competitive advantage and meet the needs of today's B2B buyers.

How effective is the current integration between your back-office systems (e.g., ERP platforms) and your front-office systems (e.g., eCommerce website, digital storefront)?

1%
13%
11%
75%
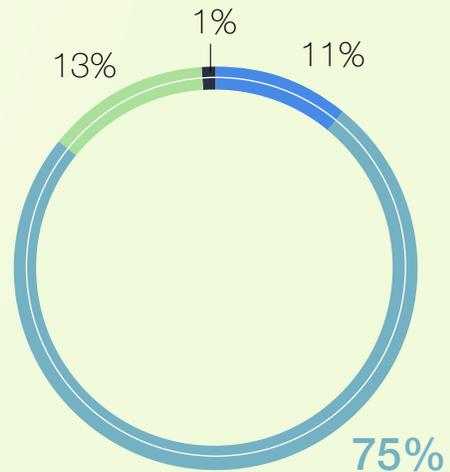
- Very effective
- Somewhat effective
- Not very effective
- Not effective at all or nonexistent

Many Digital Sales Platforms Lack Critical Capabilities

Online marketplaces, eCommerce sites, and digital sales platforms are now critical assets in the evolving world of digital B2B sales.

However, many digital sales platforms currently lack critical capabilities, hindering their effectiveness in meeting customer expectations and driving growth.

For example, half of the respondents report that their B2B buying experience is mostly automated, but 47% say it is only somewhat automated.

Companies with fewer automated sales processes may struggle to keep up with competitors who can offer faster, more efficient buying experiences. B2B buyers are consumers first, and they are accustomed to a certain amount of automation when purchasing products online. Many consumer-facing eCommerce sites can recognize buyers when they return, automatically load shipping and payment information, make personalized recommendations, and auto-enroll buyers in workflows based on their behavior.

Increasing automation capabilities such as automatic volume pricing and personalization should be a top priority for B2B organizations looking to enhance their digital sales capabilities. Automating manual processes can also be presented as "quick wins" to stakeholders to encourage more investment in transforming digital sales processes.

How manual or automated is your organization's current B2B buying experience?

3%

47%

50%
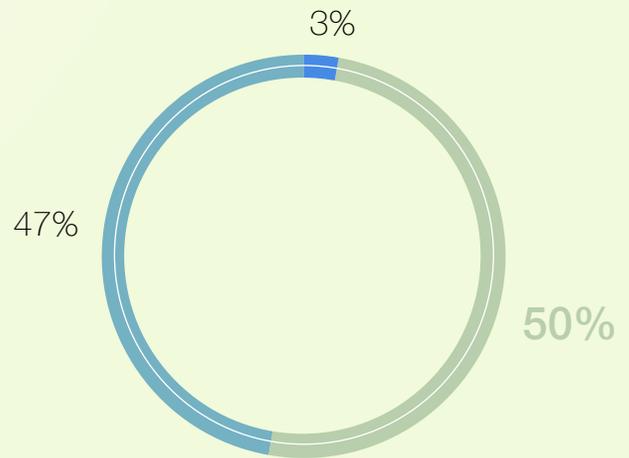
- Highly automated: Advanced automation technology is seamlessly integrated to facilitate online transactions, streamline order processing, and provide real-time data analysis.
- Mostly automated: Automation technology has been integrated to streamline most of the buying experience.
- Somewhat automated: Some automated technology is present, but manual processes are still prevalent.

Many Digital Sales Platforms Lack Critical Capabilities

For those still struggling with manual processes, several challenges emerge. Time constraints or lack of prioritization (64%), integration issues with current software (57%), high complexity in existing systems (55%), and lack of data quality or accuracy (51%) are the most common obstacles.
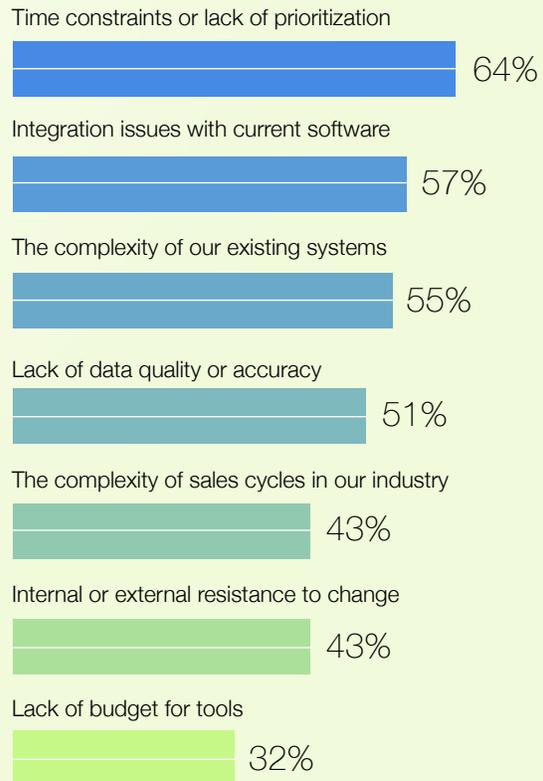
These challenges highlight the need for B2B companies to invest in streamlined, integrated systems and prioritize digital transformation initiatives. They also require sales teams to focus on specific areas of improvement.

To overcome time constraints and prioritize automation, teams can start by conducting a thorough assessment of their current sales processes to identify bottlenecks and repetitive tasks. Allocating resources effectively can help to streamline these processes.

For integration issues with current software and high system complexity, organizations might benefit from adopting modular, cloud-based solutions that offer greater flexibility and lower implementation barriers. Such solutions can often be tailored to fit existing systems, reducing complexity while improving functionality. Data integration and middleware tools can also serve as connectors between disparate systems, ensuring seamless communication and data consistency across platforms.

Finally, to tackle data quality and accuracy issues, companies should implement robust data governance frameworks, establish clear data entry protocols, and utilize automated data cleansing tools to maintain a high standard of information integrity.

Since you said manual operations are still a significant part of your B2B buying experience, which of the following are challenges you've faced in attempting to digitize and automate it?

Time constraints or lack of prioritization — 64%

Integration issues with current software — 57%

The complexity of our existing systems — 55%

Lack of data quality or accuracy — 51%

The complexity of sales cycles in our industry — 43%

Internal or external resistance to change — 43%

Lack of budget for tools — 32%

Many Digital Sales Platforms Lack Critical Capabilities

Given your current solutions and strategies, how effective is your current digital B2B buying experience at accomplishing the following goals?

● Very effective
● Somewhat effective
● Not effective

Chart data:

Goal	Very effective	Somewhat effective	Not effective
Optimizing multiple sales channels for growth	50%	42%	8%
Enhancing the speed of the purchasing process	48%	44%	8%
Creating personalized and tailored buyer experiences	47%	51%	2%
Operating each sector of our B2B eCommerce business from a single platform	47%	48%	5%
Integrating ERPs and existing technology	46%	47%	7%
Ensuring data security and privacy during transactions	46%	39%	15%
Providing comprehensive product information and resources for customers	46%	39%	15%
Providing customers with an intuitive and accessible buying experience	44%	50%	6%
Adapting to changing marketing needs and supporting innovation	41%	55%	4%
Facilitating smooth communication between buyers and sellers	31%	57%	12%

In addition to struggling with manual processes, many B2B organizations are also struggling with a lack of capabilities in the buying experience. Researchers presented the respondents with a list of ten goals, and no majority says their B2B buying experience is "very effective" at any specific goal on the list.

Only half of the respondents (50%) believe their current B2B buying experience is very effective at optimizing multiple sales channels for growth. This suggests that many companies are missing opportunities to maximize their sales potential. These organizations should focus on developing omnichannel strategies that provide consistent, seamless experiences across all touchpoints to drive growth and meet customer expectations.

Notably, most respondents report that their current B2B buying experience is only somewhat effective in a few key areas. These include facilitating smooth communication between buyers and sellers (57%), adapting to changing marketing needs and supporting innovation (55%), and creating personalized and tailored buying experiences (51%).

These findings indicate that B2B companies need to prioritize improving communication channels, enhancing their ability to adapt to market changes, and implementing more sophisticated personalization strategies.

Overall, B2B companies must prioritize automation, address integration challenges, and focus on improving key aspects of the buying experience to prepare for tomorrow's digital B2B buyer. By investing in these areas, they can create more efficient, personalized, and effective digital sales processes that drive growth and customer satisfaction.

AI and Other Digital Capabilities Will Be Significant to Enhancing B2B Sales

As the nature of B2B sales continues to evolve, emerging technologies are poised to play a crucial role in shaping the future of the industry.

This section examines the current features of B2B sales platforms and explores the potential impact of innovative technologies on the digital B2B landscape.

The most common features in current B2B sales platforms are automated volume and quantity price breaks (51%), integrated customer support tools (51%), and company profiles for each unique buyer (49%).

These features indicate a focus on pricing flexibility, customer service, and personalization in existing B2B platforms. Organizations that can offer real-time assistance to customers while they are making a digital purchase can reduce instances of dropped or abandoned purchase orders. Meanwhile, automated price breaks can deliver meaningful discounts to loyal customers while encouraging high-quantity purchasing at the time of sale.

Nonetheless, the relatively low adoption rates of these features suggest that too many organizations lack key digital capabilities in their sales channels. Companies that can effectively integrate these capabilities into their digital sales platforms can offer customers more tailored and efficient buying experiences.

They will also be in a better position to take advantage of emerging technologies, as the core capabilities of their digital sales channels are already realized.

Which of the following features are currently a part of your digital B2B sales platform?

Automated volume/quantity price breaks to encourage bulk purchasing
51%

Integrated customer support tools for real-time assistance
51%

Company profiles to represent multiple unique buyers in the back end
49%

Customer-specific purchasing rules for products and variants
46%

A headless storefront for total control of the buyer experience
44%

Advanced analytics capabilities for tracking buyer behavior and sales trends
42%

Customer-specific catalogs and personalized content
34%

Compatibility with popular apps and APIs for custom solutions
32%

Unique permissions for sales teams and staff
28%

Self-service purchasing options for buyers
20%

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AI and Other Digital Capabilities Will Be Significant to Enhancing B2B Sales

In your view, how significant an impact will the following emerging technologies have on the future of digital B2B sales?

● Very significant
● Somewhat significant
● Not significant

Artificial Intelligence (AI) - Leveraging AI for personalized customer experiences, predictive analytics, and efficient customer service through chatbots and virtual assistants.
64% / 36% / 0%

Automated Workflow Solutions - Streamlining processes through automation, reducing manual tasks, and improving efficiency in order fulfillment and customer service.
40% / 52% / 8%

Integrated Buying - Transforming product demonstrations and enabling immersive buyer experiences, allowing customers to visualize products in their environment before purchasing.
34% / 50% / 16%

Blockchain Technology - Enhancing transparency and security in transactions, as well as streamlining supply chain management through immutable ledgers.
28% / 62% / 10%

Looking ahead, B2B sales leaders believe that several emerging technologies will have a very significant impact on digital B2B sales. Artificial intelligence is one of the most anticipated technologies, with 64% of respondents expecting it to have a very significant impact on digital B2B sales. AI can enhance various aspects of the B2B sales process, including personalized product recommendations, predictive analytics for sales forecasting, and automated customer service through chatbots.

By implementing AI-driven solutions, B2B companies can improve their decision-making processes, increase operational efficiency, and provide more personalized experiences to their customers.

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AI and Other Digital Capabilities Will Be Significant to Enhancing B2B Sales

Most of the respondents also that blockchain technology (62%) and automated workflow solutions (52%) will have a somewhat significant impact on the future of digital B2B sales.

Blockchain technology has the potential to improve security in B2B transactions. It can also be used in the supply chain and in last-mile delivery to accurately monitor the transportation of products in real-time. As noted, automation will be important for organizations to reduce manual processes like data entry and create faster sales cycles.

B2B companies should stay informed about these trends and consider integrating these technologies into their digital sales strategies. Those that successfully leverage these innovations will be better positioned to meet the changing demands of B2B buyers and compete more effectively in the digital B2B marketplace.

Conclusion:
The Most Critical Changes to
the B2B Buying Experience

To gain an understanding of how the B2B landscape will change in the future, researchers asked the respondents to identify the most critical changes their organizations plan to make to their digital B2B buying experience over the next 12 months. The respondents' key focus areas for improving the digital B2B buying experience are personalization, automation, and analytics.

To personalize and customize the buying experience for customers, companies are developing customizable dashboards, implementing AI-driven recommendation engines, and creating tailored business insights to help customers optimize purchasing strategies. This emphasis on personalization reflects the growing importance of delivering unique, relevant experiences to each B2B customer, recognizing that one-size-fits-all approaches are no longer sufficient in the competitive digital landscape.

Organizations investing heavily in streamlining and automating various aspects of the buying process are focusing on simplifying contract negotiations, implementing automated budgeting tools, and integrating with clients' CRM and eProcurement systems. Companies are also focusing on automating routine tasks such as reordering processes and implementing predictive stock notifications.

The drive towards automation and streamlining demonstrates a clear recognition of the need for efficiency and speed in B2B transactions, as well as the desire to reduce manual intervention and potential errors. This result also aligns with previous results in the study that suggested many companies still struggle with manual processes in the sales process.

Finally, organizations are rolling out advanced analytics tools to help customers track purchase history, predict future requirements, and make more informed purchasing decisions. B2B organizations recognize that data-driven decision-making will be critical in adapting to changes in the marketplace, as well as changes to customer behavior, in the coming months and years. This also represents a commitment to delivering additional value to customers, as these types of analytics tools could help them make smarter buying decisions.

These planned changes reflect a clear understanding of the evolving B2B landscape, where personalization, efficiency, and data-driven decision-making are becoming increasingly crucial. By focusing on these areas, organizations are positioning themselves to meet the growing expectations of B2B buyers for seamless, informative, and tailored purchasing experiences.

Focus Areas for the Future of B2B Sales

Notably, 39% of the respondents are either not very prepared or not prepared at all for the future of B2B sales. Researchers asked these respondents what they'd like to change to become more prepared.

Based on their responses, companies that are struggling to prepare for the future are focusing on three key areas of improvement.

Integrating Advanced Analytics

Many of these respondents are prioritizing the integration of advanced analytics and data-driven decision-making processes. Companies want to develop a robust data infrastructure that allows them to predict customer needs more accurately, forecast trends, and respond swiftly to market shifts.

Combined with robust and usable data, this approach can create new opportunities in the digital sales process. Organizations with advanced analytics capabilities can automate more of their sales process, introduce contextualization and personalization, engage in more effective digital marketing, and more.

Improving Cross-Departmental Collaboration

Finally, some of these respondents emphasize the need to improve cross-departmental collaboration, particularly between sales, marketing, and IT teams.

"By aligning these departments more closely, we can leverage the strengths of each team to drive our B2B sales," says one respondent.

Successful digital transformation requires a holistic approach involving multiple facets of the organization. Leveraging each unit can improve coordination in the sales funnel and deliver a more connected B2B buying experience for customers.

Enhancing Digital Content and Customer Engagement

Some of these respondents are also focusing on enhancing their digital content strategies and their approaches to customer engagement. They aim to create more personalized, meaningful sales interactions by embracing hybrid sales models and developing scalable digital strategies that grow alongside market demands.

According to one respondent, "We need to create engaging, high-quality resources for customers to revamp our digital content strategy." Another respondent says that this focus will help them build more robust sales funnels.

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Key Suggestions

Integrate seamlessly with back-office functions and your clients' systems:

Integrating front-office and back-office systems creates more opportunities for automation, speeds purchasing, and reduces the risk of errors. Integrating with client systems can significantly improve the buying experience and allow for more robust personalization.

Focus on personalization in the B2B buying experience:

Develop systems that offer tailored insights and customization options for your customers. Personalizing experiences is crucial for staying competitive, as generic solutions no longer meet customer expectations.

Prioritize automating more of the B2B sales process:

Streamlining processes and automating routine tasks can increase efficiency, reduce errors, and improve the customer experience. Most customers now expect a certain level of automation in the purchasing experience.

Adopt artificial intelligence and automation solutions:

AI allows companies to effectively personalize product recommendations and automate customer services, and it can even be used to enhance decision-making. Automation speeds up sales processes by reducing manual tasks.

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