
5 Keys to Closing Sales by Driving Consensus

By Matt Behrend and Brett Merritt

5 KEYS TO CLOSING SALES BY DRIVING CONSENSUS

“Building enough consensus to close sales is a significant challenge.”

If you’ve worked in sales at all, you just yawned and said, “Yeah, tell me something I don’t know.” But what you might not know is just how big this problem has become.

Richardson’s 2015 Selling Challenges Study asked respondents to name the most significant challenges they faced. More than a quarter of all respondents said, “Finding ways to add relevant value to various stakeholders.” This topped both “balancing sales and relationship management” and “creating value through executive dialogue” by a healthy margin.

Creating real value, not just for the prospect, but for each stakeholder are the words of the day. Trish Bertuzzi of The Bridge Group said that people have become more concerned about two factors:

1. Watching the bottom line
2. Not being solely responsible for making a bad buying decision

“You don’t want to be solely responsible for buying something that hasn’t even been implemented two years later,” Bertuzzi said.

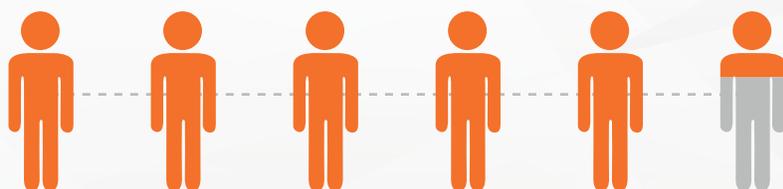
Yes, securing consensus through providing value to all stakeholders has exploded to become the biggest threat that sales teams face. But why? What’s fueling this challenge?

Buying decisions on solutions for midmarket and enterprise companies used to be made by a relative few—a manager and his or her boss. They now involve ever-growing groups of stakeholders. In 2014, a CEB survey of 3,000 B2B buyers found that the average buying group consists of more than five people. And these people aren’t all concentrated in one department or even one office. Typically, they come from all corners of the organization and disparate geographic locations. Of course, they also come with their priorities, biases, and agendas.

THE CHALLENGE

Here’s the daunting news for sales teams. Study after study has found that the bigger and the more diverse the buying group, the longer the sales process. And the higher the chance of the sale failing. And, in a more complex sale, your prospects have already their buying journey without your sales reps one third of the time (SiriusDecisions 2015 B2B Buying Study).

As integration, complexity, and collaboration between departments and teams continue to increase, how can sales teams overcome the challenge of consensus? If the job of the salesperson is to show or teach the value of their company’s product or solution, how can they possibly do that for every individual stakeholder and still close a sale within the desired sales cycle? The surface-level answer is to ensure that you customize your approach to each member of the buying group. But anyone who has tried this will tell you it’s easier said than done. And it’s anything but scalable.



**THERE ARE 5.4
STAKEHOLDERS
ON AVERAGE**

THE 5 KEYS TO CLOSING SALES BY DRIVING CONSENSUS

Fortunately, it is doable. By following these steps, sales teams can better control the interactions between the various members of the buying group. It will also help control the outcomes of those interactions—to produce more closed sales.

1. AVOID THE DEAL KILLER BY PREPARING TO SELL TO MORE THAN 5 PEOPLE

There is a sickening moment in nearly every sales engagement. Most of us have become helplessly numb to it despite how it kills deals. The moment happens when your prospect says, ***“Thanks for all the information, I just need to go back and talk with my colleagues.”*** This is the moment you lose control of the sale as you become forced to rely on your prospect to do the selling for you.

Consider that your reps ramp for 4-6 months learning how to position value through your messaging. But your clients must dive head first into selling your value to the rest of the stakeholder buying group—the most critical conversation of the buying process—with only 1-2 hours of learning time. This reliance on the prospect to teach the buying group how great your solution is all by their lonesome kills sales more often than not.

Today's sale is a group sale. This shift is complicating the fight for getting consensus in a major way. The truth is, these changes have happened subtly. For heads-down, forward-charging salespeople, these buyer changes might have flown completely under the radar. But the effects likely haven't. For instance, sales processes have gotten longer. Communicating with buyers has suddenly become a group affair.



Unilateral decision-making power has become a rare thing in sales. Sales teams, according to CEB's Karl Schmidt, Brent Adamson, and Anna Bird's article in the Harvard Business Review (HBR.org), **"Making the Consensus Sale"**, must focus on the needs, tendencies, and agendas of all stakeholders in the buying group, not just the decision maker. A failure to do so can accidentally trigger a rejection from any member of the buying group and ruin the sale.

Here are some of the biggest changes that have occurred:

Buying groups have gotten bigger

Remember the "good ol' days" when you only had to worry about winning over one or two stakeholders on your typical sale? And there was just one single decision-maker you had to please? Well, those days are now officially gone. A CEB survey suggests the average buying group is comprised of 5.4 people. That's 5.4 people for whom you must provide answers to questions, resolve concerns, and paint a picture of relevant benefits and ROI.

But why so many? We have our theories. There is also that pesky tendency of organizations and individuals to avoid risk, and spreading out the power of decision has become one way to do that. And finally, there is the problem of products and services becoming more and more complex.

Ultimately, this means that salespeople must shift their strategy away from insinuating themselves into the lives of one or two individuals and focus instead on influencing and responding to the needs and priorities of half dozen people or more for every buyer they pursue.

It's difficult to tell who is in the buying group

Finally, it's not like every organization has an org chart of who is exactly in any given buying group. Consensus' CEO, Garin Hess, found one example where a company he interviewed **"lost deals when buying groups had 4 to 5 stakeholders. They had to ask themselves if they overlooked a decision maker and struggled to identify who exactly was in the buying group. This had a significant effect on their ability to close sales."**

After all, how can you work with the individual needs of buying group members—and that surprise veto out of left field—when you don't have every member on your radar?

If the above revelations have you wondering how your sales tactics can keep up, you're not alone. Most sales organizations are having to blow up their strategies to adjust to these new, larger buying groups. One thing, though, is for sure: salespeople need to stop thinking of only pursuing one decision-maker. And secondly, salespeople need to stop pushing communication on buyers and start thinking about how they can provide the answers to so many buying group stakeholders. But how? The answer will lie in salespeople's ability to recruit the help of the primary stakeholder and coach them toward buying consensus with the others.

2. IDENTIFY THE CHAMPION AND ALL STAKEHOLDERS

In 2015's "The Challenger Customer," CEB uses the term Mobilizer as a new way of looking at the Sales Champion, and it's making waves. No matter what you want to call this person, your champion, change agent, or power sponsor, this is the person who will be taking action on the part of the salesperson, helping to drive the sale of your product or solution from within.

It takes a unique person then to fill this champion role. No consensus sale can start until the salesperson identifies who their mobilizer is on any given account. CEB goes into the various types of mobilizers in their book "The Challenger Customer." We recommend reading it and learning the nuances of mobilizers. For our purposes, we will be taking a more general approach to the term.

Know who you're dealing with

According to a presentation given by SAVO at the 2014 Sales Enablement Summit, there are three distinct groups within the typical buying group: **Mobilizers**, **Talkers**, and **Blockers**. To summarize:

Visionary, credible, and capable of driving change, 36% of buying group members fall into the **Mobilizer** category.

Known for their tendency to participate in conversations but fold when it comes to truly advocating for a purchase, **Talkers** are a significantly smaller group at 26%.

Surprisingly, at 38%, the largest group is that of **Blockers**, those stakeholders who, for whatever reason, aren't willing to entertain thought-provoking questions that might upset the status quo or provide salespeople with useful information.

As you coach your mobilizer, it's vital that you ask questions that will help you place each member of the buying group in their appropriate category. This information will have a tremendous influence on how you and your mobilizer move forward.

Once you know who your mobilizer is (and it might not be your prospect), it's time to find out who the entire buying group is and what they need.

On the Sales Blog, Anthony Iannorino writes, "Identifying and working with all of the stakeholders as you work through the sales process not only increases the likelihood of your winning, it also improves the implementation of your solution and how fast you produce results." He goes on to say that working to know the needs of the buying group allows that same group to drop their guard and, perhaps, offer their support.



3. DELIVER CONTENT THAT CONNECTS WITH EACH STAKEHOLDER

It's not enough to just identify the buying group. True consensus requires that salespeople focus more on the internal interactions and politics of the buying group. So what can sales teams do to empower mobilizers to advocate for their product with other stakeholders? Is it as simple as providing a checklist or a packet of collateral that answers a set of FAQs?

Consider Marketo's recently released "*Marketing Automation Buyer's Kit*." It comes complete with a demo checklist, a sample RFP, customer Powerpoint slides, and the always-popular ROI calculator. At first glance, it seems like everything a mobilizer would need to sell their organization on Marketo's product. But is it really?

We think, and the authors of the above HBR article agree, that driving a team of stakeholders toward consensus about your product or service will need more than a "one-size-fits-all approach." You should arm them with the right materials. The best materials you can give are those customized to their particular needs, feature desires, and relevance. Then technology can indeed go a long way toward serving the right content to the stakeholders each step of the way.

4. KNOW WHAT STAKEHOLDER FINDS VALUABLE AND RELEVANT

What is great for your champion, may not be great for all the stakeholders. Still, the path to consensus needs to address the individual priorities, biases, and values of each. Some quality discussions should uncover some critical intelligence about each stakeholder. But those aforementioned studies have revealed some startling, non-intuitive recurring patterns among stakeholders that salespeople looking for a consensus sale would do well to heed.

Any planning with your mobilizer could be useless if you don't uncover and take into account the motivations and priorities of each stakeholder. A traditional sales toolbox may not be not enough to inspire all stakeholders to agree you have the best solution.

Then there's the question of scalability. You may find that providing personalized tools and content to a slew of stakeholders for every account leaves you exhausted and demoralized. In this regard, technology which automates the distribution of customized information among stakeholders is the linchpin in the whole consensus sale.

So, how can salespeople get to know each stakeholder and their unique needs? **Start here:**

Show Value

Again, studies have found that, while data like ROI or % of performance improvement—measurements meant to demonstrate what is referred to as "**Company Value**" by CEB—can get your product considered, they're not powerful enough to get stakeholders to advocate for it.

So what is powerful enough? According to Patrick Spenner of CEB, the answer lies in what he calls Performance Value (i.e. the value of working better and achieving goals) and especially Identity Value (i.e. the value of getting respect, career advancement, popularity, etc.):

"[B]oth Performance Value and Identity Value... motivate advocacy... [B]uyers simply care more about Identity Value than any other form of value. The best selling point is therefore not unrivaled speed, power or stability. It is the sense of pride buyers derive from the purchase."

Although you might be tempted to lean on Company Value, you and your mobilizer should be asking how you can better demonstrate the Personal Value your product will create for each stakeholder, making them the star of the show.

Find Common Ground

It's not enough to know matters to each stakeholder. The best way to confront these clashing values is to **focus on those priorities and values, like reducing risk or saving money, that overlap between all stakeholders.**

By doing this, you will be able to communicate with the group as a whole in ways that will resonate with each of them as individuals—and maybe even move more of them to advocate for your product. It will also keep you from over-personalizing your messages in ways that drive them away from each other, instead of toward consensus.

Consider it another harsh reality of the new buying group: more stakeholders, more personalities to manage, more angles to consider. Again, this shows just how crucial your mobilizer is to your success. But with the right stakeholder in your corner and by asking the right questions, your collaborative plan to drive the buying group toward consensus will be tailor-made for each individual and much more likely to succeed.

5. DELIVER THE RIGHT MESSAGE AT THE RIGHT TIME IN THE RIGHT WAY

With guidance and tools customized to the individual needs of the mobilizer and the other stakeholders, timing and sequence become the last critical piece to reaching a consensus sale. Focus on the wrong conversation at the wrong time, and you might cripple the whole sales process.

The task of communicating the relevant, common ground, overlapping information to each stakeholder still lies ahead. And timing is critical. This is a daunting challenge for any salesperson who already feels stretched for time.

Again, there are tips to help. Salespeople who use them can deliver the right communications to the right stakeholders at the right time to drive consensus:



Connect stakeholders to each other

No, you can't effectively connect with every member of the buying group. But you can provide tools and content that facilitates dialogue and consensus between the members of it. How?

One way is to provide the information each stakeholder needs in one location. Even better is to link them to a source of that information but allow them the option of choosing which benefits and features are most important for them to learn about and then serving that to them, addressing their unique needs.

Begin early

You're late to the party, and you don't even realize it. A recent survey found that prospects don't engage sales until they're 57% through the deliberation process. In other words, consensus-building has moved to the top of the funnel.

This change certainly makes the case that consensus is not the domain of Sales alone, but will require a coordinated effort between marketing and sales.

Beware of over-personalization

On the topic of personalizing messages to stakeholders, the HBR article referenced earlier offered this caveat:

“When individuals in a buying group receive different messages, each one stressing that an offering meets his or her narrow needs, it can highlight the diverging goals and priorities in the group, driving a wedge between members and hindering consensus.”

To avoid inadvertently driving stakeholders apart, use tools and/or content that unites stakeholders around common interests, but that can still prove value around the unique needs of each stakeholder.

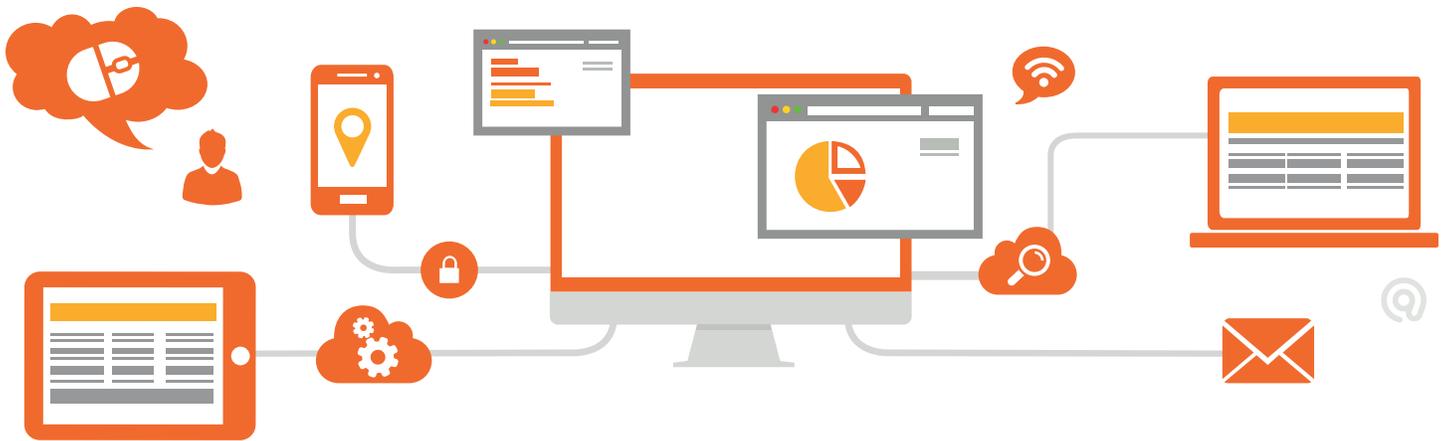
A series of short videos that allows each stakeholder to watch content around what is important to them in order of their level of interest is a great way to be personal without over personalizing.

It's not “one and done”

Remember, gaining consensus is not a one-time event. Consensus must be gained and regained throughout the buying process. Your mobilizer must first make up their own minds and then work with you to help convince others. Therefore, the demos, presentations, PDFs, and other content you provide must take these needs into account.

When sales teams can use sales technology to automate the distribution of personal, unique content to stakeholders, it allows you to close deals faster and helps the buying group align. When it's a consensus sale, no one needs to take the fall for buying something ineffective.

With this kind of collaboration happening, you will not only secure that coveted sale, but also a loyal, happy customer in the long term.



Technology the key to consensus

To generate consensus, it's now clear that salespeople need to stop trying to sell one or two individuals. Instead, the focus should be on facilitating conversations between the growing number of stakeholders. Yet, it's clear that this is almost impossible without incorporating the right technology into the process.

As we've explained throughout, technology should take much of the manual work out of the hands of Sales. With such technology in place, salespeople can focus on understanding each of their stakeholders and coaching them to success. Perhaps more importantly, they can carry on more conversations while ensuring that each conversation is quality, leading to that coveted consensus sale.

ABOUT CONSENSUS

Consensus is Software as a Service (SaaS) that accelerates B2B sales by driving consensus among stakeholders in the prospect's buying group. By automating custom product demos, some clients have cut their sales cycles by 68% and increased close rates 44%. Our interactive demo platform personalizes video and documents so each prospect and stakeholder automatically learns about a solution in the most relevant way. Our Demolytics dashboard helps customers discover and engage the entire buying group by gathering analytics and tracking what they watched, what's important to them, and who they shared it with. This drives consensus and gets to fast, confident purchase decisions.

Sources

Adamson, Brent, Matthew Dixon, Pat Spenner, and Nick Toman. *"The Challenger Customer: Selling to the Hidden Influencer Who Can Multiply Your Results."* Portfolio, 2015. Print.

Adamson, Brent, Anna Bird, Karl Schmidt. *"Making the Consensus Sale."* HBR.org

Bertuzzi, Trish. Website: <http://www.bridgegroupinc.com/>

CEB. Various studies and surveys. Links: <https://www.cebglobal.com/> http://www.joshbarnes.net/blog/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/IconoIQ_395222.pdf

<https://www.cebglobal.com/blogs/you-dont-know-your-products-best-selling-point/>

Dilantis, Tom. *"5 Ways to Avoid a Price-Driven Sale."* CEB Global.

Iannorino, Anthony. Various. Website: <http://thesalesblog.com/>

Richardson. *"2015 Selling Challenges Study."* Website: <https://www.richardson.com/>

SAVO. Presentation. Sales Enablement Summit, 2014. Website: <http://www.savogroup.com/>

SiriusDecisions. *"2015 B2B Buying Study."* Website: <https://www.siriusdecisions.com/>

Spenner, Patrick. *"Making B2B Buying Personal."* Forbes.

