

The Art of War & Sales: Is Sales the Next Frontier for the Bots?

Aspiring sales representatives sometimes get the advice to study Sun Tzu's book *The Art of War*. The connection with sales is easy to make. Strategy, battles, attack, defend, intelligence. The sales arsenal uses similar terminology. Sales is about winning over the other side, just like in war. It is not strange sales is still perceived in a bad daylight, in part fueled by popular culture in sales movies like *Glengarry Glen Ross*, *Jerry Maguire* and *Boiler Room*.

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Sales = Human

Daniel Pink gives a different view in his bestseller *To Sell Is Human: The Surprising Truth About Motivating Others*. He states that every person in the world is now engaged in sales. It's not about going door to door selling products, but about moving people, convincing them to go along with your idea, project, or with you personally. So, can something as human as sales be automated? Will we be comfortable buying from bots?

Win-Win-Win

Business-to-business (B2B) sales has changed rapidly in the last decades. For many sales roles it is no longer enough to just win over the other side. Successful sales professionals these days know how to create a win-win situation for both sides. They need to care deeply how their services help their customers in achieving their goals. The over-achievers know how to create a win-win situation by involving external partners in their deals as well.

New approaches like solution selling (end 80s) and value selling (mid 90s) have therefore been on the rise. In these approaches it is all about asking questions, listening and understanding a customer. All with the aim to add value to current needs and processes.

Challenger Sales

Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson have argued in their landmark research *The Challenger Sale: Taking Control of the Customer Conversation* that listening and adding value are no longer enough. The top performers are disrupting the customer's buying process by uncovering un-recognized needs and position the seller as the

best resource to fulfill those needs. These sellers deliver the best insights in the best way.

Gartner confirmed in a 2019 research that 54% of the high performers in complex sales are the "Challenger" type of sales.

Now when we think about delivering the best insights, the step into the domain of machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI) is not so difficult to make. Common use cases for AI in marketing are next best action (NBA) and the next best offer (NBO), why not the next best insight (NBI) for sales?

From B2C Marketing Automation to AI Taking Over Consumer Decisions

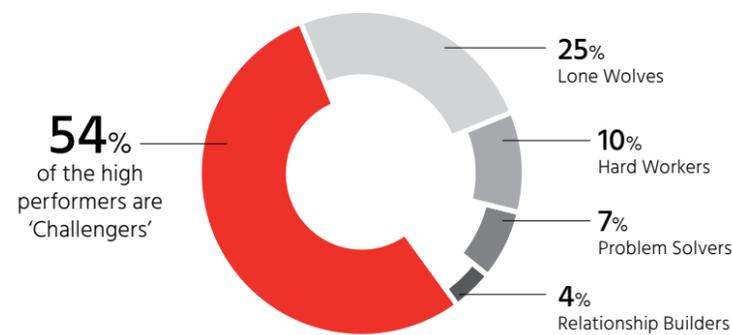
Many business-to-consumer (B2C) industries changed dramatically with the Internet as the channel of choice for many consumers. Programmatic advertising, marketing automation, personalization and marketplaces have caused total disruption of travel (Booking.com, Uber), retail (Amazon, Zalando),

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Popular quote from the movie 'Jerry Maguire' (2000)

Fig. 1: Percentage of High Performers in Complex Sales by Profile



Source: <https://www.gartner.com/en/sales-service/insights/challenger-sale>

music (Apple, Spotify) and media (Google, Netflix) industries. The new names – often not older than a decade or two – have been able to wipe away trillions of valuations from companies that ruled these industries for close to a century. Virtual shopping agents, that help consumers take decisions in grocery, holiday or even real estate shopping: the buying side will be automated as well. So yes, sales can be automated. The question really is: will all sales be automated?

B2Me

While selling to companies will always be different from selling to consumers, the differences are becoming smaller. Today most of the B2B buyers are in the same chair as where they make B2C decisions. At home. Those decisions are often driven by emotions like fear, competition, time, and innovation. The lines between work and home are no longer separate, neither are the lines between how we research, engage and ultimately buy in B2B versus B2C. Real-time B2C experiences are no longer just a direction of the business model that B2B businesses have slowly

been moving towards. It is now expected as the “new normal”. As a result, B2B sellers need to think more like B2C – which is more “in the moment”, more emotional, more aware of a customer’s immediate interest because customers don’t follow a linear path to find what they need.

The Art of Sales

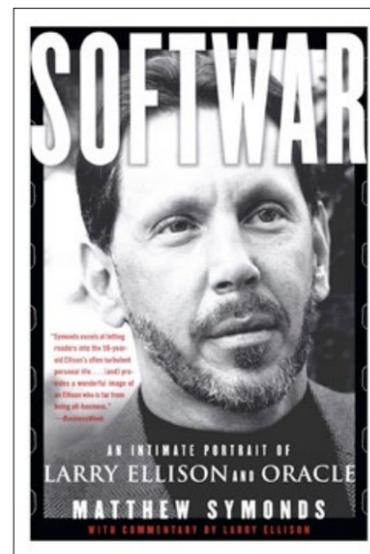
Brian Burns – the man behind one of the most popular podcasts on sales *The Brutal Truth about Sales* – often shares his doubts on the value of an engineered sales process. Engineering of the sales process has led in many cases to time wasted by sales representatives on data input and a focus on the wrong micro objectives. Burns is a vivid supporter for seeing sales as a form of art. He compares the top salesperson with a top chef in a restaurant. The chef needs to build experiences cooking over many years, building a deep understanding of the ingredients and perfect his cooking techniques. The sales professional needs to build experience in the business he sells to, deeply understand the sales material and perfect his sales techniques.

Complex Sales Automation – No Easy Fix

Does that mean the B2B sales process cannot be engineered? Or just that the engineering we have seen today is not yet working? B2B sales automation today is often linked to getting in a customer relation management (CRM) technology with some form of marketing automation. But that is a false over simplification. There is nothing automated about a sales representative needing to fill in tedious forms on a webpage just because he must. This often simply results in worthless forecasts delivered to sales management, incomplete customer data scattered over multiple entities, irrelevant marketing messages, incorrect quotes, false margin assumptions and unhappy customers.

The View From an Engineer

The founder and CTO from Oracle, Larry Ellison, is a true engineer by heart.



Larry Ellison engineering sales by connecting company process across all functions

So, you can’t blame him looking at sales through this specific lens. A quote in the biography *Softwar* gives insights in his thinking, that contradicts with the thinking on sales as a form of art.

“Very few people can sell well. An engineered process is almost always – not always but almost always – better than an ad hoc process. (...) There should be a carefully engineered step-by-step process for most common sales situations (...) automatic alignment with web, email, lead sharing.”

This vision has paved the way for how Oracle automates a large portion of its sales process and continues to engineer processes around it. Ellison was already addressing alignment with web and email as early as 2000 – when Amazon yet needed to proof profitability in B2C sales. Elements that today are becoming more and more important and a reality in selling B2B from home.

Connecting Sales to Full Front & Back Office

The complex sell is really that: complex. The process from awareness to recurring revenue is impacted by both front and the back office of each company. From Marketing, which adds awareness, interest, desire, availability to the value proposition. To HR, which contributes to sales enablement, incentivization and talent planning. To Service with response time management, incident minimalization and making happy customers. And, last but not least, Finance by providing appropriate but competitive cost and margin optimization and maintaining cashflow.

To engineer and automate a B2B sales process you really need to look across these functions. Connect each step of the process with appropriate and accurate data, so intelligence and opti-

mization can truly add value in sales. And it all needs to be done in real-time, because we know that B2B buyers expect similar experience as they get in their B2C environments. At Oracle we

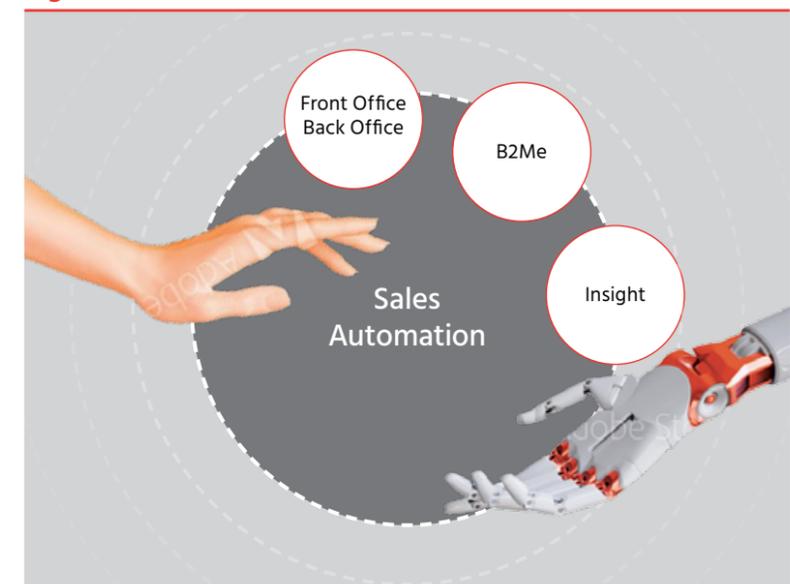
The Future of Sales: Challenger AI-to-AI Selling?

Retail, media and travel companies are already using advanced automation and intelligence to optimize their sales process to the consumer. Consumers might choose AI for managing decisions like buying groceries, selecting a holiday or even buying a house to live in.

Will B2B sales follow? Will we see a future where an AI of an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) application optimizes the best vendor by just exchanging insights with the AIs of vendors? Ending in closing a deal with the AI that delivers the best challenging insights?

It might be a future vision that seems far off. While there is a lot to say in terms of value creation and improving human life, some might hope it will never come. Let’s just conclude it sounds like a better idea to let AI run sales for us, than let it run our wars.

Fig. 2: The Future of Sales Automation



Source: Oracle.