

Sales Development in Business-to-Business Markets

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Abstract: Sales development has emerged as a critical strategy within the business-to-business (B2B) landscape, propelled by the ongoing digitalization of sales processes. This paper explores how digital technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, CRM systems, and e-commerce platforms, have reshaped sales strategies and interactions between buyers and sellers. As digital tools become integral to modern sales operations, the role of sales development in generating leads and fostering customer relationships is increasingly prominent. The paper reviews existing literature on sales development, highlighting its evolution from traditional sales models to contemporary digital frameworks. Furthermore, the study proposes an initial conceptual framework for understanding sales development in B2B contexts, setting the stage for empirical research to explore its implementation and effectiveness in enhancing sales performance and customer engagement.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sales and sales processes have been extensively researched, yet they have evolved significantly over the past few decades, driven by digitalization. The internet and digital tools, initially prominent in B2C contexts, are now transforming B2B markets as well. This paper explores how digitalization impacts sales and sales processes, focusing on a new concept of sales development.


Digitalization is a megatrend in sales, driven by advancements in information technology, machine learning, robotics, and AI. As Rodriguez et al. (2020) highlight, B2B markets are increasingly complex, necessitating more efficient, cost-effective processes. Digitalization and Sales Force Automation (SFA) are crucial in this transformation, making it a mandatory consideration for management (Mahlamäki et al., 2016). This paper will delve into how digital technologies and channels have dramatically altered buyer-seller interactions, emphasizing the significant role of digital tools such as CRM systems and e-commerce platforms in enhancing sales processes.

Furthermore, the relationship between digitalization and marketing technologies is explored. Marketing technologies, including marketing automation and CRM tools, play a vital role in

supporting sales development by providing the necessary digital infrastructure.

This paper also examines the concept of inside sales, which has gained prominence as digital channels reduce the need for face-to-face interactions. Inside sales, as a configuration of sales development, is critical in today's sales environment, offering numerous advantages over traditional outside sales approaches.

The paper contributes to academic discussion by providing more understanding of the successful use of sales development as part of a digitalized sales process in the B2B context. Concretely this is done by introducing a framework of sales development, focusing on its role in generating leads and fostering customer relationships within a digitalized sales process. The challenges and benefits of implementing sales development are discussed, providing a foundation for further empirical research. This initial framework will be refined in the future through personal interviews with representatives from B2B companies, ensuring its relevance and applicability in the modern sales context.

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2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Digitalization in Sales and Sales Processes

Sales and sales processes have been a focus of research for a long time. Yet during the past decades they have evolved significantly, particularly with the use of digitalization. The internet and other digital tools, initially prominent in B2C contexts, are now transforming B2B markets as well.

Digitalization is a megatrend in sales and is often called the “fourth industrial revolution.” It is driven by advancements in information technology, machine learning, robotics, and AI (Syam & Sharma, 2018). Rodriguez et al. (2020) highlight that B2B markets are increasingly complex and demanding, leading to less productive operations. Complex B2B sales organizations aim for more efficient, cost-effective processes through digitalization and Sales Force Automation (SFA) (Román & Rodríguez, 2015). Thus, digitalization transforms the operational environment and is a mandatory consideration for management.

Digital technologies and channels have dramatically altered buyer-seller interactions. Companies invest more in digital technologies to streamline and enhance sales processes (Terho et al., 2022). Also, according to Terho et al. (2022), marketing plays a crucial role in acquiring new leads through digital channels, with customers relying heavily on digital resources during the initial buying phases, even in B2B contexts.

In the context of this research, digitalization in sales is an important theme because sales development is mostly related to digitalization: it can be said to require effective digital tools to be able to run properly and to gain the benefits it is offering.

Common digital sales tools include CRM systems (Ahuja & Medury, 2010) and e-commerce platforms (Alsaad & Taamneh, 2019). These tools enhance sales processes by reducing internal costs or increasing outcomes (Rodríguez et al., 2020). CRM systems facilitate internal communication and data storage. E-commerce platforms facilitate transactions between trading partners, often visible to customers as webshops. Despite substantial investments in digitalization, the link between investment and performance enhancement remains unclear. Successful technology implementation depends on the interplay of technological elements and the commitment of salespeople (Rodríguez et al., 2020).

Rodriguez et al. (2020) identified internal and external enablers and obstacles to digitalizing sales

processes, categorized into organizational, technological, cultural, and legal/security dimensions. Overcoming these challenges can lead to successful digitalization and significant benefits. Priority internal sales elements for digitalization include customer identification, sales proposals, and follow-up support—steps 1, 3, and 5 in Rodriguez et al. (2020) sales steps. In the modern world, digitalization is essential for any company's existence, impacting both B2C and B2B sectors.

Machine learning and AI represent significant trends within digitalization and digital commerce. Syam and Sharma (2018) describe ongoing digitalization, including AI and machine learning, as a transformative force in the industry, reshaping sales practices. The industry is keenly observing AI's potential and limitations.

Digitalization has fundamentally altered selling. Relational selling has undergone substantial changes. Arli et al. (2018) note that sellers must adapt to larger, more organized buyers with higher demands, reflecting the evolving nature of sales in the digital age.

2.2 Digital Marketing and Marketing Technologies

When discussing sales and especially sales development and digitalization, it is essential to recognize the significant role of digital marketing and marketing technologies. These elements are intrinsically linked to sales development. Viewing sales as an isolated segment of the funnel is unwise; instead, it should be considered part of the integrated marketing and sales funnel, as Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) suggest. In addition, sales development relies on a strong connection between marketing and sales (Sleep et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2022).

The marketing department plays a crucial role in the company's business. Its efforts directly impact the sales and marketing funnel. Marketing should not function as an isolated unit. Wiersema (2013) found that integrating marketing and sales systems, like marketing automation or CRM, enhances team efficiency. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) also noted that an integrated marketing and sales funnel increases transparency between these units, facilitating better collaboration. Marketing must work closely with sales, aligning business objectives to focus on the right leads, close more customers, and boost sales growth.

Emphasis will be on marketing technologies, defined as tools or methods aiding marketing teams in achieving their targets (Graesch et al., 2020). These

technologies include database management systems enabling CRM tools, websites facilitating online marketplaces, and social media applications supporting corporate influencers.

Digitalization has profoundly impacted marketing. Before digital solutions, marketing was entirely offline. "Marketing finds itself in the middle of a digital transformation, which IT has caused and accelerated over time" (Graesch et al., 2020, p. 124). Online tools have revolutionized marketing, enhancing performance, reach, measurement, and efficiency.

From a sales perspective, marketing technologies are vital for collaboration throughout the sales funnel. Integrating and effectively using marketing automation and CRM tools are crucial for modern commerce (Sleep et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2022). Tools like CRM are often shared between marketing and sales. A common, integrated customer database helps both teams achieve their goals (Syam & Sharma, 2018).

2.3 Inside Sales

As digitalization has driven sales more towards digital channels and reduced face-to-face interactions between buyers and sellers, sales have been divided into inside sales and outside sales (Thaichon et al., 2018; Sleep et al., 2020). This division is quite old; sales have been categorized into inside and outside sales since the 1980s when telemarketing began to emerge. The term inside sales became more prevalent around the millennium, contrasting with outside sales (Kroger, 2013). Traditionally, inside sales have been defined as sales occurring remotely, whereas outside sales involve face-to-face interactions (Kroger, 2013; Thaichon et al., 2018; Sleep et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2022).

Today, these definitions may not be entirely up-to-date. A significant portion of sales and sales communications now happen remotely, which suggests that a larger part of sales can be considered inside sales (Fready et al., 2022). While some companies and roles still maintain clear distinctions between inside and outside sales, in many cases, the line between these functions has blurred. Additionally, the need for face-to-face interactions occurs much later in the B2B sales process, if at all, because modern technology can almost entirely replace face-to-face interactions (Mantrala & Albers, 2022).

According to Thaichon et al. (2018), inside sales have experienced significant growth in the last 50 years in terms of practical use. In the 1970s, sales

focused almost entirely on face-to-face contact and companies relied on outside sales personnel. Over the past 50 years, sales structures have shifted from merely providing value to buyers to creating value with them. This shift and significant technological transformations have led companies to use more inside sales to meet market demands and leverage its benefits (Thaichon et al., 2018).

As inside sales constitutes an integral part of sales structures in many contemporary companies, it inherently offers several advantages. According to Gessner and Scott (2009) and Martin (2013), organizations are increasingly reallocating resources towards developing inside sales teams. For instance, Albrecht et al. (2014) observed that approximately 40% of large technology companies are shifting resources from outside sales to inside sales, reflecting the rising prominence of inside sales within corporate sales frameworks.

Sleep et al. (2020) delineate three significant shifts that have facilitated the transition from outside sales to inside sales. Firstly, inside sales now encompasses more than traditional call center roles and order-taking; it involves activities such as order generation traditionally performed by outside sales forces. Advances in technology have enabled effective customer interaction without the need for face-to-face meetings, allowing inside sales teams to manage smaller customer accounts within organizations (Sleep et al., 2020).

Secondly, Sleep et al. (2020) highlight changes in customer behavior within the B2B context, where customers increasingly utilize various technology-based channels to gather information, thereby favoring inside sales approaches. Johnson (2005) notes the evolving nature of B2B sales processes towards being more buyer-driven. An intriguing finding by Rapp et al. (2013) suggests that whether salespersons operate in inside or outside sales roles does not significantly affect customer orientation. Moreover, customers in B2B settings have reduced their reliance on face-to-face meetings in favor of online services; as early as 2012, Mantrala and Albers (2022) reported a 37% decline in face-to-face meetings among customers. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated these changes, making virtual and remote communication commonplace in B2B interactions (Fready et al., 2022).

Thirdly, heightened competition has compelled companies to invest in cost-effective capabilities, with inside sales playing a pivotal role in delivering value-added services through every customer interaction, focusing on upselling and cross-selling opportunities (Sleep et al., 2020). Today, inside sales

represents a critical avenue for exploring new methods to enhance lead management in B2B firms, particularly through specialized inside salesforces dedicated to generating and nurturing high-quality leads for external sales teams (Kuruzovich, 2013; Thaichon et al., 2018; Sleep et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2022). This underscores the limited research into sales development, where the definition often stems from inside sales practices that differ significantly across sales domains. Thaichon et al. (2018) characterize sales development as a specialized adaptation of inside sales, underscoring its distinct operational methodologies. Terho et al. (2022) provide a rare focus on sales development and attempt to contextualize its understanding within the realm of inside sales.

In exploring sales development, understanding the relationship between inside sales and sales development is crucial. According to Sleep et al. (2020), sales development constitutes one of the four principal archetypes within the B2B inside salesforce configurations. Sales development is specifically defined as an adaptation of inside sales, alongside other configurations such as inbound sales, sales support, hybrid teams, and discrete sales functions, all outlined in Figure 1 derived from practitioner literature.



Figure 1: Major B2B inside sales force configurations (Adapted from Sleep et al., 2020).

As seen in Figure 1, sales development differs significantly from other configurations as it is not a separate function from outside sales but collaborates closely with it. For instance, discrete and hybrid configurations can operate independently from outside sales because they encompass the entire sales funnel, from prospecting to closing deals (Sleep et al., 2020). Some might argue that sales development cannot be a configuration of inside sales since Sales Development Representatives (SDRs) are not directly selling the product or service but are setting appointments for outside sales, whereas hybrid and discrete configurations manage the entire sales

process. However, this distinction is not the primary concern of this study.

2.4 Sales Development

Sales development is a relatively new term in academia, with the first article focused solely on it published in 2022 (Terho et al., 2022). Although new academically, the term is well known in practice. According to non-academic sources like Salesloft (2014), Gartner (2019), Gummings (2014), Wikipedia (2024), and Arjona (2022), sales development originated in the 1980s at Oracle. The original Oracle Direct team, led by Anneke Seley, was the first to use sales development methods. Back then, sales development was quite different, with digitalization significantly transforming these methods and teams into today's modern sales development. Some argue that business development is similar to sales development, as Business Development Representatives (BDRs) may perform tasks akin to Sales Development Representatives (SDRs), but sales development is a more precise term for this specialized unit.

Although sales development is considered a configuration of inside sales, it differs significantly from the original meaning of inside sales. While sales development focuses on generating qualified leads and setting appointments for the outside salesforce, inside sales involves the entire sales process from first contact to closing. (Thaichon et al., 2018; Sleep et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2022).

As previously mentioned, Thaichon et al. (2018), Sleep et al. (2020), and Terho et al. (2022) state that sales development is primarily used in the B2B context and is a vital component of companies' sales processes. In contrast, the function is less utilized in B2C contexts, possibly due to the reasons identified by Rodriguez et al. (2020): "B2B sales processes require stronger sales efforts by the seller in reaching out, closing deals, and maintaining business relationships with customers." B2B involves more detailed stages and long-term relationships, focusing on transitioning from one-time transactions to long-term customer relationships (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Conversely, the B2C sales process requires less effort from the sales department to reach out and achieve sales with consumers, making the process leaner (Sutanonpaiboon & Abuhamdieh, 2008). Sales development seems to fit better in B2B, but a significant obstacle is that B2B sales processes are often less digitalized than B2C, while sales development relies heavily on digital tools (Rodriguez et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2022).

Overcoming this conflict is crucial for the efficient use of sales development.

The definition of sales development is still evolving, with various references offering slightly different interpretations. However, three main publications (Thaichon et al., 2018; Sleep et al., 2020; Terho et al., 2022) are based on inside sales and define sales development similarly. Terho et al. (2022) builds on the previous definitions by Thaichon et al. (2018) and Sleep et al. (2020). Sleep et al. (2020) define sales development as an inside sales configuration focusing on lead qualification and appointment setting for outside sales. Terho et al. (2022) expand this definition, viewing the function as an integrated organizational role between marketing and sales, generating and nurturing leads, both inbound and outbound, focusing on both prospects and accounts.

As previously noted, sales development is an organizational function that bridges marketing and sales. It focuses on setting appointments for the sales force and maximizing the benefits from leads generated by marketing (Sleep et al., 2020). Terho et al. (2022) identify four distinct types of sales development processes: outbound prospect-focused, outbound account-focused, inbound prospect-focused, and inbound account-focused. In summary, prospect-focused methods have shorter turnaround cycles and benefit more from automation, while account-focused sales development requires longer cycles and more manual tasks during lead research and nurturing (Terho et al., 2022).

During their study, Terho et al. (2022) identified a few platforms besides the main topic. These findings were divided into "organizational platform decisions," "technological platform-enabling technologies," and "people platform." Each category included demands for sales development, along with benefits and challenges that can be addressed.

Organizational platform decisions refer to the seamless integration between marketing and sales, which is crucial for effective sales development. There should be jointly defined processes with clear responsibilities among units, common lead management terminology, and internal service level agreements. Shared targets, joint target setting, common goals, and aligned incentives are also essential. Additionally, a culture of open communication with regular joint meetings and active demonstration of sales development value is beneficial (Terho et al., 2022).

Technological platform-enabling technologies indicate that, as sales development is largely a back-office function building on digital sales technologies,

the technological platforms facilitating this work are central enablers. For successful implementation, the process should include lead management technologies like marketing automation and customer relationship management, alongside other tools. These systems should facilitate key functionalities in sales technology, such as engagement tools for managing digital interactions, analytics and sales intelligence tools for insights, enablement tools for accessing firm content, and pipeline management tools for steering the sales process. Well-organized data, shared databases, integrated systems, and actively updated data are also important (Terho et al., 2022).

People platform refers to managing Sales Development Representatives (SDRs), who are crucial to the sales development process. Job profiles, motivation, training, evaluation, and rewards should be aligned, and SDRs should be correctly led. Typically, SDRs are junior staff in entry-level positions, which needs consideration. The job should be challenging and rewarding to motivate SDRs to perform well. Often, a fixed salary based on performance with shared targets among units is used. It is also important to differentiate between SDRs focused on outbound prospects and those focused on inbound accounts, as different profiles may be required (Terho et al., 2022).

3 FRAMEWORK OF SALES DEVELOPMENT

Researchers examining general sales processes often debate whether to focus on one-time transactions to boost immediate sales or on relationship building to enhance customer lifetime value (CLV). Based on the existing literature, sales development is not suited for one-time transactions. According to Terho et al. (2022), sales development focuses primarily on building customer relationships and generating leads to foster more relationships both within and outside the company. The appropriateness of sales development depends on the product or service a company offers. While existing literature identifies some characteristics that indicate when sales development fits into the sales process and what demands it has for successful implementation, there is still a need for deeper insight. This research aims to provide more understanding of the successful use of sales development as part of a digitalized sales process in the B2B context.

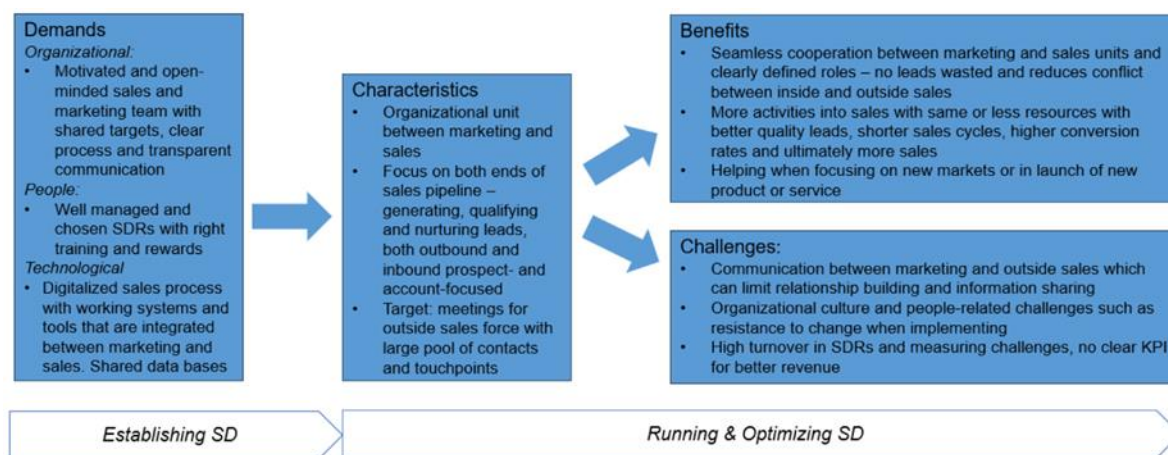


Figure 2: Initial conceptual framework for sales development.

The sales landscape has transformed significantly over recent decades, with the pace of change accelerating. Syam and Sharma (2018) describe this shift as the fourth industrial revolution, driven by digitalization in sales and business. With communication and transactions increasingly moving online, the sales environment is changing drastically. As face-to-face communication diminishes, companies are adopting or naturally transitioning to inside sales teams. This shift necessitates rethinking business strategies to achieve greater efficiency with fewer resources.

While the general sales process has evolved from Dubinsky's (1981) model, the fundamental theme of sales as a person-to-person activity remains. However, as Syam and Sharma (2018) note, AI and machine learning are becoming more integral to sales, signaling further changes in the near future. The trend toward inside sales, driven by the internet and overall digitalization, reduces the need for face-to-face meetings, potentially enhancing sales efficiency. Thaichon et al. (2018) identify this trend as the fourth evolution in sales structures, with the internet playing a crucial role and companies expanding their inside sales forces. This evolution began in the 2000s, emphasizing customer co-creation of value through various channels, supported by advancing technologies that enhance inside sales efficiency.

As inside sales becomes increasingly prevalent, whether through dedicated teams or integrated working methods, companies seek to optimize their sales processes to maximize value for both the company and the customer. Sales structures often blend outside, inside, and online sales, with inside sales playing a major role. One promising configuration for inside sales is sales development,

which can significantly enhance company performance (Sleep et al., 2020).

The aforementioned changes have prompted companies to consider establishing and utilizing sales development in their processes. The need for sales development is evident, and its efficient implementation demands certain conditions. The literature suggests that sales development should be positioned between sales and marketing, with the primary goal of arranging sales meetings for the outside sales team. The benefits of implementing sales development include a more efficient and streamlined process. However, challenges related to organizational and personnel issues can arise. An initial conceptual framework for sales development, built on existing theory, is presented in figure 2.

The figure aims to present the main themes and concerns highlighted in the literature, commonly considered by companies when establishing or using sales development. This model serves as an initial framework based on B2B literature and will be refined in the subsequent steps of the research through empirical studies, including personal interviews with representatives from B2B companies.

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