
5 Keys to Closing Sales Through Consensus

By Matt Behrend and Brett Merritt

INTRODUCTION

“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.

Yes, securing consensus with prospects has exploded to become the biggest threat that sales teams face. But why? What’s fueling this challenge?

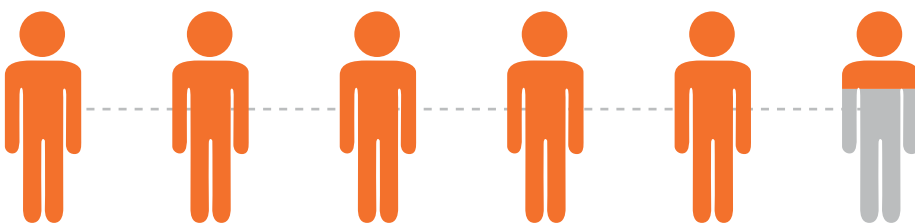
Buying decisions on solutions for mid-market and enterprise companies used to be made by a relative few (a manager and his or her boss). They now involve ever-growing groups of stakeholders. In 2014, a CEB survey of 3,000 B2B buyers found that the average buying group consists of more than five people. 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.

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.

As integration and collaboration between departments and teams continue to increase, how can sales teams overcome the challenge of consensus? 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.

Fortunately, it is doable. By following these five 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.



THERE ARE 5.4
STAKEHOLDERS
ON AVERAGE

1. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT EVERYONE HAS VETO POWER

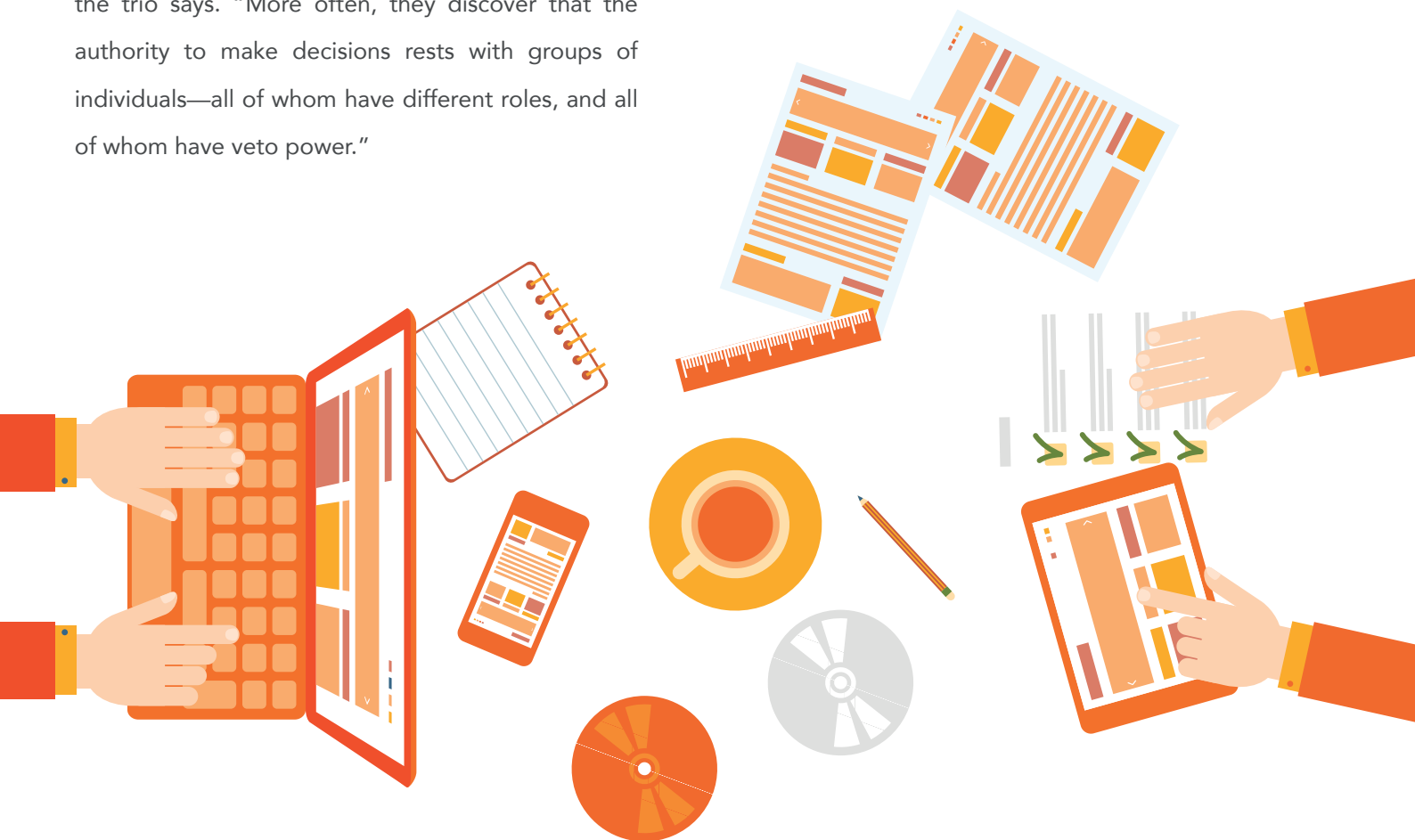
It's a fact that buying groups are growing larger. So has the way these groups make decisions. This shift is complicating the fight for consensus in a major way.

Even 10 years ago, salespeople faced a very different scenario. There was one stakeholder or two tops. One was usually the unilateral decision maker. By focusing on winning over that decision maker, salespeople could win the day. Going through an independent decision maker is no longer the case, according to Karl Schmidt, Brent Adamson, and Anna Bird's article in the Harvard Business Review, "Making the Consensus Sale."

"[R]eps today rarely find a unilateral decision maker," the trio says. "More often, they discover that the authority to make decisions rests with groups of individuals—all of whom have different roles, and all of whom have veto power."

As in so many other corners of society—from social media to the United Nations — unilateral decision-making power has become a rare thing in sales. Sales teams, says the HBR article, 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 veto from any member of the buying group and ruin the sale.

For this reason, every sale should start with a shift away from informing and selling one to two individuals. It should move toward identifying members of buying groups and coaching key members to build consensus with the others.



2. IDENTIFY THE MOBILIZER

Every sale usually begins with a mobilizer. They tend to be more motivated than the average employee to make their organization better. They passionately share their insights. They have the credibility and connections to bring decision makers to the table. They are your best shot at generating consensus within your unruly buying group. And they are a rare breed.

According to one CEB survey, half of the people who would buy a product or service would not be willing to advocate publicly for it.



They fear of losing respect, being ignored, or backing a failed product. It takes a unique person then to fill the role of a mobilizer. No consensus sale can start until the salesperson identifies who their mobilizer is on any given account.

Not that mobilizers can be automatic in selling your solution to their organization. Unfortunately, for all their motivation, passion, and insights, mobilizers often lack some crucial skills when it comes to helping others grasp the vision of a solution. Each type of mobilizer comes with their strengths and weakness. So, identifying your mobilizer has to mean more than just knowing who they are. It has to involve identifying what type of mobilizer they are.

In the book *The Challenger Customer*, the authors break down mobilizers into three groups. They are Go-Getters, Teachers, and Skeptics. Each comes with its specific priorities, weaknesses, and strengths.

Go-Getters are relentless and great at turning vague ideas into concrete work plans. But come up short in conveying an exciting vision for implementing the solution.

Teachers are great at passing on their passion for a solution to others in a persuasive, dynamic way. But they have difficulty in the organization/project management department.

Skeptics value precision, clarity, and certainty. But can often get caught up in minor details.

So take a minute to identify the type of mobilizer you're working with. Then get ready to put on your coaching hat. With any of these mobilizer types, according to *The Challenger Customer*, the mobilizer needs personalized coaching from the salesperson to build consensus with their buying group peers. Make no mistake, they are motivated to enact change, but they need your help to do it.

3. EMPOWER YOUR MOBILIZER TO CONNECT WITH YOUR STAKEHOLDERS

As salespeople pursue their goal in this brave new world of consensus, they need to understand that not only has the number of people increased, not only do they need to zero in on a mobilizer, but they also need to know that their role in the sales process has fundamentally changed.

Schmidt, Adamson, and Bird spelled out this change: “The new need to create consensus is turning decades of conventional sales wisdom on its head—replacing the requirement that sales focus first on connecting the customer with the supplier with a requirement to connect decision makers within a customer’s organization with one another.”

This step represents a sea change for sales teams used to checking in with a single point of contact again and again until a sale closes. Consensus requires that salespeople focus more on the internal interactions and politics of the buying group.

Mobilizers themselves seem to have sensed this change, with 80% of them saying they want “more support from suppliers in communicating the value of the solutions they championed.”



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?

Maybe not. To see what’s missing, you have to go back to The Challenger Customer’s types of mobilizers and the understanding of how to interact with each type.

For instance, if you’re working with a **Go-Getter**, you’re going to have the determination and drive to spare. You’re also going to need to help them refine their needs and explore the needs of the organization and the other stakeholders. Whatever tools you put in their hands need to keep these unique needs in mind.

With a **Teacher**, provide tools and coaching that helps them translate their fledgling vision into business results that resonate with other stakeholders.

The **Skeptic** might tend to be slow to trust and get lost in the details of your product. You will have to start with guidance and tools that win the mobilizer over first. Once you gain trust, you can provide guidance and tools that help the Skeptic see and convey the big picture to other stakeholders.

Apparently, empowering your mobilizer to create consensus will need more than a “one-size-fits-all approach.” It starts with what the mobilizer needs. This implies that, while content will continue to be part of the process of educating and winning over stakeholders, sales organizations would do well to use tools that speak to the needs of each of these mobilizer types. Then technology can indeed go a long way toward serving the right content to the right kind of mobilizer each step of the way.

4. KNOW WHAT EACH STAKEHOLDER FINDS RELEVANT

Now your mobilizer is prepared and empowered to engage the other stakeholders. Still, the path to consensus needs to address the individual priorities, biases, and values of each member of the buying group. Some quality discussions should uncover some critical intelligence about each stakeholder. But studies have revealed some startling, non-intuitive recurring patterns among stakeholders that salespeople looking for a consensus sale would do well to heed.

Analysis by CEB found that B2B buyers derive three types of value from products. The first, Company Value, is often the sole focus of salespeople and their collateral. The second was Performance Value, or the value of a doing a job better, faster, or with better results.

The third, almost entirely ignored in B2B sales, was Identity Value, or the value derived from respect from others, career advancement, popularity, and happiness at work. Can you guess which of these has the most potent effect on buyers’ decisions?

CEB’s analysis concluded that, although Company Value helps salespeople get a foot in the door, it doesn’t motivate people to advocate for purchase. Performance and Identity Value do. Ultimately, Identity

Value was the most powerful out of the three.

Forbes contributor and CEB leader Pat Spenner put it succinctly, “The best-selling point is therefore not unrivaled speed, power or stability. It is the sense of pride buyers derive from the purchase.”

“Buyers simply care more about Identity Value than any other form of value,” he concluded.

Stakeholders come in all shapes, sizes, and temperaments. With so many hidden layers of personality and motivation at play, what does this say about the most common tools in suppliers’ tool kits? Where do ROI calculators, lifetime-value assessments, total-cost-of-ownership scorecards, etc. fit in? They might be a good way to get considered. They may not be not enough to inspire stakeholders to advocate agreement.

Then there’s the question of scalability. Can one salesperson provide this kind of coaching and personalized tools to a slew of stakeholders for each account? Sounds exhausting and unsustainable—unless their tools can do much of the work for them. In this regard, technology which automates the distribution of customized information among stakeholders is the linchpin in the whole consensus sale.

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.

"[W]hile reaching consensus at every stage of the purchasing decision is more difficult for a group, the most arduous moments occur in the definition of the problem to be solved and the potential solution—more so than in the actual choice of supplier," explains Spenner.

Problem definition is another point of consideration. It seems to resist the idea that can just hand your mobilizer a packet of collateral. Rather, it screams out for the use of technology to control what content to share and when.

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. 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, clients have cut their sales cycles by 68% and jumped close rates 44%. Our interactive demo platform personalizes video and documents so each prospect 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.

