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# The Future Of B2B Sales Is Built On Predictive Tools

Winning Organizations Will Use AI-Driven Sales  
Force Automation Technologies To Inform And  
Empower Reps

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# Executive Summary

B2B buyers are increasingly empowered to choose when and how to engage with sales. As buyer demands for personalized and relevant information increase, organizations have an opportunity to gain a competitive edge by investing in data-driven technologies to inform and empower sellers. Sales force automation (SFA) is not just the cornerstone technology for sales organizations; it's rapidly evolving into an essential seller empowerment tool. While SFA has historically encompassed administrative management tools for monitoring and forecasting sales opportunities, today's solutions better utilize artificial intelligence (AI) to improve seller responsiveness, drive deeper and more meaningful customer engagement, and deliver highly personalized experiences for today's buyers.

In October 2017, Microsoft commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate the use of sales force automation and other AI tools among B2B enterprises around the world. Forrester conducted an online survey with 274 respondents who are responsible for decisions regarding their organizations' sales technologies to explore this topic. We found that AI and predictive tools are on the rise to unlock data across customer applications so that sellers may better predict and deliver what buyers want.

## KEY FINDINGS

- › **Increasing B2B customer demands mandate new selling methods.** Digitally empowered customers expect digitally empowered sales reps who can efficiently provide them with relevant and personalized information. Most B2B sales organizations are not equipped to meet this challenge today, but leaders are making it a top priority to provide this customer experience, as their revenues depend on it.
- › **Sales reps don't have easy access to customer insights and spend too much time mired in administrative work.** Sellers understand how their customers are evolving and are trying their best to keep up, but they have too much data and not enough insight to do anything with it. Further, dealing with overly time-consuming administrative processes often takes a seller's attention away from interacting directly with customers. Investments in tools that automate seller grunt work and recommend next-best sales actions will allow reps to have more frequent and more valuable client interactions.
- › **AI and automation are key to sales success.** Sales force automation is a rapidly changing piece of the sales technology stack. AI and machine learning will continue to improve these and other solutions, driving a multitude of benefits both for the customer and the business, ranging from the automation of simple tasks to the deeply personalized recommendations at each step of the sales process.



82% of enterprises have either implemented sales force automation today or plan to in the next 12 months

# Sellers Must Evolve To Meet Changing Buyer Demands

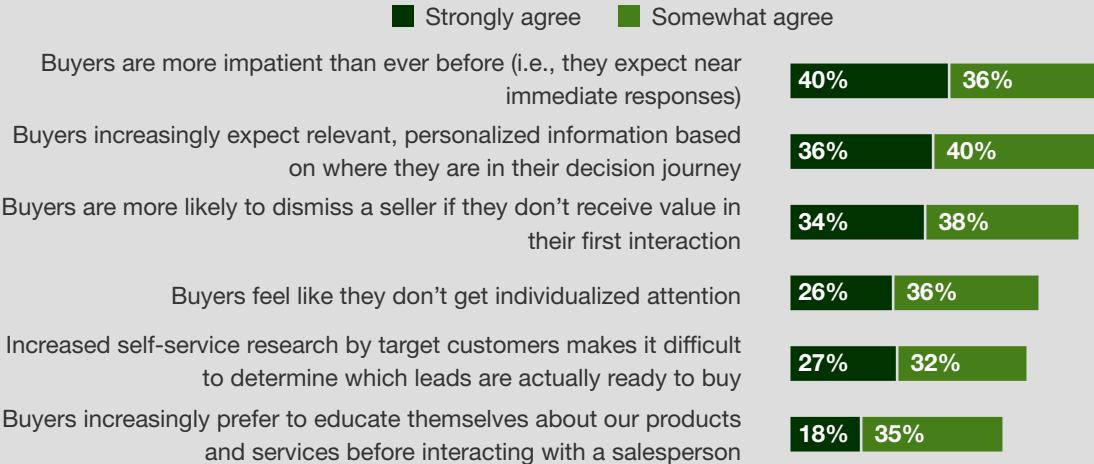
In the age of the customer, B2B buyers have the upper hand in the relationship with sellers. With nearly limitless access to information, they are able to dictate their own customer journeys, rather than following a pre-defined funnel. Businesses that want to connect with these customers and prospects must be prepared to quickly understand and respond to their needs better than the competition can. Crafting this type of superior customer experience is a top priority for organizations over the next 12 months, but to achieve this goal, most organizations must improve their capabilities by leveraging new technologies. Sales technology decision makers are focusing their efforts on predictive technologies that better utilize customer data to transform their sales processes.<sup>1</sup> Our study validated these trends and found that:



- Buyers have increasing demands for relevant, personalized, and immediate information.** Buyers today care as much about their experience with a company as they do about the end product — and their expectations are high. Seventy-six percent of survey respondents agree both that buyers are more impatient than ever before and that they increasingly expect relevant, personalized information based on where they are in their decision journeys. Furthermore, 72% believe that buyers are more likely to dismiss sellers if they don't receive immediate value in their first interaction (see Figure 1). Failing to provide customers with the experiences that they seek often results in missed conversions and ultimately lower revenue.

Figure 1

“To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your buyers’ needs and behaviors?”



Changing buyer behaviors and attitudes creates increased pressure for sales reps to deliver fast, relevant, and personalized information.

Base: 274 manager-level and above sales technology decision makers at North American and European B2B enterprises  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, October 2017

- › **Sales organizations are evolving their structure and processes to better meet increasing buyer demands.** The vast majority of sales leaders surveyed state that they are making changes to their organization, processes, alignment, and technology in order to better understand and serve their customers' changing needs. Technology solutions are the top area of focus, with 49% stating that they have invested in sales empowerment tools to help prioritize and facilitate sales communication and activities. Specifically, organizations are looking to automation and AI to provide insights from customer data in the form of lead prioritization, recommended next best actions, and guidance in how to personalize the buying experience (see Figure 2).
- › **Organizations have not activated technology to seamlessly power key sales activities.** We asked respondents about their use of a number of different automation capabilities, and we found that there is significant opportunity for further investment. Two of the three most common capabilities in use today are automated logging of sales activities into CRM systems and monitoring tools for sales managers — tools which are helpful, but not really empowering sellers with any customer insights. Leaders told us that within their organizations, many desired sales empowerment tools and capabilities either do not exist, exist only partially, or are inefficient or difficult to use (see Figure 3). As a result, there are many types of analysis such as market intelligence, text analytics, client profiles, and social data analysis that are not being utilized by sales reps as frequently nor as completely as they should be. Organizations must look to provide seamless integration of their various data sources and ensure that their sales force automation tools are optimized to enable sales reps, not just managers.

**Figure 2**

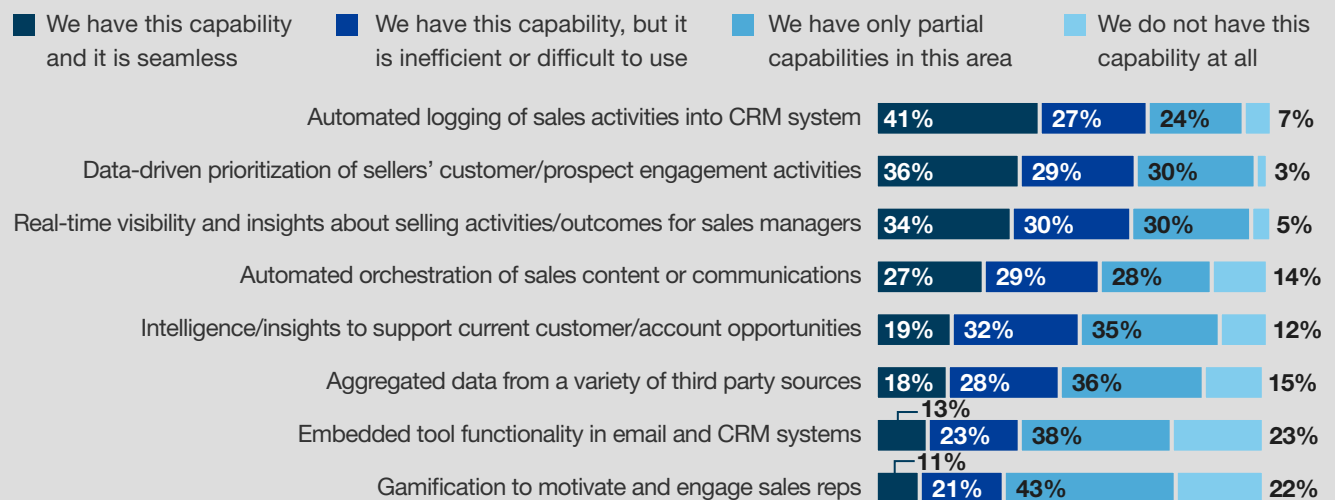
**Top five approaches sales organizations are taking to evolve to meet changing buyer needs:**

- Investments in tools to help prioritize and facilitate sales communications and activities.
- Better messaging/templates for a one-to-one customer engagement.
- Sales reorganization to better match buyer behaviors.
- Investments in predictive analytics tools to better prioritize leads.
- Standardized sales processes around CRM functionality.

Base: 274 manager-level and above sales technology decision makers at North American and European B2B enterprises  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, October 2017

**Figure 3**

**“To what extent does your current sales technology stack provide your sales organization with the following capabilities?”**



**The majority of organizations do not have efficient and easy to use technology to power key sales activities.**

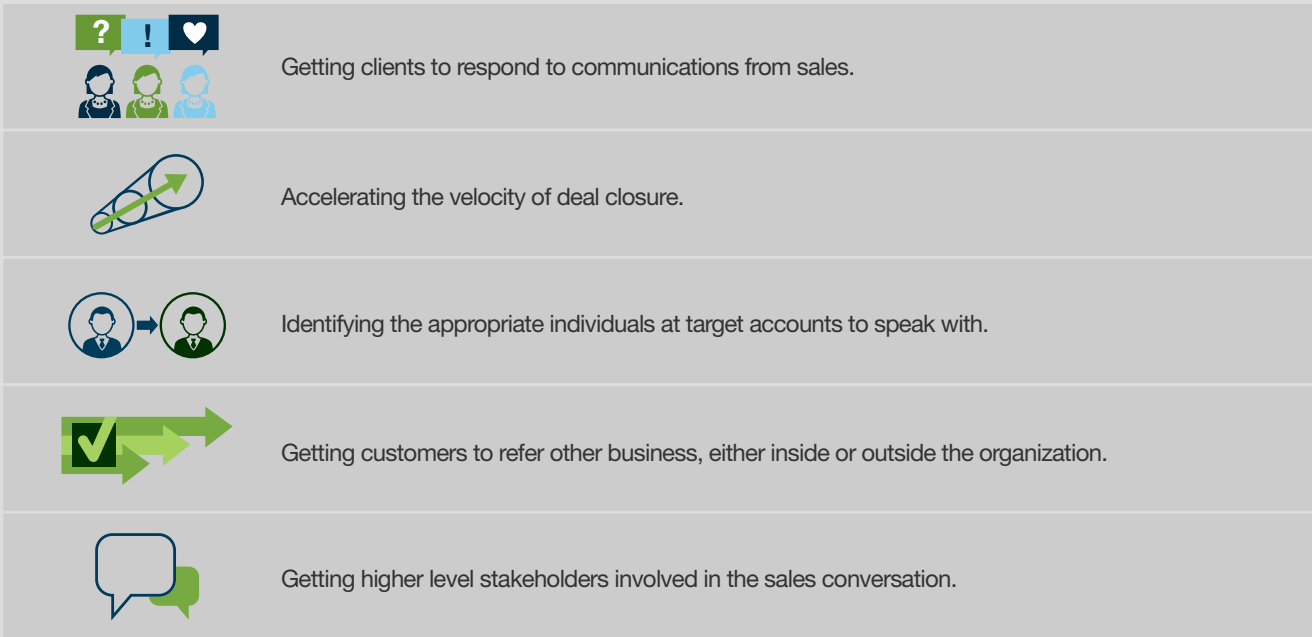
Base: 274 manager-level and above sales technology decision makers at North American and European B2B enterprises  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, October 2017

# Sales Reps Aren't Maximizing Effectiveness With Current Processes

Forrester has found that most B2B enterprises do not have the people, process, and technology in place to adjust easily to changing market realities — and have therefore been slow to adapt to serve digitally driven customers.<sup>2</sup> While leaders plod along in their business transformations, sales reps are left to try to execute on modern sales strategies with outdated tools. These reps find it extremely difficult to effectively serve up the speed and personalization that modern buyers demand, due to a lack of insights to drive action and an increased administrative burden placed on them by legacy processes:

- › **Top sales challenges include identifying the right prospects, getting them to respond, and closing deals quickly.** With their current processes and toolkits, the vast majority of reps find every stage of client engagement to be at least moderately challenging. Relationship data continues to flood and overwhelm reps, and as such the top cited challenges include getting clients to respond to communications, closing deals faster, identifying appropriate individuals at target accounts to speak with, and getting customers to refer other business (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**  
Top five sales challenges based on current capabilities and processes:



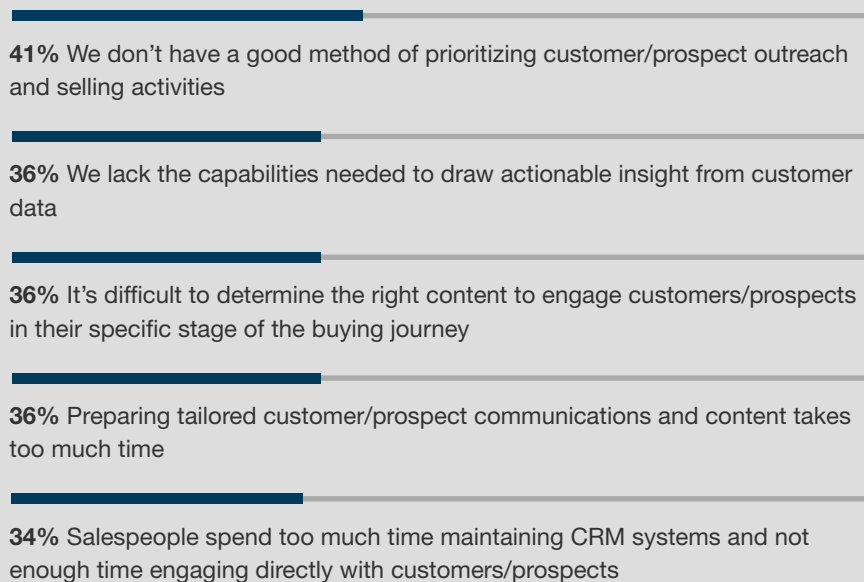
Base: 274 manager-level and above sales technology decision makers at North American and European B2B enterprises  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, October 2017

- › **Sales leaders want systems to help reps analyze customer data and prioritize/recommend the most effective selling activities.** We asked respondents what challenges most inhibit their effectiveness. The top response was that they don't have good prioritization methods for customer/prospect outreach and selling activities, followed by an inability to draw actionable insight from customer data, difficulty serving up relevant content that aligns to the specific stages of the buying journey, and finding time to prepare tailored customer/prospect communications (see Figure 5). Manually addressing these needs is not scalable.
- › **Organizations — and customers — want sales reps to spend more time engaging with customers/prospects.** Sales reps are spending too much time on administrative logging and CRM maintenance and not enough time engaging directly with customers/prospects. This is an issue that has only grown more severe as a side effect of companies becoming more data and analytics-focused, as sellers are increasingly pressured to spend time reporting activities and updating forecasts. In the end, this is not where anybody wants sellers to focus their efforts. Forrester's data shows that customers highly value well-designed human interactions, particularly when making complex decisions.<sup>3</sup> Our study found that sales decision makers would rather have their reps spend an average of 24% more time responding to prospect/customer inquiries and 20% more time engaging directly with customers/prospects than they do currently.

**Figure 5**

**“What challenges does your sales organization currently face that prevents you and your team from being more effective?”**

(Select all that apply)



Base: 274 manager-level and above sales technology decision makers at North American and European B2B enterprises

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, October 2017

# Drive Effective Sales Actions With AI And Automation Tools

Modern SFA technology, with embedded AI and machine learning, extends functionality beyond the needs of sales management to provide tools for sellers to build deeper relationships with prospects and customers.<sup>4</sup> Whether it's natural language processing to automate data capture and highlight at-risk opportunities, prioritizing leads and opportunities based on likelihood of closure and deal size, virtual assistants to quickly find answers, or the recommendation of products, offers, and next best actions throughout the sales process, the opportunities are nearly endless. With these AI capabilities and more, sellers have become valuable to their customers beyond just the buy phase of their journeys. Organizations are investing heavily in SFA and finding that it delivers significant value:

- › **Sales force automation software is the most planned and implemented sales/marketing technology and is considered to be the most valuable to sales success.** Sales force automation software is on the rise. Our study found that it is the fastest expanding sales technology both in terms of current and future implementations. In fact, only 4% of our respondent base said that they are 'not interested.' Logically, the three sales technologies that are generating the most interest among sales leaders are also the three that are seen as most valuable to an organization's success — with sales force automation at the top, followed by configure price quote (CPQ) applications and B2B data management solutions (see Figure 6).

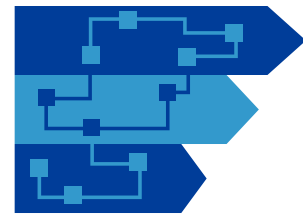
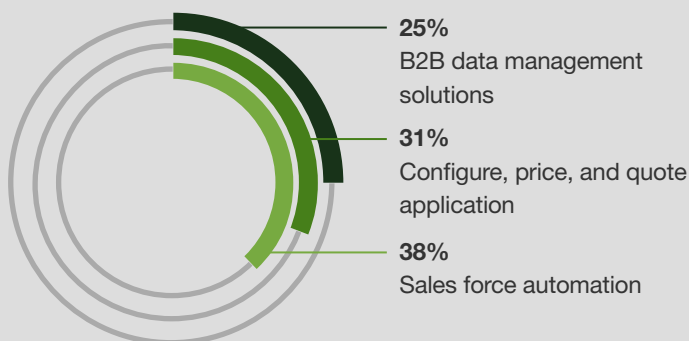


Figure 6

“Which applications or platforms in your current sales technology stack contribute most to your sales organization's success?” (% ranked in top 3)



Base: 274 manager-level and above sales technology decision makers at North American and European B2B enterprises  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, October 2017



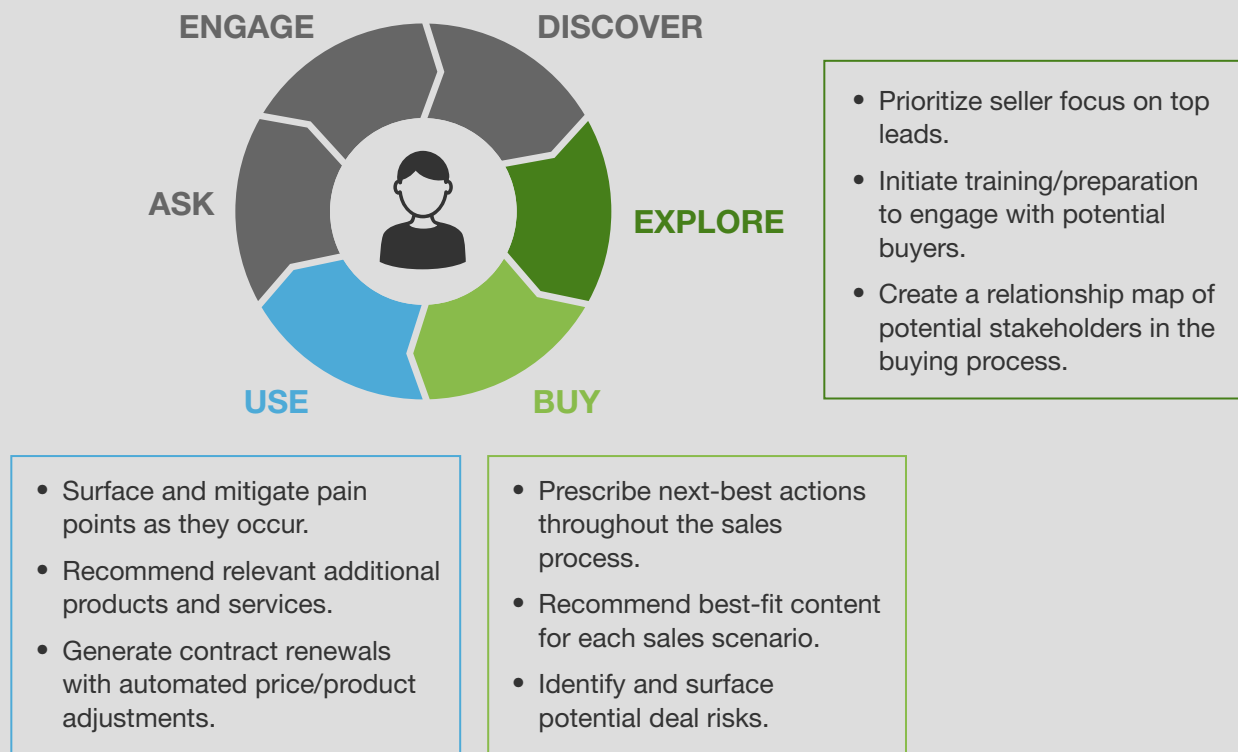
Sales force automation is seen as the top technology for driving sales success.



› **Automation and intelligence allow sales reps to quickly respond to customer needs across the buyer journey.** With AI, sales reps now can support a much broader range of pre-sale and post-sale activities, extending their influence well beyond the ‘buy’ phase of the customer journey (see Figure 7). Overall, sales reps will better understand their customers, allowing them to proactively engage customers in the explore phase as they research their purchases, and better understand post-sale patterns to predict up-sell or enrichment opportunities. This results in customers receiving more holistic service and advice from sellers, and ultimately getting more value out of the buyer-seller relationship.

Figure 7

AI broadens the seller’s influence beyond the buy phase of their customers’ journeys



Source : “How AI Will Transform Sales,” Forrester Research, Inc., December 18, 2017

- › **Virtual assistants will be part of future sales automation – 92% of organizations are interested and/or are already in the process of implementing them.** The trend towards intelligent, augmented assistance is taking hold for both buyers and sellers. Organizations are turning to AI solutions that can both manage administrative tasks and provide sales reps with better and more personalized information, therefore augmenting their ability to help buyers along their purchasing journey. These virtual assistants may search knowledge systems to find relevant customer or product information, log notes into CRM software, or schedule follow-up calls. Using these tools, sales reps are better able to form an emotional connection with customers, engaging in interactions that are much more dynamic and much less scripted. Virtual assistants will become increasingly conversational, allowing buyers and sellers alike to express their needs in natural human language and get the outcomes that they are looking for.<sup>5</sup> These tools are on the radar for most sales organizations: 22% of organizations have implemented virtual assistants today, 25% are in the planning/piloting process to adopt them within the next 12 months, and another 42% have expressed interest.

# Key Recommendations

Customer relationship management (CRM) has been a mainstay in enterprises for decades, and SFA has been there since the very beginning, but it's now time for businesses to reevaluate and explore the importance of these investments. Modern SFA solutions have extended their value from management reporting to sales empowerment, largely thanks to recent innovations around AI. These advancements have unlocked previously untapped potential to drive a business transformation. Forrester's in-depth study of sales technology decision makers yielded several important recommendations:



## **Businesses must invest in sales force automation as a key lever for empowering modern, relationship-driven sales reps.**

Businesses must treat SFA as the central nervous system of their sales organizations. Since these tools store all of your invaluable data on your buyers, businesses must focus on reducing the friction for sellers to input data and receive insights. This new focus on insights allows sellers to realize ambitions of turning transactions into relationships, thereby opening up the technology foundation to all possible interactive avenues and creating a differentiated sales experience for your customers.



## **The scope of sales force automation must go beyond automation.**

Although the benefits of process automation and transparency into activities should not go overlooked, businesses must start thinking of SFA as an insights and guidance engine. Modern SFA tools have moved from being process-driven data repositories to tools that can suggest next best actions, surface relevant presentation materials, and even inform sellers on ideal times and methods to engage with their buyers. These intelligent capabilities must permeate through and be core to your sales technology strategy.



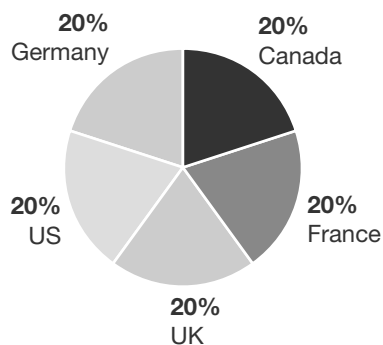
**Sales force automation should be treated as a key AI pillar.** Next-generation customer engagement will be powered with artificial intelligence. Forrester data shows that businesses are prioritizing their AI investments around the sales funnel. SFA represents some of the greatest potential for AI solutions due to its role in storing customer data and driving buyer-seller engagement. By having an SFA system that uses AI to automate the capture of valuable data, to intelligently guide sales engagement, and to foster new interfaces like voice and text, businesses can fundamentally transform sales and customer engagement.

## Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 274 manager-level or above sales technology decision makers at B2B enterprises with 500 employees or more. Respondents were located in Germany, Canada, the US, UK, or France, and worked in financial services, insurance, manufacturing, or technology. Forrester evaluated respondents' perceptions of changing market dynamics, evolving business strategies, selling challenges, and current/planned technology adoption. Respondents were offered a small incentive as a thank you for time spent on the survey. The study was conducted fully in October 2017.

## Appendix B: Demographics/Data

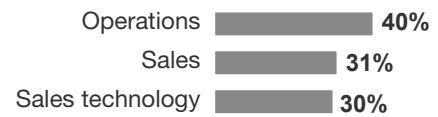
“In which country are you located?”



“Using your best estimate, how many employees work for your firm/organization worldwide?”



“Which of the following best describes your current position/department?”



Base: 274 manager-level and above sales technology decision makers at North American and European B2B enterprises  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Microsoft, October 2017

## Appendix C: Supplemental Material

### RELATED FORRESTER RESEARCH

“How AI Will Transform Sales,” Forrester Research, Inc., December 18, 2017. (<https://www.forrester.com/report/How+AI+Will+Transform+Sales/-/E-RES132849>)

“Next-Gen Tools Will Drive Your Digital Transformation In Sales,” Forrester Research Inc., November 27, 2017. (<https://www.forrester.com/report/NextGen+Tools+Will+Drive+Your+Digital+Transformation+In+Sales/-/E-RES137504>)

“Organize And Staff For B2B Digital Transformation,” Forrester Research, Inc., November 7, 2017. (<https://www.forrester.com/report/Organize+And+Staff+For+B2B+Digital+Transformation/-/E-RES78781>)

## Appendix D: Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Source: “Next-Gen Tools Will Drive Your Digital Transformation In Sales,” Forrester Research, Inc., November 27, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Source: “Organize And Staff For B2B Digital Transformation,” Forrester Research, Inc., November 7, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Source: “Rethink Customer Service To Build Emotional Engagement,” Forrester Research, Inc., May 22, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Source: “The Forrester Wave: Sales Force Automation Solutions, Q2 2017” Forrester Research, Inc., June 27, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Source: “AI Will Revolutionize Digital Experiences,” Forrester Research, Inc., September 11, 2017.