



**CSO Insights™**  
The Research Division of Miller Heiman Group

# Selling in the Age of Ceaseless Change:

## *The 2018-2019 Sales Performance Report*



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## SUMMARY

Machiavelli famously said that nations have no permanent friends, only permanent interests. Sales organizations also have permanent interests, and they make a mistake when they assume they have permanent tools, resources, processes... or permanent customers. Change can carry a company forward or leave it behind.

In the age of ceaseless change, performance improvement is a continual quest, and sits at the top of many sales leaders' lists of permanent interests.

CSO Insights' *2018-2019 Sales Performance* survey of nearly 900 global sales leaders identified four main objectives underpinning their performance improvement efforts in the coming 12 months:

- Improving lead generation
- Capturing new accounts
- Expanding penetration into existing customers
- Increasing win rates

The purpose of this report is to show how sales organizations today are performing in terms of these objectives, how that compares to recent years and what successful companies are doing that's working.

**Chapter 1** begins with an overview of the state of sales, as expressed by the 2018 Sales Relationship Process (SRP) Matrix. While much in the world of sales is changing rapidly, sales *results* have not changed much. Organizations that are thriving have three characteristics in common: They have a customer-centric culture, their sales process is dynamically aligned to the customer's path, and they are confident in their sellers' ability to provide insight and perspective to customers.

**Chapter 2** offers four data-derived recommendations for improving lead generation: approach leads from the customer's path, establish a common understanding of effective collaboration, fix the basics by building a foundation of definitions, scoring models and integrated processes, and get prospecting right.

**Chapter 3** takes an in-depth look at study participants' most often cited goal: capturing new accounts. New account selling is more time-consuming now than it was five years ago, and knowing how to identify and prioritize those prospects who are most likely to buy is essential.

**Chapter 4** finds three ways to increase penetration into existing accounts: bridge the gap between customer service and sales, use "customer experience" rather than sales process as a backbone to sales transformation, and explore new technologies.

**Chapter 5** tackles the topic of increasing win rates, "the one metric we have tracked over the years that causes the most heartburn for CSOs, CFOs and CEOs." Here again the SRP Matrix relationship levels are a factor, with sellers who have achieved "Trusted Partner" status reporting the highest win rates (59.9%).

**Chapter 6** concludes the report with lessons learned from nearly 900 sales leaders who candidly answered questions like, "If you could completely re-create your sales organization starting with a blank slate, what would you do differently?" The how-to recommendations for sales transformation are, we think, particularly valuable.

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## CHAPTER 1: The State of Sales

Every year, CSO Insights conducts a study to assess the state of B2B sales: When viewed as a discipline, a function and an industry, where is sales going? What are sales organizations doing differently? What's working and what isn't? How are the challenges sales leaders face changing?

We start with a look at the numbers. What we notice in 2018 is that revenue attainment (making THE number) is on an uptrend, moving from 88.9% to 93.9% in the last year, making this the third straight year of growth. However, this upswing is not present in the leading KPIs used to measure sales productivity:

- Quota attainment has increased only slightly from 2017, moving from 53.0% to 54.3%. However, this modest growth is not large enough nor consistent enough to be considered a trend. Rates are still below the 2014 rate of 63%.
- Win rates have stayed the same as the previous year at 47.3%. Sellers are still closing less than half of what they forecast to close.

- Seller performance: This year, we checked in on 16 different activities undertaken by sellers, from needs analysis to cross-sale/upsell, prioritizing prospects and more. Sales leaders considered their teams to be less effective at 15 of the 16 than they were five years ago.

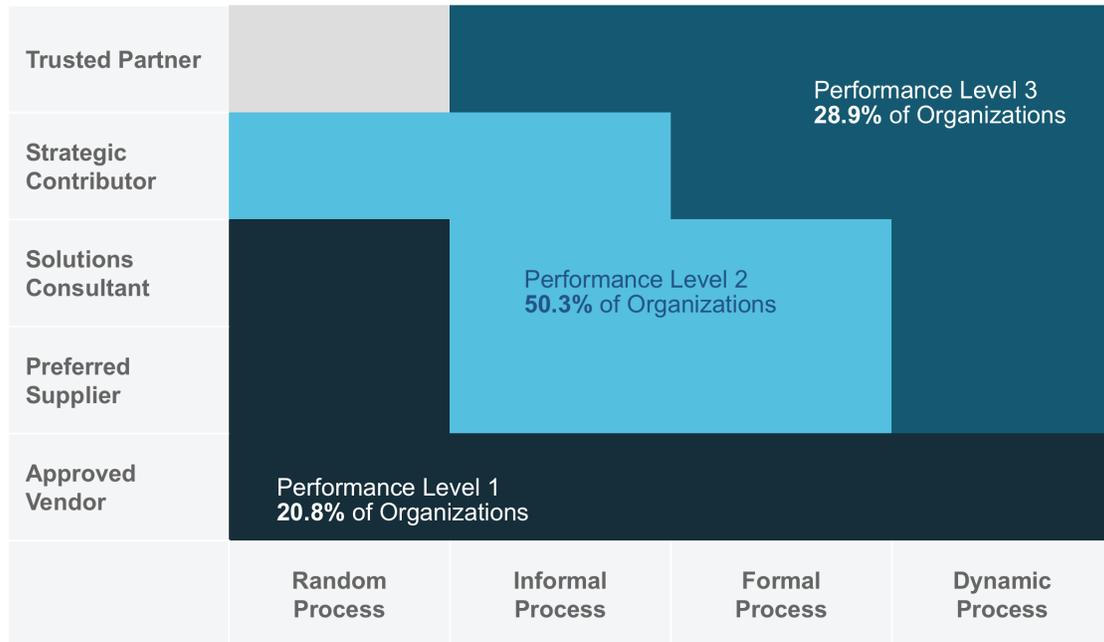
Sales leaders are finding a way to make the number, which is critical to survival. But they aren't doing it by improving the productivity and effectiveness of their sellers and sales leaders.

### **The Sales Relationship Process (SRP) Matrix™**

This stagnation is apparent when considering the lack of movement within the CSO Insights Sales Relationship Process (SRP) Matrix. The SRP Matrix is a framework for assessing sales effectiveness that keys in on two critical elements: the depth of relationships organizations have with their customers (the vertical axis) and the extent to which the sales process is formalized and deployed (the horizontal axis). Specific definitions for each level of relationship and each level of process are found in [Appendix I](#).

In comparing the matrix to the previous two years, we see very little movement.

### 2018 Sales Relationship Process Matrix



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The question is whether it matters. The answer this year (and in past 11 years that we’ve been doing this analysis) is “Yes!” The more formal the sales process and the deeper the relationship, the better the sales results.

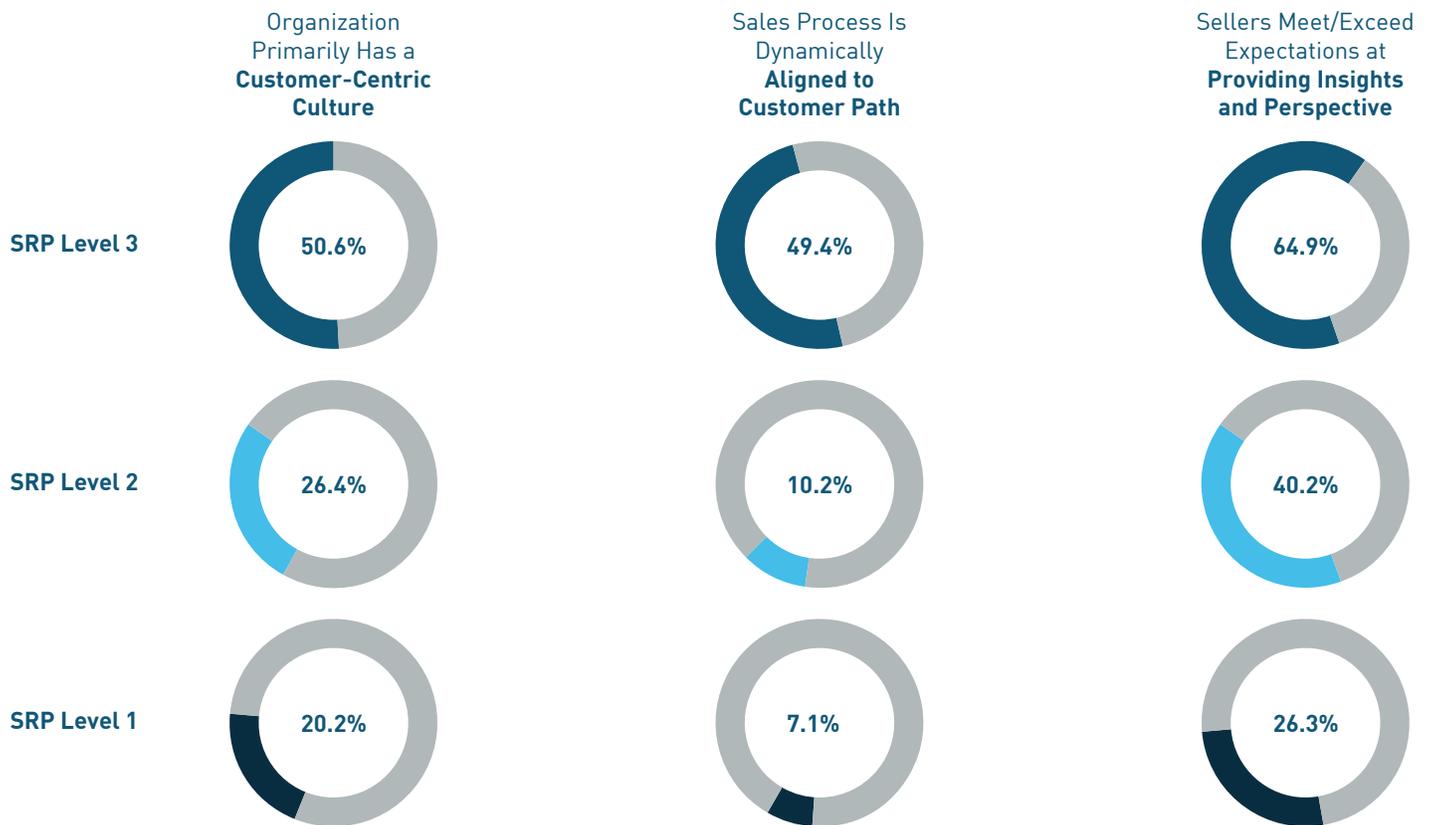
2018 SRP Metrics	Performance Level 1	Performance Level 2	Performance Level 3
Overall Plan Attainment	92.9%	93.8%	95.0%
Quota Attainment	45.8%	54.0%	60.7%
Win Rates of Forecast Deals	40.8%	46.2%	53.7%
Loss Rates of Forecast Deals	39.0%	32.2%	26.9%
No-Decisions of Forecast Deals	20.2%	21.6%	19.5%
Voluntary Turnover	10.7%	7.9%	7.6%
Involuntary Turnover	7.4%	5.4%	4.9%

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We use seven key metrics to compare organizations' performance to each other. These benchmarks apply globally and across industry. In each case (with the exception of no-decision rates which are a perennial challenge for everyone), Level 3 on average outperforms Level 2, which outperforms Level 1.

Clearly, moving from a lower to a higher performance level pays dividends. What is the key to doing so? We found three compelling characteristics of Level 3 organizations in this year's data:

1. They were much more likely than other organizations to say that their culture was customer-centric (versus sales, service or process centric).
2. They had a high level of alignment between sales process and customer's path\*.
3. They were much more confident in their sellers' ability to provide insights and perspective to customers as a critical element of their sales approach.



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\*We prefer "path" to "journey." The distinction is that a journey may be open-ended or even aimless, but buyers and sellers agree that a path has a destination.

## Customer-centric culture

Most would agree that culture can be a strong contributor or inhibitor to success. As such, we were curious to know what kinds of cultures were associated with higher performance. We asked the sales leaders in our study to tell us how they perceived their culture. Was it a service culture? Sales culture? Process? Product/Marketing? Customer-centric?

Level 3 organizations were far more likely to say that they had customer-centric cultures. In fact, they were about twice as likely to have this kind of culture as Level 2 organizations, with over half of the Level 3 organizations identified as customer-centric (50.6%). Only 20.2% of Level 1 organizations selected this option. Interestingly, having a customer-centric culture had strong correlations to *both* higher levels of relationship and higher levels of process, effectively moving organizations both up and over on the matrix.

Another interesting finding was that process cultures didn't actually necessarily have a dynamic sales process (one that is defined, formalized and measured). And sales cultures didn't always enjoy the best relationships. In fact, sales cultures were more often associated with being an approved vendor or preferred supplier, the lowest two levels of relationship. Very few sales cultures (13%) were perceived to be at the top two levels of relationship.

## Aligning sales process to the customer's path

This year's data suggests that aligning your sales process with your customer's path is of particular importance. That path includes awareness, buying (most closely linked to sales process) and implementation. About one-half (49.4%) of Level

3 firms reported the deepest level of alignment, compared to 10.2% of Level 2 and 7.1% of Level 1.

As you might expect, process alignment played a significant role in driving organizations further along the horizontal axis of the SRP Matrix and was the single biggest differentiator among those with high and low levels of process adoption. We've long espoused the need for process in sales. Yet, there are slight but important nuances that bring a new wrinkle to this kind of process mapping into today's world.

It is no longer, if it ever was, a solo journey. In the past, it was helpful, even insightful, to map buyer actions to seller actions as a roadmap to a desired end. Buyers were less informed, less experienced and more open to guidance. As we note in the *2018 Buyer Preferences Study*, today's buyer sees less of a role for sellers in their buying path. The balance of power has shifted and so, too, should the sales process. The best practice now is to map selling actions to the buyers' processes, rather than the reverse. For example, what is the seller doing to help the customer make the decision they need to make at that point in their process? How is the seller helping the buyer move to the next step of the buying process? The parallel paths will still take sellers to the desired destination (winning the business), but the point of departure will be on the buyer side rather than on the seller side.

## Providing insights and perspective

The final element that stood out for our Level 3 organizations was their confidence in their sellers' ability to provide thought leadership, insights and perspective to clients. This is an element of sales

methodology, the “how” of executing the sales process and connecting it, interaction by interaction, to the customer path.

Nearly two-thirds (64.9%) of Level 3 organizations meet or exceed expectations in providing customers with thought leadership and perspectives to advance their thinking, whereas only 40.2% of Level 2 organizations do so, and just over one-quarter (26.3%) of Level 1 organizations do so. Looked at from a relationship standpoint, when salespeople exceed expectations in providing customers with insights and perspectives to advance their thinking, organizations are perceived as strategic contributors or actual partners more than half (58.6%) the time.

***Looking at all three of these characteristics together shows that Level 3 organizations are embracing “customer experience” as a broad concept, of which sales process and salespeople are just one piece.***

With this as a backdrop, sales leaders have some decisions to make about where to focus their energies. We’ll devote our next chapters to exploring in depth the four primary approaches that sales leaders are taking to achieve their goals over the next 12 months: improving lead generation, capturing new accounts, increasing penetration into existing accounts, and increasing win rates. These chapters will provide specific illustrations of how this modern approach to the customer plays out in sales transformation activities.

## CHAPTER 2: Improving Lead Generation

Sales start with leads. As such, the effectiveness of lead generation processes determines a sales leader’s future success. The more ambitious their revenue and growth goals, the more important – and the more challenging – lead generation becomes.

In addition to being a top objective for sales leaders in our study for each of the last four years, it was also a top challenge. In fact, the “inability to generate enough qualified leads” was the second most impactful barrier to achieving success this year (37.8%), right after difficult competitive differentiation (39.4%). Despite a constant focus on leads, many sales leaders continue to struggle to answer:

- What is a lead?
- Where do leads actually come from?

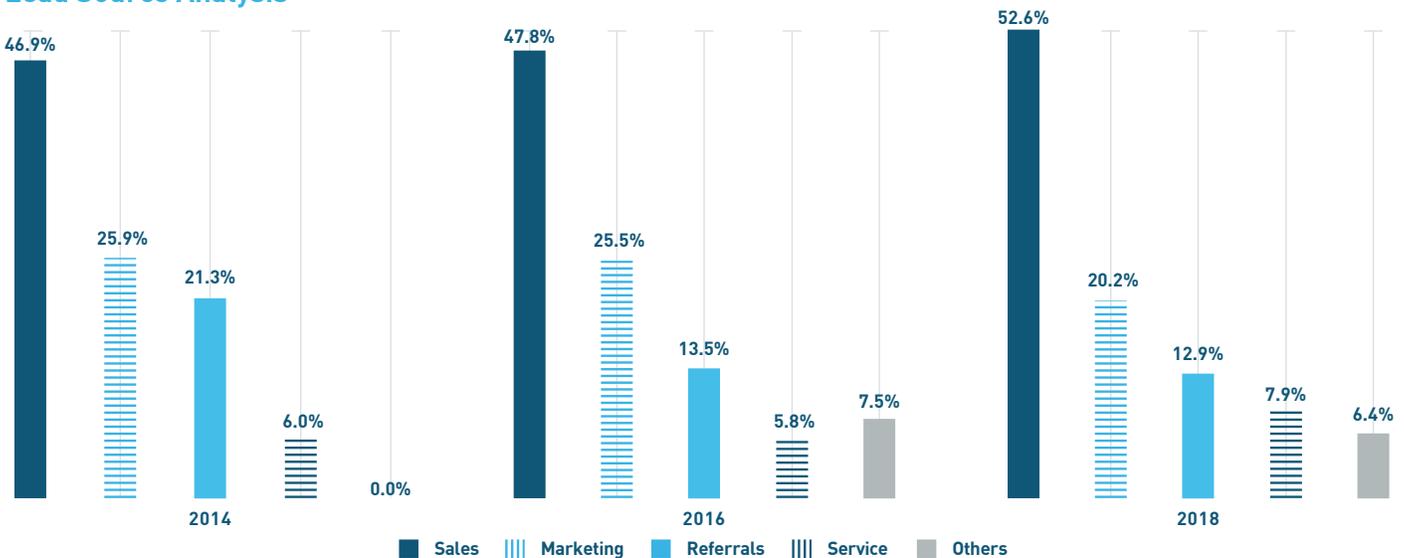
- Which leads are the best?
- Who should own them?
- How do we use technologies like marketing automation to improve effectiveness?

The answers are in the data.

### Salespeople still generate the most leads

The usual assumption is that lead generation is first and foremost a marketing responsibility. However, looking at our long-term research, the data tells a different story. Sales, marketing, and to a lesser degree, service and referrals, are the most common lead sources, with sales leading the way.

### Lead Source Analysis



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This may be surprising, given the trend towards increasing levels of technology within marketing functions. In 2018, more than 6,200 vendors provided more than 6,800 marketing solutions (see [Scott Brinker](#), Chief Marketing Technologist). New platforms and AI tools are launched daily to use for Account Based Marketing (ABM), market identification, lead scoring, campaign automation and more.

In the initial stages of this technology explosion, the first benefits realized were an uptick in volume and activities that could be automated: more emails, more messages, more contacts. These tools did not improve prospecting quality in the eyes of the prospect. After focusing on the automation aspect of lead generation for the last couple of years, it's now time to leverage the analytics that technology provides to tailor and personalize the messaging and to fundamentally change the paradigm from quantity to quality. It's not the number of messages that counts. It's the conversion rate that makes the difference, and that's based on quality.

GDPR, in place since May 2018 for all organizations that want to sell to European citizens, mandates that all prospecting messages be sent only to those recipients who have expressed a general interest in an organization's offerings. That will force sellers and marketers to create more value, relevance and differentiation to attract potential buyers.

As technology evolves, so does the organizational structure. In addition to the often murky question of "What is a lead?" there is also the question of "Who is sales?" In many structures, sales development reps (SDRs) do the heavy lifting on lead generation, taking

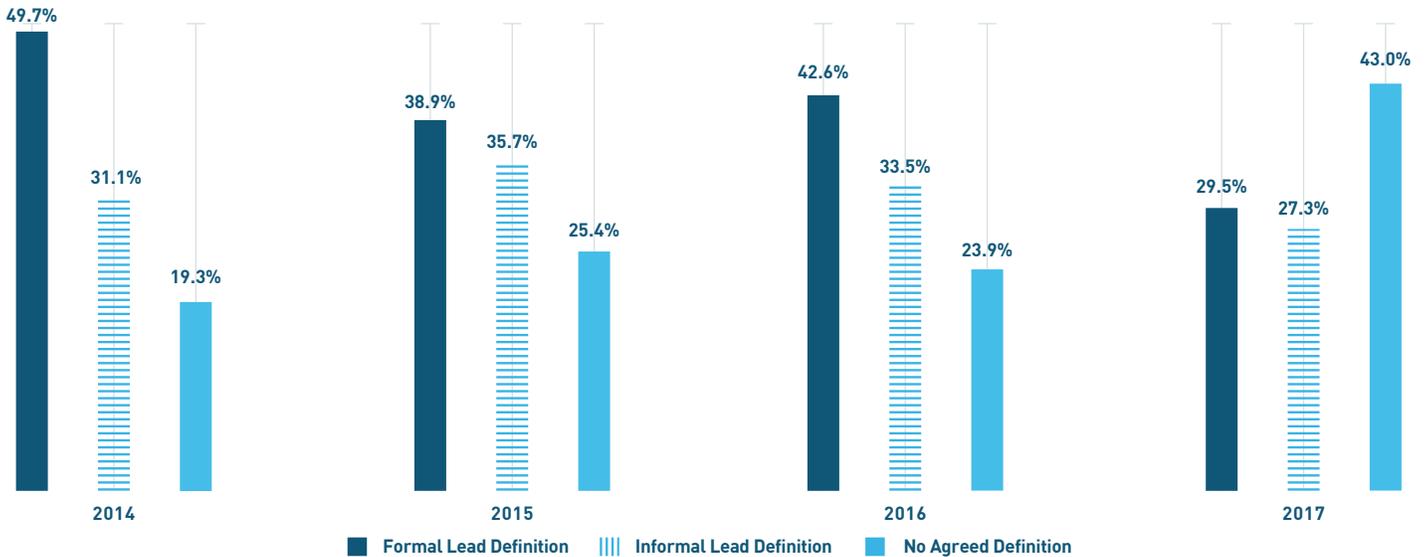
the initial steps to field inbound interest and conduct the qualifying and nurturing activities needed to turn the interest into a qualified lead to be passed to sales. In some models, SDRs report into marketing, while in others they report into sales.

Finally, we should shine a spotlight on social selling. Salespeople are their own content marketers, individual brand managers and lead generators via the way that they leverage social tools. In the [2017 Sales Enablement Optimization Study](#), we find that the better aligned marketing and sales social strategies are, the better the social selling adoption is, and the better quota attainment and win rates are.

#### **Alignment on lead definition is getting worse**

Sales and marketing can't collaborate on leads if they can't agree on what a lead actually is. To invest marketing resources wisely, a lead definition should be tailored to fit the ideal customer profile, specify various stages of lead maturity up to "sales-ready," and establish marketing and sales responsibilities along the customer's path. In addition, there should be a clear understanding of how to measure lead generation effectiveness. It is not about the number of leads. The concept should be centered on the revenue contribution of each single lead, regardless of its origin.

### Lead Definition Alignment Between Sales and Marketing



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At first sight, the data is depressing. How could it be that more organizations had a formal lead definition in 2014 (49.7%) than in 2016 (42.6%) and in 2017 (29.5%)?

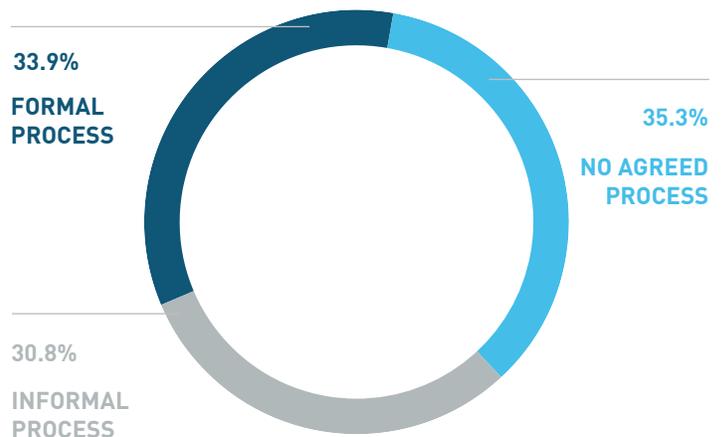
The matter is more complex than this question suggests. Based on the data, half of the organizations started their marketing automation revolution with a lead definition and the other half leveraged technology without a lead definition, perhaps assuming that the technology would alone solve the issue.

Before AI-based solutions were available, it was about building the model and asking technology to run the model as defined. Now, AI-based solutions use the initial model, learn from the data and improve and adjust the initial model based on these learnings. This allows technology to drive both efficiency and effectiveness. Organizations should consider how AI-based technology could help them improve their lead generation efforts.

### Nurturing leads requires collaboration

Lead definition is only one side of the coin; a common approach to lead nurturing is the other.

### Jointly Agreed Process between Sales and Marketing for Nurturing Leads



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The data from *2017 World-Class Practices Study* shows, as illustrated here, that 33.9% of organizations have a formal lead nurturing process used by both sales and marketing. Another 30.8% of organizations reported having an informal one, and 35.3% reported having no agreed-upon process.

***Putting this data point in perspective with the lead definition data point, we can see that less than one-third of organizations have clarity on their lead definition and their lead nurturing process.***

The more marketing technology is leveraged and the more marketing and sales processes are integrated, the more important it is to have both sides of the coin equally formalized and implemented. While a few years ago, a clear lead definition seemed to be enough, it's now evident that leads have to be nurtured until they become sales-ready in order to drive lead generation effectiveness.

Looking at the issue from a customer's path perspective, it's obvious that organizations need both: a clear lead definition, including a scoring model, and a lead nurturing process. Sending "unready" leads directly to the sales force kills the lead and frustrates the sales force.

## Recommendations

Based on the data discussed above, there are several ways to improve lead generation effectiveness.

- **Change your design point to the customer's path.** As discussed in Chapter 1, the most successful organizations are connecting all of their sales processes to the customer. Organizations worry too much about aligning sales and marketing with each other. They need to worry more about aligning them both with the customer. That drives

the integration by default. Additionally, use the data from our *2018 Buyer Preferences Study* to support the need to look at lead generation from the customer's perspective.

- **Establish a common understanding of effective collaboration.** Collaboration is not something that happens for its own sake. Instead, effective collaboration is always focused on the objectives, here lead generation effectiveness, to be achieved. Also, it's important to define how success will be measured. A dashboard that reports a combination of leading indicators, such as conversion rates per lead stage, and lagging indicators such as revenue contribution, will increase visibility and awareness of lead generation effectiveness.
- **Fix the basics: definitions, scoring models and integrated processes.** Define what a lead is as compared to an inquiry and to an opportunity with several maturity stages. Terms like "marketing qualified" or "sales qualified" can distract from the customer as the design point and may not be needed. Instead, look at different lead maturity stages through the lens of the customer's path. Next, develop a scoring model for the qualification and lead nurturing steps. Develop models that reflect the specifics of your industry as well as the complexity of your buying/selling scenarios. If this work has been done, integrate these into your processes and ensure that the technology you use is based on your definitions and models, *not* the other way around. With that foundation in place, AI-based technology solutions can gather and analyze the data to further evolve the model.
- **From inability to ability: get prospecting right.** There are three areas where marketing and sales leaders should collaborate to drive lead generation effectiveness:

- o **Process.** Generating leads covers the early stages of the customer's path, which makes it a collaborative challenge for marketing and sales. The process has to ensure that preparation and research for tailored campaigns based on the lead definition are mandatory. In parallel, the [process should also ensure that no unprepared cold calls and no "one size fits all" messages are sent to random recipients.](#)
- o **Sales enablement.** Establish a solid value messaging approach that creates [consistency across all enablement services](#), especially those designed for lead generation purposes.

Ideally marketing has an orchestrating role to ensure that value messages are consistent and tailored in all relevant enablement services.

- o **Frontline managers.** The most important step to [drive reinforcement and adoption of the desired lead generation behaviors](#) is for the frontline managers in marketing and sales to consistently coach their direct reports on the desired lead generation and prospecting practices and behaviors. Measuring success based on leading indicators, such as conversion rates, allows for quick adjustments based on changing buyer behaviors.

## CHAPTER 3: Capturing New Accounts

“Grow market share” is a never-ending goal for most sales organizations. In the *2018-2019 Sales Performance Study*, capturing new accounts was the most often cited priority (57.3%) when we asked the study participants to share their top goals for this year. Historically, this has continuously been at or near the top of the list. While garnering the position as top of mindshare, it is interesting to see that on average, revenue from new customers accounted for only 29.9% of total revenues.

### Effectiveness of Closing New Business with Customers

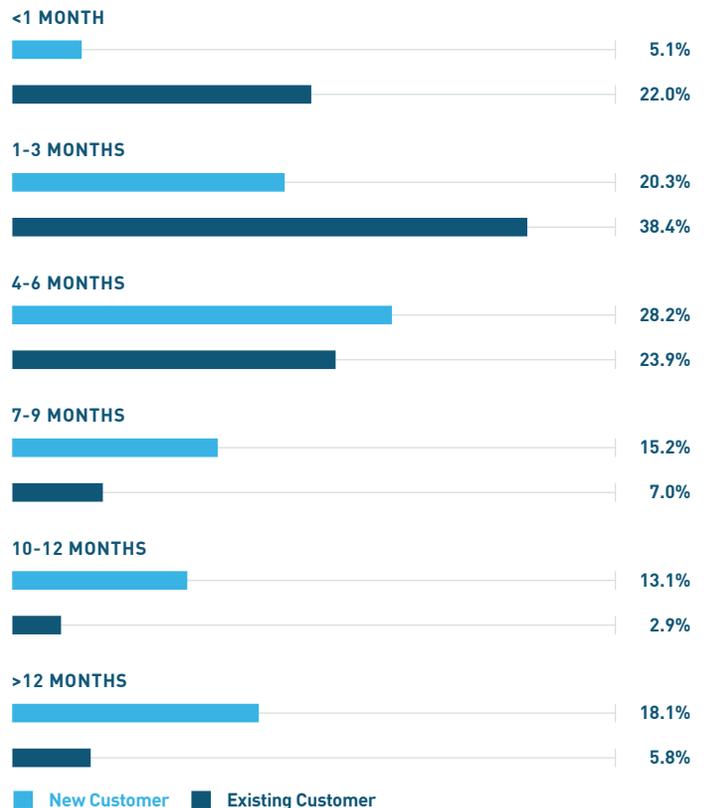


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Clearly, knowing what you want to accomplish is important, but knowledge alone won't make it happen. When we asked study participants to assess their ability to close deals with new customers, we found that very few sales organizations cited this as one of their core competencies. Almost 70% of companies rate this aspect of selling as one that needs improvement, if not a major process redesign, making it the lowest rated operational metric in the *2018-2019 Sales Performance Study*.

The old maxim that it is easier to sell more to an existing customer than it is to sell to a new customer takes on new meaning when you dive into the numbers behind that thought. As part of this year's study, we gathered data on the length of sell cycles for both new and existing customers. In the chart, we see a summary of the study findings, which clearly validates this adage. We'll discuss selling into existing accounts in the next chapter.

### Typical Sales Cycle to Close a Deal with New and Existing Customers



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When we compare this year’s data to that of five years ago, we also see new account selling becoming more time-consuming. In 2013, 30% of the study participants reported a sell cycle of three months or less, as compared to 25.4% this year. At the other end of the spectrum, longer-than-one-year sell cycles have increased from 10.0% in 2013 to 18.1% this year.

We know that continually adding new customers is a priority, and we also know it is hard. What can be done to make it easier? To start to answer that question, we analyzed the study data, looking for factors that had a statistically significant impact on new account capture. In doing so, three insights emerged.

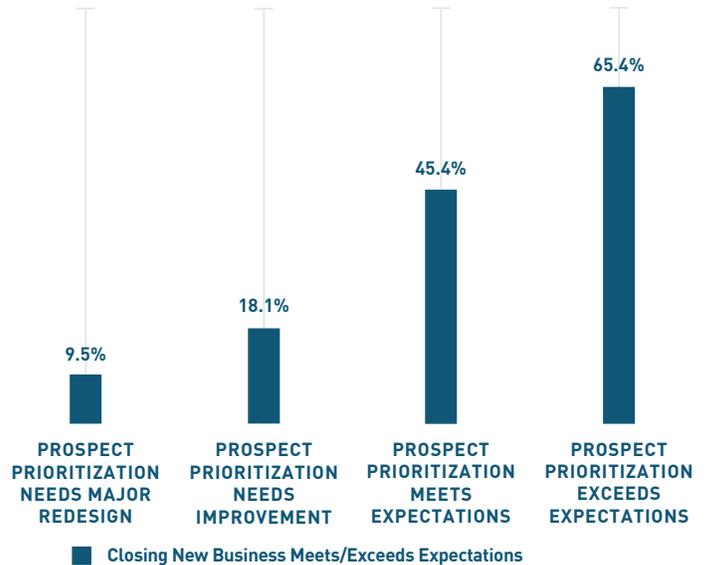
### Prospect prioritization is critical, but difficult

Conceptually, sales and marketing executives understand that not all prospects are created equal. There are factors that can make a prospect more likely or less likely to buy from you. You may, for example, sell more effectively into certain vertical industries than others. You may relate better to some key stakeholders than others. You may solve some specific problems more comprehensively than others.

In segmenting the study data based on how effective a sales organization is at prioritizing which accounts to focus on, we found a strong, statistically significant relationship between that attribute of selling and a company’s ability to close business with new customers.

As the chart illustrates, a majority (65.4%) of those exceeding expectations at prioritizing their prospects are also confident in their ability to close new

### Prospect Prioritization Related to Closing New Business



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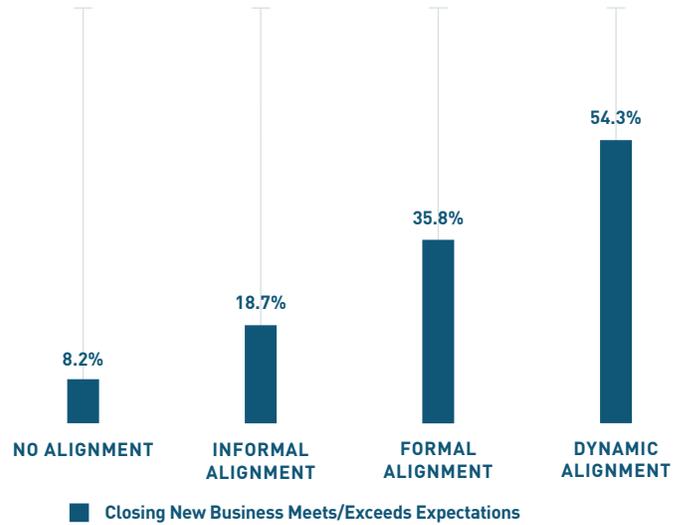
business. On the flipside, very few (9.5%) of those who assess their prioritization efforts as needing major redesign would say that closing new accounts is a strength.

The differences in performance should not just grab the attention of sales management, but executive management as well. But let us share with you a few more metrics. Looking at the full survey population, only 43.3% of firms received a “meets or exceeds expectations” for prospect prioritization, compared to 56.7% of those who had a rating of “needs major redesign or needs improvement.” A concerning trend is that when we look at the metrics from the 2013 study, the numbers were 56.4% and 43.6% respectively, with the lower performing responses now the majority. Not only is prospect prioritization a hard task; it is getting harder.

### Closing abilities improve when the sales process is aligned

We noted in Chapter 1 that the highest performing sales organizations had a high degree of alignment between their sales process and the customer’s path. One of the benefits of that alignment appears to be an organizational strength in closing new business. In assessing the relationship between these two factors in the 2018-2019 Sales Performance Study data, we saw the following correlations:

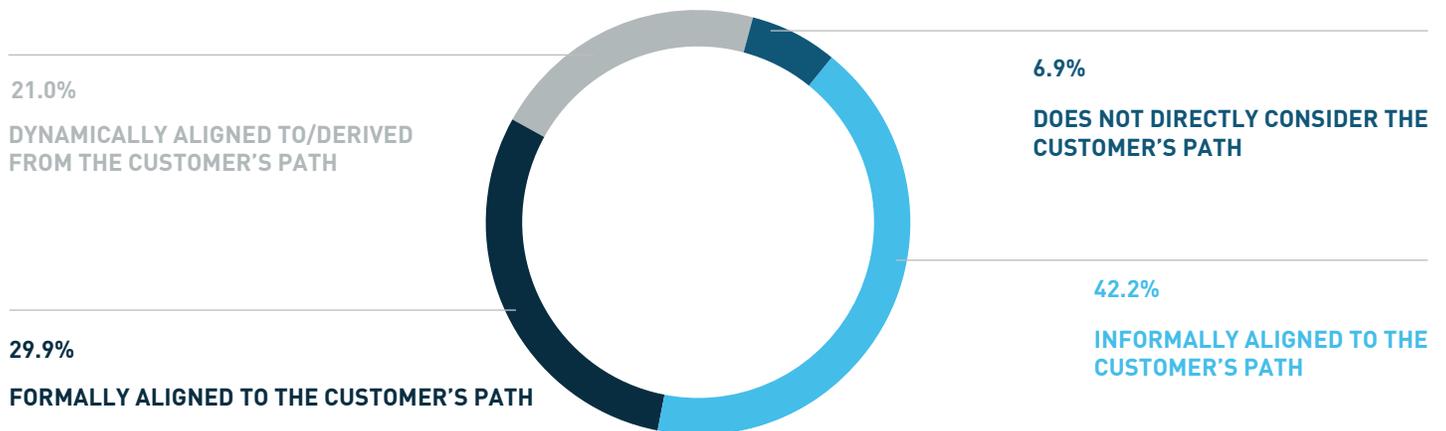
### Sales Process/Customer Path Alignment Related to Closing New Business



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A little over half (54.3%) of those with the highest level of alignment (dynamic) rated closing new accounts as a strength. Those with no process/customer path alignment were extremely unlikely (only 8.2%) to consider closing a strength. Unfortunately, despite this apparent benefit, such alignment is rare in our study.

### Sales Process Related to Customer's Path



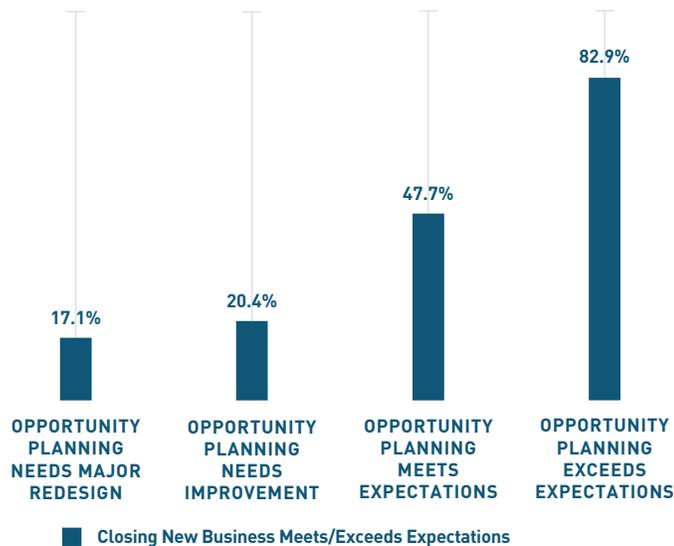
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Just 21% of our survey participants had this dynamic level of alignment, with the largest segment of respondents (42.4%) reporting that their alignment was informal. Informal alignment does not have a strong relationship to the ability to close new business.

### Plan your work, then work your plan

Opportunity planning is something many sales organizations talk about. Let’s explore some key data points that highlight why that talk needs to be backed up with action. As part of our analysis this year, we gathered data on how effective companies are at not just developing, but also executing, strategic opportunity plans

### Opportunity Planning Related to Closing New Business



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The spread in performance was one of the most profound of all the types of analyses we conducted. A strong majority (82.9%) of those exceeding expectations in opportunity planning noted closing new business as a strength. This is nearly five times

the proportion of strong closers (17.1%) found within the group needing major redesign to their opportunity planning.

A major factor to consider is that proficiency at opportunity planning and execution produced the largest increase in win rates of forecast deals of any of the operational metrics we reviewed.

A deeper look into the numbers shows that this is another example where knowing what to do does not always translate into doing it. We found that only 33.9% of the surveyed participants had a “meets or exceeds expectations” rating when it came to strategic opportunity management. Conversely, 66.1% had a “needs improvement” or lower rating. So, while the performance differences in the table above are impressive, only a minority of companies are achieving these types of results when it comes to leveraging opportunity planning to help close deals with new customers.

### Recommendations

Sales leaders have several opportunities to improve their ability to bring new customers into their organizations:

- Optimize the sales process with data.** In Chapter 1, we mentioned sales process mapping and how it has changed. Sales leaders should identify all the strategies and tactics they and their customers are currently using to move through a product evaluation/decision-making process. Once you have this documented from both the seller and buyer perspective, you can fine tune your sales process to better align with and support the buying process. If you then map both those processes into your CRM system, you set

the stage for moving to dynamic alignment. From then on, you can gather data on the activities used by both sellers and buyers to see which ones move new prospects successfully through the buy cycle. Armed with these new insights, you can optimize the sales process on an ongoing basis to best meet customer expectations and successfully deal with changes in the marketplace.

- **Treat opportunity planning as a process, not an event.** We too often see opportunity planning as an event rather than a process. By that, we mean that opportunity plans may be filled out correctly and approved by management, but then what? If they end up sitting in a folder, never seen by human beings again, then you can check off that you planned the work, but you can't say that you worked the plan. The key to changing this dynamic is to leverage technology to ensure the plans are actually executed. In addition to innovations in opportunity management capabilities in core CRM systems, there are commercially available solutions from a number of companies that focus on optimizing plan implementation. They incorporate plan execution into the salesperson's daily workflow, tracking that planned tasks are

being completed as promised, and notifying managers when things start to go off track. Using technology, more companies can turn opportunity plans into new customers.

- **Start experimenting with AI.** AI and big data are showing that they can play a significant role in providing new levels of visibility into which accounts to pursue and which to avoid. One software company that had previously been using just six attributes to segment prospects identified over 100 additional factors when they used big data tools to analyze key factors that influenced the likelihood of companies buying from them. Based on this expanded list, they achieved a 3X increase in lead conversion rates to real opportunities. As part of our 2018 sales transformation analysis, we have been reviewing AI and big data options to see how these technologies can facilitate better prospect prioritization. CSO Insights advisory services clients who want to explore these types of solutions should feel free to contact their assigned analyst for a briefing on which systems to consider and the new capabilities they can bring to the task of identifying the best new accounts to focus your selling efforts on.

## CHAPTER 4: Increasing Penetration into Existing Accounts

It's one thing to close business with a new customer, and another to keep and grow your relationships with them over time. In the *2018-2019 Sales Performance Study*, the second most important objective for sales leaders to meet their goals was increasing the penetration into their existing accounts. Sales organizations in the vast majority of business models are highly dependent on securing revenues from existing customers. Such revenues are often more predictable than other sources and ideally, as the incumbent, the sales organization should have an advantage when it comes to renewing the business.

Across all the business models, geographies and industries that comprise the almost 900 organizations in our study, revenue derived from existing customers accounted for 70.1% of total results. This was larger than in previous years. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, organizations continue to struggle with lead generation and new account capture, making them more reliant on existing relationships.

The growth in existing-customer revenue comes from expanding existing accounts rather than improving account retention. Customer churn, defined as the number of accounts that stop doing business with you in a given year, is 13.9%, remaining relatively

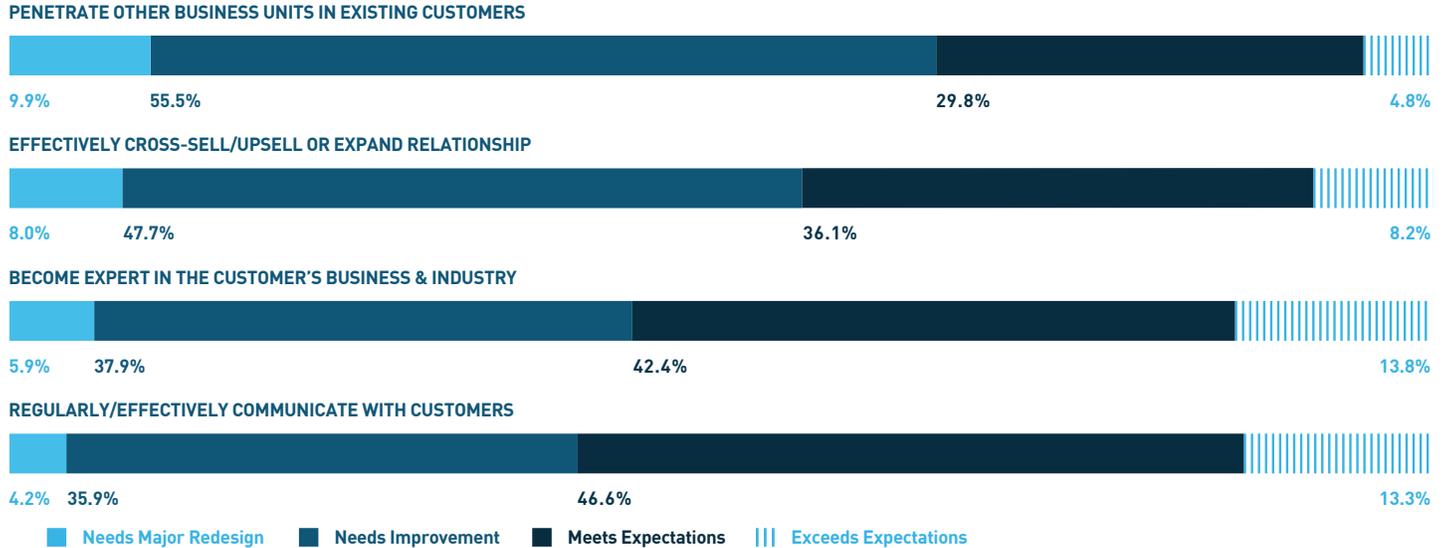
constant as compared to 13.2% five years ago. If you consider that revenue plan attainment is going up, revenue from existing customers is going up and churn remains steady, then this may be an indication that sales organizations are doing a better job of keeping and growing the *right* accounts.

In addition to the topline, there are profitability benefits to being the incumbent in an account. While there may be downward price pressures from clients in out years, there are cost-of-sale advantages. Sales cycles to close opportunities with existing customers were reported to be an average of 3.8 months as compared to 7.2 months for new customers. That means it costs about half as much to secure this business from a cost-of-sale perspective.

### Account management gaps

We asked sales leaders for their perceptions of several key competencies required to grow business. Despite the importance to the organization, leaders reported large and consistent gaps. In fact, as with the other capabilities we measured, many reported more of a need for improvement than had been the case in 2013. Only a third (34.6%) of respondents felt like account expansion was a strength for their organization.

## Confidence in Account Management



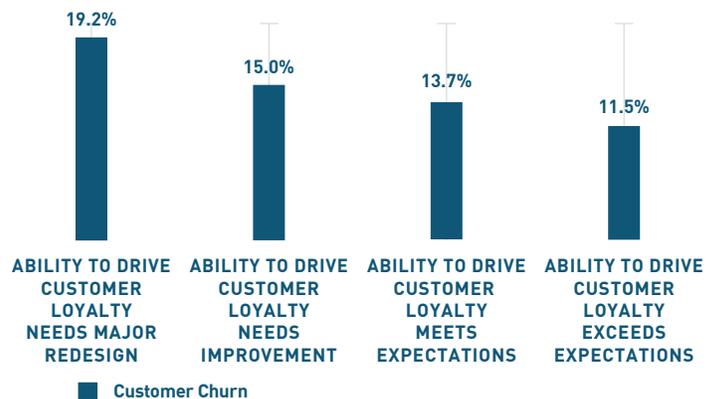
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### Customer loyalty is the bigger picture

Cross-sales and business-unit penetration are clearly key. But these selling activities should not be approached in a vacuum. To do so risks an internal focus. While the payoff from these activities is better sales results, the *purpose* of them is to create more customer loyalty. Those who do these activities well, and succeed in creating higher levels of customer loyalty, not surprisingly have lower levels of customer churn.

Customer loyalty is surely a lofty goal, and leaders should be wary of narrowing responsibility for it down to just its sales elements. Increasing penetration of existing accounts requires looking at customer relationships before and after the sales process. As such, account management becomes a partnership between sales, marketing, service, customer success, relationship management and any other role or function that is customer-facing.

### Ability to Drive Loyalty Related to Customer Churn



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### It's not an issue of time; it's an issue of planning

One challenge sales executives face is guiding their teams on where to spend time. If both capturing new accounts and growing existing accounts are important, how does a salesperson or a team strike the right balance? To help answer this question, we collected information on where salespeople were investing their time and compared it to account management activities.

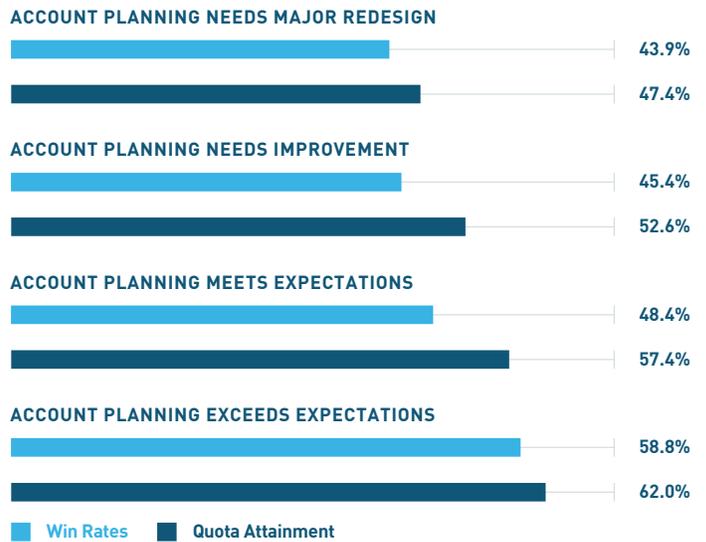
There is a very subtle correlation between additional time spent on post-sales tasks and the proportion of revenues coming from existing customers. That makes sense. More business from existing accounts means you'd have to spend more time processing the orders and servicing the business. However, there was no correlation between time spent on post-sales tasks and the following metrics:

- success at renewing business
- a reduction in customer churn
- strength of relationship level (as per the SRP Matrix)

Investing more time is not necessarily the answer and does not equate to better account management. What did make the difference was rigorous account planning.

Just as planning showed results in capturing new accounts, it is linked to results in growing existing. Specifically, high performance on the ability to create account plans is linked to higher win rates and higher quota attainment.

### Account Planning Related to Sales Performance Metrics



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### Recommendations

Account management continues to be a vital element of sales strategy in most selling models, with clear benefits as shown by our research. However, the research equally indicates that the competencies which drive successful account management continue to need improvement or major redesign in half of sales organizations. Sales leaders looking to improve penetration of existing accounts may wish to:

- **Bridge the gap between customer service and sales.** Many organizations are moving forward by blurring the line between sales and service. This may involve something as formal as creating customer success positions responsible for nurturing relationships, and ultimately renewing business. Or, it may be more informal, such as aligning customer service resources with sales resources into teams responsible for customer satisfaction and retention. This can be aided by expanding the metrics by which each of these (usually distinct) departments is measured.

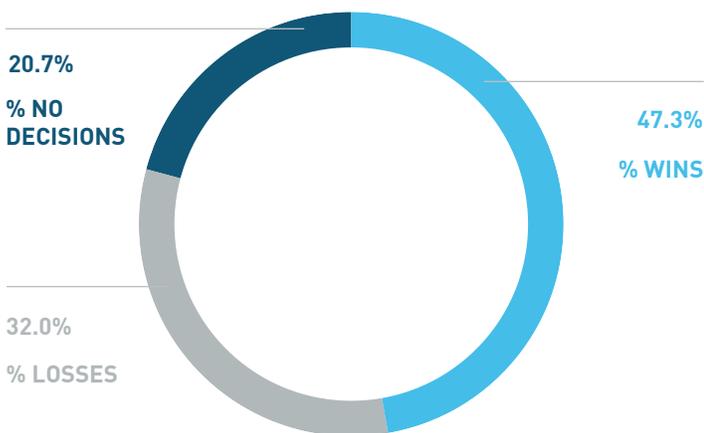
[This blog](#) provides more discussion on customer service in account management.

- **Ensure account planning is more than cross-sales.** Account planning should focus not just on how to identify and close additional opportunities in an account, but also and more importantly on how to help the client solve business problems in a way that increases their loyalty. Key elements of account planning include:
    - o **Research.** Collecting internal and external data to build a picture of, and vision for, the account. Using structural or decision-making knowledge to divide the account into segments.
    - o **Analysis.** Prioritizing segments or potential opportunities to pursue based on criteria such as ability to solve business problems, differentiate from other (often internal) solutions, visibility etc. Crystallizing the opportunities to drive account loyalty.
    - o **Relationship mapping.** Identifying the strategic players and evaluating their authority and influence. Figuring out how to connect those key players by aligning them with internal resources.
  - o **Moving forward.** Identifying the strategies and tactics to take the relationship forward. What should the organization keep, start and stop doing? What other company assets (marketing, product development, operations) could be involved?
  - **Explore new technologies.** Organizations are increasingly turning to sales technologies to improve effectiveness and efficiency. In fact, our recent [2018 Sales Operations Optimization Study](#) reported that sales organizations are using, on average, 10 different sales technology tools with four more planned in the next 12 months. Increasingly, artificial intelligence tools come into play here, not only providing shortcuts for the research and analysis pieces of account planning, but in some cases completely automating the renewals process. A major bank we spoke with used AI to triple the opportunities generated from their existing customer base.
- Time is a precious and rare resource for most sellers. Thus, it makes sense to look for ways to improve the results of account management activities, without necessarily increasing the time invested in them by capitalizing on additional resources and assets.

## CHAPTER 5: Increasing Win Rates

Without a doubt, the one metric we have tracked over the years that causes the most heartburn for CSOs, CFOs and CEOs is the outcome of forecast deals. In the chart below, we see the average percentage for win rates, competitive losses, and opportunities that ended in no decision from the *2018-2019 Sales Performance Study*. The 47.3% win rate is identical to the figure reported in the 2017 study. Losses increased modestly from 30.9% a year ago to 32.0% this year, and no decisions decreased from 21.8% to 20.7%.

### Outcome of Forecasted Opportunities



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Let us reinforce that this represents the outcome of “forecasted” opportunities, not pipeline. To be forecastable, a deal typically must have progressed far enough through the funnel and met certain criteria, so that the salesperson has a high degree of confidence that the opportunity will close. At a minimum, their manager has had to agree with that assessment for the deal to move into the “commit” column. So, everything in the forecast comes directly

from sales, yet forecasts continue to be wrong more than half the time. It is no wonder, then, that increasing win rates of forecast deals was one of the top priorities for the participants in this year’s study.

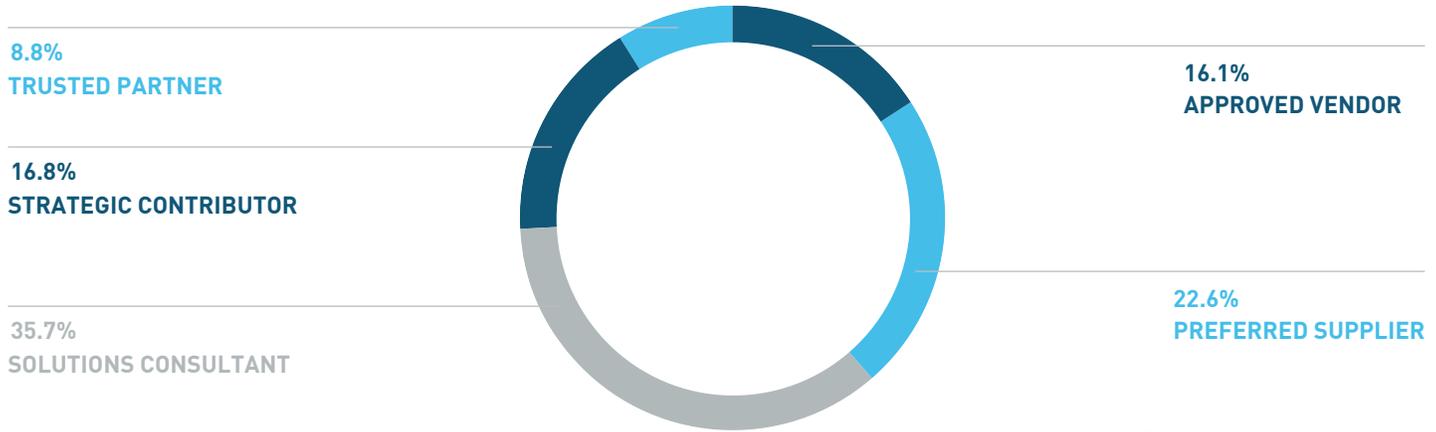
We next looked at the steps required to get to the end of a sell cycle: leads to first discussion, first discussions to presentation, presentation to proposal, and finally proposals to close. The current rates are not significantly different from the conversion success rates reported five years ago. Generally, the lowest stage conversion rates were from proposal to close, highlighting the need for more strenuous funnel management processes.

The 47.3% average win rate reported by respondents serves as a sort of barometer of sales effectiveness for us. But it should be noted that it is an average, and as such, we see some companies doing notably better and others notably worse. So, the focus of our analysis shifted towards the factors that help companies achieve their goal of increasing win rates.

### If you intend to bet either on process or on relationships, pick relationships

When we looked at selling to new accounts in Chapter 3, we pointed out that process, especially when it is tied to the customer’s path, can have a big impact on sales success. In looking at overall win rates, we saw a subtle relationship between process rigor and winning more deals, but we found a much more profound impact on sales performance when we looked at the level of relationship that a company has with their customers.

### Level of Relationship with Clients



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In the chart, we see a summary of the breakdown of levels of relationship (see [Appendix](#) for the definitions) from Approved Vendor all the way up to Trusted Partner. This distribution is similar to recent years. In looking at the win rates for each of these levels, we found the following:

	Level of Relationship				
	Approved Vendor	Preferred Supplier	Solutions Consultant	Strategic Contributor	Trusted Partner
<b>Win Rate</b>	39.5%	47.9%	45.7%	50.5%	59.9%

In the table we see a spread of more than 20 percentage points as we move up the relationship hierarchy. This compares to an eight-percentage-point spread when we looked at levels of sales process as a standalone metric. So, while both are important to overall sales success, if the primary focus is on increasing win rates, then invest in deepening relationships.

#### Provide more than product information

Diving deeper into the data, we looked to see if certain

events or activities that occurred during the sales process could have a positive impact on win rates. As noted in Chapter 1, one aspect of sales methodology prevalent in Level 3 organizations is the ability to provide perspective and insights during the sales process.

2018-2019 Sales Performance Study participants overall did not consider this to be an organizational strength.

#### Ability to Provide Clients with Insights and Perspective



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When we then calculated the average win rates as related to the ability to share insights and perspective, the business case for why companies should be

investing in initiatives to make improvements in this area became clear. The following summarizes the results of that analysis:

	Confidence in Providing Clients with Insights & Perspective			
	Needs Major Redesign	Needs Improvement	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
<b>Win Rate</b>	40.2%	46.0%	49.1%	55.2%

### Leverage existing customers to get new ones

One other area we found that has a noticeable impact on win rates starts at the beginning of the sales funnel. When you are effective at getting referrals from existing customers to others that they know, you start off the sales process with an edge.

In the chart below, we see a summary of how effective companies are at this aspect of account management. Here again the numbers do not tell a very encouraging story.

### Ability to Generate Referrals from Existing Customers



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But once again, noteworthy win rate improvements resulted from increased effectiveness in this area.

	Ability to Generate Referrals from Existing Customers			
	Needs Major Redesign	Needs Improvement	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
<b>Win Rate</b>	43.9%	45.1%	49.9%	57.4%

### Recommendations

- **Ask your customers.** Setting up a customer advisory board has helped many companies determine exactly what creates value for their customers. This is different from a user group. With the advisory board you are looking for honest feedback on the good, the bad and the ugly of what

it is like for customers to do business with you and use your solutions. We brought up the idea of buy-cycle/sell-cycle mapping in the chapter on capturing new accounts. You can also leverage the insights that emerged from CSO Insights' *The Growing Buyer-Seller Gap: Results from the 2018*

*Buyers Preferences Study.* In that report, produced from data gathered from 500 B2B buyers, we share a variety of insights on how and when buyers are engaging sellers. We also share the feedback they gave us on the circumstances that would make them want to engage sellers earlier, and what they said would make their relationships with vendors more valuable.

- **Leverage content management systems to ease the process of providing perspective.** One method for improving salespeople's ability to effectively share perspectives with clients is to leverage technology innovations to support the process. A services firm shared with us the details of their AI-based predictive content management system implementation. Based on an analysis of the client's challenges and their current environment, the system not only identifies the right stakeholders to engage within the account, but also provides guidance on the content, insights and perspective to use with each stakeholder at each phase of the sell cycle. As salespeople provide the system with feedback on how effective the content was at moving the sales process forward, the system refines its algorithms to make more precise future recommendations. For an overview of how these platforms work and who the players are in this solution space, advisory services clients should feel free to set up a briefing.

- **Start a referral program.** A wealth of insights into how to effectively structure a referral management program have come to light over the past few years. CRM solutions directly tied to implementing and monitoring these programs are also commercially available and worth evaluating. Experts in referral management talk about the critical importance of timing; for example, knowing when to ask for referrals. A software firm shared with us that they had they created a tool that monitor the LinkedIn profiles of their best power users. When they saw that one of those individuals had changed companies, they reached out to congratulate them on their move, and to ask for a referral to the right decision-makers in the new firm.

In Chapters 1-5, we've shared our insights on the state of sales, what is correlated to success and what is linked to failure. We've analyzed trends, benchmarked the metrics and shared best practices. We close the report with some peer advice and hindsight. Like most sales leaders, those who participate in our survey have tried a range of transformation strategies and tactics. Some have worked and some have not.

## CHAPTER 6: Lessons Learned from Sales Leaders

The four objectives that sales leaders are focused on will sound familiar.

Getting leads, winning more of the opportunities you mine from those leads to capture new accounts and ultimately turning closed business into recurring revenues: that's the business of sales. While leaders may focus on one objective more than another at any given time, they will surely be worried about all of them. Most will always be working on a range of transformation initiatives in order to be more successful across the board.

Today's sales leaders are constantly tweaking performance drivers. Every annual planning cycle requires a range of decisions on what to tweak, what to abolish and what to keep. We asked the nearly 900 sales leaders in our study what lessons they had learned from their attempts to transform their organization. Specifically, we wanted to know:

- *If you could completely re-create your sales organization starting with a blank slate, what would you do differently?*
- *What activities, approaches, initiatives, etc. were undertaken in the past, but are no longer done because they weren't impactful/effective?*

### Starting from scratch: the wish list

If given the chance to start all over, respondents overwhelmingly picked **talent** as the one thing they would change. From swapping out specific leaders to turning over entire departments to changing hiring profiles, leaders clearly did not feel like their current talent was optimal. In fact, when asked whether they

had the talent needed to be successful in the future, only 16.4% said yes. For more on sales talent, see our *2018 Sales Talent Study*.



*"Build a team focused [with] higher order of problem definition*

*and problem solving [abilities]"*

*"Focus on entrepreneurial skills and define a career path for all new hires."*

*"Not hire salespeople with decades of old habits to improve."*

The second most common response was to **change the sales structure**. Leaders told us that if they had the chance to start over, they would have designed their sales force very differently. Many said that they would organize by vertical, enabling them to target industry knowledge more specifically to engage their prospects and customers.



*"Industry-aligned new business team, with separate account management team."*

*"Need to change from a hunter only model to a more customer centric model. Hunter only was good to drive market share but has created a bad customer experience"*

Other ideas on the sales leaders' wish list included:

- **Changing the sales methodology or approach to selling.** *"Effectively create research programs to create and close high value deals."*
- **Better aligning sales with other parts of the organization.** *"Incorporate sales function into the customer-aligned roles. Currently sales are disconnected from client facing activities."*
- **Aligning more tightly to the customer.** *"Start with the end-user in mind and build out from there."*
- **Using different technologies or use existing technologies differently.** *"Implement a formal sales process, using the latest sales technologies"*

What many of these "wish list" items had in common is that they would be hard to execute seamlessly. Many fall into the bucket of "painting the plane while flying." All were possible. Yet, they would likely require leaders to accept short-term (possibly significant) disruption in the business. For example, completely changing the sales force structure and re-aligning all accounts will certainly create a lot of short-term noise in the system. Many leaders struggle to balance the demands of quarterly goals with the possible benefits of more dramatic initiatives. As a result, many "sales transformation" initiatives aren't transformational but rather incremental improvements – mapping and re-mapping sales processes, automating demand gen systems, restructuring territories, etc.

### Stop throwing good money after bad

When we asked sales leaders which initiatives or projects they had stopped investing in, the most common response (with almost twice as many mentions as the second choice) was **dropping an ineffective lead generation campaign**. As noted in the

earlier chapter, lead generation has been historically challenging for organizations. However, with more technologies available and more operations-oriented and data-driven marketing departments, initiative success or failure should be more obvious. The most commonly abandoned strategies were in-person events, cold calling campaigns, outsourcing lead generation to external providers and over-relying on social media to generate leads.



*"We stopped using trade shows to generate leads."*

*"We are more selective in our use of social media, many of the channels are trashed"*

*"Shifted our marketing dollars to more of a centralized approach vs. field based."*

The second most common change was **dropping an ineffective sales process or sales methodology**. Leaders abandoned sales process steps that weren't taking hold, training programs that produced few results and even tools that were too complicated for the outcome.



*"Complicated, over-done, process of selling."*

*"Trying to be the One-Stop Shop, selling the same way to all customers."*

*"We have begun a laser focus approach to account-based selling."*

Other initiatives that sales leaders left by the wayside included:

- **Changing the coverage models.** “[Eliminated] Geography based coverage model.”
- **Stop focusing efforts on a particular market or product.** “[Stopped] focusing on new product launches. We found this has not worked. Sticking to the core of what we do.”
- **Eliminating ineffective training initiatives.** “Less selling theory, more selling practice”
- **Tracking ineffective KPIs.** “[stopped tracking] ... KPI’s around time and quantity of activity”
- **Changing compensation plans that did not drive the right behaviors.** “Aligned comp plans to facilitate team selling.”

Many of these items were more discrete. For example, you can stop conducting events for lead generation without having to completely overhaul your marketing department. However, some coverage and structural decisions surely took extensive work to execute, showing that with the right payoff more extensive changes can be justified. The key is collecting enough data to make the decision with evidence and model the potential outcomes. This may require new ways to measure marketing, new KPIs for individual sellers and new voice-of-customer metrics.

## Moving forward

So where does this leave us?

We began by talking about the stagnation of sales. Most are struggling to excel at the winning combination of sales process and deep customer relationships.

Yet, some are driving forward. What makes those organizations unique is their holistic focus on the

customer as demonstrated by a customer-centric culture, a sales process that is aligned to the customer’s path and a strong ability to provide value to the customer in terms of perspective and insights.

While most sales leaders would agree with this approach at the conceptual level, they are skeptical that it is demonstrated in their organizations’ more granular strategies for lead generation, capturing new accounts, increasing penetration in existing accounts and improving win rates – the top four objectives that sales leaders have for the next 12 months.

That takes us back to the phrase on most sales leaders’ minds: “sales transformation.” Breaking out of this stagnation is going to mean real changes to programs processes, people, technologies and tools. As you move forward, keep in mind:

- **Don’t delay by trying to make it linear.** There is no one place to start (process, hiring profile, comp plan). Start where you can affect the most change with the least disruption to your customers and sellers. As excited as we are about each new finding in these studies, we have to remember that what can be done will always outstrip any one organization’s ability to execute. Furthermore, any attempt to execute changes wholesale will create nothing but chaos in the typical sales organization. The key is to think of change in systematic fashion, constantly refining it and continuously reintegrating it.
- **Think of transformation as a shift, not a project.** It’s not a one-year plan or even a three-year plan. It’s ongoing, with the focus on becoming agile and adaptive, versus buckling down to get through it. Double down on your change-readiness program. If you don’t have one, start one.

- **Expand your vision of what is possible.** AI should be viewed as a driver versus an enabler. AI changes the landscape of what is possible versus just making what you already do more effective and efficient. It should be thought of as a strategy in itself, not the technology which supports a strategy. AI creates new possibilities for implementing fundamentally new ways of territory alignment, forecast management, buyer engagement, etc.
- **Make data-based decisions.** Use our studies, others' studies, your voice of customer data, your sales data. We are not suggesting the old "*paralysis by analysis*" but rather that most modern

sales organizations have tons of data which is not being harnessed. But remember, though you start with data, it doesn't end there. Human beings are context-oriented creatures. They need you use the data to paint a positive vision of how this will improve lives – not only the customer's, but also their own.

And if we haven't said it enough throughout this report...**align everything to the customer and how they wish to solve their business problems.** It may sound like a cliché, but as noted throughout the report, there is a very specific and detailed way to do it, and the results are tangible.

## APPENDIX I: SRP Matrix Definitions

### Climbing the ladder to higher performance: sales process and customer relationships

Sales leaders often face a dilemma when trying to improve sales performance. Do investments in the sales process landscape impact performance... or not? Many believe that investing in the right skills and behaviors alone can solve the problems impeding performance. The CSO Insights Sales Relationship Process Matrix™ clearly shows, year over year, how sales process maturity, customer relationships and performance impact each other and must be addressed together. The SRP Matrix helps you examine your existing structure and design your sales performance future.

### The Sales Relationship Process Matrix defined

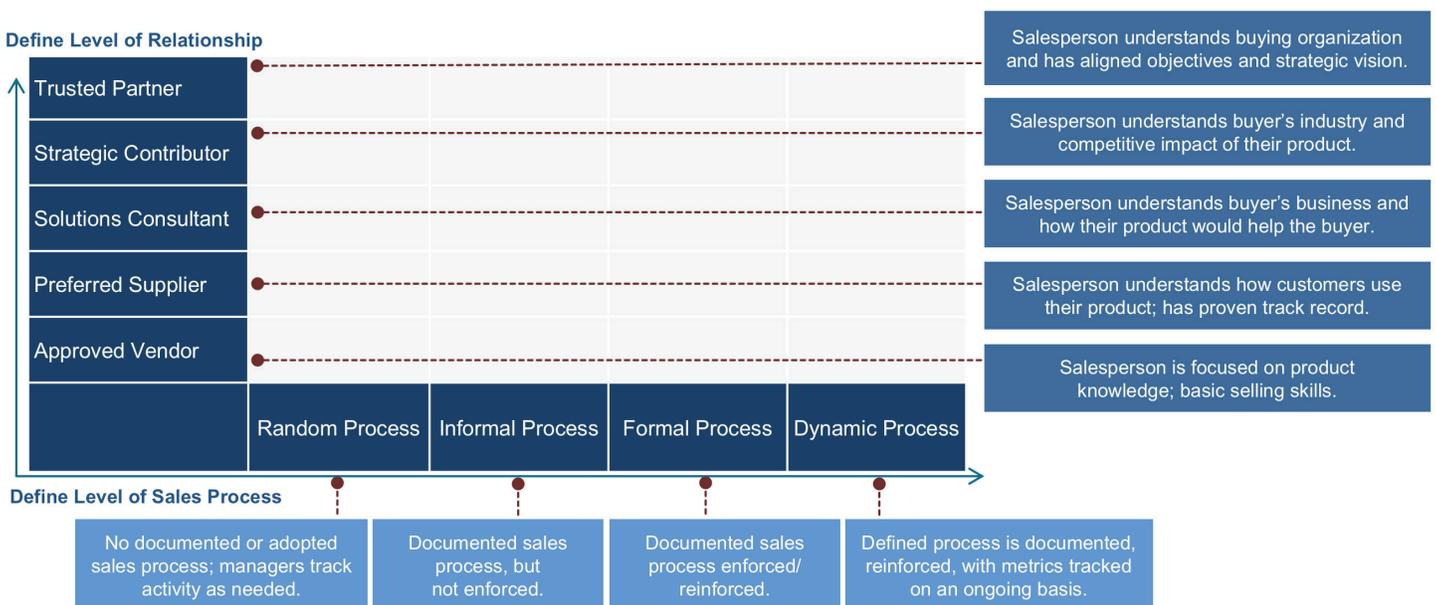
CSO Insights first presented the SRP Matrix in 2007 and has been tracking its key metrics for the past eleven years. The matrix serves as a framework for organizations to quickly identify how they currently

operate and what levels of relationship and process implementation they need to achieve to remain competitive going forward. As it turns out, elevating your position along each dimension is not simply a “nice idea” or a good thing to do. The data clearly and consistently support the importance of doing so due to the remarkable impact on sales performance metrics.

The SRP Matrix consists of two dimensions:

- Sales process levels: random, informal, formal and dynamic
- Customer relationship levels: approved vendor, preferred supplier, solutions consultant, strategic contributor and trusted partner

In the following graphic, you can see how the four levels of sales process maturity are defined, and what the five levels of customer relationships mean.



However, such a framework only creates value when it clearly shows the impact of position on sales performance. To show this, we defined three performance levels based on four key metrics:

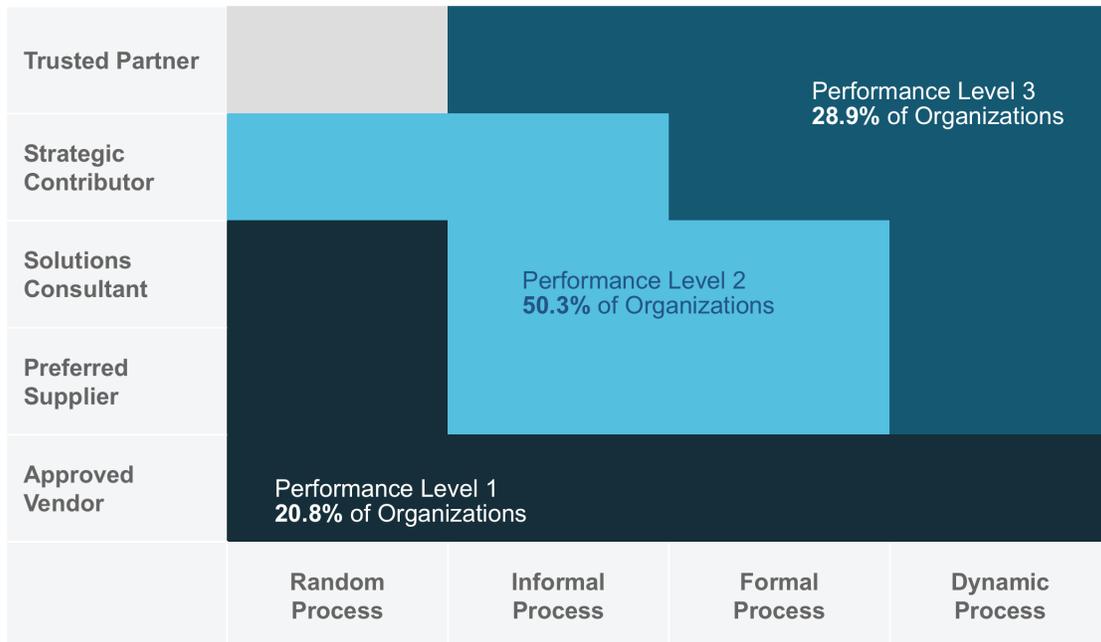
1. Percentage of salespeople meeting quota
2. Percentage of overall revenue-plan attainment
3. Sales forecast accuracy
  - a. Win rates for forecast deals
  - b. Loss rates for forecast deals
  - c. No-decision rates for forecast deals

4. Total salespeople turnover
  - a. Voluntary turnover
  - b. Involuntary turnover

These performance levels play out across the matrix, with the percentage of our study participants that fall into each performance level also shown.

The following graphic shows the 2018 results.

### 2018 Sales Relationship Process Matrix



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### The 2018 SRP Matrix results in a nutshell

Now let's have a look at the 2018 data to see the performance impact of process maturity and

customer relationships on the above mentioned key performance metrics.

2018 SRP Metrics	Performance Level 1	Performance Level 2	Performance Level 3
Overall Plan Attainment	92.9%	93.8%	95.0%
Quota Attainment	45.8%	54.0%	60.7%
Win Rates of Forecast Deals	40.8%	46.2%	53.7%
Loss Rates of Forecast Deals	39.0%	32.2%	26.9%
No-Decisions of Forecast Deals	20.2%	21.6%	19.5%
Voluntary Turnover	10.7%	7.9%	7.6%
Involuntary Turnover	7.4%	5.4%	4.9%

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Revenue attainment ranges from 92.9% in performance Level 1 up to 95.0% in performance level 3. The percentage of salespeople achieving or exceeding quota ranges from 45.8% in performance Level 1 up to 60.7% in performance Level 3. The average quota attainment of 53.5% is comparable to last year. The win rates for forecast deals range between 40.8% (which is worse than gambling win rates in Las Vegas) and 53.7%. See also the related loss rates, as well as the turnover rates.

Plug in your own numbers to see how your organization compares.

Furthermore, have a look at the decline of loss rates and the decreasing turnover rates that result from higher performance levels. No ambitious sales leader can ignore those numbers.

#### A hypothetical example

Let's assume that your current location in the SRP Matrix is Vendor/Informal. In this case, your salespeople typically are making product pitches and have mastered

basic sales skills. At the same time, they are largely ignoring the documented sales process, and they report activities, pipeline and bookings to their managers and use SME's in an ad hoc and ill-prepared way.

Locating your position in the matrix helps you identify where you need to be (e.g., Solutions Consultant/Formal) as a next step. Based on that information, the actions needed in the process and relationship dimensions can be detailed, planned and aligned to each other. Typically, you will need a close collaboration between your sales operations team and your sales enablement team that equips and develops your salespeople and sales managers.

However, change takes time, and measurable results do not appear instantly. That means that your salespeople's activities and behaviors, the tools and methods they use and the behaviors you reward will need to change BEFORE your position on the matrix changes. This model will help you consider various paths and approaches to realizing the changes your team needs to make over time.

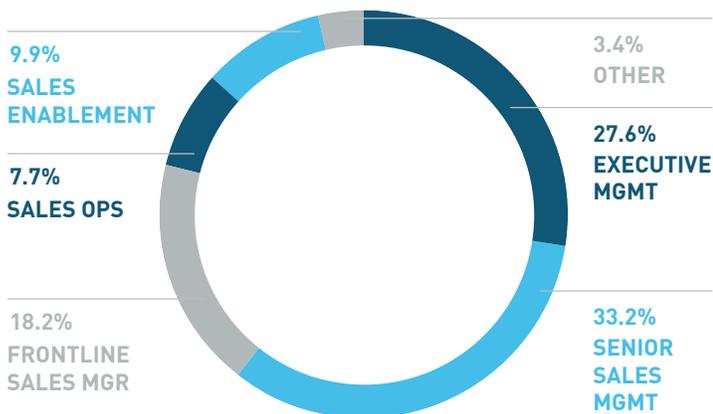
It is also worth considering which dimension affords the easiest, fastest and/or most economical path. Since the level of relationship is defined to be *as perceived by the buyer*, it is fair to say that you have less direct control over this. Conversely, the level of sales process you have implemented is in your

control. The question then becomes, how can you evolve and improve your sales process and equip your salespeople and your sales managers to be in the best position to create compelling value for today's ever-changing buyers?

## APPENDIX II: Demographics

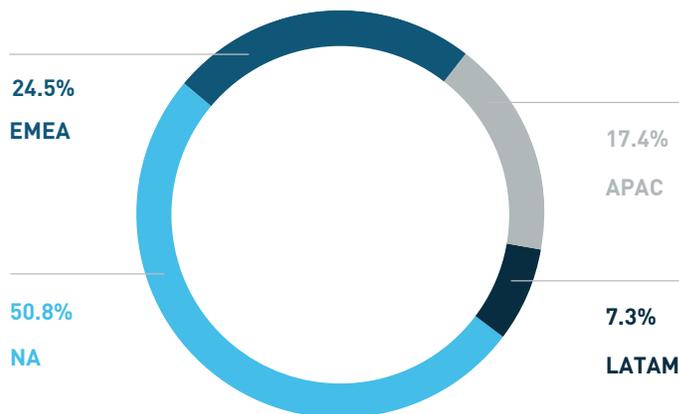
Data was collected from 886 sales leaders around the world during the summer of 2018 regarding current data and plans for the next 12 months.

Survey Participants by Role



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Survey Participants by Region



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Sales leader respondents represented 23 industries. Please contact your CSO Insights analyst for geographic or industry-specific information.



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### **About CSO Insights**

CSO Insights is the independent research arm within Miller Heiman Group™, dedicated to improving the performance and productivity of complex B2B sales. The CSO Insights team of respected analysts provides sales leaders with the research, data, expertise, and best practices required to build sustainable strategies for sales performance improvement. CSO Insights' annual sales effectiveness studies, along with its benchmarking capabilities, are industry standards for sales leaders seeking operational and behavioral insights into how to improve their sales performance and to gain holistic assessments of their selling and sales management efficacy. Annual research studies address sales and service best practices, sales enablement and sales performance optimization.