

A Forrester Consulting  
Thought Leadership Paper  
Commissioned By True Influence  
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# Modernize Your B2B Selling With Prospective Buyer Engagement

How Marketing And Sales Teams Must Align  
Behind Customer-Centered Selling To Thrive

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Prospective buyer engagement is a multichannel, optimized mix of digital and human touches that reach and build interest with the right buying groups for a firm's offerings.

## Executive Summary

The global pandemic has fundamentally upended marketing and selling. This is as true for business-to-business (B2B) brands as it is for their business-to-consumer (B2C) counterparts — if not more so. In truth, the pandemic has accelerated the digital destinies of both business buyers and sellers — meaning the future of selling has arrived sooner than many could have expected. To support B2B customer purchase journeys that have become even more self-reliant, self-directed, and digital-first, B2B companies must respond with go-to-market strategies that prioritize the customers' needs and contexts first, engaging them in the channel and at the time of their choosing, while demonstrating their understanding of the buyers' context. This vision, called prospective buyer engagement, ensures that buyers will be supported optimally throughout their journeys.

True Influence commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate the state of B2B sellers' go-to-market strategies. Forrester conducted an online survey with 260 respondents within marketing and sales roles at B2B companies to explore this topic. We found that while sellers realize the future of selling has arrived, many struggle to meet the moment with comprehensive, optimized prospective buyer engagement strategies.

### KEY FINDINGS

- › **Sellers understand the importance of buyer-centric strategies but struggle to deliver differentiated experiences.** Most B2B decision-makers agree that buyers are shifting their business buying behaviors; to keep up, these B2B leaders are prioritizing customer-centric objectives this year, including improving loyalty and satisfaction. However, just 12% of B2B marketing leaders and 14% of sales leaders say their firms are delivering mature buyer engagement strategies that meet these buyer needs today.
- › **B2B companies' struggles with measurement and technology jeopardize sales efficiencies and customer relationships.** Three-quarters of B2B decision-makers report their companies struggle to observe and measure customer purchase journeys today; 34% or fewer say their current technology lets them observe, share, and utilize their customer data effectively. As a result, organizations close deals less efficiently, are wasteful with marketing and sales spend, and turn off customers more frequently because of friction in buying journeys.
- › **Prospective buyer engagement strategies drive better buyer and seller outcomes.** More effective go-to-market strategies result in better marketing spend and resource efficiency, higher customer loyalty, improved customer advocacy, and gains in customer satisfaction. Respondents at B2B companies that have adopted and are deploying prospective buyer engagement strategies report significantly better performance against these objectives than lower-maturity sellers.

# Sellers Must Prepare Now For The Future Of Selling

Over the last decade, evolving environmental factors have driven fundamental changes in B2B buyer behavior that have now reached an inflection point. Buyers have become increasingly self-reliant and self-directed, with more than half getting purchase information from digital sources for their research, shortlisting, purchases, or trials.<sup>1</sup> They are in control and now expect a radically different type of relationship with sellers — one based on help and support, not simply closing a deal.<sup>2</sup> These expectations raise significant challenges for sellers, who must know their customers more intimately than ever before, deliver more human and helpful information ahead of a sale, and perform harmonious handoffs between marketing, sales, and post-sale support to ensure a seamless customer experience.<sup>3</sup>

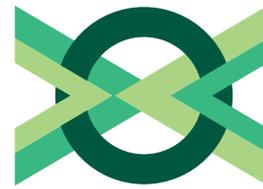
## **B2B SELLERS SEE CUSTOMER-CENTRICITY DRIVE BUSINESS SUCCESS**

B2B companies are tuning into these changes quickly. Eighty-one percent of respondents agree that digital channels are more important than ever in reaching buyers, while 78% realize that buyers are engaging with them much later in the purchase journey, and three-quarters recognize buyers are more self-directed when making purchase decisions today.

Marketers and sellers must navigate this global shift in buyer behavior while managing the business in an unprecedented economic environment. On the one hand, lower revenues, disrupted customer engagement strategies, and monumental uncertainty fostered by a global pandemic have put significant financial pressure on organizations to maximize returns while reducing costs. On the other, B2B companies can capitalize on this disruptive environment to refresh their go-to-market strategies and put the customer squarely at the center.

B2B marketing and sales teams are agreeing to objectives that reflect these dual — but not necessarily *dueling* — focus areas. Study respondents report their top business objectives for the year include a renewed focus on improving customer loyalty and satisfaction while also keeping a solid eye on driving more marketing efficiency and higher profitability for key product lines (see Figure 1).

Forrester sees these goals as ultimately compatible: By getting customers to engage more often and more readily through quality, value-driven experiences, marketing grows the business more profitably through retention and relationships developed at a lower cost to serve.<sup>4</sup> To unlock these outcomes, marketing and sales must align behind a coordinated, comprehensive engagement model that gives customers value throughout their journey, from prospect to client to advocate — the vision that prospective buyer engagement is meant to support.



**B2B brands must reevaluate their marketing and sales strategies to serve the modern business buyer on their terms.**

**Figure 1**

**“What are your organization’s key marketing and sales objectives for this year?”**



Better alignment between sales and marketing can aid sellers looking to maximize both customer value and business success.

Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

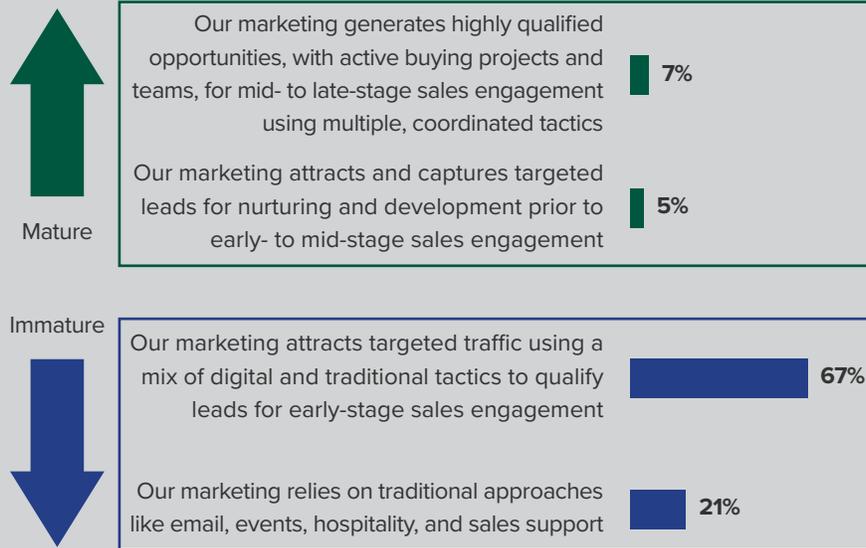
### **EFFECTIVE BUYER ENGAGEMENT REMAINS ELUSIVE**

Prospective buyer engagement is a multichannel, optimized mix of digital and human touches that reach and build interest with the right buying groups for a firm’s offerings. This approach disrupts the traditional lanes marketing and sales occupy — where marketing teams use digital and offline channels to build awareness in a target audience, develop leads, and then hand them off to sales to further qualify and negotiate deals. Instead, marketing and sales coordinate tightly to ensure customers receive relevant information when needed, regardless of the stage of the purchase journey in which those needs arise.

In this approach, marketing delivers highly qualified opportunities based on an understanding of the firm’s ideal customer profile. Marketing teams use different tactics in a coordinated manner to build interest and understanding while sales teams use customer data and interactions to detect and interpret buyer signals across channels. Technology leverages data to uncover opportunities to support and drive the customer to the next-best action. Unfortunately, most marketing and sales strategies lack this kind of holistic, coordinated, and analytic engagement model, with just 12% of marketing leaders and 14% of sales leaders pursuing mature prospective buyer engagement strategies at their firms, respectively (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

“Which of the following most closely describes how your marketing team addresses prospective buyers today?”



Just 12% of B2B marketers follow mature buyer engagement strategies today.

“Which of the following most closely describes how your selling team addresses prospective buyers today?”



Just 14% of sales leaders say their organizations have the visibility and focus to support buyer-guided customer journeys.

Base: 137 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

# Modern Selling Practices Must Respond To Buyer Needs

Just because something is worth doing does not mean it's easy. B2B firms reinventing their go-to-market strategies face headwinds outside of current environmental factors. Chief among these challenges, three-quarters of decision-makers say their firms struggle to observe and measure customer purchase journeys (see Figure 3). Reinvention starts with observation and is fundamental to prospective buyer engagement. Marketing and selling efficiency and effectiveness increase when teams can observe and measure customer signals, identify where prospects need help, and identify the kinds of support most likely to deliver value. In short, how can you properly respond if you can't hear the question?

Unfortunately, good observation and analytic skills alone are not enough; incompatible metrics and misaligned goals remain a significant challenge. While 96% of respondents say their firms have experienced at least one significant barrier to adopting prospective buyer engagement, the most common issue B2B leaders cite is a lack of alignment between marketing and sales metrics that fails to set the stage for a coordinated response to customer needs. That response is then further hindered by technology that fails to support buyer journeys with optimized content and sales support materials that would let sellers act and respond based on buyers' journey signals.

Technology alone doesn't produce prospective buyer engagement, but it is an essential component. Marketing and sales teams need tools that let them listen to and interpret buyer signals, identify opportunities, and respond in a coordinated, targeted manner. Just over one-third of respondents say their tools help their teams to identify their best buying groups and target the key stakeholders within them — and the reviews get more challenging from there. Only a quarter believe their tech stack can reliably identify customer needs by segment and deliver personalized experiences with an 80% or better accuracy rate (see Figure 4). And just 28% report their firms can conduct advanced segmentation while only 3% can create 1:1, individualized experiences.

**Figure 3**

**“Please rate how effectively your company carries out the following tasks as it applies to prospective buyer engagement.”**  
(Showing “Highly effective”)



Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

**Figure 4**

**“How much do you agree with the following statements about technology and data at your company?”** (Showing “Completely agree”)

**34%** Our technology allows marketers/sellers to identify buying groups and target the right contacts in those groups

**28%** Our martech stack technologies support a prospective buyer engagement approach

**27%** Our data allows marketers/sellers to identify buying groups and target the right contacts in those groups

**27%** Our technology and data allow us to prioritize the most active opportunities within accounts or across segments for further engagement

**26%** Our technology and data allow marketing/sales to segment prospective opportunities by buyer-expressed needs

**25%** Our technology allows our marketing to deliver personalized information and messages to target buying groups and contacts with 80% accuracy or higher

Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

Due to technology challenges, among others, just 3% of sellers can support buyer journeys with 1:1 personalized experiences.

## **THE COSTS OF POORLY OPTIMIZED ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES ARE SIGNIFICANT ... AND WELL-UNDERSTOOD**

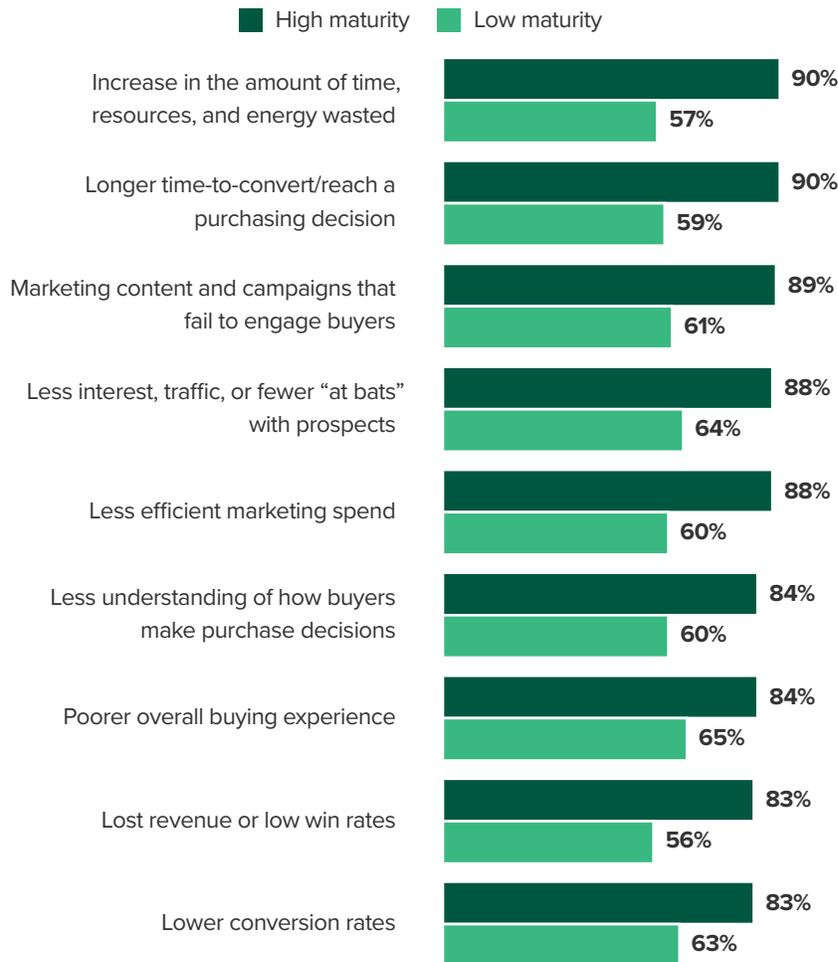
B2B decision-makers know they must develop a customer-centric engagement strategy to win, serve, and retain customers in this digital age. These leaders realize the repercussions of failing to understand and support customer journeys — fewer opportunities and less efficiency in winning customers. Nearly 80% report that when a company fails to execute consistent, optimized, multichannel engagement strategies, it will get fewer prospect opportunities, extended paths to purchase, and wasted marketing campaigns and less efficient marketing and sales efforts.

Interestingly, the B2B leaders whose companies adopt more mature engagement strategies understand the costs of inconsistently executed, siloed marketing and sales strategies well. They are 22 percentage points more likely to say that broken journeys lead to fewer “at bats” with prospects; 33 percentage points more likely to claim broken journeys lead to wasted energy, time, and resources; and 31 percentage points more likely to point to longer paths to purchase. These mature sellers demonstrate a hyper-awareness of the consequences of failing to understand and build strategy around customer journeys and put in the time and effort into avoid them (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

**“How much do you agree that the following issues arise when a company does not effectively execute prospective buyer engagement strategies?”**

(Showing “Completely agree”)



More mature B2B brands are hyper-aware of the pitfalls of broken customer journeys.

Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

# Differentiate With Prospective Buyer Engagement

Firms that have yet to transform their go-to-market strategies face an opportunity to differentiate themselves: Just 15% of decision-makers say their firms are executing mature prospective buyer engagement today. What does it take to build an effective prospective buyer engagement program? Establishing mature practices across five stages:

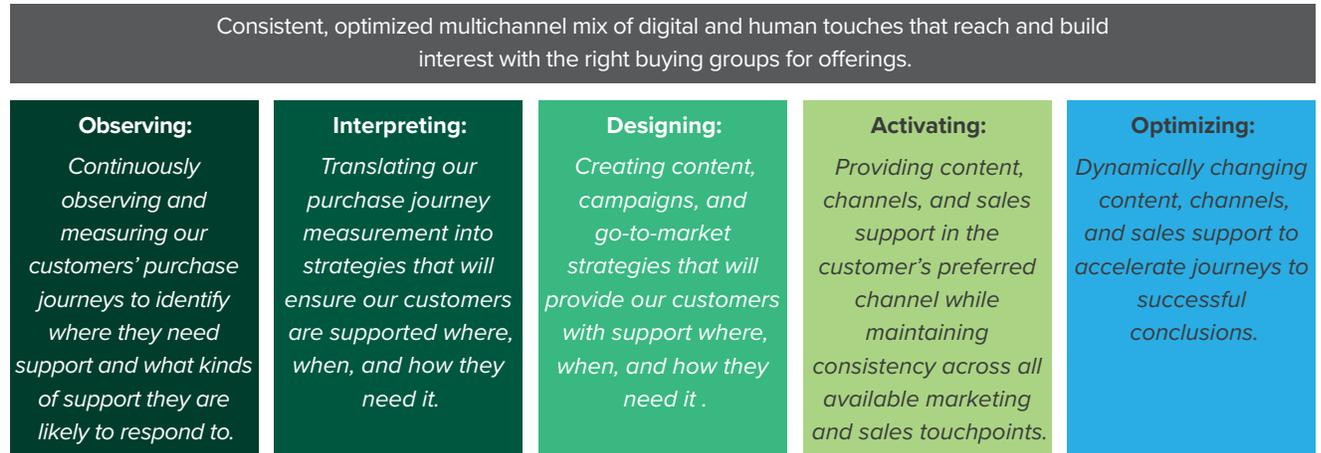
- › **Observing.** Maturity improves as marketing and sales teams hone their customer data collection processes and management skills. In the best case, they can continuously observe customer activity across the entire purchase journey and automatically collect data that identifies where prospects run into issues and when they need more support. Creating an ideal customer profile requires observing how your best customers came to be and what differentiates them from the average.
- › **Interpreting.** Customer interest, journey, and preference data becomes insight when you apply the proper analysis. Mature organizations use machine learning and AI to find prospective buying patterns, predict which activities will engage which buyers, and optimize digital and content marketing performance by understanding what buyers find interesting and relevant. These firms also use intelligence tools to help marketers, sellers, and success managers detect new opportunities to engage customers and increase the value they receive from the firm.
- › **Designing.** Business buyers are largely unimpressed by B2B marketing content.<sup>5</sup> Mature firms focus on creating content that is helpful and valuable and make it available throughout the buyers' journeys. Marketers at mature companies abandon flat, product-centric content in favor of dynamic formats such as video, interactive media, and guided selling tools that engage buyers as they also tell a story. They build calculators and comparison tools that help sellers show how their products and services really solve buyers' issues.
- › **Activating.** Any content is useless if buyers can't find it and consume it. Likewise, sales interactions range from annoying to painful if the seller's overture lacks insight and understanding. Prospective buyer engagement emphasizes getting content out to customers in the channels they prefer, not just the ones marketing and sales use. Mature firms also maintain a consistent but personalized experience across all available channels that buyers are likely to use.
- › **Optimizing.** Mature firms flex to accommodate changing market conditions. Not only are their interactions more human and their content more helpful in solving problems, but they also realize that buyer needs are dynamic and influenced by context.<sup>6</sup> They aim to guide buyers through the buyer's purchase journey and develop the processes, skills, and automation to dynamically change content, channels, and sales support to accelerate journeys to successful conclusions (see Figure 6).



Just 15% of B2B brand leaders say their firms have adopted mature prospective buyer engagement strategies today.

Figure 6

The Five Pillars Of Prospective Buyer Engagement



Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

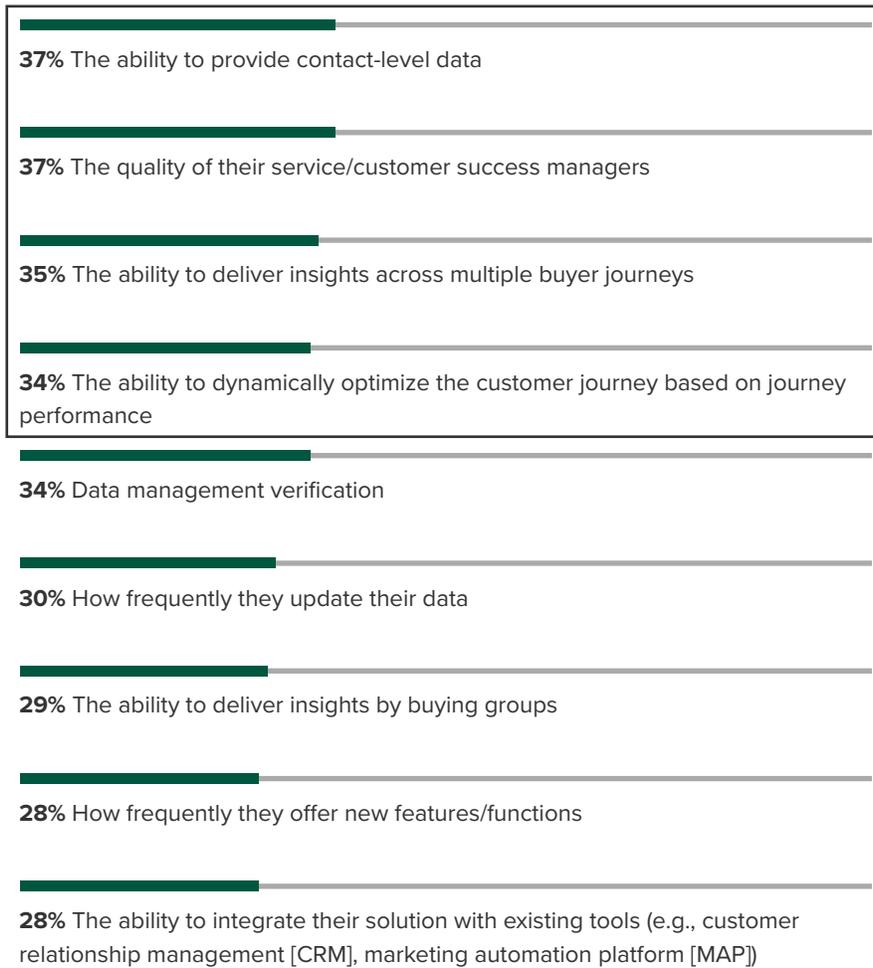
**EXECUTING ADVANCED GO-TO-MARKET STRATEGIES REQUIRES DATA AND TECHNOLOGY**

Technology is core to scaling the advantages that come with prospective buyer engagement, but so is data. Respondents say they find it most important that vendors provide them with powerful tools to hear, interpret, and act on customer journey signals. Sellers are hungry for tools that provide contact-level data to power segmentation and personalization efforts, flexibility to deliver insights across multiple potential buyer journeys, the ability to optimize customer journeys based on measured journey performance, and assurance that data is properly managed. They understand, too, that these programs require support as high-quality customer service/customer success also features high on sellers' needs list (see Figure 7).

These capabilities power sellers' understanding of what their prospects experience as they engage, where in their journeys they encounter friction and require support, ongoing visibility directing where journeys need to be buttressed, and optimization to deliver the most relevant, personalized support possible.

**Figure 7**

**“Which of the following capabilities do you consider important when choosing a vendor to enable prospective buyer engagement?”**



Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

**B2B brands need the ability to observe and act on signals within buyer journeys, along with support and data hygiene to set a firm foundation.**

# Prospective Buyer Engagement Drives Better Outcomes

A challenging business climate requires marketing and sales teams to justify investment proposals with a solid business case. The evidence is clear that investments in prospective buyer engagement pay off. B2B teams with mature strategies report significant overperformance on customer- and business-oriented objectives compared to their less mature peers.

Higher-maturity brand decision-makers are far more likely to report overperformance on the kinds of customer goals that drive retention and deepen relationships. Mature brands are 73% more likely to exceed their goals for improving customer advocacy, 58% more likely to succeed at improving customer satisfaction, 64% more likely to outperform their goals in driving customer loyalty, and 44% better at inhibiting customer attrition compared to firms with less mature prospective buyer engagement strategies.

These brand decision makers also report being more successful at business outcomes like driving efficiencies and reducing waste. Mature sellers are 66% more likely to overachieve on improving their marketing spend and efficiency goals, 19% better at driving sales efficiency and performance, and 58% more effective at winning net-new customers. Furthermore, they have been 55% more successful in reducing costs generally to weather the pandemic-driven economic downturn.

Decision-makers at more mature firms directly credit their prospective buyer engagement strategies for driving positive outcomes for their business. To demonstrate this idea, this study compared how likely leaders at mature companies are to credit their go-to-market strategy with helping them succeed at their key goals to less mature companies. We took the gap between them and created a prospective buyer engagement improvement delta, which demonstrates the power of adopting strategies that drive consistent, optimized, multichannel engagement. The results are convincing: Not only do more mature companies overperform against their less mature peers across key business objectives, but their leaders are far more likely to say their go-to-market strategies put them in a position to succeed (see Figure 8).

This illustrates not only that more successful companies are more mature in aligning sales and marketing into a coherent go-to-market strategy, but also that their strategies are driving their success. Brands therefore have a clear opportunity to drive better outcomes for themselves and for their buyers through prospective buyer engagement. As they do so, they will also be helping steer their companies in the right direction to be ready for the future of selling.

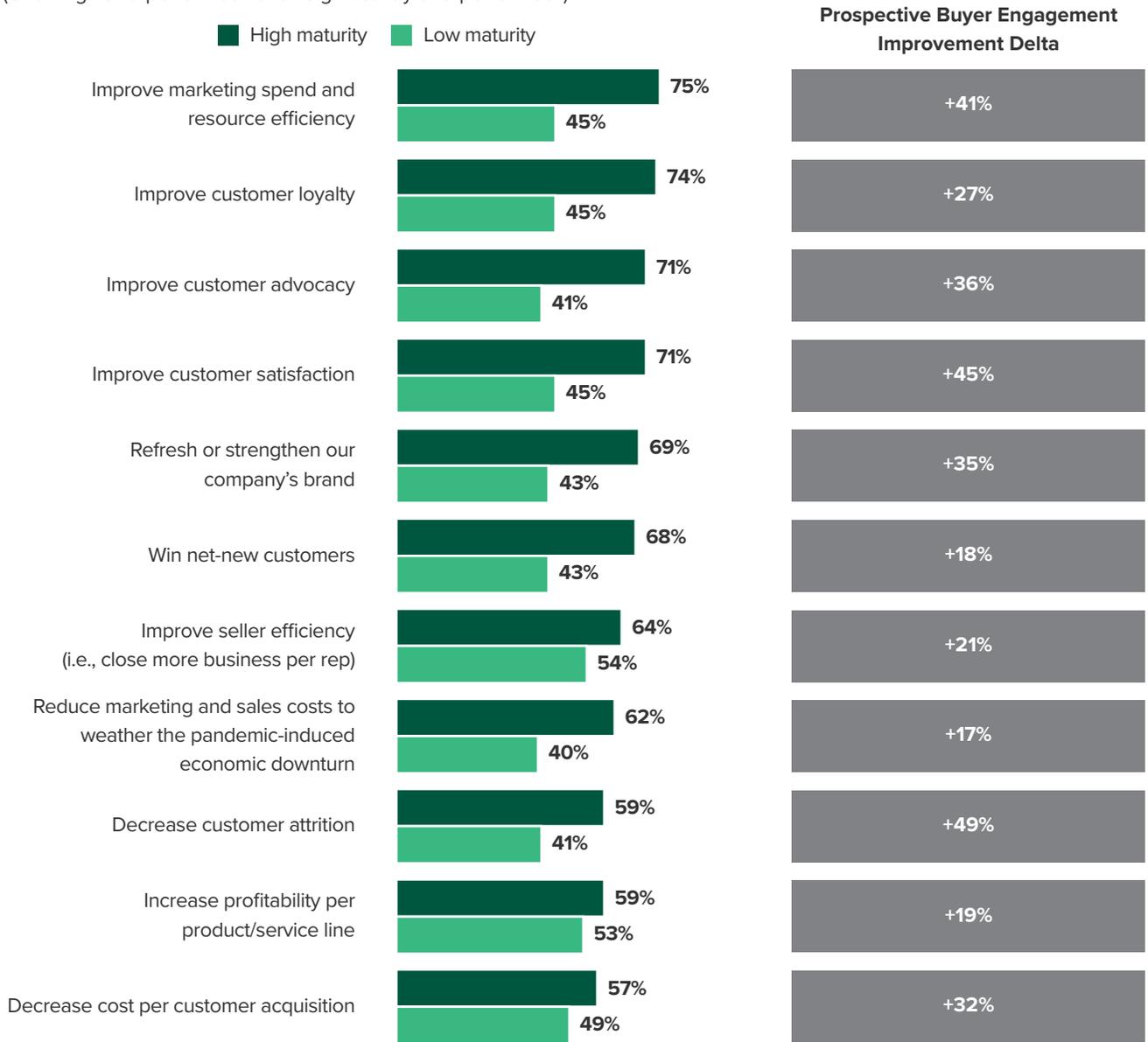


**Marketing and sales teams are driven to improve customer outcomes and business efficiency.**

**Figure 8**

**“How is your company performing against its key business objectives so far this year?”**

(Showing “Overperformed” and “Significantly overperformed”)



Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

# Key Recommendations

Forrester's in-depth survey of B2B marketing and sales decision-makers about their go-to-market strategies and the importance of engaging prospective buyers, not just trying to sell to them, yielded several important recommendations:



**Invest in customer intelligence.** Relying on legwork, high-paid industry experts, or agency partners to comb through financial reports, news, and social media to learn more about a prospect's buying interests only goes so far. Top teams use customer insight technologies and services instead to scour the internet, clean up account and contact data records, and track buyer behavior. Collecting intelligence is essential to learning who is in the market and what topics interest them. An automated, modern system for customer data acquisition and engagement lets teams gain a more nuanced understanding of prospects and ferret out new opportunities more quickly.



**Distill insight, then put it to work.** Marketers always wonder which tactics and channels will appeal to their target audiences best. Instead, refocus that old promotional lens: Prospective buyer engagement succeeds through insights, and insights come when marketers pay attention to buyers. Whether they “like” posts or share their ideas on social media, publish blogs, or shoot video, the people you want to connect with are making their needs known. Spend time researching the market and competitors of target accounts, commenting on their social channels, and following them digitally. Share what you learn with sales and success management teams to develop a holistic perspective against which you can determine the right engagement plan.



**Test your ideal customer profile (ICP) assumptions often.** Market and competitive changes, closing a new deal, or adding a new set of capabilities can alter your ideal customer profile. While it is important to pick a buyer engagement strategy, successful marketing and sales teams know when to flex to accommodate changing conditions. This means objectively evaluating whether account selection, research, engagement plans, and orchestrated execution both meet business objectives and guide buyers in their decision-making. Be prepared to reexamine your hypotheses about market conditions or buyers' needs if you fall short on engaging the right buyer for your business.

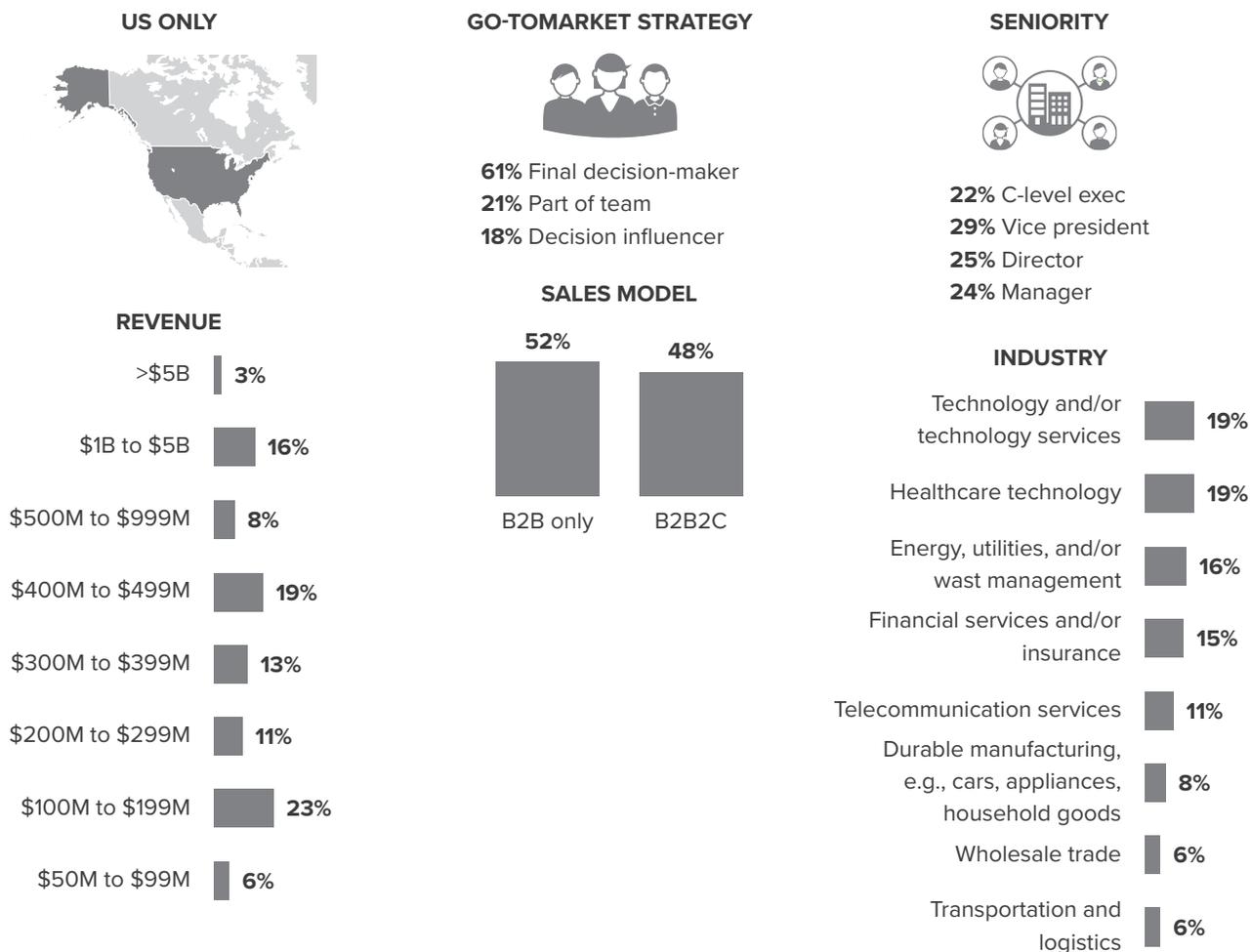


**Modernize your marketing mindset.** B2B marketers say they understand customers but often lack empathy for the trials buyers face during the purchase journey. Once a firm commits to mature prospective buyer engagement, marketing and sales teams can't continue to shape planning and execution with a mindset from the mass marketing and promotional sales era that fails to understand buyers as people. To increase innovative, empathetic thinking, consciously work on ways to dislodge old product-focused mindsets and help teams not just understand buyers but also learn and feel their wants, needs, and concerns.

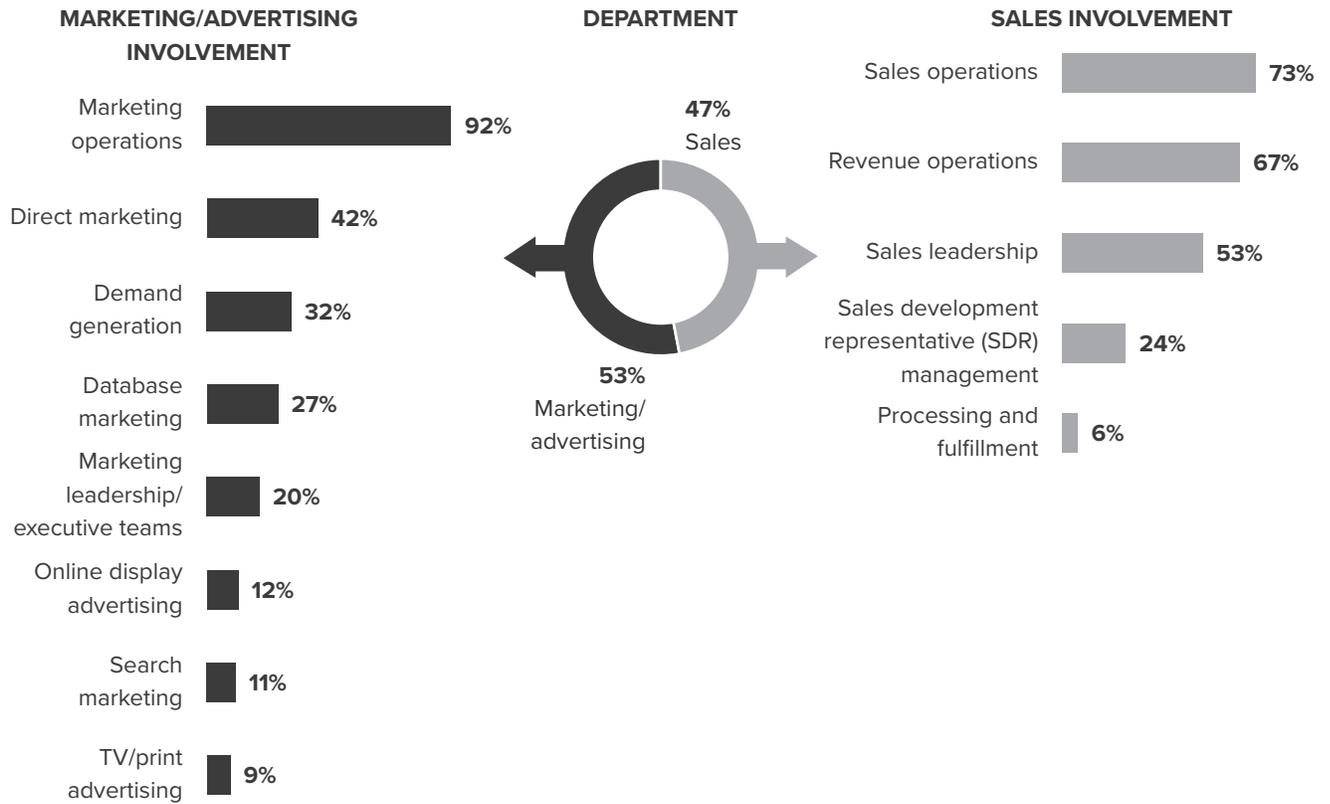
# Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 260 B2B decision-makers in the US to evaluate the state of their go-to-market strategies. Survey participants included decision-makers in sales and marketing roles. Questions provided to the participants asked about their selling strategies and the challenges and objectives that they were navigating through. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive as a thank you for time spent on the survey. The study began in April 2020 and was completed in October 2020.

# Appendix B: Demographics/Data



Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations  
 Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020



Base: 260 manager+ decision-makers who work in marketing/advertising or sales at B2B organizations  
 Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of True Influence, October 2020

## Appendix C: Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Source: "Credible, Empathetic Content Wins Over Elusive B2B Buyers," Forrester Research, Inc., April 30, 2020.
- <sup>2</sup> Source: "What B2B Buyers Crave," Forrester Research, Inc., May 4, 2020.
- <sup>3</sup> Source: "Predictions 2020: B2B Marketing And Sales," Forrester Research, Inc., October 29, 2019.
- <sup>4</sup> Source: "Customer Marketing Elevates B2B Post Sale Experiences And Buyer Value," Forrester Research, Inc., March 31, 2020.
- <sup>5</sup> Source: "Credible, Empathetic Content Wins Over Elusive B2B Buyers," Forrester Research, Inc., April 30, 2020.
- <sup>6</sup> Source: "Three Steps To Modernize Marketing Thinking," Forrester Research, Inc., May 13, 2019.