

Gartner for Sales

**Biweekly Update:
Sales Enablement's
Response to COVID-19
(25 May 2020)**

Sales Research Team

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Initiatives: Sales Effectiveness and Enablement **and 1 more**

Learn how a group of over 50 sales enablement leaders is responding to the COVID-19 crisis. Issues addressed include returning to field-based selling, continued investment in virtual selling capabilities and supporting frontline sales managers to efficiently navigate the crisis.

Quick Answer

What are the top priorities for sales enablement leaders as they support sellers through the COVID-19 crisis?

- **Returning to field-based selling:** Recalibrating workforce deployment to field-based selling by gauging customers' willingness, and the urgency, for face-to-face meetings and incorporating health and safety considerations for sellers
- **Building virtual selling capabilities:** Assessing customers' digital buying experiences and continuing to invest in virtual selling tools, technologies and sales force training in light of prolonged need for social distancing and working from home
- **Supporting frontline sales managers:** Equipping frontline sales managers with the necessary tools to effectively coach and lead the frontline sales force while navigating their evolving responsibilities in the virtual environment

More Detail

Key Take-Aways on Returning to Field-Based Selling in the "New Normal"

- Sales enablement leaders expect customers to be slow in returning to face-to-face meetings with sellers in the postpandemic future. While customers' propensity to meet in person will be dependent on the severity of the pandemic's impact in that geography, organizations are witnessing a rise in face-to-face sales meetings in regions where the virus spread has been contained or minimized. Nonetheless, most businesses are operating with a high degree of caution across geographies, encouraging sellers to observe social distancing laws and practice extra hygiene during customer interactions.
- In-person buying isn't just an economic decision anymore; it's also a health and safety consideration. A rapid economic recovery doesn't necessarily imply a quick return to in-person buying. Enablement leaders anticipate that the virtual selling environment will continue for a

long time. In fact, the decision about the timeline for returning to in-person selling and buying will be independent of the kind or shape of economic recovery – U, V, W or swoosh.

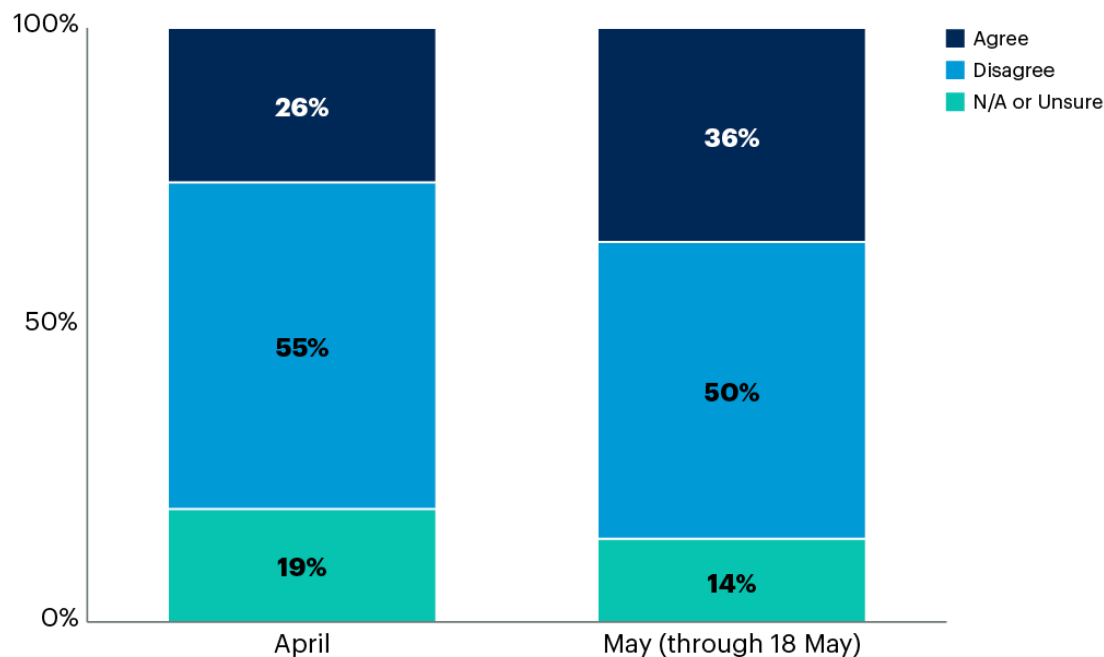
- Some sellers might not be comfortable returning to the field, even when travel restrictions are lifted and customers are willing to hold in-person meetings. While personal health and safety are of utmost importance, continued virtual engagement with customers is expected to have an impact on seller performance, compensation and commission. Executive sales leaders need to be hyperaware of this potential “human problem” and be crystal clear and empathetic in their messaging and instructions to the sales force on returning to the field.

Key Take-Aways on Continued Investment in Virtual Selling Capabilities

- The possibility of subsequent waves of outbreak is emerging as a significant threat to sales leaders’ “return to field” plans. This concern is driven by the rise in COVID-19 cases in China after the lifting of the lockdown and reopening of businesses. Given this context, sales enablement leaders are viewing virtual selling as the way forward for the foreseeable future. Organizations are considering not asking sellers to travel for sales meetings for the rest of the calendar year.
- Customers have become more open to quick virtual meetings with sellers, often multiple times in a week. They have also become more accommodating of follow-up calls requested by either the sellers or by the customers themselves to include additional buying decision makers on the call. In the rapidly changing buying environment, sales enablement leaders are focusing on training sellers to not only leverage virtual selling tools but also modify the content of their conversations and be conscious of soft skills in the digital interface – for example, hand gestures, voice modulation and the background image.
- Sales enablement leaders are using this time as an opportunity to digitize many facets of the sales process, including training sellers to sell in a digital platform while also teaching buyers to buy virtually. There were some concerns that a point of “web meeting fatigue” would be reached among buyers and lead to shorter sales cycles. This anticipated fatigue will require sellers to convey the value proposition of their products/services more quickly than in face-to-face meetings and will benefit sellers who occupy more mind space among buyers.
- Adopting a wait-and-see approach in resuming face-to-face selling might be a risky decision, especially for industries that have traditionally relied on physical seller-buyer interactions. Investments in digital selling capabilities and sales force training are required to sell in the current environment, not only because of the uncertainty about the length of travel restrictions but also because of the first-mover advantage competitors can potentially acquire. Many organizations have adapted quickly to sell virtually and are constantly innovating to improve customers’ buying experience. The percentage of sales leaders conducting “buyer experience” exercises to assess customers’ digital buying experiences has increased from 26% in April to 36% in May (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of Sales Leaders Conducting Buyer Experience Exercises

Percentage of Sales Leaders Conducting Buyer Experience Exercises



n = 73 (April); 22 (May)

Source: 2020 Gartner COVID-19 and Sales Leader Pulse Survey

Responses to survey prompt: "We conducted 'buyer experience' exercises to assess shortcomings in digital buying experiences."

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Key Take-Aways on Equipping Frontline Sales Managers

- Frontline sales managers have had to quickly adapt to managing and coaching their teams virtually given the transition to remote working. To manage a remote team effectively, sales enablement leaders must equip them with the necessary collaboration tools and technologies and monitor the usage and effectiveness of these tools on an ongoing basis.
- To understand how the current uncertainties are affecting frontline sales managers, sales enablement leaders should deliberate on the following:
 - What activities are sales managers spending the majority of their time on now?
 - Are those activities in line with what we want them to focus on?
 - How has the virtual setting changed sales managers' ability to manage and coach their teams?
 - What tools have been provided to sales managers to navigate the additional, evolving set of responsibilities during the current situation?

Recommended by the Authors

“Next Steps for Sales Leaders After the Initial COVID-19 Disruption”

Use this document to help establish strategies for responding to rapidly shifting market dynamics and drive greater confidence among both customers and sellers to own the market narrative with preplanned responses.

“Coronavirus (COVID-19) Resource Center”

Visit our resource center for a growing number of resources to guide executives from sales and all corporate functions in responding to the outbreak.

“Gartner Peer Connect Sales Community”

Participate in ongoing discussions with chief sales officers, heads of sales operations and sales enablement on topics including how they are responding to COVID-19 and its related impact on their organizations and customers.

Recommended For You

Benchmarks on Sales Enablements’ Response to COVID-19: Update for Week of 27 April

Benchmarks on Sales Enablements’ Response to COVID-19: Update for Week of 20 April Biweekly

Update: Sales Enablement’s Response to COVID-19 (11 May 2020)

Sales Enablement’s Response to the Developing COVID-19 Crisis: Week Ending 27 March 2020

Sales Enablement’s Response to the Developing COVID-19 Crisis: Week Ending 3 April 2020

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