



# State of Sales Report Pocket Guide





# Introduction: A human touch at scale

As a sales professional, your skills are in demand more than ever. That's because sales continues to be a top investment priority for businesses. In the U.S. alone, companies spend **\$15 billion** each year training sales employees and **\$800 billion** on incentives to retain sales talent.

Despite this momentum, B2B sales has never been more challenging. Highly personalized services like Netflix and Amazon are driving customers to expect more from the brands they interact with, including those with B2B sales teams. Millennials, who have especially high expectations for personalization, are gaining influence in the workforce and will make up **46%** of professionals by 2020.

Sellers today must meet these heightened expectations while building consensus among a larger group of stakeholders: the average buyer's circle is now **6.8 people**. They must also team up with their marketing counterparts to reach each of these individuals at every stage of the path to purchase. To be successful in modern sales, you need to build relationships at scale—tapping into advanced sales technology to engage with the right contacts faster, while fostering human connection and trust.

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**46%**

of workforce will be millennials by 2020

**6.8**

people make up the average buyer's circle



The third annual LinkedIn State of Sales report studies this new landscape, including the expectations of today's B2B decision makers and the modern selling strategies and technologies employed by B2B sales professionals to scale their impact, outperform their peers and close more deals.

Read on for the Key Findings from this year's LinkedIn State of Sales report—and how you can use these insights to boost your sales performance.

# Executive Summary: 5 key findings

1

**Technology gives sales professionals a competitive edge.** Almost three-quarters of sales professionals (73%) use sales technology to close more deals. Top sales performers—who close deals at a 51% higher rate than their peers—see networking platforms as “very important” to their success.

2

**Decision makers expect understanding and human connection.** Virtually all decision makers (96%) say they’re more likely to consider a brand’s products or services if sales professionals have a clear understanding of their business needs.

3

**Marketing and sales orchestration helps close deals, but data silos remain.** The top sales professionals are working more closely with marketing and seeing better results, but there’s room for improvement. Only 20% of sales professionals report a significant overlap in the data used by marketing and sales to target leads.

4

**Millennial sales professionals tap into marketing insights at higher rates.** Millennials (ages 21-38) are quicker to implement new strategies like marketing and sales orchestration, which is contributing to their success as the highest-performing age group.

5

**Without trust, fewer deals close.** Sales professionals rank trust as the No. 1 factor in closing deals (40%)—above ROI and price—and 51% of decision makers rank trust as the top factor they desire in a salesperson.





# Sales technology is the x factor for closing deals

**Businesses are increasingly investing in sales technology.** Sales teams are turning to cloud-based software, in particular, to accelerate productivity, gather contextual details about customers and automate tedious tasks.

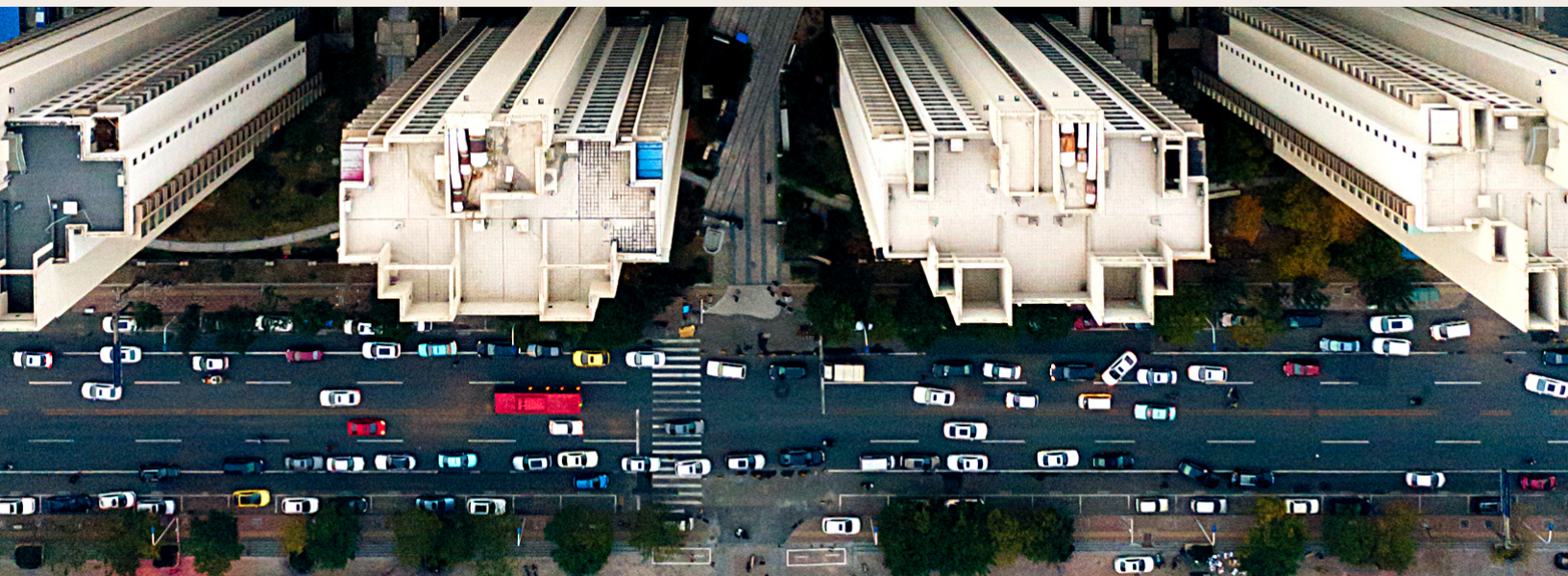
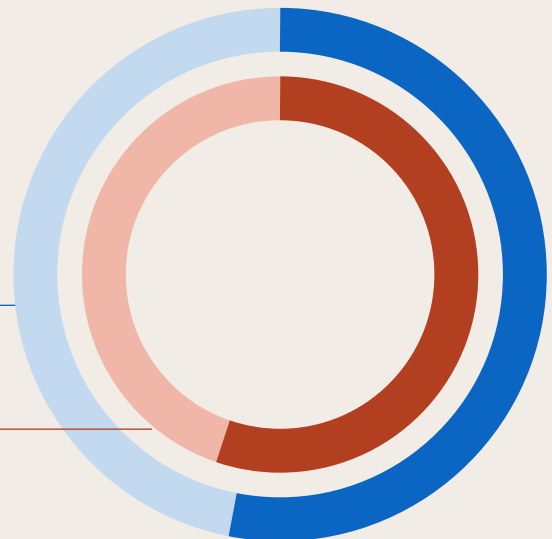
Three-quarters of sales professionals (**73%**) use technology to close more deals. Of this group, **97%** consider sales technology “very important” or “important.” The majority of sales professionals (**59% overall and 65% of top performers**) say they’re spending more time using

technology, too; **93%** are using sales technology just as much or more than in 2017. CRM adoption alone has grown **113%** since 2016, with **64%** of sales professionals reporting that they use CRM tools.

With sales tech on the rise, it’s no surprise that companies are pouring more resources into equipping their salesforces with these tools.

Since 2016, planned investment in sales technology has grown by **53%**

Over half (**55%**) of sales professionals expect this trend to continue next year





Social tools are  
table stakes for  
the modern seller

70%

of sales professionals say they're most active on LinkedIn for business purposes, compared to social media platforms like Facebook (64%), Twitter (43%), YouTube (41%), and Instagram (39%).

## Technology usage is up across multiple platforms:



64%

More than half of sales professionals (64%) use CRM tools like Salesforce and Microsoft Dynamics—**up 28% from 2017**

62%

62% use collaboration tools like Box, Google Docs, Microsoft Office and Dropbox—**up 6% from 2017**

59%

59% use networking platforms like LinkedIn and Facebook—**up 5% since 2017**

40%

40% use enterprise communication platforms—**up 8% since 2017**

# Sales technology is ineffective without a human touch

**Personal connection matters.** As beloved B2C brands have conditioned everyone to expect highly personalized recommendations, content and personalized interactions, decision makers have embraced similar expectations of the B2B path to purchase. Conventional sales approaches don't stack up—buyers now find them cold, impersonal and obviously automated.

As a result, decision makers are more likely to consider a brand's products or services when the experience is personalized, for instance if a sales professional has a clear understanding of their business needs (96%) or their role (94%); shares content relevant to their role (93%); provides personalized communications (93%); or targets the appropriate people at their company for initial discussions (92%).

Decision makers are more likely to engage with sales when introduced through a mutual connection, particularly if the sales professional represents a strong brand. The influence of a strong brand increased by 37% since last year and is the **No. 1 factor** cited by decision makers when choosing to engage with sales.

## Which factors most influence decision makers in an initial engagement?

52%

Representing a well-known company with a strong professional brand

47%

Providing specific information relevant to their current job

41%

Mentioning the sales professional's company and product solutions

39%

Referencing a colleague they both know

32%

Having good charisma

Decision makers are least likely to engage with sales professionals who lack knowledge about their company (79%) and whose products or services are irrelevant to their company (76%).





# The sales and marketing divide diminishes

**Sales and marketing are starting to work more closely together**, benefiting both sales professionals and decision makers alike. Forty-four percent of sales executives say they work more closely with marketing than in past years. Overall, those who say they work “very closely” or “closely” with marketing has grown 35% since the 2016 survey.

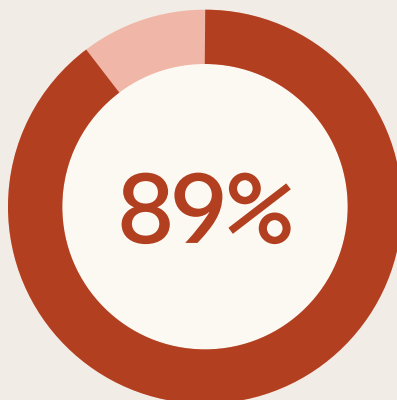
Top sales professionals have a stronger relationship with their marketing counterparts. They are **13%** more likely to say they work “very closely” or “closely” with marketing in prospecting efforts than their peers.

On a scale of one (a very small role) to 10 (a very big role), **57%** of the top sales professionals rate marketing’s importance in closing deals at an eight or above, while **41%** of their average counterparts say the same.

**Still, the data divide remains.** While many sales and marketing teams are keen to partner more closely, data is often siloed in the technology platforms used by each function. Only **20%** of sales professionals say they see significant overlap in the data used by marketing and sales to target prospects.

This misalignment could contribute to the quality of leads sales professionals say they receive from marketing. Only **22%** say leads from marketing are excellent and **42%** say they’re good.

## Marketing and sales misalignment impacts brand perception.



**Eighty-nine percent** of decision makers say consistent marketing and sales language about a product is “very important” (**50%**) or “important” (**39%**).

Nearly half (**48%**) say they often or always experience different messaging from sales and marketing when learning about a solution.



# Millennials are eager to orchestrate marketing and sales efforts

**Millennials are quicker than other age groups to use new strategies and technologies.** These younger sales executives mirror the technology usage of the most successful sales professionals at the highest rates. Sixty-two percent of millennials (and 65% of top performers) say they anticipate spending more time this year using sales technology. On the other hand, 56% of Generation X and Baby Boomers say they anticipate investing more time this year compared to last year.

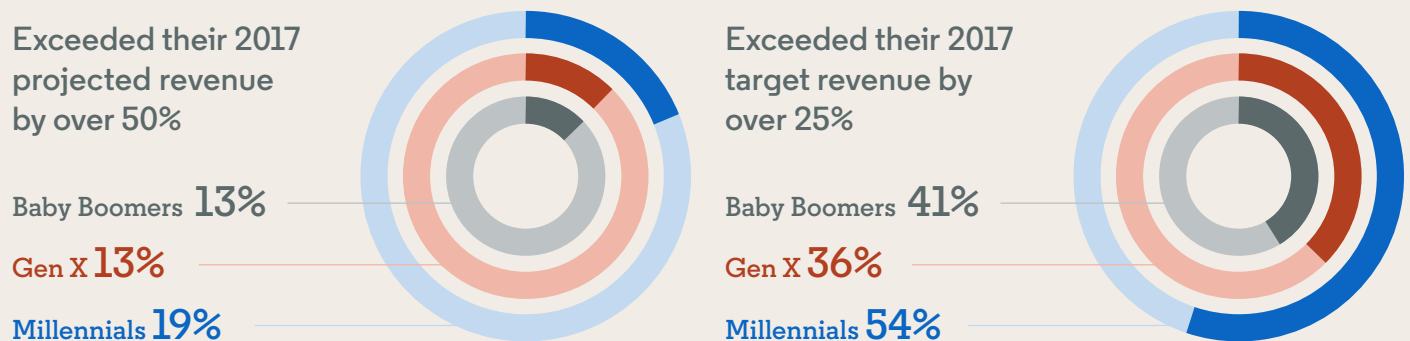
**A tight-knit relationship with marketing is paying off for millennials**, who tend to outperform Generation X and Baby Boomer sales professionals. Top performing millennials are **23%** more likely to say they work “very closely” with marketing than Generation X and **73%** more likely than Baby Boomers.

This partnership has strengthened over the past year. Millennial sales pros are **12%** more likely than Generation X and **24%** more likely than Baby Boomers to spend more time working with marketing than in past years.

In turn, millennials say they see excellent leads from marketing at **56%** higher rates than Generation X and **115%** higher than Baby Boomers.

## How did 2017 sales performance compare by generation?

Millennials are on the fast track to sales success. In comparison to Generation X and Baby Boomers, 46 percent more millennials exceeded their 2017 projected revenue target by more than 50 percent.



Millennials also credit a larger portion of their success to sales technology. **Twenty-eight percent** of millennials think CRM tools are “extremely critical” to their success, compared to **18%** of Generation X and **9%**

of Baby Boomers. Similarly, almost one-third (**30%**) of millennials think sales intelligence tools are extremely critical, compared to **22%** of Generation X and only **7%** of Baby Boomers.



# Trust is the top indicator for sales success

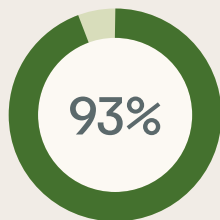
**It's more important than ever for sales professionals to earn and maintain trust as consumer skepticism of big brands peaks.**

**Ninety-nine percent** of sales professionals say trust is “very important” or “important” to winning new business. **Forty percent** rank trust as the most important contributor to closing a deal—even above ROI of the product or service (**28%**) and price (**18%**). An additional **24%** rank trust second. Trust has led as a priority factor influencing deals since our first survey in 2016.

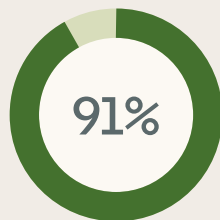
**Fifty-one percent** of decision makers rank trust as the No. 1 factor they desire in a salesperson, followed by responsiveness (**42%**), expertise in the field (**42%**), problem solving (**37%**) and transparency (**34%**).

## Sales professionals earn high marks from buyers.

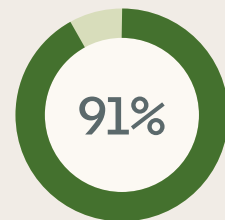
When asked how they perceive sales professionals they work with, decision makers “strongly agree” or “agree” sales professionals are:



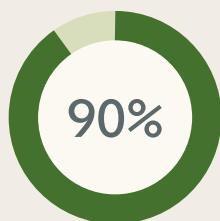
Professional



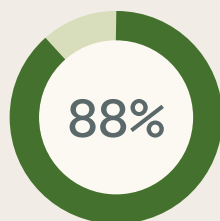
Well informed about their industry



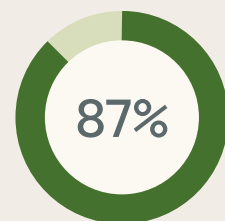
Consultative



Well informed about their company



Trusted advisors



Focused on building relationships

# 66%

Two-thirds (66%) of decision makers feel the sales professionals they work with are essential partners all or most of the time (22% and 44%, respectively).

# Conclusion

Today's selling landscape comes with heightened consumer expectations and skepticism—without a personalized purchasing experience, you'll quickly lose buyers' interest.

That's why it's important to implement a modern selling strategy: tap into technology to scale, lean into marketing to align insights, but don't forget real human connections are irreplaceable. Top sales professionals are closing more deals on a foundation of trust; relationships are still at the heart of selling.

This approach will enable you to better target prospects, personalize experiences and meet buyers' expectations, today and in the future.

# Methodology

Market Cube, a research panel company, conducted two online surveys from August 7-15, 2018.

For 2018, two sample groups were surveyed representing both sales professionals and decision makers. The first was a sample of 507 professionals from the United States who primarily work in B2B sales. The second was a sample of 502 business decision makers from the U.S. who have influence over purchasing decisions at B2B companies. Both samples includes respondents over 21-years-old who are employed at companies of different sizes and functions.

The report also references a group of "top sales professionals" who are defined as sales professionals who exceed their sales target by at least **25%**.

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