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The Next Era of Sales: AI-Guided Selling

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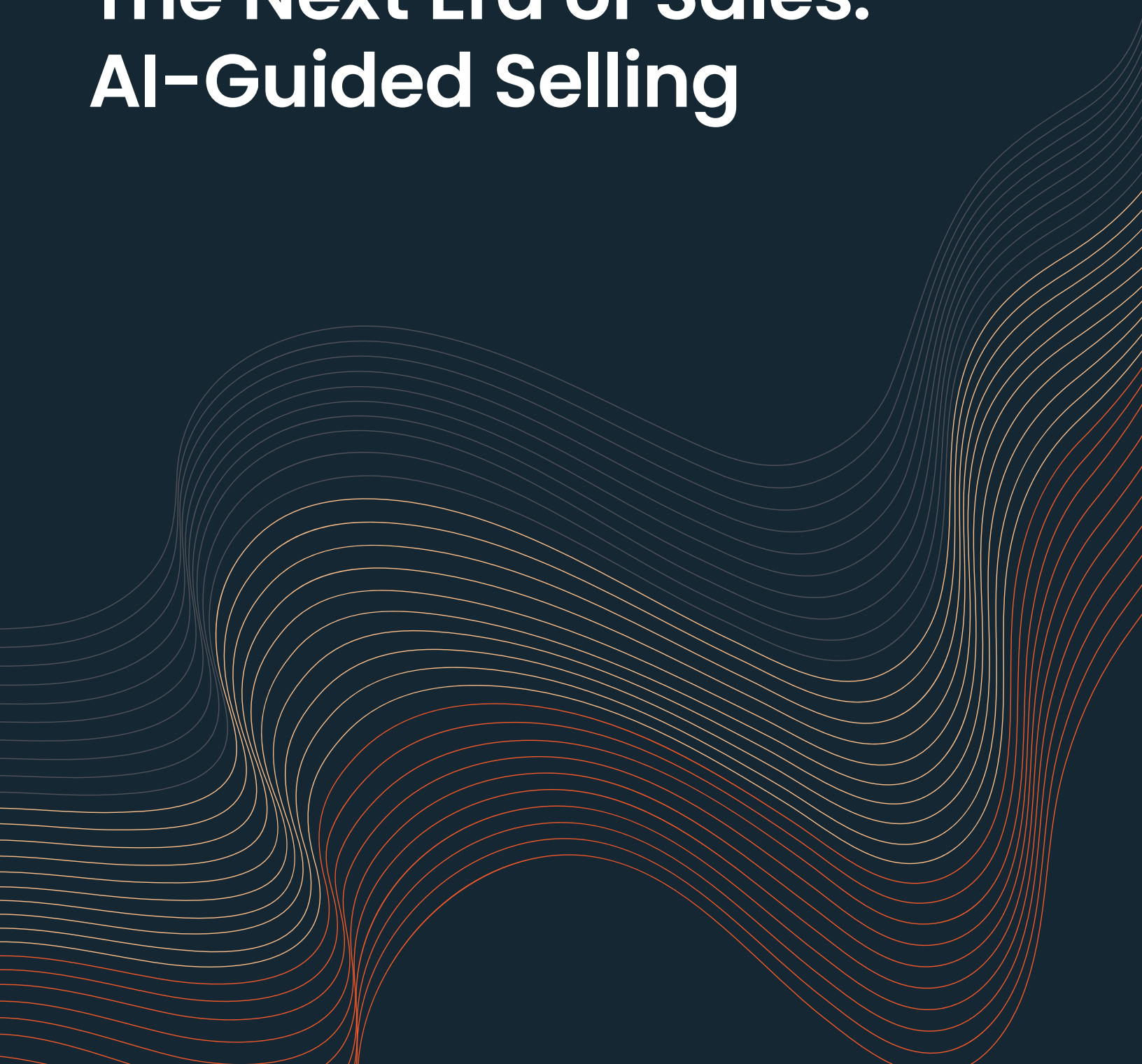
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Executive summary

Selling guided by artificial intelligence systems, i.e. AI-guided selling, is coming. By 2025, we expect the introduction of true AI-guided selling where AI-based sales enablement systems will be able to extract, load and transform sales-related data to make focused, real-time, and incisive, recommendations to revenue teams—and then largely execute those recommendations independently.

These AI-guided solutions will provide proactive, in-the-moment, and detailed advice for various sales situations. Imagine sellers planning their next client meeting or call being provided competitive information to surface based on the competitors the prospect has been evaluating, or specific content recommendations to handle the most likely objections.

Upon the seller's approval, these systems will perform the mundane tasks to deliver on those recommendations, like pulling together customized content for meetings. Likewise, AI solutions will recommend and largely execute campaigns on behalf of marketers, basing recommendations on marketing goals combined with a detailed, up-to-date analysis of content, channel performance, industry and segment variations, etc. They will even take on tasks such as writing, tailoring, or converting content for specific campaigns and channels in order to optimize engagement.

Introduction

B2B sales is evolving and the Zoom-boom of 2020 has only accelerated those changes. Sales—including what's referred to as the "last mile", where a sales representative engages directly with the buyer—is increasingly online and customer-driven. All signs suggest these trends will continue well beyond the pandemic resulting in a new normal of hybrid online-offline selling with customers driving the sales process.

These shifts are resulting in a new role for sellers, forcing them to become sales facilitators and even advisors, what Gartner terms "Sense Making" sellers. High-performing sellers rely on a deep understanding of their buyers and a rich set of corporate content in order to provide information and guidance to buyers as they navigate an overflowing wealth of often competing information about products.

AI marketing and sales solutions are rapidly improving in tandem with the aforementioned digital shifts. CTOs understand the need to invest in these improving solutions. The number of companies implementing AI-related technologies has grown by 270% over the last four years.

This is the road leading to AI-guided selling. Successful sales people will bring their empathy and social skills to the last mile, while leveraging the advice of AI systems that will proactively prompt them with the most effective actions they can take at any given point and aid them in taking those actions. However, to leverage the power of AI-guided selling, organizations must first prepare their sellers or this technological revolution.

AI-guided selling will help sellers become sense makers

In its report, The Sense Making Seller, Gartner says that changes in the market are giving rise to "Sense Making sellers": sellers who guide buyers in making sense of vast amounts of information in order to allow them to make confident purchase decisions.

Sales leaders need to enable their sellers to perform this role, but it's not scalable without AI. AI-powered systems will help turn sellers into "Sense Makers" by surfacing the relevant information, suggesting conversations to have, and providing the content to see and support those sales actions.

300
200
100
1 2 3 4

270%
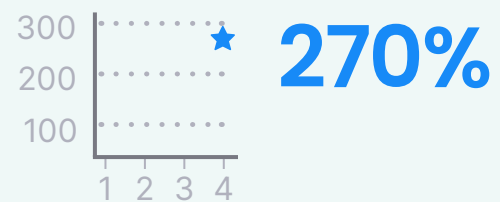
Four year growth in enterprises deploying AI[1]

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[1] https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2019-01-21-gartner-survey-shows-37-percent-of-organizations-have#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20enterprises%20implementing,struggle%20with%20acute%20talent%20shortages.

The evolution of sales

The rise of AI-guided selling rests on three factors:

- **Market conditions:** Increase in digital selling and self-directed buyers journeys fueled by content

- **Accessible data and data analytics:** Sophisticated data storage and transformation tools

- **AI coming into fruition:** The promise of AI becoming reality

Digital and virtual selling become the norm

The recent expedition of digital transformation has only accelerated trends that were already emerging. Namely, buyers are taking more and more control of the customer journey by using online content and tools to research, compare, and move down the path of a purchasing decision, prior to engaging with Sales.

Some degree of selling is likely here to stay. Back in April, a Gartner survey reported that "**27% of polled sales leaders** agreed to permanently shifting field sellers to virtual sellers." In a recent report (The Future of Sales) Gartner estimates that by 2025, **80% of B2B sales interactions** between vendors and buyers will take place in digital channels, largely due to buyer preference.
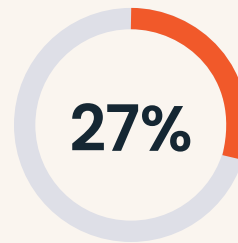
27% of polled sales leaders agreed to permanently shifting field sellers to virtual sellers.[2]
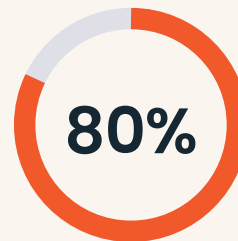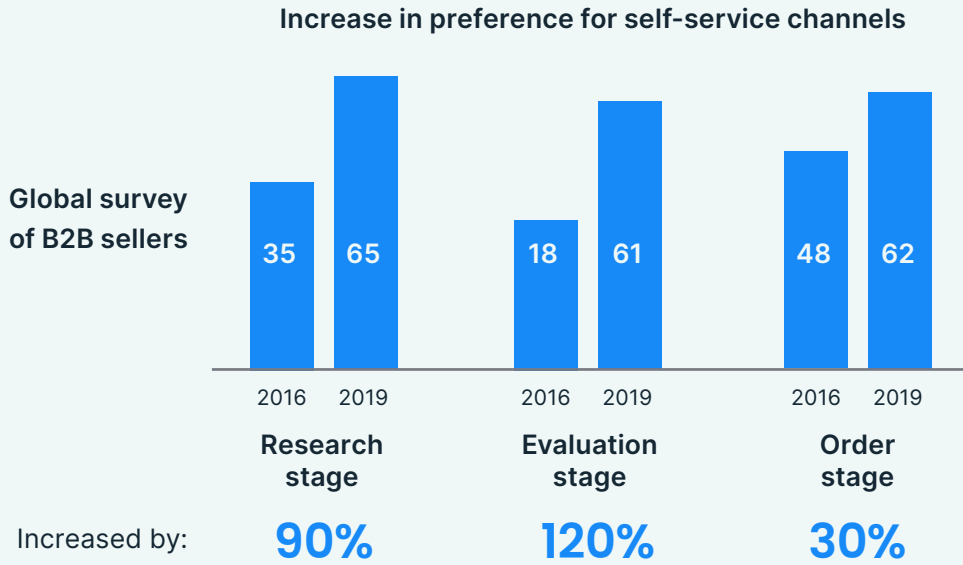
80% of B2B sales interactions between vendors and buyers will take place in digital channels (by 2025).[3]

Self-service matters for B2B[4]

Increase in preference for self-service channels

Global survey of B2B sellers

	Research stage		Evaluation stage		Order stage	
	2016	2019	2016	2019	2016	2019
	35	65	18	61	48	62

Increased by: **90%** **120%** **30%**

Data courtesy of:
[4]https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/the-b2b-digital-inflection-point-how-sales-have-changed-during-covid-19

Data drives success

- Highly data-driven organizations are **three times more likely** to see significant improvements in decision making[5]

- They are "**162% more likely** to have claimed they significantly overperformed"

- And **11% more** of sellers in data-driven sales organizations achieved their goals[6]

- These sellers also won forecasted deals **8% more often**.

[5] https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/data-driven-decision-making
[6] https://business.linkedin.com/sales-solutions/b2b-sales-strategy-guides/the-state-of-sales-2020-report

The AI promise starts to become reality

The third factor in the evolution of sales is AI. Analysts agree that the reality of AI is catching up to the promise and businesses are recognizing that change. According to McKinsey[7]:

- **63% of executives** reported revenue increases from AI adoption in the business units that were using AI

- High performers (in AI use) were almost three times as likely to report revenue gains of **over 10%**.

- Marketing and sales was **one of the three** areas that executives were most likely to report revenue growth from AI use.

Yet, AI adoption challenges remain a roadblock for many businesses. For example, a recent O'Reilly survey[8] showed that while 85% of organizations surveyed were evaluating or using AI, almost 22% cited a lack of institutional support as a significant impediment.

Organizations must foster data-driven mindsets to pave the way for AI use. According to data visualization software company Tableau, a data culture is a necessity: "The most successful data-driven companies invest in culture as much as they invest in technology, embedding data into core business functions. And organizational culture—including data culture—starts at the top."

> ''
>
> Even the AI high performers have work to do... **only 36 percent** of respondents from these companies say their frontline employees use AI insights in real time for daily decision making."
>
> **McKinsey & Company**
> Global AI Survey: AI proves its worth, but few scale impact

[7] https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/artificial-intelligence/global-ai-survey-ai-proves-its-worth-but-few-scale-impact
[8] https://www.oreilly.com/radar/ai-adoption-in-the-enterprise-2020/

Deep dive: The technology underpinning AI-guided selling

AI-guided selling won't happen overnight. In addition to the AI algorithms themselves—which are advancing, but still not fully capable of delivering on the ultimate vision—two other capabilities are critical:

- Integrated and broad data sources to train and feed AI systems

- Rich integrations for input and output to enable omnipresent recommendations

Data sources: integrated and broad

AI tools will need access to multiple data sources to both train the AI models and to feed them real-time input for analysis. Initially, this will be data owned and managed by the user's organization: CRM information, conversations, content analytics, digital interactions, customer success and support systems, etc.

Over time, we anticipate AI tools from vendors will be fed by anonymous and aggregated information from multiple industry or business data sources brokered by organizations that manage large datasets.

AI omnipresence: Reach sellers where they live and just-in-time

Providing recommendations isn't enough. AI-guided selling also requires that those recommendations be surfaced where sellers live.

While sales operations may want to consolidate on one system, such as a CRM, every seller works differently and not all sellers will be willing to work in one system. To meet the goal of just-in-time, personalized guidance, AI tools must be able to deliver guidance on the devices and systems that each seller uses. Thus, in order to maximize value, AI-guided selling must be solution and device agnostic. This will require a rich set of API-based integrations provided by many different vendors.

What will AI-guided selling look like?

Sellers

For sellers of the future, AI will be omnipresent and proactive. They won't have to go looking for recommendations or advice. It will come to them on the devices and in the apps they are using, at the moment when that advice is most valuable.

> "Knowing that people are having conversations is great, but if you don't have the content platform to back up the conversation platform, you're not having the right conversations. You've got to tell them the right things."

Tom Strader
VP Product Management
Seismic

Looking up a contact's number on your mobile phone?

A notification appears reminding you that in the last call, the buyer said her daughter was getting married so you can ask how the wedding went.

Have a call coming up with a client?

As you check your calendar in the morning, AI notifies you that the client has been active in online discussion groups asking questions about how your product's features compare with a specific competitor. The AI system suggests competitive content to have handy in your meeting.

Responding to a request for a follow-up meeting?

The AI system identifies the roles of the team members you haven't met, assesses their technical depth and likely role in the purchase decision, and then proposes specific slides to include in your presentation for that meeting. When the Seller approves the recommendation, the AI-based tool compiles the slides, personalizing their content in subtle ways to reflect the prospect's industry, org size, and region.

Online meeting nearing its end?

A private notification appears recommending you suggest a meeting IT and suggests a piece of content to send ahead of time around IT requirements, all based on the analysis of the conversation during this meeting and the patterns of wins in similar size organizations with similar goals.

Marketers

AI systems will be just as proactive with marketers as with sellers. Given advances in AI writing code, it's likely that AI systems will take on some of the writing work that content creators currently do.

Mid-market pipeline goals increased?

The AI solution determines that the manufacturing vertical has the best upside potential. It suggests creating an infographic and video from a long-form piece of content that has performed well in that vertical, and running a Display and Paid Search campaign targeted to manufacturing.

Is a new topic emerging in your industry?

The day before your meeting about the blog content calendar, the AI system notifies you of an analyst report highlighting a new topic and term and suggests that a thought leadership piece on the topic would garner a 20% increase in blog traffic.

Preparing a campaign around a launch?

An AI system identifies the partners with the most technical synergy and whose business situation suggests they are most likely to take advantage of launch content. The AI solution makes text changes to each of the relevant partner pages and drafts one-pagers for each partner, with content and messaging that reflects the partner's business and the value prop offered by your combined technology.

Product marketing managers

New personas emerging for your product or solution?

An AI solution recommends targeting these personas after identifying these emerging personas based on who is showing up on sales calls, a rise in website activity from people with those titles, and increased content engagement from them.

Working on a new messaging framework?

Your AI-powered enablement tool proposes the best messaging or new messaging based on an analysis of what current messages are resonating both across your sales and marketing channels and amongst similar companies.

Looking forward:
The path to AI-guided selling

As AI-guided selling becomes reality, it will usher in a new era. The very nature of selling will be transformed. The most successful sellers will have to adapt to a changing role that requires relying on sales enablement solutions with strong AI capabilities. Those who do adapt are poised to be high performers able to drive greater revenue for their companies. And buyers will win too—seeing sellers as valuable partners who provide critical education and information on the path to purchase.

If AI is the future of selling, how do you position your organization today to take advantage of it in the near future?

Conclusion

To be successful with AI-guided selling, sales people must first accept, then adopt, and finally embrace AI. The more that your organization establishes an analytics and data-centric mindset now, the easier it will be for sellers and revenue-generating teams to embrace this transition.

To do that, organizations must take action on two fronts: implement content analytics systems and take on (or espouse) a more data-driven mindset. On the technical side, businesses must deploy and mature their use of sales enablement systems. On the cultural side, they must mature employee understanding and use of data for decision-making.

This will normalize data analysis and data use as a part of business decision-making. It will build user trust in intelligent recommendations and automated processes. And it will lay the IT groundwork for the sales and marketing tech stack and integrations that will be necessary when it comes time to deploy AI-guided selling solutions mid-decade.

Organizations that wait until AI-guided selling arrives and then try to quickly transition will be at a distinct disadvantage. Those that have already developed a data-driven mindset and embedded processes that use data for day-to-day sales and marketing decision-making will be well positioned to move to AI-guided selling and reap all the competitive advantages that will come with it.

Ready to put your organization on the path to AI-guided selling?

Read our white paper, Preparing for AI-Guided Selling: A Roadmap for Forward-Thinking Businesses, to learn how to build a roadmap for your organization to prepare for AI-guided selling.

Download the white paper →

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About Seismic

Seismic is the industry-leading sales enablement and digital sales engagement solution, aligning go-to-market teams and empowering them to deliver engaging buyer experiences that drive growth. Seismic's Storytelling Platform™ delivers innovative capabilities for marketers to orchestrate content delivery across all channels, and for sellers to engage with prospective buyers in a compelling, resonant manner at every step of the buyer journey More than 700 enterprises including IBM and American Express have made Seismic their sales enablement platform of choice. The Seismic Storytelling Platform™ integrates with business-critical platforms including Microsoft, Salesforce, Google and Adobe. Seismic is headquartered in San Diego, with offices across North America, Europe, and Australia.

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