The Insight-Driven Revolution: Transforming Account Selling Through Eight Buyer-Centric Shifts

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POLARIS I/O
THE GO TO CUSTOMER COMPANY

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Introduction

Executive buyer behavior has accelerated in its shift to an entirely buyer-centric model, where account sellers are replaced with online research and more complex buying networks. Today, only 28% of sales conversations create enough value for buyers to take action (Corporate Visions) and 70% of GTM strategies are misaligned with buyer behavior, costing companies millions in lost revenue (SBI). The traditional go-to-market sales motion—focused on lead generation to drive product sales to prospects—no longer works.

As a result, today's GTM sales model is highly inefficient, placing extensive strain on commercial systems. Leaders are now expected to leverage AI for efficiency gains, eliminating sales and BDR headcount that is no longer valuable, while pursuing aggressive growth targets. However, taking a scalpel to a sales model no longer working doesn't solve the problem. New AI-driven growth models that align with today's buyer behavior is the answer. There's a difference.

Essential account sellers will shift to insight-driven selling from product-driven selling, regardless of whether their organization supports it or not. It is imperative for survival. According to Gartner, **83% of sales leaders lack confidence in their seller's ability to adapt to changing customer needs and expectations**. To be adaptive to customer needs and responsive to expectations, account sellers must become insight-driven—knowledgeable about the buyer's challenges, environmental factors, evolving situation, urgency, and decision-making process. They must also be able to provide an informed perspective, driven by insights about the buyer's needs, goals, and objectives.

What is a *commercial* insight?

A commercial insight is the understanding and articulation of the root cause of a problem that, if addressed, results in a meaningful and sustainable business outcome and desired future state.

So, what is an insight in the first place—something that a "go-to-customer" sales motion trades on, as a kind of currency, with executive buyers? Insights are the fuel that keeps account teams relevant, builds trust, and drives long-term relationships with customers. Commercial insights are derived from analyzing a customer situation to get at the root cause of a problem, challenge, or threat that, if addressed, results in a sustainable outcome that achieves a desired future state.

An insight isn't just a headline or a lone data point floating without context. True insights emerge when we connect the dots between challenges, stakeholders, urgency, value, and the strategic orchestration of resources—all aligned under a shared vision of success. Without these connections, insights remain inert. **Actionable insights are the new currency for success.**

For account sellers, this currency fuels high-value pipeline opportunities by engaging customers with clarity and purpose. For marketers and sales strategists, crafting these insights becomes their core mandate—a competitive edge that transforms how opportunities are identified and nurtured. Businesses that fail to adopt this mindset risk irrelevance. In an era where insights drive decisions, stagnation isn't just a growth barrier—it's a direct threat to customer retention and market survival. **The message is clear: shift to an insight-driven approach or fade from relevancy with buyers.**

Shifting to an Insight-Driven Approach: Working Backwards from Customers vs. Forward with Products

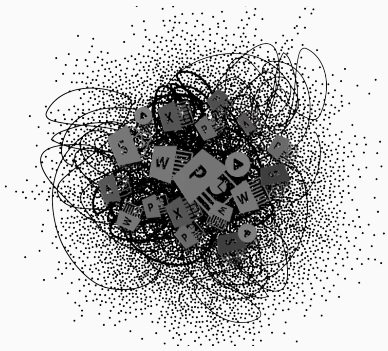
The shift from product to insight-driven selling requires a shift in approach, but also a shift towards a growth mindset to embrace this new approach. Account sellers must put their customers' needs first by gaining a deeper understanding of their business environment and the key decision-makers within it. To be successful today, account sellers need to shift their orientation–and do it quickly. To facilitate this, we have identified eight "shifts" that outline how best to align with a customer's buying journey. This alignment is critical: **When you align with buyers, you win. When you don't, you lose. It's that simple**. That is the upside – a customer-centric, insight-driven approach works.

Adapt and Thrive:
8 Essential Shifts to Align with Customer Needs

	CURRENT STATE	DESIRED STATE
1	*from* **Product Selling**	*to* **Problem Solving**
2	*from* **Leads**	*to* **Needs**
3	*from* **Intent Signals**	*to* **Pre-intent Signals**
4	*from* **Surface Level**	*to* **Deep Understanding**
5	*from* **Rarely Relevant**	*to* **Relevant and Timely**
6	*from* **One Buyer**	*to* **Buyer Networks**
7	*from* **Whitespace**	*to* **Bluespace**
8	*from* **Few Purchases**	*to* **Many Purchases**

1 Shift from Product Selling to Problem Solving

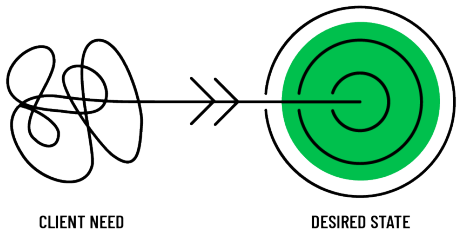
We all know that product selling—the traditional focus of sales training—alienates buyers. Instead, it's better to position yourself as an expert on clients' current challenges and threats, armed with a perspective informed by your organization's research, case studies, client success stories, and relevant external insights tailored to their situation. Prioritize understanding the problem: ask probing questions, identify root causes, and share actionable findings with customer stakeholders. This approach should be your primary focus.



CURRENT STATE

From Product Selling

Most account sellers focus on pitching product features and functions—a strategy that no longer works with today's empowered buyers. Consider this: 81% of buyers are unhappy with their experience (Forrester), 59% of sellers fail to grasp buyers' goals (Salesforce), and 60% of qualified deals end with no decision made (Corporate Visions).



DESIRED STATE

To Problem Solving

When account sellers get in early—before executive buyers have started addressing a core challenge—they can create, shape, and win new deals. Win rates double, deal sizes grow by 2-3x, and sales cycles shorten, with fewer deals ending in "no decision." Account sellers who co-create solutions with customers win bigger deals faster.

Benefits of Problem-Centric Selling

Modern sales methodologies increasingly prioritize solving customer problems over traditional product-focused pitches. This shift reflects evolving buyer expectations and the demand for solutions that align with their needs and desired outcomes. Problem-centric strategies drive 10x pipeline increases, 2-3x increases in deal size, and reduced sales cycles and instances of "no decision" compared to transactional product selling.

> Currently, **only 34%** of Key Account Managers report hitting quota as a result of outdated approaches that don't align with buyer needs.
>
> Gartner

2 Shift from Leads to Needs

Focusing on making a single sale to many prospects is the historical domain of account sellers. However, within each enterprise account lies a significant, hidden pipeline of unmet needs. Buyers want help addressing their challenges, especially in the early stages. Why not focus on cultivating a growth pipeline built from customers' needs, concentrating your efforts where you can truly make a difference in helping them succeed? When you do, customers will embrace you as an important resource.

CURRENT STATE

From Leads

Marketing still focuses on generating "marketing qualified leads" (MQLs), but the statistics are dismal. It's not unusual that only 0.5% of leads convert on average, signaling that buyers are no longer responding to cold outreach. As a result, customer growth and retention has become the top CSO objective for 2025.

DESIRED STATE

To Needs

Companies should shift their focus to "**customer-qualified needs**" (CQNs). To drive customer growth, account teams must identify and prioritize needs they can address both successfully and credibly. These teams should demonstrate a deep understanding of the customer's problems by offering insights that can be effectively used in problem-based conversations.

Benefits of Focusing on Customer Needs

In an era where traditional MQL strategies yield diminishing returns, businesses must pivot by prioritizing "customer-qualified needs" (CQN). By focusing on understanding and addressing customer challenges with credibility and precision, teams can unlock sustainable growth and ensure that solutions align with the real, evolving demands of their existing account base. This approach transforms customer relationships into engines of long-term growth, making systematic retention and expansion the cornerstones of revenue growth.

59% of sellers fail to grasp buyers goals.

salesforce

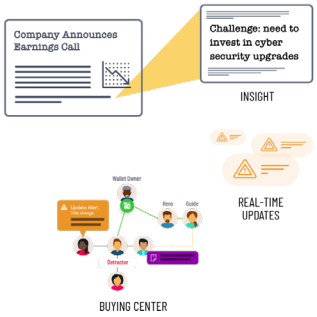
3 Shift from Intent to Pre-Intent Signals

Once a customer is already shopping, it's too late in the buying process for account sellers to win. Buyers have already moved far down the path in shaping their thinking. If you haven't been creating and shaping opportunities with executive buyers before they start shopping, you aren't likely to win. Time and again, we see that those engaged early in the buying journey create, shape, and win large deals faster—and win other expansion sales—given their continued relevance in the customers' moments of need. **Speed to need is a competitive differentiator. The lack of relevancy early in the buyer journey alienates buyers, drives commoditization, erodes margin, and renders account teams low value.**

CURRENT STATE

From Intent Signals

Once buyers are already shopping for solutions, it's too late. By the time they are actively researching, buyers are quickly gathering all the information they need and prefer not to interface with account sellers. Account sellers who enter the buying cycle too late are quickly commoditized and relegated to competing on price vs. value.



DESIRED STATE

To Pre-Intent Signals

Pre-intent signals emerge when a compelling event occurs that requires executive buyer attention. Recognizing these pre-intent signals, prioritizing the right ones, engaging early, shaping a funded initiative, and co-creating solutions are when buyers embrace vendor support. Larger, profitable deals are the result.

Benefits of Prioritizing Pre-Intent Signals

Pre-intent signals empower businesses to anticipate customer needs, build strategic relationships, and drive revenue growth through proactive engagement. By translating these signals into actionable insights, account sellers can easily understand and engage with customers in a highly relevant manner. When you unify relevant messaging with pre-intent signals—mapped to the right stakeholders, at the right time, with the right message—you build trust quickly. **Trust drives relationships and repeat purchasing.**

> **Only 28%** of sales conversations create enough value for buyers to take action.
>
> CorporateVisions

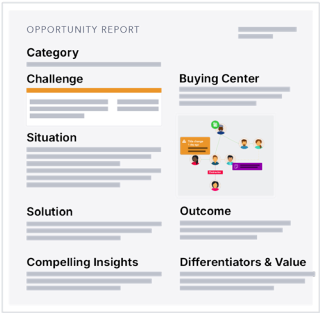
4 Shift from Surface Level to Deep Understanding

More depth is required, beyond a news headline, to truly engage buyers in a meaningful sales conversation. Account sellers need to demonstrate far more business and role acumen than they do today. However, it can't only be on the account seller alone to develop this deeper knowledge. According to Gartner, 72% of sellers already feel overwhelmed by the skills they are told they need. Account sellers are in the business of APPLYING insights into sales conversations. **This is a full-time job!** Expecting account sellers to use "do-it-yourself" tools, connect all the dots, translate information into insight-driven sales conversations, and continuously update the message based on evolving customer conditions already doesn't work. Account sellers don't have the time and, as a result, they often glean only surface-level information that is not effective.

CURRENT STATE

From Surface Level

Information overload overwhelms account sellers, making it difficult to stay informed, engage early, and remain competitive in the market. Furthermore, the number of internal selling steps further dilutes the time spent on understanding customer problems and the needs and perspectives of those involved, quickly disappointing and alienating buyers.



DESIRED STATE

To Deep Understanding

Executive buyers value an informed perspective when addressing challenges because they need to solve problems efficiently and achieve sustainable business results. An in-depth understanding of the problem and the needs of each buyer empowers account sellers to provide powerful recommendations.

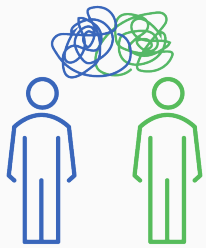
Benefits of Understanding Problems and Needs

Understanding buyer-specific problems and needs is a strategic imperative for modern businesses. By deeply analyzing customer needs, challenges, and threats, as well as individual buyer preferences and expectations, organizations can drive significant growth in high-value accounts. Delivering actionable insights directly to account sellers boosts team efficiency by 50%, expands pipelines, and increases revenue.

> Key account managers spend, on average, **9 hours per week** of non-selling time that creates "drag" for KAMs and decreases their discretionary effort.
>
> Gartner

5 Shift from Rarely Relevant to Relevant and Timely

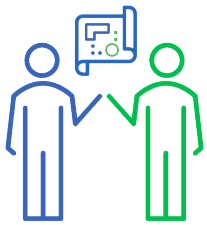
Without a supply chain of insights feeding your account selling teams, account sellers can't remain relevant to stakeholders when it matters. This becomes a massive competitive advantage when commercial workflows proactively deliver timely, relevant insights directly to account sellers' inboxes. However, as previously stated, a news headline is not an insight—it's merely a data point. True insights must be actionable, incorporating the people involved (their challenges or problems), background context, perspectives, and messaging aligned with those views. AND they must be updated. Every challenge goes through an evolution of changes, which requires compelling events to be continuously updated and summarized.



CURRENT STATE

From Rarely Relevant

Informed perspectives and points of view are only valuable when they are relevant to an executive buyer at the moment of need. Mis-timing these recommendations results in wasted time and effort, longer sales cycles, and no decision, as account sellers are not aligned with the buyer's immediate needs.



DESIRED STATE

To Relevant and Timely

When you are in the room addressing customer needs as they arise, executive buyers value and reward those who provide meaningful recommendations that are both relevant and timely. Account sellers who are late or unaware of a challenge are at a competitive disadvantage.

Benefits of Being Relevant and Timely

In the dynamic landscape of executive decision-making, the value of informed perspectives hinges on their precise alignment with the buyer's immediate priorities. Recommendations that miss the mark in timing or relevance lead to inefficiencies, stalled processes, and lost opportunities. Conversely, account sellers who engage proactively—delivering actionable insights at the exact moment of need—earn credibility, accelerate outcomes, and secure a decisive edge. Success, therefore, lies not just in the quality of advice, but also in the strategic synchronization of insight with the evolving demands of the executive buyer.

> **74%** of decision makers choose a buying "vision."
>
> FORRESTER®

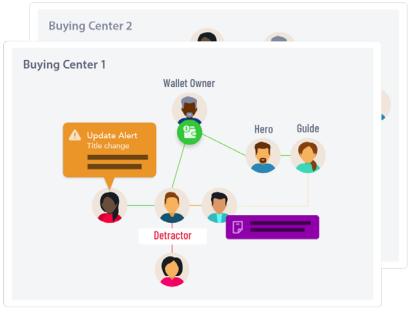
6 Shift from One Buyer to Buying Networks

The buying process is now more complex, involving numerous stakeholders with roles such as decision-makers, influencers, and facilitators. No longer can you rely on just one or two contacts; approvals, process facilitation, and requirements validation now involve multiple people. A clear visual map of all stakeholders is essential. Like a chess game, your entire account team must stay aligned with everyone involved. While this complexity is real, a consistent, methodical approach brings results by revealing who's involved and what they need. Once your buying network is mapped, it should be saved for reuse over and over as part of repeat sales efforts.

CURRENT STATE

From One Buyer

Account sellers often lock in on one buyer or a few "key contacts" they know and work with regularly. However, a CRM system can reinforce this limiting view. In reality, there is a hidden network of multiple buyers and influencers. According to Gartner, the average buying group typically includes 11 to 20 stakeholders, all of whom must agree on a decision.



DESIRED STATE

To Buying Networks

Buying networks have grown in size and now require consensus among all participants before moving forward with a vendor. Once you understand these networks and the roles of those involved, you can secure repeat transactions and gradually deepen your knowledge and influence-building valuable tribal knowledge over time.

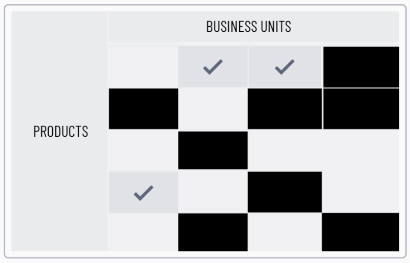
Benefits of Aligning with the Buying Networks

Account sellers often focus on familiar buyers or key contacts, but this narrow view misses the reality that modern buying networks involve 11 to 20 stakeholders needing consensus. Using mapping tools to engage these broader networks helps businesses move beyond transactions to foster additional growth. This strategic shift deepens account sellers' understanding of decision dynamics, builds influential tribal knowledge, and develops long-term partnerships.

> **11-20%** of stakeholders are now involved in making a buying decision.
>
> Gartner

7 Shift from Whitespace to Bluespace

Whitespace is a product-centric approach to analyzing account growth. It represents an inside-out perspective of what has been sold versus what remains unsold, organized by product and business unit. Bluespace offers an outside-in view of customer needs, organized by category of problem / challenge and buying center. Bluespace focuses on analyzing what customers are, or will likely be, spending money on. These buying centers develop funded initiatives and typically span multiple business units and departments. By shifting from a product-driven whitespace strategy to a problem-centric bluespace approach, businesses can identify and quantify real opportunities based on customer needs, map the relevant buying centers, prioritize which opportunities to pursue, and track action plans for each one. Actionable, continuously updated insights become a vital strategic asset, ensuring sales efforts are targeted and effective-unlike the ineffective approach of hoping unsold products will be purchased.



CURRENT STATE

From Whitespace

Whitespace, designed to look for new areas to sell products by business unit, is the opposite of what executive buyers need. Executive buyers don't care about products and disengage quickly with account sellers.

DESIRED STATE

To Bluespace

Bluespace looks at areas of opportunity from the buyer's perspective, based on problem categories by buying center—often involving stakeholders who span multiple business units. Bluespace aligns with buyer needs.

Benefits of a Buyer Needs / Bluespace Approach

Whitespace's product-centric approach overlooks executive buyers' urgent budget priorities. In contrast, bluespace shifts focus to the buyer's perspective by organizing opportunities around prioritized challenges and aligning with modern, insight-driven buying networks. By addressing interconnected stakeholder problems, bluespace helps analyze and prioritize multiple account needs, serving as the account team's roadmap to success.

> Aligning solution to needs has consistently shown the highest correlation to wins and losses compared to other skills, with a widening performance gap between winners and losers over the past 2 years.
>
> **CorporateVisions**

8 Shift from Few Purchases to Many Purchases

Most companies focus heavily on acquiring new customers and overlook the significant growth potential in selling contract add-ons to existing accounts. I've witnessed a single team outsell a 16-person sales team by 10x at one-tenth the cost, all from one customer, highlighting the power of systematically mining current accounts. In today's competitive environment, shifting from relentless prospecting to strategic account expansion is crucial. This approach leverages the inherent trust already established with existing customers, allowing for more efficient and broader sales opportunities by deepening relationships and expanding both horizontally across departments and vertically through organizational levels, rather than starting from scratch with new prospects.

CURRENT STATE

From Few Purchases

Prospecting has traditionally relied on a historical go-to-market (GTM) motion focused on selling products to many prospective customers, rather than solving problems for fewer customers who spend the most. This approach leads to commoditization, smaller one-time deals, and lower margins.

DESIRED STATE

To Many Purchases

An invisible pipeline based on customer needs exists within key accounts. Customer needs should be translated into actionable insights for account sellers and acted upon quickly to create a sustainable system of growth. A high volume of contract expansion sales requires a go-to-customer (GTC) motion to support it.

Benefits of Go-to-Customer Approach

The traditional go-to-market (GTM) approach, centered on high-volume product sales rather than targeted problem-solving within accounts, perpetuates commoditization and price-driven competition, ultimately undermining sustainable growth. In contrast, a go-to-customer (GTC) approach prioritizes understanding and acting on customer needs to unlock an "invisible pipeline" of account-driven expansion. This shift requires translating insights into swift, actionable guidance for account sellers, fostering deeper relationships and recurring value.

> **Only 8%** of B2B organizations have real systematic alignment with buyers.
>
> McKinsey&Company

In conclusion

	Three main challenges prevent account sellers from becoming insight-driven:	To overcome these challenges, market leaders will:
1	Information overload overwhelms account sellers, making it difficult to stay informed, engage early, and remain competitive in the market	Unify information continuously and deliver it into the inboxes of account sellers, ensuring they are always informed and timely with buyers
2	The resulting lack of relevancy alienates buyers, drives commoditization, erodes margins, and renders teams low-value in the minds of executive buyers	Unify relevant messaging with pre-intent signals, mapping to the right stakeholders at the right time with the right message
3	Internal fragmentation results in a lack of knowledge capture and blind spots, causing pipeline volume and velocity to decay	Unify tribal knowledge across departments and teams, storing it centrally for maximum visibility and sales effectiveness

Decode Hidden Customer Signals and Gain the Competitive Advantage

The shift from product-driven to insight-driven selling is not merely a strategic adjustment, but a fundamental necessity for survival in the modern business landscape. By embracing pre-intent signals and leveraging AI to transform data into actionable insights, businesses can unlock hidden revenue streams, build stronger customer relationships, and achieve sustainable growth.

Insight-driven leaders will begin the shift to insight-driven selling, gain a competitive advantage, and learn to harvest expansive growth opportunities with customer accounts, while others continue to struggle to keep up and remain relevant. Separate yourself from the pack by shifting your approach: get in early, solve account problems, and win bigger deals faster.

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Sources

1. Gartner, Leverage Technology to Boost Key Account Manager Performance, August 2024

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