



RICHARDSON  
THE POWER TO SELL

2019

Richardson's Annual  
**SELLING CHALLENGES  
RESEARCH STUDY**

# INTRODUCTION

Richardson's annual research study of sales professionals across industries offers ground-level insights into changes within the sales environment.

The responses revealed that changes in the business environment are demanding new selling skills. Sales professionals need to be agile. They need the ability to transition from one skill to another as they encounter different challenges. That is, they need to deliver different value propositions across various stakeholders, each with a unique perspective. Success today is about knowing when and where each skill needs to be deployed. The customer's needs and perceptions change throughout the buying process; therefore, the sales professional must adjust accordingly.

# 2019

In 2019 successful sales professionals will be able to read each selling scenario and fine-tune their approaches in the moment.



# EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

We surveyed over 300 sales professionals to identify their anticipated sales challenges in 2019. This report provides the top answers to our questions across multiple categories of selling activity. We also deliver our insight into how best to address each of the top challenges.

The most pressing challenge for sales professionals is the increased complexity in selling today. It is no longer enough to rely on one skill. Success now requires managing multiple touchpoints even within one selling opportunity. Sales professionals need to consider how they will maintain a consistent cadence across multiple channels, overcome the buyers' misperception of what they need, and build allies within the customer decision-making team. A growing sense of uncertainty and unpredictability means that selling now demands balancing between an appeal to logic and emotion.

The second most pressing challenge at 26% was "understanding how to create competitive differentiation," indicating that many solutions today offer a breadth of features and customization that make it difficult to stand out from other options. Moreover, customers are often already familiar with many of a solution's features and benefits through their online research. The third largest response at 25% was "consistency in executing meetings as an effective team," illustrating the emerging need to present cohesively in front of multiple stakeholders and seamlessly transition to and from a subject matter expert, as needed.

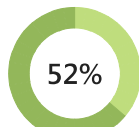
These responses show that sales professionals need the ability to pair the right selling skill with the right challenge. With agility, sales professionals can quickly flex and adapt in ways that respond to the sale in real time.

MORE THAN  
**300**  
RESPONSES  
RECEIVED

## COMPANY SIZE

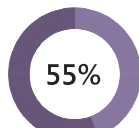


< \$200 Million



> \$500 Million

## QUOTA SIZE



Carry a goal over  
\$1 Million

# 1 PROSPECTING

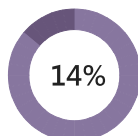
In 2019, which of the following will be the biggest challenge in your prospecting efforts?

Customers today face competing priorities. Therefore, sales professionals are discovering that it is getting more difficult to get the customer's attention, especially in the initial outreach efforts. For this reason, "gaining appointments" ranked as the top challenge facing sales professionals in their prospecting efforts. Part of the customer's reluctance to engage sales professionals may stem from indications that a less bullish economic environment lies ahead. Additionally, gaining an appointment often entails aligning numerous schedules, as multiple stakeholders are involved in the buying process today.

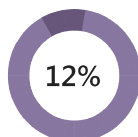
The second and third highest responses of "getting to the right stakeholder" and "maintaining a consistent cadence of contact across multiple channels" illustrates the fractured nature of selling in today's market. Multiple decision makers each have their individual set of priorities and internal demands. Getting these disparate groups to coalesce is an increasing challenge. Sales professionals struggle not only to align schedules but also to address a growing list of needs as the stakeholder count rises. Some sales professionals meet this challenge by engaging buyers in a virtual setting like Zoom or Skype.

Lastly, the prospecting challenge "creating a targeted prospecting strategy," which was the top challenge in 2018, was not part of the top three challenges in the 2019 study. This change might indicate that sales professionals have access to a plethora of prospecting tools and instead face challenges in getting those tools to have the intended effect.

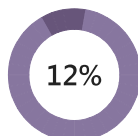
## 2019 TOP PROSPECTING CHALLENGES



Gaining appointments

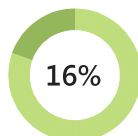


Maintaining a consistent cadence of contact across multiple channels

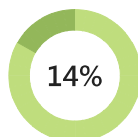


Getting to the right stakeholder

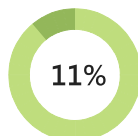
## 2018 TOP PROSPECTING CHALLENGES



Creating a targeted prospecting strategy



Getting to the right stakeholder



Identifying triggers/sales signals that indicate issues that you can resolve

## RICHARDSON INSIGHTS

### Gaining Appointments

According to an ATKearney review of more than 1,600 B2B sales professionals, "accelerated commoditization and substitution" has interrupted the connection between the sales professional and the customer. Moreover, gaining an appointment demands more of the sales professional's time. Sales professionals can gain the customer's interest with a hinge. A hinge is a current issue that's unique to the customer's world. A recent expansion or a new regulatory law are examples of a hinge. Next, sales professionals need messaging that cites a challenge associated with the hinge, leading to a course of action supported by clear value offered by the solution. This approach culminates with a request for an appointment leading with a benefit to the customer.

### Maintaining Consistent Contact across Multiple Channels

Sales professionals can maintain consistency across channels by simplifying their messages. Rather than relying on detailed product explanations, sales professionals should use concise, clear language to make the most of their limited time with the customer. This tight messaging should be used to underscore how others in the same or similar industries have adopted the solution with successful results. This approach relies on what psychologists call "normative messaging." This technique aligns the customer to the solution's value by proving its efficacy with other customers. Prospecting succeeds or fails in the span of only a few minutes. Making each minute count means developing a carefully crafted, concise message that underscores how others have succeeded with the solution.

### Getting to the Right Stakeholder

Social tools offer a strong starting point for sales professionals seeking stakeholders. Even if the first contact is not part of the core decision-making team, sales professionals can work within the customer's organization to uptier. Doing so, however, means earning the right to ask for access by considering the emotions in play and underscoring how the solution benefits the individual providing access to the stakeholders. Remember that complex factors like regret aversion, choice overload, and the sunk cost fallacy are all behavioral science factors in play, and moving forward means addressing each.

# 2 CLIENT NEEDS

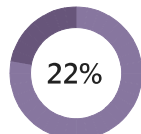
Which of the following do you feel will be your biggest challenge in uncovering and exploring client needs?

The top challenge cited by respondents was “creating value and insight during the conversation with the client.” This was the second most frequent challenge indicated by survey participants last year, suggesting that it is getting more difficult to deliver ideas that resonate with buyers. Meaningful insights can only develop when the sales professional has a deep understanding of the customer’s industry and business and the emergent challenges they need to overcome.

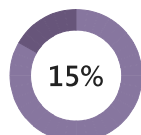
“Overcoming buyers’ misperceptions of what they need” was the second most cited challenge, moving up from the third-place spot last year. These misperceptions often stem from the customer’s online research, which can complicate, obscure, and misdiagnose the problem. Overcoming the buyers misperceptions is a challenging endeavor. Sales professionals must be careful not to offend the stakeholders while, at the same time, shaping their perceptions.

“Exploring client issues and challenges to define the strategic impact of your solution” made its way into third place, up from fourth place last year. Sales professionals are discovering that customers are more guarded and less willing to share their strategic drivers to those who haven’t earned the right to ask.

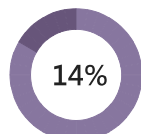
## 2019 TOP CHALLENGES UNCOVERING CLIENT NEEDS



Creating value and insight during the conversation with the client

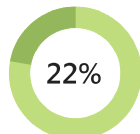


Overcoming buyers' misperceptions of what they need

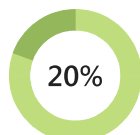


Exploring client issues and challenges to define the strategic impact of your solution

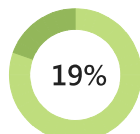
## 2018 TOP CHALLENGES UNCOVERING CLIENT NEEDS



Uncovering complete information regarding the decision-making process



Creating value and insight during the conversation with the customer



Overcoming buyers' misperceptions of what they need

## RICHARDSON INSIGHTS

### Creating Value and Insight

Generating valuable insights starts by understanding the customer’s core issue. They need to know the root of the problem. Once the sales professional understands the issue, then they can measure the impact of the problem. The impact is important because it illustrates the danger of doing nothing. From here, the sales professional can explore the customer’s existing approach to the problem and where it might be lacking. Finally, the sales professional can deliver an insight that expands the customer’s thinking and reveals unseen factors.

### Overcoming the Buyers’ Misperceptions

Overcoming the buyers’ misperceptions means asserting a point of view to guide or reframe thinking. Sales professionals must first create a safety zone by normalizing the situation and reassuring the customer that misperceptions are common. Next, the sales professional should clarify their intent to share their perspective. Then, sales professionals need a structured statement that identifies the issue, action, and value underpinning the perspective. Finally, it’s critical to ask reflection questions to see how the customer is receiving the point of view. Once feedback is offered, sales professionals can align on action by agreeing on a specific path forward. This approach requires transparency on the part of the sales professional. In many cases, the sales professional’s willingness to share information is more influential than the content of the information.

### Exploring Client Issues

Exploring client issues is a challenge today because buying decisions come from many stakeholders. Each stakeholder has a different perspective on value and a different understanding of the key challenge. These differences can lead to misalignment. Sales professionals must uncover misalignment and intervene if the sale is at risk. Correcting misalignment requires a customer-focused approach that starts by building from a common ground. This strategy doesn’t mean avoiding conflict — in fact, sales professionals need to drill down to uncover the root cause of the misalignment.

# 3 NEGOTIATIONS

Which of the following do you believe will be your toughest negotiation challenge?

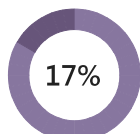
"Maintaining profitability" was the top challenge for sales professionals. This challenge has replaced last year's top response, which was "gaining higher prices." Sales professionals are feeling the pricing pressure as more solutions become commoditized. Additionally, as research from Bain indicates, "customers have become more experienced with competitive, disciplined bid processes." Finally, winning the sale often involves unseating an incumbent that has already made price concessions to retain the business.

Like last year, the top three challenges are connected to pricing concerns, as sales professionals cite "working with clients who continue to reopen the negotiation/more concessions" and "gaining higher prices" as the second and third highest-rated challenges respectively.

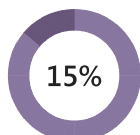
The customer's tendency to reopen negotiations reconfirms the notion that negotiations are an ongoing process. This characteristic of selling today is often due to the multiple stakeholders involved. Sales professionals are working to overcome objections and demands across a variety of decision makers.

These factors mean that "gaining higher prices" is a serious challenge. Research shows that the economy is likely to slow in 2019, and businesses are becoming less optimistic about future economic conditions and are therefore reluctant to absorb risk. Gaining higher prices represents the dual challenge of getting customers comfortable with a buying decision and getting them to expand the financial scope of the sale or see its full value.

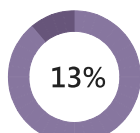
## 2019 TOP NEGOTIATION CHALLENGES



Maintaining profitability

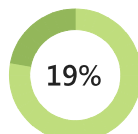


Working with clients who continue to reopen the negotiation/more concessions

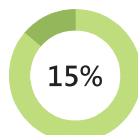


Gaining higher prices

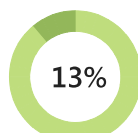
## 2018 TOP NEGOTIATION CHALLENGES



Gaining higher prices



Maintaining control throughout the negotiation process



Closing win-win deals

## RICHARDSON INSIGHTS

### Maintaining Profitability

To maintain profitability, sales professionals must be able to control the negotiation process. Control is important because it prevents the common trap of reacting to customer demands with trading. When a sales professional trades, they give away ground on price and terms. To control, a sales professional must convert demands to needs. The reason: demands are inflexible and can only be satisfied with a concession, which is often a decrease in price or a reduction in scale of the solution. In contrast, a need is flexible because it can be achieved in several ways. Control also shapes perceptions of value by focusing the customer on what they stand to gain while also underscoring what they stand to lose by not moving forward.

### Working with Clients Who Continue to Reopen Negotiations

Sometimes, customers reopen negotiations. When this happens, it might be necessary to engage in trading to move the negotiation to a close. A trading strategy allows sales professionals to protect their essentials and avoid leaving money on the table. With a trade, a sales professional gives to get. Effective trading means knowing the full value of what is being offered. Without knowing what is being relinquished, a sales professional cannot determine what they'll receive in return. Knowing the value of an item offered in trading also helps the sales professional prioritize the list of items available for trading.

### Gaining Higher Prices

Commoditization continues to drive the customer's demands for a lower price. Preventing this outcome and even increasing prices means getting better at articulating value while building trust. Many solutions today are complex and require some level of ongoing support from the sales professional. Customers know they can expect support when they trust the sales professional. Therefore, trust has value that can be converted to an increased financial commitment from the customer. Over the long-term, product features almost always risk commoditization. Trust, however, is not as easy for competitors to replicate.



# 4 BUYER'S DECISIONS

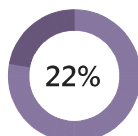
What is the biggest challenge you think your buyers face when making a purchasing decision?

The status quo has deep roots. "Building a case for change" and "combating the status quo" were two of the top three responses. Customers continue to be reluctant to change their current states. As the pace of business intensifies, buying decisions are getting sidelined as leaders struggle to hit the revenue goal for the quarter or the year. Even if the customers see the value in the solution, they often fear the burden of implementation and adoption that distracts from the growing list of daily responsibilities.

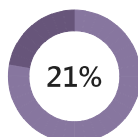
The second most frequent answer to the question was "comparing their options." The nature of business challenges today is more complex than ever. This complexity leads to fractures among the stakeholders. Each has a different way of defining success. Each is accountable for different outcomes and therefore will see the issue in a different way. Just the initial step of defining the challenge is a considerable hurdle, which makes comparing options even more challenging.

Last year, "securing budget" was one of the top three responses to this question. This year, more sales professionals are struggling just to reach this phase of the selling process. Selling today means more than outperforming competing sales professionals because the competition is often an abstract feature like fear, ambivalence, complexity, and routine.

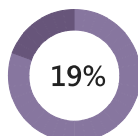
2019 CHALLENGES FACING BUYERS



Building a case for change

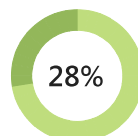


Comparing their options

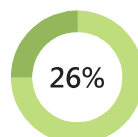


Combating the status quo

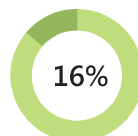
2018 CHALLENGES FACING BUYERS



Combating the status quo



Comparing their options



Securing budget

## RICHARDSON INSIGHTS

### Building a Case for Change

Sales professionals need to address the elements of change within the customer's business. These elements include the customer's strategy, the core issue, desired outcomes, solution options, and perceptions of value and risk. It's the sales professionals job to bring these elements into clear view and share insights and value to shape each element in their favor. To reach a buying decision, the case for change must be strong enough to prevail against all the forces driving against change.

### Comparing Options

Sales professionals need to shape the customer's perceptions of gaps with current or competing solutions. They also need to float ideas to influence the decision criteria in favor of the solution they're selling. Floating ideas also builds credibility and confidence in the solution. The key is to link value to business and individual needs. Sometimes, it's effective to share stories that build interest and confidence in a way that helps the customer envision the solution in their world.

### Combating the Status Quo

The status quo is more challenging today because its power is multiplied by the number of stakeholders present. Therefore, overcoming the status quo requires building alignment. To do so, sales professionals must anchor the conversation in the customer's higher-level goals while confirming areas in which alignment already exists and areas in which it doesn't. Discussing gaps in alignment uncovers all perspectives. With this information, sales professionals can adapt and blend approaches, as needed.

# 5 MANAGING ACCOUNTS

Which of the following will be the most difficult to deal with in terms of managing accounts and expanding relationships?

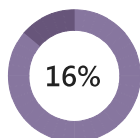
Growing key accounts is an ongoing challenge. Sales professionals are recognizing the difficulty of "becoming a trusted advisor" to businesses facing revenue goals and shifting internal priorities. This challenge was the most cited in response to the question of expanding relationships. The responses from last year echo this sentiment, given that sales professionals selected "balancing sales and relationship management" more than any other response in 2018.

The struggle to become a trusted advisor is characterized by challenges in "finding ways to add relevant value for various stakeholders" and "balancing sales with relationship management," the two responses tied for second place.

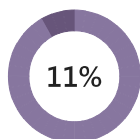
Adding value and becoming a trusted advisor requires customer insights that go beyond what the stakeholders have learned on their own.

This base of knowledge leads to different definitions of value across the buying group. A solution has a different value proposition for a CEO than it does for the CMO, CHRO, or even the procurement specialist. The number of minutes sales professionals have in front of these different buyers is shrinking. Therefore, each interaction must add value beyond a list of product features. If the sales professional becomes an active participant in the struggle to solve a business challenge, they will become a trusted advisor.

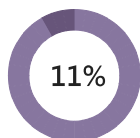
## 2019 TOP CHALLENGES MANAGING ACCOUNTS



Becoming a trusted advisor

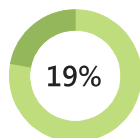


Finding ways to add relevant value for various stakeholders

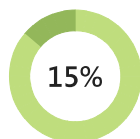


Balancing sales and relationship management

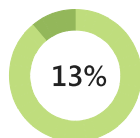
## 2018 TOP CHALLENGES MANAGING ACCOUNTS



Balancing sales and relationship management



Becoming a trusted advisor



Finding ways to add relevant value for various stakeholders

## RICHARDSON INSIGHTS

### Becoming a Trusted Advisor

To become a trusted advisor, sales professionals must get involved in the hidden dialogue. The hidden dialogues are the conversations that occur only among the buyers. As a result, sales professionals are left with an incomplete picture. Adding relevant value requires the sales professional to seek inclusion into these dialogues. Each of these conversations represents an iteration of the buyer's journey, and the sales professional must be able to influence thinking at every step.

### Finding Ways to Add Relevant Value for Various Stakeholders

Developing relevant value for stakeholders begins with an understanding of what the customer is trying to accomplish. Customer goals all fit into one of three categories: to make money, save money, or reduce risk. Once a sales professional knows which of these three is driving the customer's decisions, they can begin to develop value by considering the customer's objectives, issues, initiatives, values, and culture. For example, business issues fall into one of six major categories: resources, market, competitive, regulatory, financial, and operational. Real value creation arises from the overlap between the customer's strategic initiatives and the solution.

### Balancing Sales and Relationship Management

The sale extends beyond closing. The sales professional must ensure that the customer is satisfied with implementation and ongoing support. Without ensuring that these steps unfold properly, the sales professional has little hope of expanding the selling relationship later. This characteristic of selling is truly a balancing act because the sales professional must be willing to let others in their organization complete these follow-up steps while also remaining close enough to the action to ensure that all touchpoints are successful.



# 6 SELLING SKILLS

What do you think will be your most valuable selling skill in 2019?

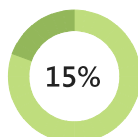
As so many of the previous questions indicate, “delivering a compelling value proposition” is the most valuable selling skill in 2019. Previously discussed answers like “creating value and insight during the conversation with the client,” “building a case for change,” and “finding ways to add relevant value for various stakeholders” all trace back to delivering a compelling value proposition.

A meaningful value proposition is rare in a business landscape characterized by commoditization. Quality is not the selling feature it once was. Customers assume all solutions offer quality, and they want more for their business. In fact, experts at Bain explain that their “research shows that with some purchases, considerations, such as whether a product can enhance the buyer’s reputation or reduce anxiety, play a large role.” A resonant value proposition takes these factors into account.

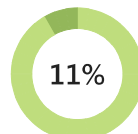
Even a compelling value proposition is not enough; sales professionals need a way to convey the message. They must consider concepts like germane load, which refers to the amount of interpretation the message requires. Messages that require interpretation will not resonate or stick. Make the decision process easy for the customer. Customers are pressed for time and are under pressure. They need memorable messaging that can be absorbed effortlessly.

Respondents also made it clear that asking insightful questions is a valuable skill. This makes intuitive sense, given that the answers to these questions help shape the value proposition.

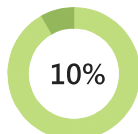
## 2019 TOP SELLING SKILLS



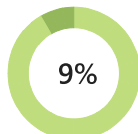
Delivering a compelling value proposition



Asking insightful and relevant questions to understand customer needs and challenges



Matching the benefits of my solution to customer needs



Positioning insights that shape a customer's thinking



The effectiveness of a value proposition rises and falls, in part, with the economy. As one respondent remarked, “sometimes just getting them to maintain an order is hard, much less to increase purchases.” Another respondent called this trend the “what have you done for me lately mentality.” What remains true throughout business cycles is that the more a sales professional understands a customer and their challenges, the better equipped they are to develop a value proposition that lands.

An effective value proposition addresses the risk and reward of making a change. It is strong enough to encourage the customer to the next step despite perceived risks. Additionally, the value proposition must provide a “proof of value,” which is best achieved by demonstrating how the solution has helped other businesses succeed. Finally, it must articulate benefits that are easily measured. While many of the solution’s benefits are not quantifiable, there must be at least one feature that lends itself to measurable outcomes.

All of these strategies begin with insightful questions that get specific and arise from the sales professional’s understanding of the company’s competitors and industry.

# ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES

Beyond the challenges outlined in Richardson's 2019 research study, sales professionals identified several additional areas of challenge.

## AN UNPREDICTABLE MARKET

Buyers have less certainty about the broader economy. These concerns arise from increasing volatility and shortening business cycles. In fact, data from Deutsche Bank indicates that these cycles are likely to shorten in the coming years, if they have not already. Some respondents are seeing this phenomenon firsthand, citing "unpredictable market forces." Some businesses are already responding to this uncertainty with "reduced income and related budget cuts." This trend is a concern for sales professionals who have indicated that customers fear a "potential economic slowdown." A consultative approach to selling works in this environment because it tracks the changes as they unfold. Consultative selling moves with the customer.



## GAINING ACCESS TO SENIOR STAKEHOLDERS

Sales professionals continue to struggle in their attempts to reach senior stakeholders. With so much focus on pricing, sales professionals often face procurement specialists first. This challenge means that factors like cost become frontloaded in the dialogue. As a result, the sales professional doesn't have as much opportunity to ask questions, deliver insights, and develop a customized value proposition. Gaining access to senior stakeholders begins by building a foundation for the request. The most effective way to do so is to draft a value statement that addresses the relevant issue, action, and value. The issue summarizes the customer's goal or challenge. The action explains how the solution will meet the customer's needs. Finally, the value must answer the question "So what?" What are the positive outcomes the customer can expect?

**The more specific,  
the better.**

# 2019 SELLING CHALLENGES SUMMARY

Increasing volatility has renewed sensitivity to risk among customers. Therefore, sales professionals need improved agility, which is the combination of skill proficiency coupled with an understanding of how and when to use these skills throughout the twisting road that is the buyer's journey.

Getting the customer's attention is as difficult as ever. Often, customers view a business purchase as a burden on their time and an exposure to risk. This characteristic of selling today reinforces the idea that sales professionals need deeper insights and a more customized value proposition to uproot customers from the status quo.

Moreover, the power of a strong value proposition is doubled by the fact that it serves to protect or even increase the financial value of the sale.

At Richardson, our approach to helping our customers solve these challenges is to build sales skills through our **Connected Selling Curriculum™**. The curriculum is a collection of sales training programs built to work together and build upon each other across roles and capabilities to drive a common language and clear approach for sales performance at scale.

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