

# SALES FROM THE BUYER'S PERSPECTIVE

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# INTRODUCTION

Most research about business-to-business (B2B) sales training tends to go down one of two avenues: what sales leaders are doing with the sales training programs at their respective companies and what salespeople think about the training they receive. Although the former is usually more common than the latter, there is a third perspective that is seldom explored: the buyer's perspective.

Why be concerned with what buyers think about sales? Buyers are the reason a sales function exists in a company. A salesperson needs someone to sell *to*, wherever that person happens to be in the decision-making hierarchy at a company. Sales representatives work to gain access to both influencers and decision-makers. And it is these interactions, in all their forms, that any sales training effort should address.

For many buyers, "sales" is frequently seen as a dirty word. There is no shortage of examples in popular press that highlight tales of sales gone wrong. In contrast, the successful sale is often transparent; evidence of it is everywhere, in profit statements, company newsletters and so on. Vendor companies are always seeking to maximize the engagement of buyers in positive, productive and collaborative ways to forge long-lasting relationships that benefit everyone on both sides of the transaction.

But what about buyers? What types of relationships are buyers looking to foster with a solution provider? What do buyers ultimately think about the vendor companies and the representatives they work with?

To examine these issues in greater detail, Training Industry, Inc. and ValueSelling Associates, Inc. conducted a study to examine how B2B sales interactions are perceived by buyer companies. In late 2017, 260 respondents with buying decision-making roles from an array of companies completed a confidential survey reporting their organizations' perceptions about salespeople and the quality of buyer-vendor relationships.

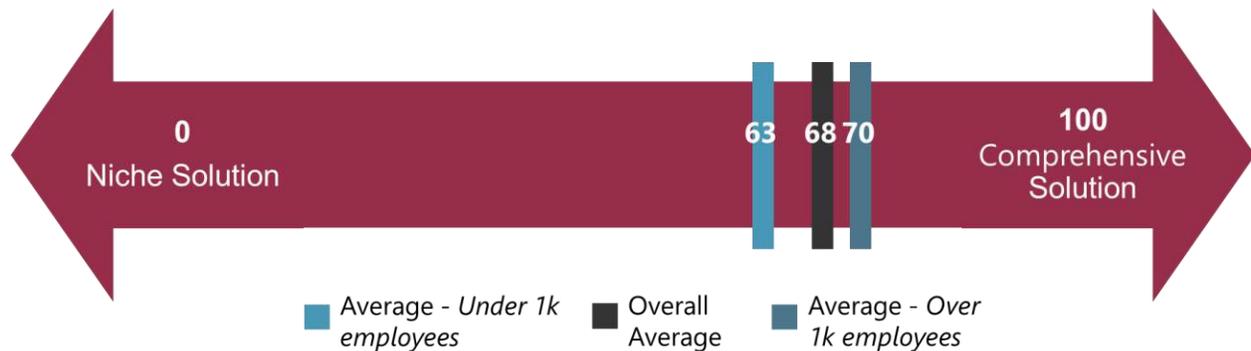
# BUYER-VENDOR RELATIONSHIPS

First, we sought to typify the nature of the relationships that buyers have with the vendors they deal with. To that end, we asked survey respondents to estimate the breadth of the portfolio of products and services that their companies source from vendors.

## BUYERS SEEK VENDORS THAT OFFER A RANGE OF SOLUTIONS

As shown in Figure 1, most buyers deal with vendors that offer a range of solutions. The average of 68 out of 100 suggests that these vendors are not necessarily offering end-to-end solutions, but they are offering products and services that may solve multiple problems. By organizational size, larger companies prefer vendors that may offer comprehensive solutions, but on the whole, companies of all sizes tend to deal with vendors that offer more than a single solution. This finding suggests that vendors not only need to have multiple solutions but also that these solutions need to be scalable to companies of all sizes.

**FIGURE 1.** Vendor Portfolio Breadth (0-100 Scale)

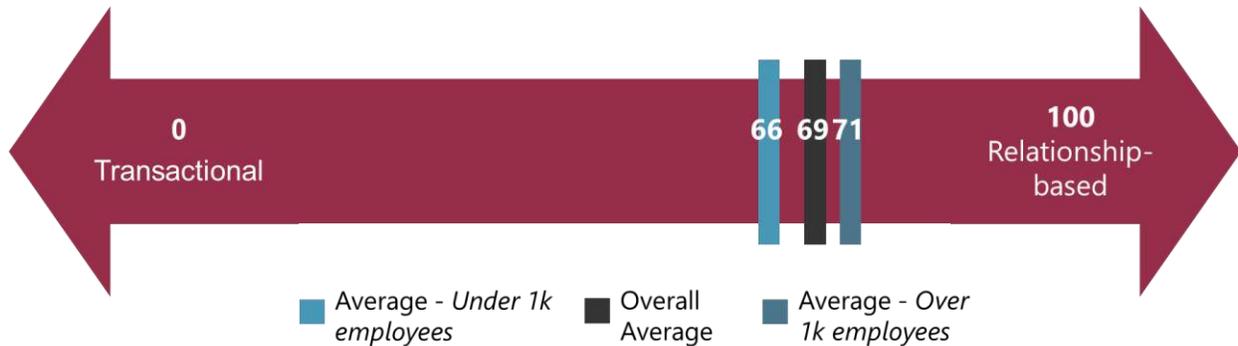


## BUYERS SEEK LONG-TERM VENDOR RELATIONSHIPS

Next, we asked survey respondents to characterize the nature of the relationships that their companies are seeking with the vendors they deal with.

As shown in Figure 2, the majority of buyers are looking for longer-term vendor relationships. This means that buyers are usually seeking to forge “trusted partner” arrangements with vendors when possible rather than sourcing short-term solutions on an “as-needed” basis. Again, organizational size does not significantly change how companies look to engage with their solutions providers.

**FIGURE 2.** Buyers' Relationship Preferences (0-100 Scale)

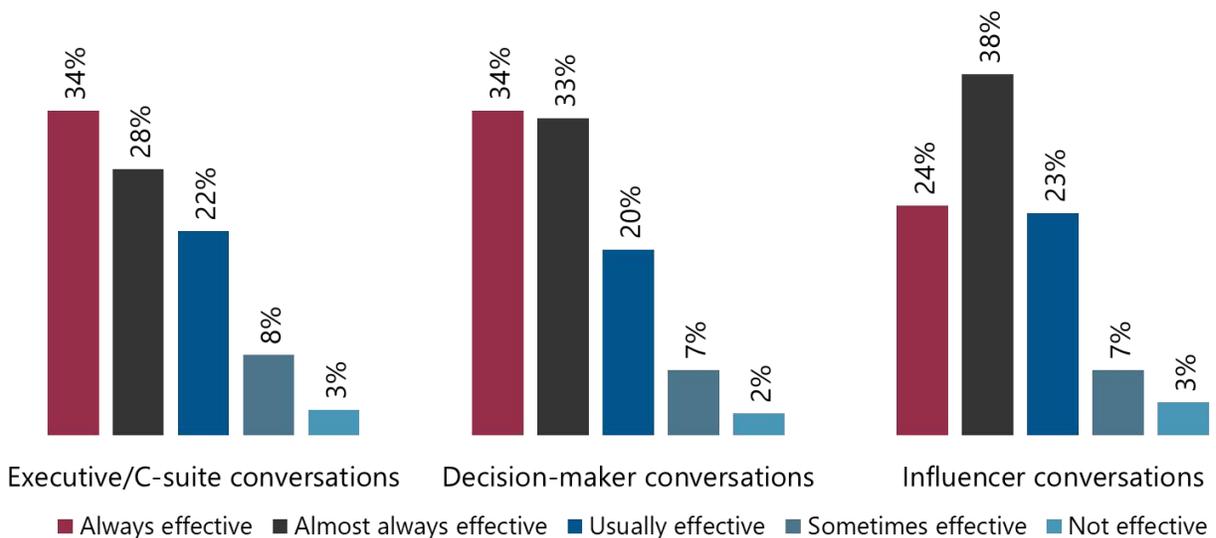


### VENDORS ARE NOT EFFECTIVE IN ENGAGING BUYERS

One of the most crucial aspects of buyer-vendor interactions is whether a vendor can successfully engage the buyer, both in securing a meeting and holding a business conversation. As shown in Figure 3, roughly one-third of vendors are effective at engaging company leaders and decision-makers.

From a sales director/manager perspective, "always effective" should be the standard to which sales training programs aspire. Sales reps have one shot, so the bar must be high. They should "always be effective" in engaging. "Always effective" doesn't mean they will make the sale. It means they were able to get a person's attention and discuss relevant information during the conversation. Troublingly, only about 1 out of 4 vendors are effective at engaging with influencers within the buyer company, who are often the internal champions and sponsors of potential B2B purchases.

**FIGURE 3.** Buyers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Engagement by Vendors

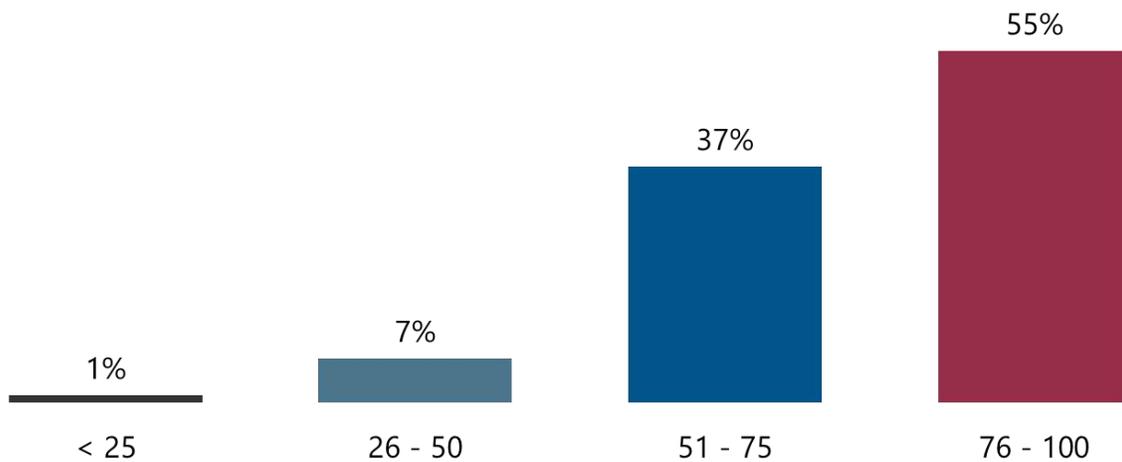


Even if the framing for the results of Figure 3 is expanded to include “almost always effective” responses, it still implies that only about 60 percent of these interactions are effective. While more optimistic, it nonetheless suggests that many vendors are struggling to connect with buyers. Given the importance of these interactions and the difficulties often encountered with securing an executive audience, these results suggest vendors are falling significantly short of meeting the buyer’s expectations for engaging conversations, which is critical to closing B2B sales.

## MORE THAN 50% OF BUYERS ARE HIGHLY SATISFIED OVERALL

Overall, however, buyers are generally positive about their experiences with vendors. As shown in Figure 4, over half of buyers were highly satisfied with the relationship between their company and the vendors they deal with. The average score was 75.3. By school standards, this score amounts to vendors earning a grade of “C” from buyers. While many vendors scored higher than a “C” in school parlance, these data show there is definite room for improvement when it comes to vendors meeting the needs of buyers.

**FIGURE 4.** Buyers’ Vendor Satisfaction Ratings (0-100 Scale)



To summarize this section, from the buyer’s perspective:

- Vendor companies tend to offer more comprehensive solutions rather than niche products, even to smaller buyer organizations.
- Most are seeking vendor relationships that are long-term, rather than short-term and transactional in nature.
- Vendor companies tend to perform more poorly when selling to influencers who can function as internal ambassadors within the buyer organization.
- Overall, vendor companies are doing a passable job, despite not being consistently effective at engaging with the leaders of buyer companies.

# BUYER-VENDOR INTERACTIONS

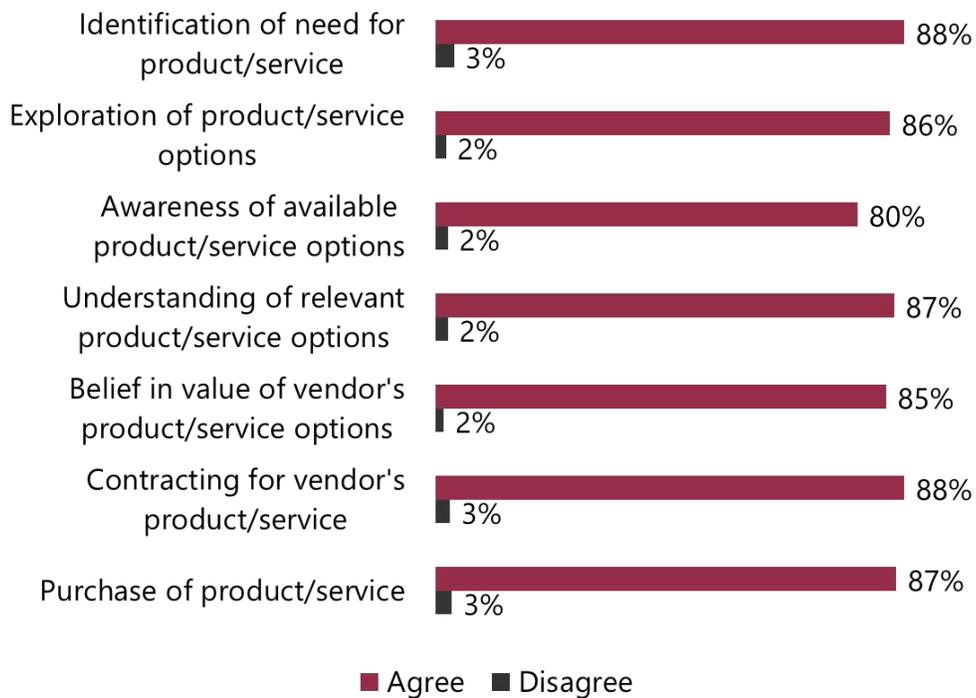
Are buyers resigned to subpar interactions with vendors? In this section, we'll explore the reasons why buyers sometimes see vendors as less than stellar.

## BUYERS WANT TO ENGAGE WITH VENDORS THROUGHOUT THE PROCESS

First, when do buyers prefer to interact with these vendors in their decision-making process? As shown in Figure 5, the answer is, "whenever." Across the spectrum of stages in the buying process, from identifying a need to concluding a purchase, buyers are open to engaging with a vendor at pretty much any point.

A typical sales training program teaches sales reps how to work with a customer from the point of identifying a need through closing the sale; there's a defined beginning and end for the relationship. What these results suggest is that this process is not the way buyers always work. In some instances, they will follow the standard, expected process, but it's equally likely that a buyer will not only have identified their need but also done all the research about the competition to hone in on the best fit for their company.

**FIGURE 5.** Preferred Vendor Entry into Buyers' Decision Processes

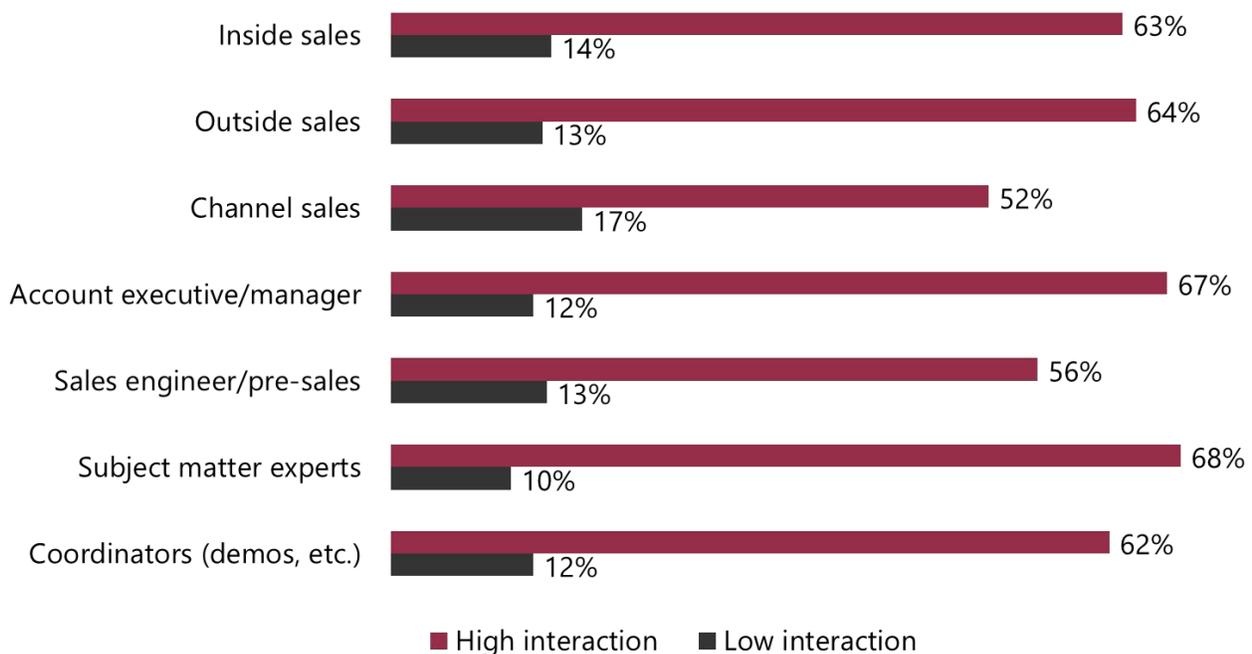


## COMPLEX B2B SALES HAS BECOME A TEAM SELLING ACTIVITY

As technology continues to transform the workplace, there has been increasing attention to the changing nature of the role of the salesperson. What was once an organizational role largely defined by outside sales, where a salesperson met with potential customers face to face and traveled in the field, has been shifting to inside sales, where a salesperson works from a home office and communicates with potential customers through technology.

Figure 6 suggests that a sales interaction has become a “team selling” exercise. Although a buyer often has a point-of-contact representative from a vendor company, a buyer’s impression of the vendor is shaped by multiple touchpoints with employees across the vendor company. The question becomes, “How strong is the team?”

**FIGURE 6.** Buyer Interaction with Vendor Representatives

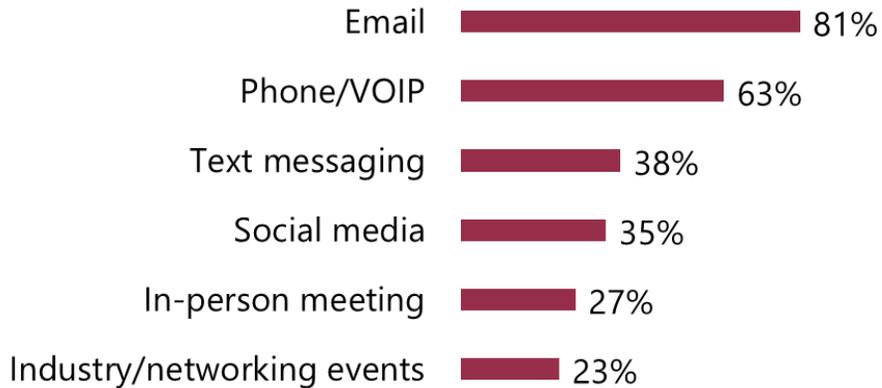


## BUYERS PREFER TO INTERACT VIA TECHNOLOGY

We asked respondents to indicate all the channels through which they prefer to be contacted when dealing with vendor companies and salespeople. The data, as shown in Figure 7, show that the majority of buyers prefer to interact with vendors through virtual means – primarily email and some type of voice call. The handshake is not dead; roughly a quarter of respondents included it among their preferences. However, buyers overwhelmingly prefer being contacted by email and phone. These results demonstrate

the importance of making sure what is “said” in writing or voicemail is well thought out and articulated.

**FIGURE 7.** *Buyers’ Preferred Contact Method from Vendors*



## BUYERS VALUE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

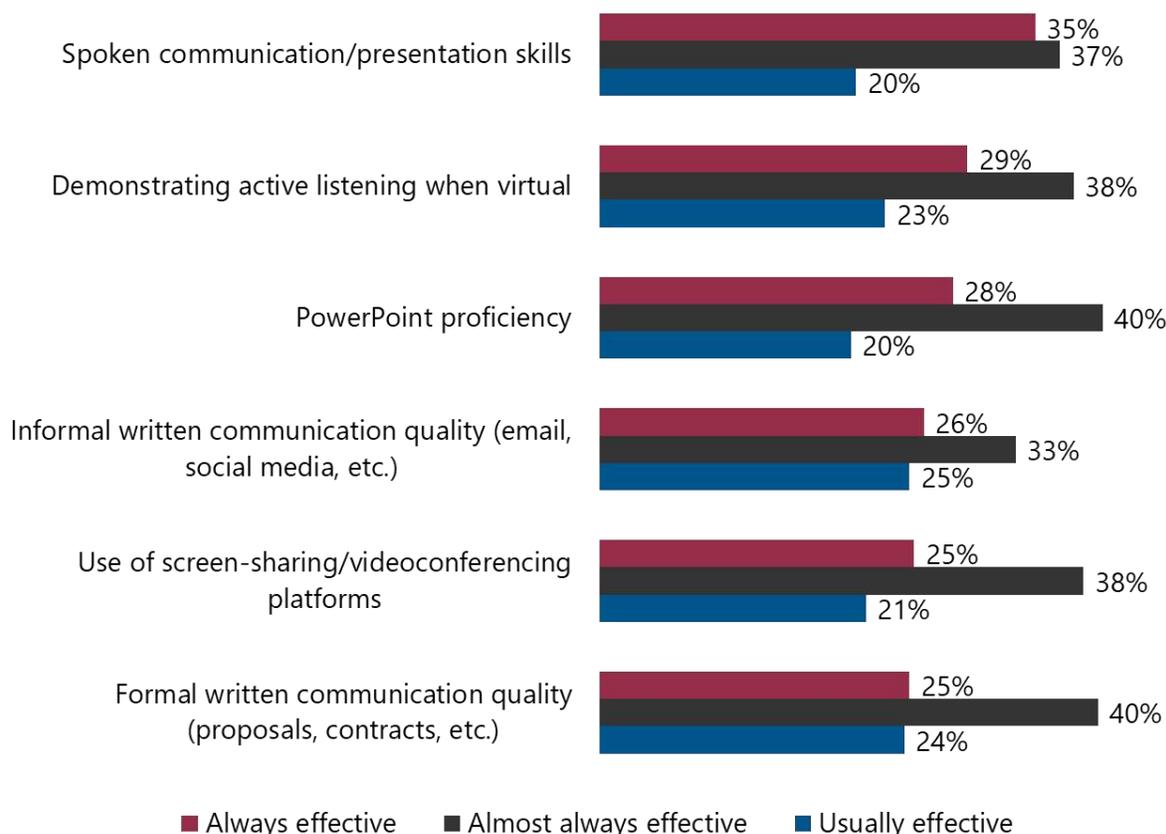
In light of buyers’ preference for virtual communication, we also asked survey respondents for their opinion of the effectiveness of salespeople when it comes to being able to communicate and present information via virtual means.

As shown in Figure 8, less than one-third of buyers rated sales-people as “always effective” at these skills, demonstrating a specific need for salespeople to develop stronger technology-related skills. With the shift to inside sales, the ability to navigate common technologies such as PowerPoint and screen-sharing/videoconferencing tools has become increasingly important.

The results in Figure 8 unveil some disquieting insights. If the majority of buyers prefer to communicate via informal written means, such as email and text, the quality of interaction through those channels becomes critically important for vendors to cultivate. Instead, only a quarter of buyers said their vendors are consistently effective.

Similarly, the quality of formal proposals and contracts should be a point of emphasis for vendors. How much revenue is potentially “left on the table” because of poor written communication? How many buyers abandon vendors that are ignoring this skill area?

**FIGURE 8.** *Virtual Communication Skills by Vendor Representatives*



## LESS THAN ONE-THIRD OF BUYERS FEEL VENDORS ARE WELL-INFORMED

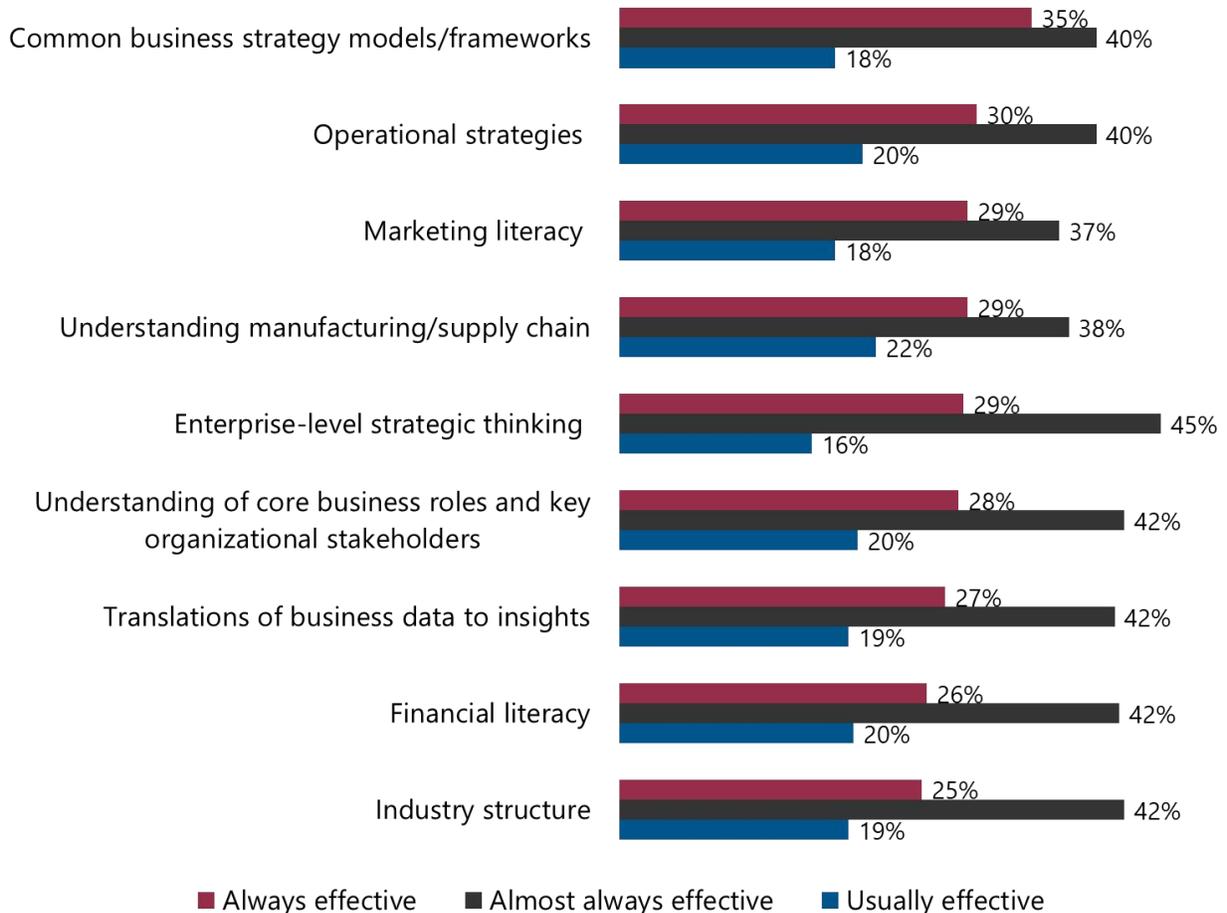
A pressing question for vendors to consider is whether buyers feel understood. When buyers are interacting with vendors, do the vendors seem to know what they’re talking about?

According to the ratings of effectiveness shown in Figure 9, yes, to a degree. We asked respondents to rate how well vendors demonstrate their competency within several areas of business knowledge. Again, only about a third or fewer of respondents said that the vendors they deal with are consistently well-informed about any of the content areas listed in Figure 9. Is it enough that two out of three conversations don’t clear the bar of being “always effective?” Most sales directors/managers would say, “no.”

While it can be argued that it’s impossible for all buyer-vendor interactions to be effective 100 percent of the time, that doesn’t mean the goal is too lofty. The sales function of any company bridges the divide between the need of a buyer and a product or service that meets and addresses that need. The fiscal survival of a company depends on the repeated closure of this gap. Accordingly, there’s really no such thing as an overinformed

salesperson. In this respect, Figure 9 represents where the particular shortfalls of information lie in modern sales functions.

**FIGURE 9.** *Buyers' Opinion of Demonstrated Sales Knowledge*



To summarize the results of this section, from the buyer's perspective:

- The buying cycle does not always start at the same place, and a vendor's sales representatives need to be proficient at engaging with buyers at any entry point into the buying cycle.
- Buyer impressions are formed based on multiple touchpoints with different vendor representatives of varying importance to the account.
- The communication skills of vendors are lukewarm at best across the preferred methods of communication that are vital to today's sales environments.
- Vendors often lack a command of industry-relevant knowledge in multiple domains relevant to buyer organizations.

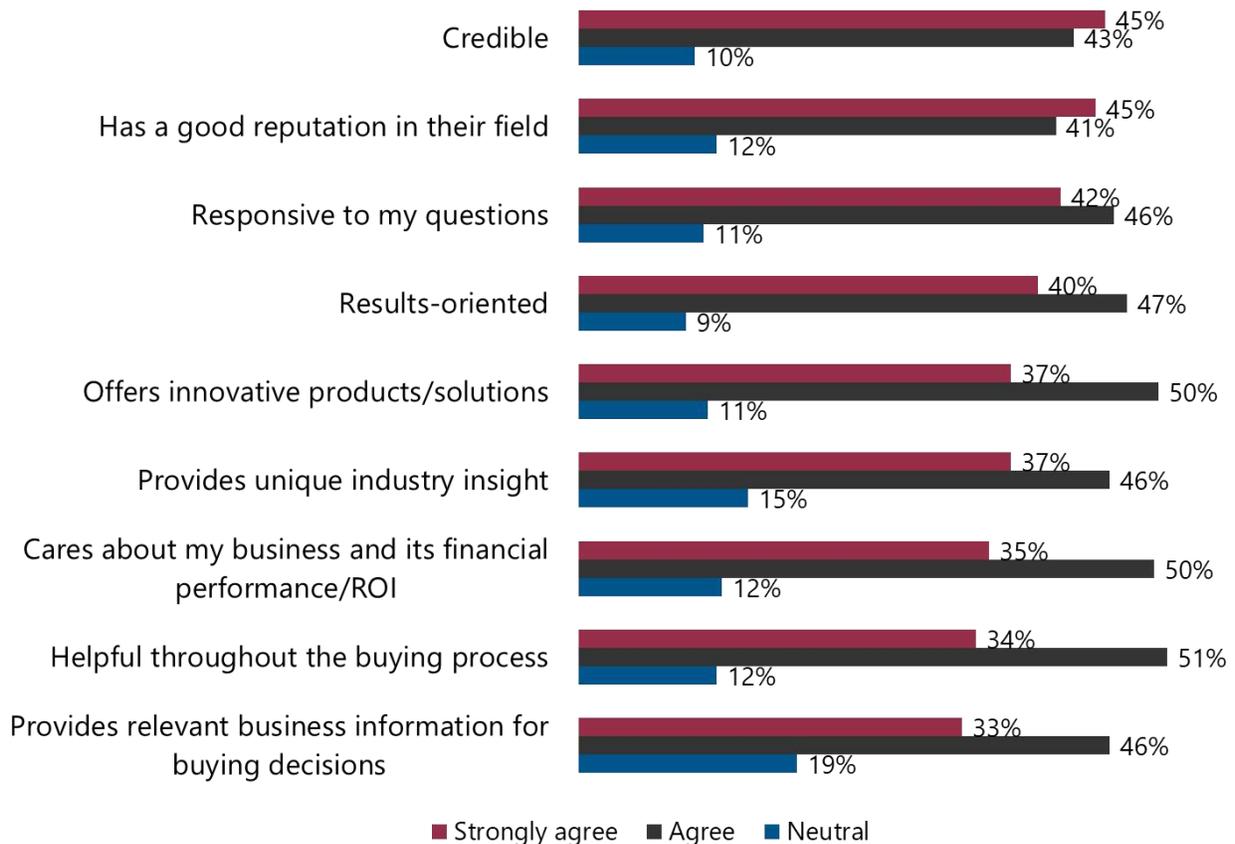
# BUYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF SALES REPRESENTATIVES

Although the perception of a vendor may be based on a buyer's interaction with multiple people, there is usually a single point of contact that he or she deals with during the sales process.

## HOW BUYERS FEEL ABOUT THEIR SALES REPS

First, we asked respondents for their opinions of point-of-contact sales representatives by collecting ratings on their agreement across generally desirable characteristics of salespeople. As shown in Figure 10, these perceptions tend to be positive. However, there is a meaningful distinction between a rating of "strongly agree" and a rating of "agree"; there is ground yet to be gained by vendors. Given that sales is a customer-oriented function, it would be surprising to see widespread disagreement with these characteristics, but it is worrisome that only about one-third of buyers strongly agree that their point-of-contact rep is helpful throughout the buying process.

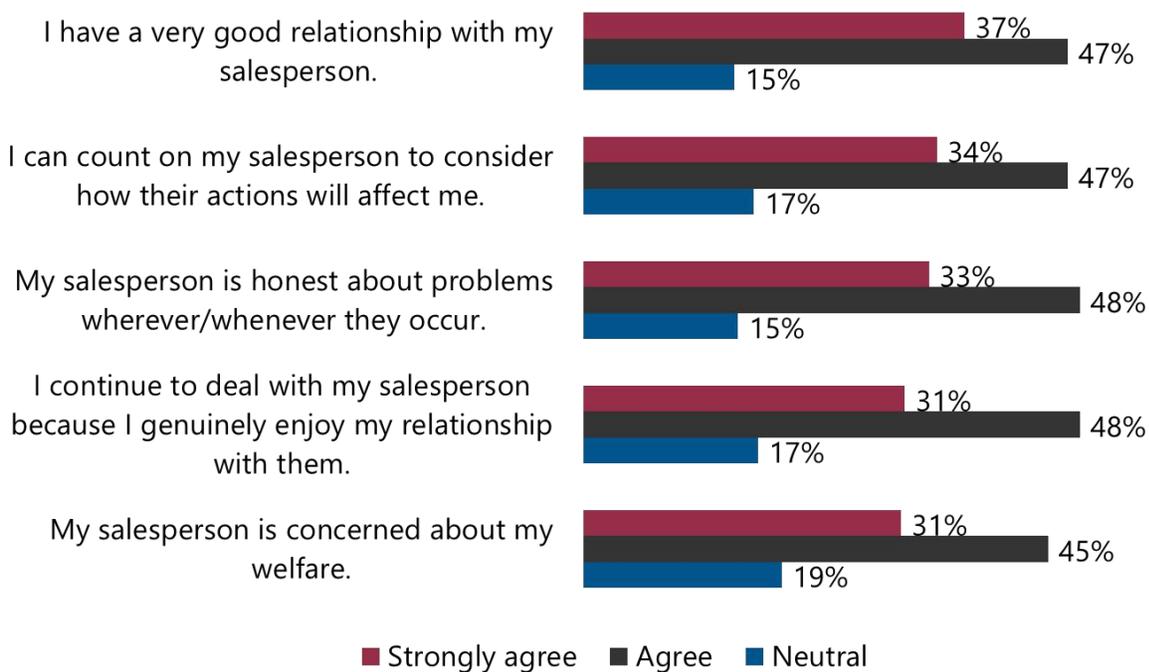
**FIGURE 10.** *Buyers' Opinions of Point-of-Contact Sales Representatives*



To further examine the extent of positive perceptions of sales representatives, we asked respondents to rate the intentions and relationship quality between themselves and point-of-contact representatives.

As shown in Figure 11, again, the results were generally positive. As with the previous figure, however, the proportion of “strongly agree” ratings does not comprise the majority of buyer opinions. At least 15 percent of respondents abstained from endorsing a positive perception; nearly half were willing to merely “agree” with the statements. These results do not show that point-of-contact representatives are the “rock star” salespeople that many companies and sales leaders would like to believe they are.

**FIGURE 11.** *Buyers’ Perceptions of their Relationship with Sales Representatives*



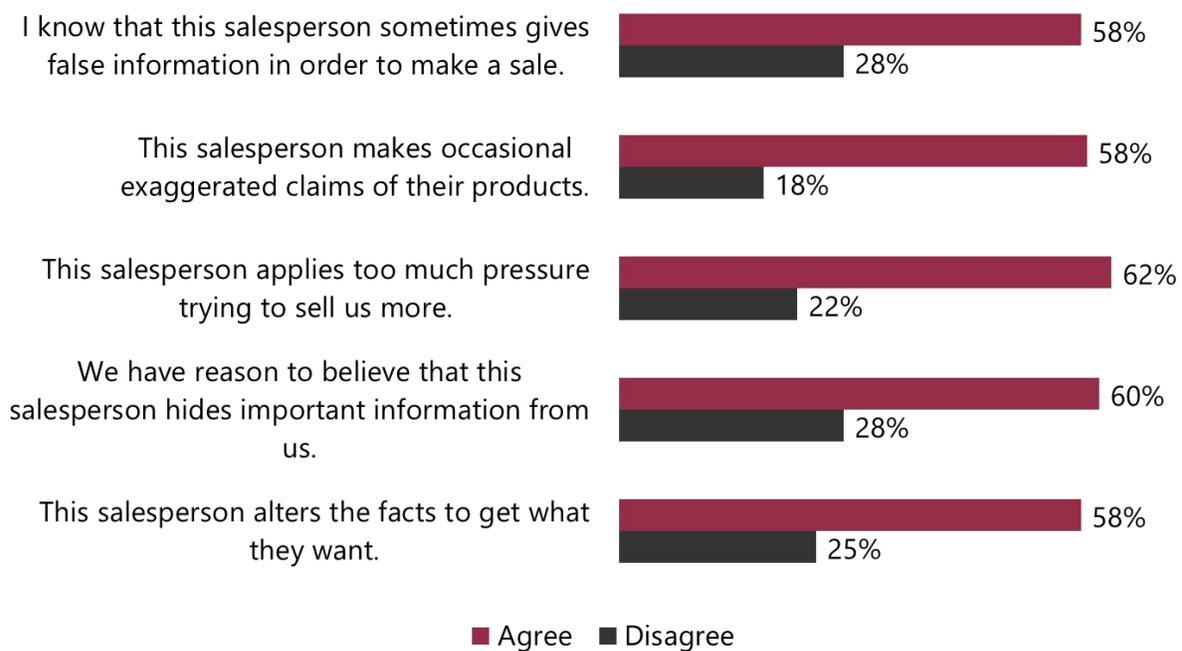
## BUYERS QUESTION THEIR SALES REPS’ INTEGRITY

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we also wanted to examine the extent of buyers’ negative perceptions of sales representatives. We asked respondents to rate each of a series of statements that probed their perceptions of the intentions of point-of-contact representatives.

As shown in Figure 12, the results are not a mirror image of the data about positive perceptions. These data show the contrast of intention and ethics – even if they are merely perceived rather than actual ethics. A buyer may know that a point-of-contact representative is not individually responsible for the quality of the products and services

he or she is selling or the ability of a product or service to solve a problem or meet a business need. These results suggest that it is not mutually exclusive for a buyer to deal with a vendor company and distrust the integrity of salespeople. That may be a tradeoff that many buyers are willing to make because of the solution the vendor offers, or it may depict a resignation about the nature of many point-of-contact representatives. It may even reflect an unjustified prejudice on the part of the buyer. Whatever the underlying reason, however, these are perceptions that vendors should aspire to counteract when they are undue and rectify when they are warranted.

**FIGURE 12.** *Negative Perceptions of Point-of-Contact Sales Representatives*



To summarize this section, from the buyer perspective:

- About one-half to one-third of point-of-contact representatives are consistently credible/helpful in ways that add value.
- Ten to 20 percent of sales reps are seen as lacking general business competence.
- Most sales representatives are assumed to have good intentions, and the majority of vendor relationships are seen in a positive light.
- Though upward of 40 percent of buyers have a resoundingly positive view of the character of point-of-contact sales representatives, roughly 60 percent actively question their integrity.

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

On average, vendors receive a “C” grade from buyers. There are many drivers of these buyer perceptions, including:

- The too-often lackluster performance of vendors when engaging with senior leaders, as they are usually, but not always, effective at engaging senior decision-makers in the buyer organization
  - Only 34 percent of respondents noted that vendors were “always effective” at executive-level sales conversations.
- A potential blind spot for vendor companies about the reality of “team selling” and the multiple points of entry in the modern buying cycle
- A dearth of the virtual skills that are crucial to contacting, communicating with and presenting to 21<sup>st</sup>-century organizations
- An incomplete command of core business knowledge about organizational strategies, structures and operations
- Interactions with sales representatives who may not be seen as helpful, credible or trustworthy

Taken as a whole, the results of this research suggest a buyer landscape where these buyers are doing more of their own homework, partially due to the fact that some of their interactions with both their main point of contact and ancillary representatives of a vendor are not seen as the greatest use of time. Why? A combination of a lack of knowledge about the nature of prospective buyers’ business realities and a lack of skills to communicate effectively in an increasingly technologically-mediated sales environment. As these buyers are looking to source long-term, comprehensive solutions and forge relationships with their vendors, in turn, the vendors must meet them with the knowledge and skills to foster these connections.

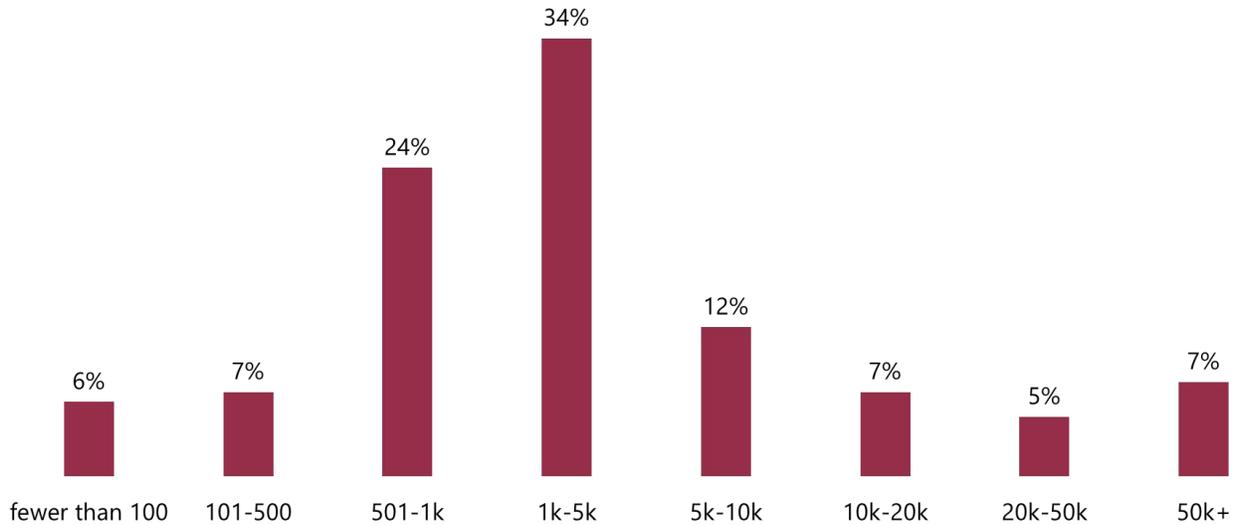
Based on these results, we have four recommendations to vendor companies:

1. Grow the business acumen of the sales function to include a deeper understanding of financial insights.
2. Grow the virtual communication touch points of the sales function.
3. Foster the skills to better diagnose where a buyer may be in the buying cycle and resynchronize.
4. Ensure that point-of-contact representatives are managing both their actual ethics and their perceived ethics in the view of buyer companies.

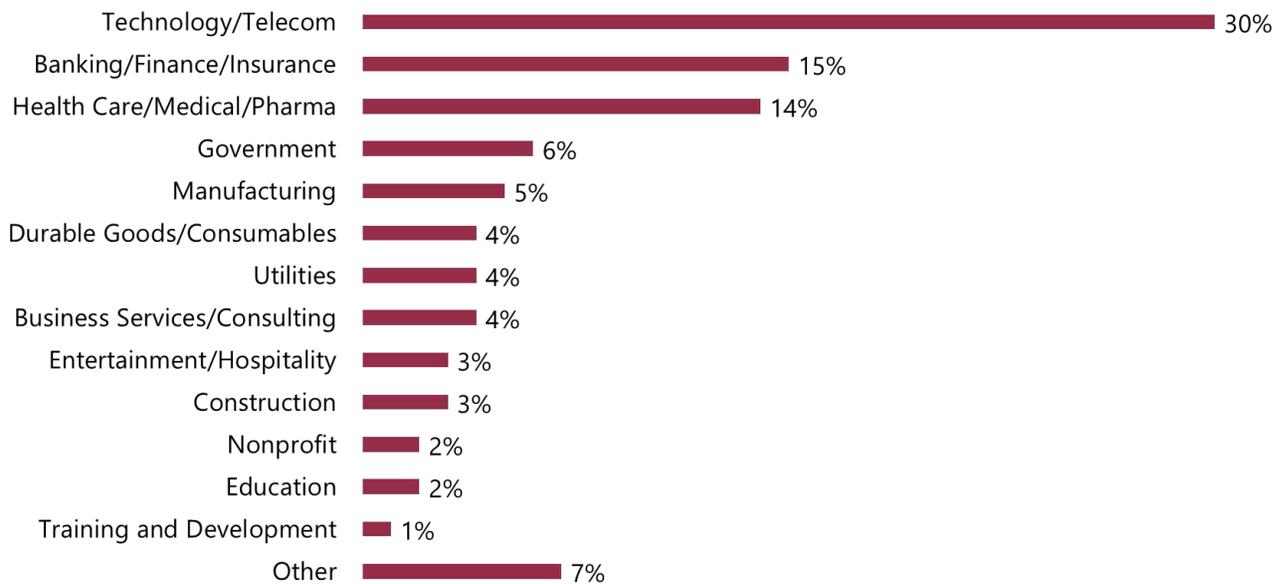
# STUDY DEMOGRAPHICS

Figures 13 through 16 provide context on the 260 survey respondents who participated in this research. They summarize the companies the respondents represent in addition to their roles and tenure within their respective organizations.

**FIGURE 13.** Organizational Size of Respondents' Companies

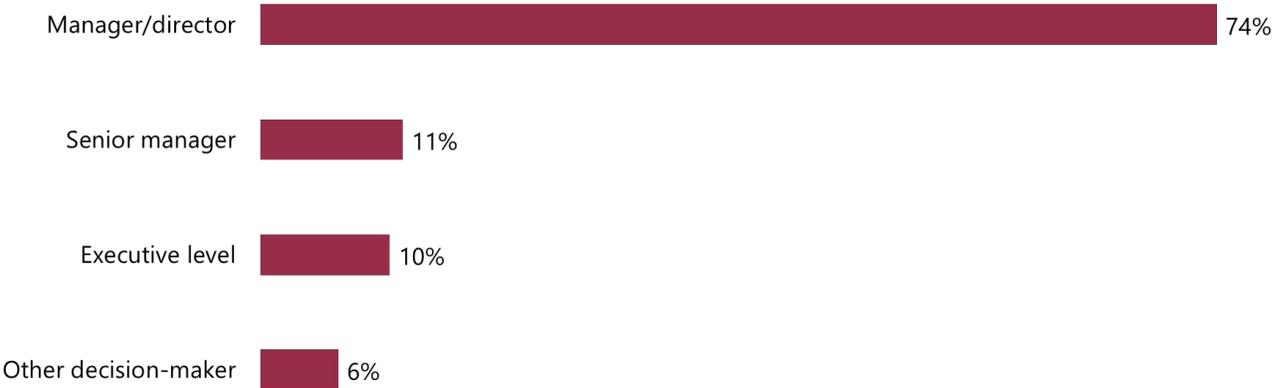


**FIGURE 14.** Industries Represented by Survey Respondents

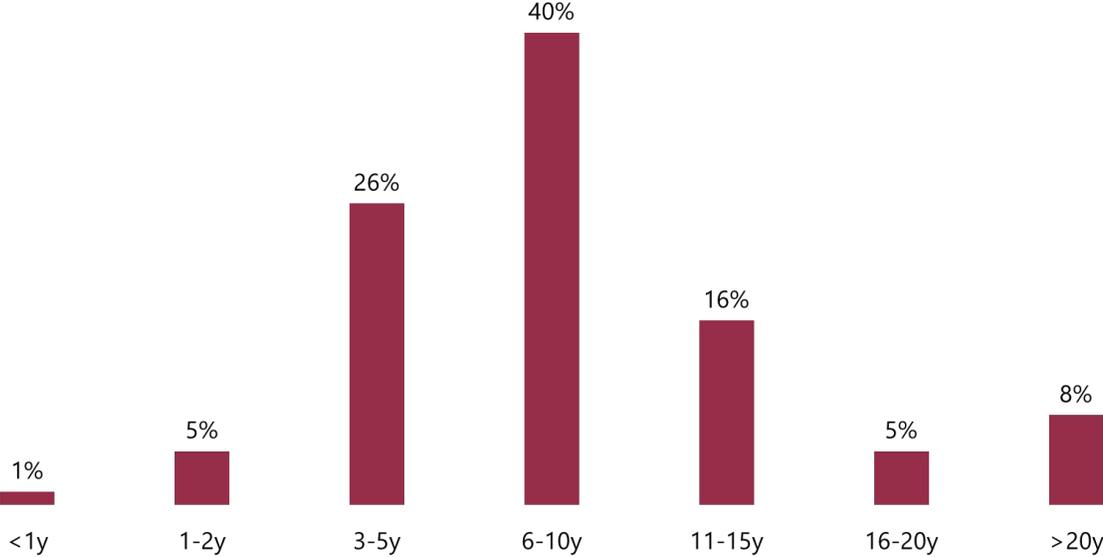


As shown in these demographic figures, the respondents to this research were business professionals who are involved in business decisions, and at least one-quarter have been in these roles for more than a decade. They represent a range of management and leadership roles from a variety of companies across a range of industries.

**FIGURE 15.** *Job Roles of Survey Respondents*



**FIGURE 16.** *Job Tenure of Survey Respondents*



# ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

## About ValueSelling Associates, Inc.

ValueSelling Associates is the creator of the ValueSelling Framework®, the sales methodology preferred by sales executives around the globe. Since 1991, ValueSelling Associates has helped thousands of sales professionals increase their sales productivity. Offering customized training to FORTUNE 1000, mid-sized and start-up companies, ValueSelling Associates' proprietary sales training tools and consulting services deliver measurable results. Clients turn to the experts at ValueSelling Associates for services that yield immediate impact, repeatable strategies and sustainable results.

For more information, go to [www.valueselling.com](http://www.valueselling.com).



## About Training Industry

Our focus is on helping dedicated business and training professionals get the information, insight and tools needed to more effectively manage the business of learning. Our website, TrainingIndustry.com, spotlights the latest news, articles, case studies and best practices within the training industry.

For more information, go to [www.trainingindustry.com](http://www.trainingindustry.com), call 866.298.4203, or connect with us on Twitter and LinkedIn.



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*Note:* Selected measures used in this research were adapted from scales originally published in:

Hughes, D. E., Le Bon, J., & Rapp, A. (2013). Gaining and leveraging customer-based competitive intelligence: The pivotal role of social capital and salesperson adaptive selling skills. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 41, 91-110.

Wang, G., Dou, W., & Zhou, N. (2012). The interactive effects of sales force controls on salespeople behaviors and customer outcomes. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 32(2), 225-243.