AI changes sales.

From Hunter and Farmer to *Full-Cycle* Sales Professional

The shift in B2B sales, and why the human side matters more than ever

White paper · Guido Wüner, Sell From Within

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Foreword: The B2B buyer has taken control

As of 2026, the dynamics of B2B sales and marketing are changing fundamentally. Selling that relies mainly on being liked or on cold, bulk outreach is becoming less effective. Business buyers are behaving more like consumers: they research independently, often digitally and with the help of AI, and they are more critical than ever about whom they trust.

At the same time, those same buyers still look for a human at decisive moments to help them choose. That tension—wanting to do it themselves while still looking for a trusted advisor—is the starting point of this white paper.

Executive summary

B2B sales is shifting from hunting and farming to advising. Buyers are doing more themselves, AI is taking over information work, and the value of the salesperson is shifting toward trust, judgment and initiative. The classic hunter and farmer are evolving into the Strategic New Sales Advisor, the Customer Growth Specialist and, increasingly, the Full-Cycle Sales Professional who combines both.

This white paper shows that the shift rarely stalls because of knowledge or technology, but because of behavior under pressure. AI gives salespeople time, but in most organizations that time does not go to the conversations that make the difference. That is where the greatest untapped potential in sales lies.

Five key findings

#	Finding	Key figure
1	The buyer wants control, but looks for a human at decisive moments	67% prefer at least part of the journey without a salesperson; 69% want to validate AI insights with a salesperson (Gartner, 2026)
2	Visible expertise beats persuasion	73% of decision-makers trust thought leadership more than marketing material (Edelman-LinkedIn, 2024)
3	Buying has become a network, with major differences by segment	Average of 13 internal stakeholders plus 9 external influencers in Forrester’s global research; often 3 to 8 in SMEs

#	Finding	Key figure
4	AI creates time, but the time disappears	4.8 hours saved per week; 72% of organizations barely reinvest that time (Gartner, 2026)
5	The psychological side determines whether the shift succeeds	Psychological flexibility predicts health and performance at work (Bond & Bunce, 2003)

The message for commercial leaders. Invest in tools and skills, but also manage what happens when the work becomes uncomfortable. Organizations that turn freed-up time into proactive, valuable customer conversations achieve their customer-growth goals 2.2 times more often, according to Gartner. That requires attention to Head, Heart and Hands: how salespeople deal with doubt, what drives them, and what they do every day.

1. Introduction: why the shift is happening now

B2B sales is not changing gradually, but at a pace few organizations saw coming. Since generative AI became broadly available in late 2022, the playing field has fundamentally changed in less than four years. In 2023, according to Gartner, less than 5% of B2B sellers' work involved generative AI; Gartner expects that figure to reach 60% by 2028. (Gartner, 2023) On the buyer side, the change has been just as fast: by the end of 2025, 45% of B2B buyers had used AI in a recent purchase, and the share of buyers preferring a rep-free journey rose in one year from 61% to 67%. (Gartner, 2026)

Three forces are converging: a buyer who is more independent than ever, AI taking over information work, and purchasing decisions involving more stakeholders. Together, they make the classic division between hunters and farmers outdated.

And the change is accelerating. Organizations and salespeople that are not prepared now may not see the impact in revenue tomorrow, but they will in two or three years: when buyers have already made their shortlist before they appear, and when competitors have already turned the time AI frees up into better customer conversations. Those who start now build an advantage. Those who wait have to catch up.

The traditional salesperson had two sources of value: access to information and the customer relationship.

The first source is drying up. Buyers find product information, prices, reviews and comparisons themselves, increasingly through an AI assistant.

What remains is the value only a human can provide: judgment, trust, and the ability to help a customer through a difficult decision.

This white paper describes that shift in four steps:

What is changing on the buyer side: autonomy, AI use and larger buying groups.

What is changing on the seller side: AI takes over routine work and the roles are converging.

What remains underexposed: the psychological side of the shift. Learning new skills is one thing; using them under pressure is another.

What this requires from organizations and leaders, and how to guide the transition.

About the evidence. The figures in this paper come as much as possible from primary sources from research firms such as Gartner and Forrester and from scientific research. Where figures differ significantly by segment, that is stated. Many sales trend reports exaggerate the scale of change; this paper deliberately chooses nuance, because good decisions start with an honest picture.

2. The new buyer: autonomous, digital and critical

The B2B buyer wants to do most of the journey independently, but looks for a human at the moments that matter. That is the core of the shift: the salesperson loses the role of information source and gains a role as a source of trust.

The preference for self-service and the need for human validation go together: buyers do not blindly trust any source, including AI.

The buyer wants control. In a Gartner survey of 646 B2B buyers (August–September 2025), 67% said they preferred an experience without a salesperson. A year earlier, that was 61%. An important detail: this is a preference for at least part of the purchase, not the entire journey. Follow-up research also found that 70% prefer a fully digital, self-service buying experience. (Gartner, March 2026; Gartner, May 2026)

The buyer uses AI, but does not trust it blindly. Buyers consulted an average of seven information sources in a recent purchase, and 45% used generative AI, mainly to gather information about suppliers and products. At the same time, 51% say they are more likely to encounter misleading information through AI; for sellers, that figure is 49%. Buyers therefore do not fully trust any single source.

The salesperson is still needed, at different moments. 69% of buyers want to validate AI insights with a salesperson. According to Gartner, salespeople remain the most important source at three moments: investigating the actual problem, choosing a preferred supplier and securing internal support, and completing the purchase.

Trust is revenue. Buyers who have confidence in their decision report a high-quality deal twice as often as buyers with low confidence. Gartner also expects that by 2030, 75% of B2B buyers will prefer sales experiences in which human interaction takes priority over AI. (Gartner, August 2025)

Buying itself remains difficult. Forrester surveyed more than 16,000 business buyers worldwide: 86% of B2B purchases get stuck during the process, and 81% of buyers are dissatisfied with the supplier they selected afterwards. (Forrester, December 2024)

What this means. The salesperson who mainly provides information is being replaced by a search engine or AI assistant. The salesperson who helps make a difficult decision, reduce risk and organize internal support becomes more valuable than ever. Gartner puts it clearly: salespeople should not be less present, but present differently.

Nuance. A preference in a survey is not behavior. The figures also mainly concern more complex purchases in international research groups. In Dutch SMEs, and in services where trust in the

individual is central, the relationship often plays a larger role. The direction, however, is visible everywhere.

3. How buyers search: from search engine to AI assistant and visible expertise

Buyers increasingly find suppliers through AI assistants and through experts they trust. Those who are visible as experts enter the picture before contact; those who are invisible do not make the shortlist.

From keyword to question. Where a buyer once searched for keywords and compared websites themselves, they increasingly ask an AI assistant a complete question: which three providers fit my situation? The field focused on this is called Generative Engine Optimization (GEO). It is less about technical discoverability and more about digital authority: being mentioned in trade media, on independent platforms and by experts.

Nuance: the shift is happening more gradually than predicted. In February 2024, Gartner predicted that the volume of traditional search-engine use would fall by 25% in 2026 because of AI chatbots. Analyses in 2026 show that total search volume has not fallen by 25%, partly because Google integrated AI answers into its own search results. For some types of search queries, however, the effect on website traffic is substantial. (Search Engine Land; Inimino, 2026) The lesson: the direction is right, the pace was overestimated, but the shift is accelerating as AI continues to improve and develop faster.

Expertise beats marketing. The annual Edelman and LinkedIn study among decision-makers and C-level executives in seven countries shows why substantive expertise carries so much weight (Edelman-LinkedIn, 2024):

Finding	Share of decision-makers
Considers thought leadership a more reliable basis for assessing capabilities than marketing material and product information	73%
More open to contact from an organization that consistently publishes strong thought leadership	approximately 90%
Researched a product or service they had not previously considered because of thought leadership	75%
Spends an hour or more per week reading thought leadership	52% (54% among C-level)

What this means for the salesperson. Visibility is no longer only a marketing task. The salesperson who shares knowledge on LinkedIn, in an industry article, as a speaker or in conversations within a network builds trust before there is a buying moment. That is not hunting, but planting seeds. It does require something many salespeople find uncomfortable: being visible with your own opinion and knowledge and taking the risk that not everyone will agree with you.

Nuance. Thought leadership only works if it genuinely adds something. The same Edelman research shows that many decision-makers consider the quality of what they read mediocre. Posting more is therefore not the solution; sharing better and more honestly is.

4. Buying groups: larger and more complex, but not equally large everywhere

Decisions are almost never made by one person anymore. As a result, the salesperson deals less with a single customer and more with a network of people inside and outside the buyer's organization. The size of that network varies significantly by segment.

What the research says

Source	Buying group size	Context
Forrester, January 2026	13 internal stakeholders plus 9 external influencers, measured separately	Global, all categories; higher for complex or strategic purchases
Forrester, December 2024	Average of 13 internal stakeholders; 89% of purchases involve two or more departments	More than 16,000 buyers worldwide
Gartner (cited in Traction Complete)	6 to 10 decision-makers	Complex B2B solutions
Influ2, 2026	Half 2 to 4 people, 42% 5 to 9 people; 10 or more only in enterprise	Small sample (50 buyers), enterprise and mid-market

The nuance. The often-quoted "15+" or "20+" figures arise by adding Forrester's internal and external groups together. Forrester deliberately measures them separately. For Dutch SMEs and much of business services, a group of three to eight stakeholders is more realistic. The trend is visible everywhere: more departments, more risk awareness, more need for substantiation.

Three buying developments changing the salesperson's role

Procurement moves upstream. According to Forrester, procurement is the decision-maker in 53% of buying processes and is involved from the beginning rather than only at the end.

Buyers validate through their network. Buyers use AI for speed, but test their findings with colleagues, peers, analysts and experts. Notably, as a trigger to contact a supplier, buyers more often mentioned a conversation with a subject-matter expert than information from AI tools. (Digital Commerce 360 on Forrester, 2026)

For AI-related purchases, the group doubles. Purchases involving generative AI features require more evaluation and more departments.

What this means for the salesperson. The role shifts from persuading to facilitating: clarifying different interests, helping the buyer build internal support, and speaking the language of the CFO, the IT manager and the end user at the same time. That is an advisory role. And it requires something no sales technique can provide: maintaining perspective and calm when there is doubt, conflicting interests and delay.

5. AI in sales: what it takes over and what remains human

AI demonstrably saves salespeople time, but most organizations do not turn that time into better selling. That is the most important and least discussed finding about AI in sales.

The starting point: little time for the actual work. Salesforce reported that salespeople spend only 28% of their workweek actually selling; the rest goes to administration, deal management, research and internal alignment. (Salesforce, State of Sales) That is exactly the routine work AI can take over well.

The time saving is real. Gartner reports that AI tools save salespeople an average of 4.8 hours per week. (Gartner, May 2026)

But the time disappears. 72% of sales organizations barely reinvest that saved time in valuable sales activities. Gartner calls this the “reinvestment gap”. Organizations that do reinvest the time achieve their customer-growth goals 2.2 times more often and their lead-to-opportunity conversion goals 3.1 times more often (research among 210 sales leaders, January–February 2026). Returns vary widely: 25% of organizations report a return of 50% or more on AI investments, while 20% report a negative return of 50% or more.

More AI is not automatically better. Gartner predicts that AI agents will be ten times as numerous as salespeople by 2028, but fewer than 40% of salespeople will say those agents have improved their productivity. (Destination CRM on Gartner, 2025) Gartner explicitly advises measuring success through relationship building and emotional intelligence as well.

What AI takes over and what remains human

AI takes over (or strongly supports)	Remains human
Customer and market research, account profiles	The conversation about the customer’s actual problem
Updating CRM, call notes, follow-up emails	Building trust and daring to give advice
Lead qualification and initial selection	Helping a buyer organize internal support
Draft proposals and business cases	Negotiating, weighing risk, absorbing a no
Signaling buying intent and deal risk	Being visible with your own knowledge and opinion
Conversation analysis for coaching	Making proactive calls when it feels uncomfortable

The core. The right-hand column contains exactly the work that is most uncomfortable for many salespeople. As long as there was enough administration and preparation, that discomfort could remain unnoticed: there was always something else to do. AI removes that buffer.

Gartner puts it this way: productivity does not stall because salespeople forget how to sell. The next chapter shows that there is a second, human explanation alongside systems.

Nuance. The Gartner figures mainly come from larger, international sales organizations. In smaller organizations, AI adoption is often less advanced, but the question of what to do with freed-up time matters just as much.

6. The evolution of sales roles

The hard separation between the hunter who chases new customers and the farmer who serves existing customers no longer fits how buyers buy. Both roles are evolving, and in many organizations they are merging into one profile: the Full-Cycle Sales Professional.

From role to role

Old role	New role	Core focus	Why now
Hunter (Trapper, SDR/BDR)	Strategic New Sales Advisor	Attract new customers through substantive expertise, visibility and networks, and help the buyer make a complex decision	Buyers research independently first and validate through experts. Those visible as experts are found and invited in.
Farmer / (Rancher, CSM)	Customer Growth Specialist	Proactively think with existing customers and show where additional value lies	Retention is not enough. Growth comes from helping customers become even more successful with your product or service.
Both	Full-Cycle Sales Professional	A strategic advisor who attracts new accounts through expertise and helps grow existing accounts	AI takes over routine work, allowing one professional to combine both roles.

Why the classic hunter is losing ground. Cold calling and mass emailing work less well with buyers who research independently and filter out generic approaches. Earlier Gartner research found that 73% of buyers actively avoid suppliers who send irrelevant messages. (Buyer Enablement, overview of Gartner research) The modern new-business salesperson hunts less and builds more: authority, a network, and relationships with partners and experts the buyer trusts.

Why the classic farmer becomes too reactive. Simply asking whether everything is still going well delivers less and less when budgets are under pressure and procurement is involved from the start. The modern farmer does not need to become a data analyst, but does need to be proactive: understand the customer's business, spot opportunities and start the conversation about what the customer is not yet asking for.

Nuance: not everyone has to do everything. The merging of roles is a direction, not a law. In organizations with high volumes or highly complex deals, specialized roles remain useful. And not every farmer needs to become a hunter. The core of the change is that both roles need the same foundation: substantive expertise, proactivity, and the ability to have a difficult conversation.

What the new sales roles have in common

They add value at the moments when the buyer hesitates and support the buyer in making a choice, rather than simply providing information and negotiating.

They are visible with their knowledge, also outside the sales conversation.

They take initiative, even when it feels uncomfortable.

They use AI as a tool and invest the time it frees up in more personal connections and conversations.

7. The underestimated factor: the psychological side of the shift

The new sales roles require not only new skills, but above all different behavior under pressure: being proactive, being visible and entering the uncomfortable conversation. This is not a knowledge question. It is a psychological question, and most sales organizations and training programs pay very little attention to it.

AI removes the buffer

Routine work always had a hidden function: it offered a place to be without doing the difficult work. Update the CRM once more, refine a proposal once more, do a little more research. It feels like work, and it is work. But it is also where avoidance can hide.

When AI takes over that work, exactly the work associated with discomfort remains: calling the customer who is not waiting for you, giving your opinion in a boardroom, becoming visible with your expertise, hearing “no” more often. The freed-up time does not automatically go to those conversations. It fills with new tasks, extra coordination or more preparation. The choice is therefore: Unconscious Avoidance (= Preference and Loss) or Reinvesting in Conversations (= Priority and Growth).

Whether freed-up time goes toward growth depends not only on systems and processes, but especially on what a salesperson does when the work becomes uncomfortable.

This connects to what Gartner calls the reinvestment gap: 72% of sales organizations barely invest AI-saved time in valuable sales activities. Gartner mainly looks for the explanation in systems and work processes. That is justified, but incomplete. Even in a well-designed system, a human still has to pick up the phone.

Avoidance is measurable, and costly

Gartner previously studied the motivation of more than 900 B2B salespeople: 89% reported feeling burned out, and 54% were actively looking for another job. (Gartner) Gartner distinguishes between drive and drag. Drag, the opposite of drive, shows up as avoiding or postponing work, boredom and difficulty focusing. Salespeople with high drag hit their targets less often, burn out more often and leave sooner. (Destination CRM on Gartner; SalesFuel)

Avoidance is therefore not a character flaw. It is a predictable human pattern that becomes visible in revenue, absence and turnover.

Psychological flexibility: the missing capability

Research	Finding
Bond & Bunce (2003), Journal of Applied Psychology	Among more than 400 employees of a UK financial services provider, psychological flexibility predicted both mental health and an objective performance measure one year later, even after controlling for job control and other factors. Employees with greater flexibility also benefited more from job control. (New Harbinger, overview)

Research	Finding
Bond, Lloyd & Guenole (2013), Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology	Development of the WAAQ, a questionnaire for psychological flexibility specifically at work; flexibility is an important determinant of health and effective behavior at work. (Wiley)
Kuo et al. (2018), Applied Psychology	Psychological flexibility at work is associated with proactive work behavior. (Wiley)
Meta-analysis of ACT in the workplace (2022), Journal of Contextual Behavioral Science	Workplace ACT training reduces psychological burden and stress and increases psychological flexibility and well-being. (ScienceDirect)

Psychological flexibility is the ability to stay in contact with what is happening now, even when it is uncomfortable, and continue acting in line with what matters to you. It is the core concept of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and one of the best-researched psychological factors in work contexts.

Nuance. The effects of workplace ACT training are generally moderate and vary considerably by study. The effect on stress and psychological burden is better established than the effect on performance, and not all studies find an increase in psychological flexibility itself. (PMC, systematic review 2025; ScienceDirect, review 2025) Research specifically among salespeople is increasing. The theoretical line is strong; the evidence specifically for sales is therefore still developing.

Why this gets to the heart of it

The new roles all require the same thing: acting while it feels uncomfortable. The Strategic New Sales Advisor must be visible with an opinion. The Customer Growth Specialist must start the conversation the customer is not asking for. The Full-Cycle Sales Professional must spend freed-up time on the work that feels most uncomfortable. Skills and tools make this possible. Psychological flexibility makes it happen.

8. What this requires from organizations and leaders

The transition to new sales roles is a change project, not a training program. Organizations that only add tools and skills get stuck on behavior. Gartner previously found that 77% of salespeople struggle to complete tasks efficiently, despite rising budgets for technology and training, and advised sales leaders to focus on behavior change. (CX Today on Gartner, 2023)

Five steps for a careful transition

Step	What you do	Pitfall to avoid
1. Map your team honestly	Look at strength, preference and development space per person: who has an aptitude for new customers, customer growth or both?	Putting people in boxes based on their current role. Many reactive farmers are not unsuitable, but have never been invited to be proactive.
2. Develop skills and behavior	Train substantive expertise, business insight and AI use, while also working on behavior under pressure: taking initiative, being visible and having the difficult conversation	Only transferring knowledge and expecting behavior to follow automatically

Step	What you do	Pitfall to avoid
3. Hire for the new profile	Look for advisors: analytical, curious, good listeners, and willing to be visible with their knowledge	Hiring for polish or solely for experience in the old role
4. Adjust goals and rewards	Also reward customer growth, retention, opportunity quality and using freed-up time for customer conversations	Counting only activities (number of calls) or only quarterly revenue
5. Lead the change	Managers coach behavior, create room for experimentation and talk openly about discomfort	Delegating the change to HR or to a tool

Why leadership makes the difference. Earlier Gartner research found that salespeople who feel like a cog in the machine hit their target up to 34% less often and are 44% more likely to look for another job. Autonomy and meaning are not soft factors, but performance factors. Bond and Bunce's research also shows that employees with greater psychological flexibility benefit most from autonomy. Giving space and developing flexibility reinforce each other.

What leaders can do concretely, starting tomorrow

In every team meeting, ask not only what was done, but also what was left undone and why.

Agree on what happens to the time AI frees up, for example a fixed number of proactive customer conversations per week.

Let salespeople share their knowledge internally and externally, and value it as work, not as an extra.

Discuss discomfort as a normal part of the profession, not as a weakness.

Nuance. Not every organization needs to take all steps at once. Start with the team and customers where the shift is most noticeable, measure what changes and then scale.

9. The Sell From Within perspective: Head, Heart and Hands

Sustainable success in the new sales roles requires attention to three layers at the same time: how a salesperson deals with their thoughts (Head), what drives them (Heart), and what they actually do (Hands). Organizations that manage only the Hands get short-term results. Those that include all three build behavior that lasts.

Sell From Within model · Head, Heart and Hands

Layer	The question	What it delivers in the new role	Supporting foundation
Head	How do you deal with doubt, a no and the thought that you are bothering someone?	Take initiative while doubt is present; recover faster after rejection	Psychological flexibility (ACT): making room for thoughts without letting them determine behavior
Heart	Why do you do this work and what makes it worthwhile to you?	Fuel for proactive behavior; direction in choosing a role	Self-Determination Theory (SDT): autonomy, competence and relatedness; Ikigai: meaning at work

Layer	The question	What it delivers in the new role	Supporting foundation
Hands	What do you do today, concretely, in line with what matters to you?	One valuable customer action every day; freed-up time spent on conversations	Committed action (ACT): small, feasible steps aligned with values

The three pillars carry the behavior; the organizational foundation determines whether that behavior has room to operate.

What this means for the three roles

The Strategic New Sales Advisor needs the Head above all: being visible with an opinion requires being able to tolerate the risk of rejection.

The Customer Growth Specialist needs the Heart above all: proactively thinking with the customer comes from genuine involvement in their success, not from an upsell target.

The Full-Cycle Sales Professional needs the Hands above all: the discipline to spend freed-up time every day on the work that matters.

Why this is distinctive. Most sales training focuses on the Hands: techniques, conversation models, tools. That is necessary, but it does not explain why salespeople who know exactly how to do something still do not always do it. The Head and Heart layers fill that gap. They create the difference between knowing and doing.

An honest caveat. Psychological flexibility is not a magic solution either. Organizational conditions such as realistic goals, autonomy and good leadership remain decisive. A salesperson working in a system that rewards avoidance will fall back into old patterns even with the best training. Head, Heart and Hands work best when the organization creates the space to use them.

10. Conclusion and recommendations for commercial leaders

The shift in B2B sales is not about less humanity, but about a different kind of human in the sales process. AI takes over information work; the salesperson becomes more valuable as an advisor, a source of trust and an initiator. Organizations that see this only as a technology or skills issue miss the most important factor: behavior under pressure.

Five conclusions

The buyer wants control, but looks for a human at decisive moments. Two thirds of buyers prefer a rep-free journey, while 69% want to validate AI insights with a salesperson.

Visible expertise beats persuasion. Decision-makers trust substantive knowledge more than marketing material, and subject-matter experts trigger contact more often than AI tools.

AI saves time, but most organizations lose that time again. The reinvestment gap is the greatest untapped potential in sales.

The hunter and farmer evolve into advisors. The Strategic New Sales Advisor, the Customer Growth Specialist and the Full-Cycle Sales Professional share one foundation: expertise, proactivity and the ability to have difficult conversations.

The psychological side determines whether the shift succeeds. Avoidance is the hidden mechanism behind the reinvestment gap. Psychological flexibility is the capability that makes the difference between knowing and doing.

Recommendations

Timing	Recommendation
This month	Discuss with your team what is happening to the time AI and tools already free up. Make it visible.
This quarter	Map where each salesperson's strength lies (new customers, customer growth or both) and what is structurally being left undone.
This quarter	Add a behavior component to every skills or AI training: what do you do when it becomes uncomfortable?
This year	Adjust goals and rewards so customer growth, retention and proactive customer conversations count.
This year	Develop managers into coaches who make behavior and discomfort discussable, not just results.
Ongoing	Measure not only revenue and activities, but also energy, engagement and psychological flexibility, for example with the WAAQ.

In closing. The salesperson of the future is neither hunter nor farmer, but an advisor who dares to be visible with their knowledge, takes initiative with existing and new customers, and spends the time technology gives them on what only a human can do: build trust. It starts not with a new tool, but with the question of what you do when it becomes uncomfortable.

About the author. Guido Wüner Wewengkang has been an entrepreneur since 2001, is an ACT coach, NIMA trainer and author of Sell From Within – Verkopen vanuit jezelf: Prioriteit boven Voorkeur. He supports commercial professionals and leaders in sustainable performance at the intersection of sales psychology and behavioral science. Contact: guido@guidowuner.nl · www.guidowuner.nl

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