



LEADING SALES THROUGH THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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AS THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS creates unprecedented uncertainty, it's critical that companies figure out how to protect and increase revenues—not default to just containing or cutting costs. Indeed, the ability to grow will separate the leaders from the pack when the global economy rebounds, as it eventually will.

Once sales leaders have stabilized the immediate situation, they must turn to what it will take to sustain momentum despite social distancing around the globe and invest to rebound in the recovery. Companies in every industry have the opportunity to come out of the crisis as winners. In fact, 14% of companies were able to not only accelerate growth but also increase profitability during the past four recessions, according to a recent BCG study.

But with offices and factories shut, leading to delivery cancellations and delays; employees and customers forced to work from home; resources at a premium; and travel becoming nearly impossible, companies have many challenges to tackle right away.

Sales leaders, especially in B2B markets, will determine if companies can turn this crisis into an opportunity. They must take four steps to lead sales, and their companies, through these turbulent times (see the exhibit):

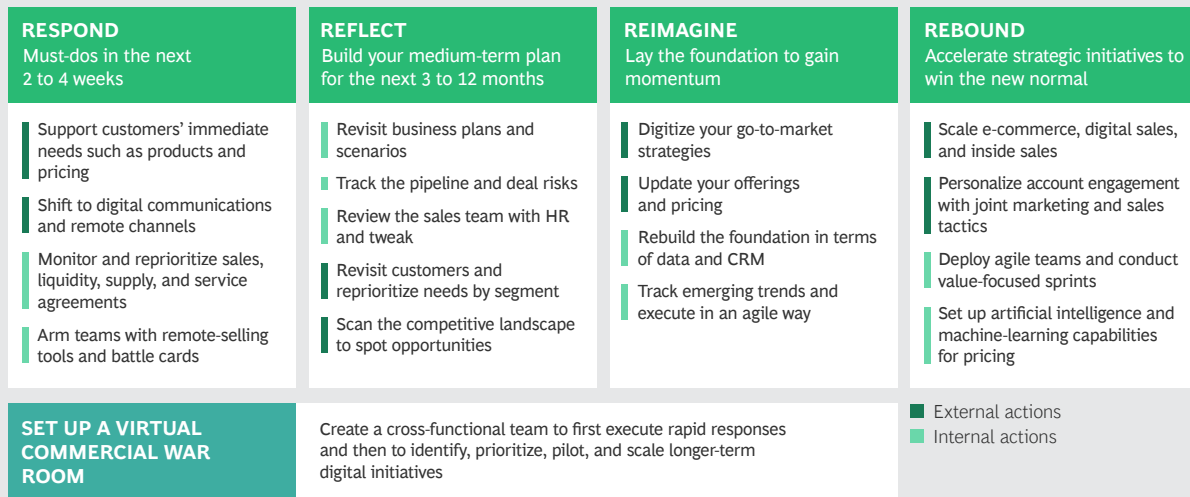
- Respond by engaging immediately with, and stabilizing, sales
- Reflect on the fluid situation
- Reimagine sales to regain momentum
- Rebound by pivoting sales so that their teams can win when the crisis ends

Respond by Engaging with, and Stabilizing, Sales

It's critical to engage fast and often with the marketing, sales, pricing, and service teams, underlining the pandemic-related uncertainty surrounding the business and stabilizing the teams, processes, and pipeline. Actions demonstrate commitment, so leaders must respond to the immediate

The Four Rs of the B2B Sales Response

← Immediate value realization ————— Sustained, longer-term impact ————— →



Source: BCG analysis.

needs of the sales organization beyond health and safety. That involves communicating constantly, supporting employees—especially caregivers and at-risk employees—through the stresses and strains of the situation, and finding ways to keep everyone focused on the job.

Setting up a virtual commercial war room to drive a deliberate and well-coordinated customer-focused response is important. The cross-functional team that staffs this war room must work in an agile way using virtual teaming tools, as several companies have shown us. It must be charged with creating a dashboard that tracks sales, risks, supply chain issues, customer challenges, HR problems, and safety concerns on a daily basis. The team must also develop short-term actions to stabilize sales and generate liquidity and to address the burning issue of how to sell during the crisis.

Because of variations in the spread of COVID-19, make sure that the virtual war room has national and regional representation. That will ensure quicker feedback as well as more effective decisions. For instance, when Amazon was confronted by shortages of essential products in the US and Europe, a company taskforce modified

the products that the online retailer stores and ships. It has prioritized the delivery of household staples, medical supplies, and other high-demand products for the foreseeable future, accelerating only those deliveries.

Discussions regarding the level of service that companies can provide (also known as service-level agreements) are inevitable, both inside the organization and with customers. Meeting commitments may be tough under the current conditions, so it's best to be honest and transparent with customers about the situation and the steps your company is taking to maintain service levels.

Business leaders must adapt quickly. Getting teams to shift to working virtually will entail rolling out, scaling, and testing key technologies, such as VPN access and broadband connectivity, as well as essential applications such as videoconferencing. The longer the pandemic continues, the more likely it is that the crisis will become an inflection point after which B2B sales teams will work virtually most of the time. Planning today to invest in the technologies and people needed to make that shift will pay off tomorrow.

Reflect on the Fluid and Emerging Scenario

Despite the need for urgency, circumstances dictate that leaders be deliberate and think through the challenges facing them before they react. They should consult their business continuity plans, which help protect employees and assets, and ensure that they're able to function, despite the constraints, during such a crisis.

To identify the best course of action, sales leaders' first step must be to gauge the company's exposure on both the demand and the supply fronts according to the pandemic's impact on product markets and regions and the organization's readiness to cope with the crisis. As a [BCG article in the Harvard Business Review](#) argues, there is no one number that can capture or predict COVID-19's economic impact; companies have to look at signals emanating from a wide variety of factors to figure out the way forward.

Teams must analyze in depth the main customer challenges in each group and product segment to identify the actions they can take. One way of doing this is to gather data from the field and other indicators to create a scenario-based forecast that draws on a realistic view of demand and supply. For instance, BCG's [COVID-19 Consumer Sentiment Snapshot](#) draws from a survey conducted every two weeks to analyze consumer perceptions, attitudes, and spending changes as they evolve.

Having developed a dynamic perspective about the situation, sales must deploy an agile but phased approach to ensure quick and targeted responses. In markets where sales are tumbling, it's important to identify key customers that sales should focus on and develop a view about where the industry is trending in order to provide insight to customers. If demand is remaining stable or rising, as in some cases, sales must find innovative ways to handle the uptick quickly.

Either way, the first stage should consist of rapid planning to establish an action plan. To identify the levers at their disposal, companies should conduct workshops with

senior management and select commercial managers. The goal should be to draw up maps of the levers available to sales, prioritized by the company's exposure to the crisis and the levers' maturity. And the war room can coordinate the actions that need to be taken.

Then, sales must conduct virtual agile-action sprints that will allow the speedy development of sales strategies to mitigate the impact of the crisis and tackle short-term gaps in the sales process. Sales leaders can fashion the sprints, which can be run in parallel to the process of rolling out other changes, so that they are able to develop rapid responses in the areas of highest exposure. Together, the action sprints will help develop a commercial roadmap and deliver the organization some much-needed quick wins.

In some companies, salespeople may have to be kept motivated by altering performance management systems and incentives to reflect the new context. Leaders could, for instance, announce an incentive floor, below which commissions will not fall, calculated from each salesperson's three-month rolling average or the previous year's performance.

Reimagine Sales to Regain Momentum

As the shock settles in, sales must be prepped for the first five most likely conversations with existing customers. That entails developing a crisis battlecard, which would typically include salespeople's responses when customers ask (as they are likely to) about a new schedule of contact, existing deals and service levels, negotiating new contracts, resuming and rerouting supplies, pricing changes, and even emerging best practices in the industry. Don't forget that sales can provide great insights, especially for small and midsize businesses.

Sales leaders should use the crisis to develop, and hone, digital sales playbooks, which will guide teams in engaging with customers virtually. A playbook should describe the best practices about working

remotely, in terms of new technologies and new processes, and setting expectations with customers. Some playbooks, we've noticed, contain best practices about social selling and one-to-one marketing as well.

Resources must be used in a targeted fashion to counter falloffs in demand. Sales must coordinate engagement across digital channels to create powerful experiences. Using traditional B2B marketing techniques such as events, conferences, trade shows, and summits will not be possible for the foreseeable future. With customers working from home, they will spend more time online, so it may be time to shift to a digital marketing model. Companies must transfer marketing budgets to online channels, using the unique capabilities of digital marketing to target audiences. In fact, this may be an opportunity to migrate live events to digital ones such as webinars, online discussions, and virtual community building.

Strengthening or setting up a B2B demand center—a central or regional hub of shared marketing services, infrastructure, and processes—that can use digital marketing techniques (such as paid search, display ads, search engine optimization, and targeted email) to identify, nurture, and close leads is a fitting response amid the current uncertainty.

Sales leaders must also break down the silos between marketing, sales, and service so that the three functions can coordinate their engagement with customer accounts. That will ensure a more effective response while conserving resources. One way of eliminating those boundaries is to use account-based engagement principles, which will enable marketing to deploy digital channels and customized content to personalize engagement, thereby amplifying the efforts of the sales and service teams. Sales must prioritize accounts, identifying the key customers to focus on so that they can serve them more effectively and build deeper relationships. Salespeople can use technology and data to target many more account sizes and segments than was previously feasible.

Rebound by Pivoting Sales to Win When the Crisis Ends

Companies have to plan for the future even while dealing with the crisis. It's a good idea to prepare for worst-case scenarios including the unintended consequences of the pandemic. Sales should develop the most conservative short-term forecasts for demand as well as supply given the likely constraints such as prolonged social isolation. That way, organizations won't be caught entirely off-guard by the twists and turns the crisis may take.

But what goes down must come up, so companies should also prepare for the rebound. Sales teams should develop forecasts that show how much demand and supply could bounce back, and they should diagnose how much time production and distribution teams will need to ramp up and eliminate bottlenecks so that they are able to deliver to capacity once the crisis ends.

Acquiring new customers, particularly by employing the cost-effective and data-driven methods used during the crisis, will be important. To do that, companies should drive the adoption of emerging new sales models such as e-commerce and digital self-service today. Over the past decade, B2B buyers have turned to the internet to search for options, evaluate vendors, and, sometimes, to buy. That has resulted in an explosion of digital data, which is helping companies understand customers better and tailor customer journeys. This may be a good time to reestablish the ground rules—such as ensuring high data quality in the CRM system—that were neglected when times were good.

Simultaneously, there has been a migration to the inside sales model over the past decade. Armed with data about the customer's progress along the buying journey, an inside sales rep can talk to a potential customer and close a sale faster and more cost-effectively than traditional call centers or face-to-face reps can.

Moreover, retaining existing customers and upselling to them will become a priority during the upswing. Sales must double

down on existing customers to drive product adoption and land upselling and cross-selling opportunities. Finally, upgrading the sales experience and the customer journey, particularly by harnessing digital technologies, is important. Sales leaders must invest time and resources to drive added value through training, upskilling, and process redesign, among other initiatives.

The current crisis poses an opportunity for sales to gear up in technological terms. Sellers and support teams must have laptops, smartphones, and internet access and, more important, must know how to use the

features (such as webcams and QR readers) on their hardware in order to do their jobs. The time may be ripe to set up a sales technology group that experiments with emerging technologies, conducts pilots, and drives the adoption of advanced technologies that will allow remote work at scale by sales teams, now and in the future.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC poses a major challenge in the short run, but it also offers the opportunity to transform the sales organization. That will help companies come out of the crisis stronger.

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