



## The Challenger Sale

### Taking Control of the Customer Conversation

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

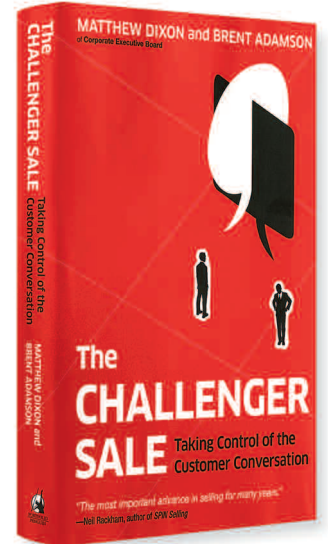
What's the secret to sales success? If you're like most business leaders, you'd say it's fundamentally about relationships — and you'd be wrong. The best salespeople don't just build relationships with customers. They challenge them.

Based on an exhaustive study of thousands of sales reps across multiple industries and geographies, *The Challenger Sale* argues that classic relationship-building is a losing approach, especially when it comes to selling complex, large-scale business-to-business solutions. The authors' study found that every sales rep falls into one of five distinct profiles, and while all of these types of reps can deliver average sales performance, only one — the Challenger — delivers consistently high performance.

The things that make Challengers unique are teachable to the average sales rep. Once you understand how to identify the Challengers in your organization, you can model their approach and embed it throughout your sales force. The authors explain how almost any average-performing sales rep, once equipped with the right tools, can successfully reframe customers' expectations and deliver a distinctive purchase experience that drives higher levels of customer loyalty and, ultimately, greater growth.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why the rules of selling have changed and how to apply the new Challenger formula for success.
- How to achieve insight into the customer's business and teach him or her how to better compete in the market.
- How to tailor your sales message to the customer's particular needs.
- How to be assertive and take control of the sale from the beginning.
- Why sales management is an integral part of the Challenger formula.



by Matthew Dixon  
and Brent Adamson

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE CHALLENGER SALE

by Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson

**The authors:** Matthew Dixon and Brent Adamson are managing directors with Corporate Executive Board's Sales Executive Council in Washington, D.C.

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## Introduction: A Surprising Look Into the Future

In the unforgettable early months of 2009, as the bottom fell out of the global economy, customers had vanished overnight. Commerce had ground to a halt. Credit was scarce and cash even scarcer. For anyone in business, times were tough. But for heads of sales, they were an absolute nightmare. It's one thing to sell to reluctant, even nervous customers. It's another thing altogether to sell to no one at all. And that's where we were in early 2009.

### Selling Into the Teeth of a Bad Economy

Yet therein lay the mystery. A small but uniquely gifted number of sales reps were selling. In fact, they were selling a lot. While others struggled to close even the smallest of deals, these individuals were bringing in the kind of business most reps could only dream of even in an up economy. How could you possibly capture that magic, bottle it, and export it to everyone else?

It was into this sales environment that the Sales Executive Council (SEC) — a program within the Corporate Executive Board — launched what has become one of the most important studies of sales rep productivity in decades. Tasked by our members — heads of sales from the world's largest, best-known companies — we set out to identify what exactly set this very special set of sales reps apart.

And having studied that question extensively for the better part of four years, spanning dozens of companies and thousands of sales reps, we have discovered three core insights that have fundamentally rewritten the sales playbook and led B2B sales executives all over the world to think very differently about how they sell.

### Insight #1: There Are Five Kinds of Sales Reps.

It turns out that just about every B2B sales executive in the world falls into one of five distinct profiles, a specific set of skills and behaviors that define his or her primary mode of interacting with customers. These five profiles — the Hard Worker, the Relationship Builder, the Lone Wolf, the Reactive Problem Solver and the Challenger — prove to be an incredibly practical way of dividing the world into a manageable set of alternative sales techniques.

**Insight #2: One Is a Clear Winner, One Is a Clear Loser.** When you take those five profiles and compare them with actual sales performance, you find that there is a very clear winner and a very clear loser: The Challenger spectacularly outperforms the other four, while the Relationship Builder falls dramatically behind. When we show the results to sales leaders, they find them to be deeply disturbing, because they've placed by far their biggest bet on the profile least likely to win.

**Insight #3: Challengers Master the Complex Sale, Not the Economy.** The third and final core insight from this work is that the profile most likely to win isn't winning because of the down economy, but irrespective of it. These reps are winning because they've mastered the complex sale, not because they've mastered a complex economy. Your very best sales reps are far better able to drive sales and deliver customer value in any kind of economic environment. What we ultimately found is a dramatically improved recipe for a successful solution sales rep. We call these winning reps Challengers. ●



1-800-SUMMARY  
service@summary.com

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor In Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Amanda Langen, Graphic Designer; Corbin Collins, Contributing Editor

### The Challenger: A New Model for High Performance

In our analysis, of the 44 or so attributes we tested, six of them showed up as statistically significant in defining someone as a Challenger rep:

- Offers the customer unique perspectives.
- Has strong two-way communication skills.
- Knows the individual customer's value drivers.
- Can identify economic drivers of the customer's business.
- Is comfortable discussing money.
- Can pressure the customer.

At first glance, this list may seem like a strange mix of unrelated qualities. Each of these attributes represents a particular way in which Challenger reps significantly outperform their colleagues in the core.

#### The Challenger Selling Model: Teaching, Tailoring, Taking Control

If we group the attributes into three categories we find they paint a very clear picture of who the Challenger truly is. A Challenger is really defined by the ability to do three things: teach, tailor and take control.

With their unique perspective on the customer's business and their ability to engage in robust two-way dialog, Challengers are able to teach for differentiation during the sales interaction.

Because Challengers possess a superior sense of a customer's economic and value drivers, they are able to tailor for resonance, delivering the right message to the right person within the customer organization.

Finally, Challengers are comfortable discussing money and can, when needed, press the customer a bit. In this way, the Challenger takes control of the sale.

#### Challengers Are Made, Not Born

One of the things we know from our research is that every rep in our study had traces of the Challenger "gene." It just wasn't the thing they "majored" in. But because we focused our work specifically on skills, attitudes, behaviors and knowledge, with the right tools, training, coaching, and reward and recognition system, you can likely equip many of your reps who minor in challenging to act more like Challengers in front of the customer.

There is ample evidence that Challengers can be made. We've seen this firsthand: Our own SEC Solutions group (the consulting arm of SEC) has had tremendous success helping our members build

### The Five Types of Sales Reps

- **Hard Workers** show up early, stay late and are always willing to put in the extra effort. And they are always looking for opportunities to improve their game.
- **Relationship Builders** are all about nurturing strong personal and professional relationships and advocates across the customer organization.
- **Lone Wolves** are deeply self-confident. They tend to follow their own instincts instead of the rules.
- **Reactive Problem Solvers** are naturally drawn to ensuring that all of the promises that are inevitably made as part of a sale are actually kept once the deal is done.
- **Challengers** are the debaters on the team. They've got a deep understanding of the customer's business and use that understanding to push the customer's thinking and teach him or her something new about how his or her company can compete more effectively.

Challengers within their own organizations. If you are a sales rep, regardless of whether or not you are a natural Challenger, this discussion of the Challenger Sales Model will help boost your personal effectiveness as a salesperson. While your current approach may differ from the Challenger Model, don't think of these differences as carved in stone. Understanding that these gaps exist and, more important, that you have it in your power to close them, is a critical part of the journey.

One of the key lessons from our work is that it's the combination of the Challenger attributes — the ability to teach, tailor, take control and do it all while leveraging constructive tension — that sets the Challenger apart. If you teach without tailoring, you come off as irrelevant. If you tailor but don't teach, you risk sounding like every other supplier. If you take control but offer no value, you risk being simply annoying.

#### Challenging Is About Organizational Capability, Not Just Rep Skills

An organization that leaves the teaching content up to its individual reps will be pulled in many different directions as reps promise customers solutions to myriad business issues — including many your company is not equipped to solve.

The act of delivering a teaching pitch is a skill, to be sure, but the content of a teaching pitch — the business issues you teach customers to value, the idea around

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which you reframe how customers think about their business — must be scalable and repeatable and, as such, must be created by the organization. The same can be said for parts of tailoring. And Challenger reps armed with powerful teaching messages produced by their organizations will be in a much better position to take control of the customer conversation.

A big mistake we see organizations make in their Challenger efforts is assuming that change will happen instantly. Moving to a Challenger model is a commercial transformation, one that early adopters tell us takes time to get right.

Ramming through Challenger training for reps without also carefully constructing robust teaching pitches for them to deliver or arming front-line managers to reinforce the right behaviors and skills might yield a small bump in rep productivity, but two outcomes are practically guaranteed: The performance boost attained will fall well short of what it could have delivered if done properly and, more likely than not, it will be perceived as the training “flavor of the month,” soon to be forgotten or rejected by most reps. ●

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### Teaching for Differentiation: Why Insight Matters

Over the last 15 years, most sales training has centered on a core principle: The shortest path to sales success is a deep understanding of customers’ needs. If you’re going to sell “solutions,” the thinking goes, you’ve got to first “discover” your customers’ most pressing points of pain and then build a tight connection between what’s keeping them up at night and what you’re seeking to sell.

The idea being, if we just dig deep enough to find “the story behind the story,” we’ll eventually get to a place where customers are so forthcoming about what they truly need that right there on the spot we can craft a highly targeted offer that provides the perfect “solution” to their problem. A solution so perfectly aligned with their needs that they have no choice but to buy it — no matter what the cost.

But what if customers truly don’t know what they need? What if customers’ single greatest need — ironically — is to figure out exactly what they need? If this were true, rather than asking customers what they need, the better sales technique might, in fact, be to tell customers what they need. And that’s exactly what Challengers do. When you get down to it, Challengers aren’t so much world-class investigators as they are world-class teachers. They win not by understanding

their customers’ world as well as the customers know it themselves, but by actually knowing their customers’ world better than their customers know it themselves, teaching them what they don’t know but should.

### The Power of Insight

Of the 50 or so insights we tested in our customer loyalty survey, 17 of them fell into the sales experience category, each reflecting at least a marginally positive impact on customer loyalty. They included things like, “Demonstrates a high level of professionalism,” “Adjusts to our unique needs and specifications,” “Portrays a realistic picture of costs,” and “Matches communications to my preferences.” However, when we ranked the list according to impact, we found seven in particular that rose way above the others in terms of importance:

- Rep offers unique and valuable perspectives on the market.
- Rep helps me navigate alternatives.
- Rep provides ongoing advice or consultation.
- Rep helps me avoid potential land mines.
- Rep educates me on new issues and outcomes.
- Supplier is easy to buy from.
- Supplier has widespread support across my organization.

Take another look at the top five attributes listed there — the key characteristics defining a world-class sales experience. Each of these attributes speaks directly to an urgent need of the customer not to buy something, but to learn something. They’re looking to suppliers to help them identify new opportunities to cut costs, increase revenue, penetrate new markets and mitigate risk in ways they themselves have not yet recognized. Essentially, this is the customer saying, rather emphatically, “Stop wasting my time. Challenge me. Teach me something new.”

It’s a powerful conclusion that runs contrary to years of thought and training in B2B sales. Sure a supplier has to have great products, brand and service. But from the customer’s perspective, most already do. After all, if that weren’t the case, they probably wouldn’t be speaking with that supplier in the first place. Instead, what sets the best suppliers apart is not the quality of their products, but the value of their insight — new ideas to help customers either make money or save money in ways they didn’t even know were possible.

In this sense, customer loyalty is much less about what you sell and much more about how you sell. The best companies don’t win through the quality of the products they sell, but through the quality of the insight they

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deliver as part of the sale itself. The battle for customer loyalty is won or lost long before a thing ever gets sold. And the best reps win that battle not by “discovering” what customers already know they need, but by teaching them a new way of thinking altogether. After all, if you don’t change the way a customer thinks — and, ultimately, acts — then you really haven’t taught him or her anything to begin with; At least nothing worth bothering about. And where’s the value in that?

### Building Insight-Led Conversations

This isn’t so much about delivering a formal presentation as it’s about telling a compelling story. Along the way, there should be some real drama, perhaps a bit of suspense, and maybe even a surprise or two. Ultimately, the goal is to take customers on a roller-coaster ride, leading first to a rather dark place before showing them the light at the end of the tunnel. And that light, of course, is your solution.

Done well, a teaching pitch makes customers feel sort of sick about all the money they’re wasting, revenue they’re missing or risk they’re unknowingly exposed to. But if your story fails to engage both sides of the brain simultaneously — the rational and the emotional — it’s too easy for your customer to make no decision even over a good decision, as logic alone is rarely enough to overcome the status quo. Disruptive change is as much about following your gut as it is about following your head. ●

### Tailoring for Resonance

The best way you sell more stuff over time isn’t by going directly to the person who signs the deal, but by approaching him or her indirectly through stakeholders who are able to establish more widespread support for your solution. The link between stakeholders and the decision maker is significantly stronger, whereas the link between the rep and the decision maker is significantly weaker — the rep’s ability to influence the sale in the executive suite is nowhere near as strong as the stakeholder’s ability to do the same thing.

Just as important as the direction of the information flow is the nature of the actual information flowing through them. In the traditional model, it’s customer-generated intelligence valuable to the supplier. In the emerging model, it’s supplier-generated insight valuable to the customer. This is the new physics of sales — it’s like the world is spinning in the opposite direction.

Over the last several years, how well have you balanced the time, effort and money you’ve invested in

### How Challengers Tailor the Sales Message

A Challenger rep arrives at the customer with a deep understanding of how individual stakeholders fit into their overall business — what their role is and what they’re worried about — as well as the specific quantifiable results that those individuals want to achieve.

Most sales reps tend to deliver the same message whether they’re talking to senior decision makers or more junior end users, and usually their message is about your products rather than the customer’s challenges. Challenger reps aren’t focused on what they are selling, but on what the person they’re speaking to is trying to accomplish.

gaining access to the customer’s executive office with comparable efforts to identify key stakeholders and equip them to evangelize on your behalf? For most organizations, that’s a huge missed opportunity. While you shouldn’t stop calling on decision makers, you now know that those efforts do not negate the huge impact key stakeholders can have on driving more business over time. And this is something your best sales reps, your Challengers, do as a matter of course.

### Tailoring to Different Levels

From a practical standpoint, what all of this means is that your reps now have to talk to more people than ever just to get the deal done. And we have found that one of the biggest obstacles that core reps have to grapple with when it comes to dealing with a consensus-based buying environment is how to tailor the sales message to these different stakeholders in order to achieve maximum resonance.

For individual customers, tailoring takes on many forms. A good way to think about how to tailor messages is to start at the broadest level — the customer’s industry — and work your way down to the person’s company, the person’s role and, finally, to that individual person. Think about how well your current approach resonates at each of these levels for each of the many diverse customer stakeholders your reps now need to contact. The vast majority of sales messaging out in the market is not contextualized at any level, let alone at each of these levels for each kind of stakeholder. Typically, that messaging is about a supplier and that supplier’s product and services.

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### Start Broad and Narrow It Down

So as a starting point, marketing can add a tremendous amount of value simply by helping sales reps to tailor at the industry and company levels. There are so many sources of information — and many of them free — that can aid a rep in offering, at the very least, some industry and company context to the sales pitch. What's going on in terms of industry trends and current events? Has a big competitor recently folded up or has there been a meaningful merger? What do the company's recent press releases and earnings statements suggest about strategic priorities?

When a rep comes in with not just a sales pitch, but with a sense of what's going on in that customer's company and industry, you've got the beginnings of a tailored message. These two outer layers are arguably the easier ones, and when you see tailored messaging in practice, it's usually at this level. Much rarer is messaging that is tailored at the level of a customer stakeholder's role — and rarer still is messaging that's tailored to that individual, i.e., his or her personal goals and objectives. ●

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### Taking Control of the Sale

According to the data, the ability to take control of the sale comes from two things: Challenger reps are naturally more comfortable talking about money and they're able to “push” the customer. What we're really talking about here is the Challenger's ability to demonstrate and hold firm on value and the ability to maintain momentum across the sales process. Challengers are comfortable discussing money because they are confident in the value they will provide to the customer. There's really nothing that instills confidence like knowing that you will deliver superior value to your customers — and Challengers have that confidence in spades. This means that the Challenger has no problem respectfully pushing back when the customer asks for a discount, looser terms or increased scope without a commensurate increase in price (i.e., “freebies”).

This isn't the same confidence one feels knowing his or her company's products and services are No. 1 in the market. It's confidence built on the knowledge that you've taught the customer about a problem he or she didn't previously know he or she had. There's now a burning platform — one you created — and it just so happens that you sell the only solution to that problem. Being No. 1 in the market is great, but unfortunately it isn't anything your customers really care about.

Challengers also create momentum. Their deals don't get stuck nearly as often in “no-decision land” the way typical core reps' deals tend to. This is because a Challenger will push things along, always thinking ahead to the next step. When Relationship Builders come to the end of a customer meeting, they won't push hard on next steps for fear of ruining what was otherwise a positive interaction. But Challengers understand that the goal is to sell a deal, not just have a good meeting; they are focused on moving ahead.

### Taking Control from the Beginning, Not at the End

Neil Rackham shared with us a story from his research. “A big problem,” he explained, “is the customer who invites a salesperson to come in, analyze a problem and generate creative solutions. Many sales organizations will spend well into the six figures to pursue a complex opportunity. All too often, though, the customer encourages this free consulting work until the best solution becomes clear, at which point they go shopping for the cheapest supplier.”

This is a core difference between Relationship Builders and Challengers, in Neil Rackham's assessment. “In my own research, I saw some reps losing more customers to cheaper suppliers late in the sale because they failed to take control early on. They steered clear of having a tough conversation about the commercial side of the interaction, fearing it would damage the relationship. Other reps, however, confronted the customer early in the sale, saying, ‘It's going to cost us \$200K to put our best thinking into your problem. We're willing to do it, but we need some assurance that if we invest in you, you'll invest in us.’ These reps had far fewer customers switch to cheaper suppliers late in the sale process.”

Challengers find many other opportunities to take control during the sale — again, well in advance of the negotiating table. Even if a rep can successfully verify a customer's real intentions at the beginning of the sales process, many deals will get bogged down nevertheless. Challengers distinguish themselves by building momentum within the customer organization — momentum that enables them to drive to a conclusion faster than the typical rep.

### Taking Control of More Than Just Money

Challengers can push customers on financial terms and aspects of the selling/buying process, but more important, they push customers in terms of how they think about their world and their challenges. This is the essence of Commercial Teaching: the ability to reframe the way customers think about their world.

Why is it important to take control around ideas? Because it's extremely unlikely that a customer — especially a seasoned executive — is going to roll over and accept the reframe that the Challenger delivers without a healthy dose of skepticism. More likely, he'll push back. He'll ask why. He'll ask to see the supporting data. He'll say his company is different. These are the questions that make Relationship builders' knees go weak. Seeking to defuse tension, the Relationship Builder will acquiesce, caving on the argument and hoping to salvage what's left of the conversation, in the end relegating himself to a price-driven conversation about products and survival rates rather than the bigger, more valuable solution that could have been.

But it's this kind of challenge the Challenger lives for. The Challenger will use constructive tension to her advantage. Instead of giving in at the first sign of resistance to her argument, the Challenger pushes back: "You're right, your company surely is different, but so are the other organizations we work with . . . and I can tell you that this insight has helped them to rethink the way they run their operations. With your permission, let's explore this idea in more depth and then circle back to make sure I've adequately addressed any concerns you might have."

### **Reps Need to Become Assertive, Not Aggressive**

People confuse taking control — that is, the Challenger's tendency to be assertive during the sale — with aggressiveness. But these are actually two very different things.

While aggressive people will pursue their goals by attacking others and using antagonistic language, assertive individuals are much more constructive, using strong language, perhaps, but not so strong that it's off-putting or offensive. So the rep pushes the customer, but does so with respect and sensitivity to how the customer is reacting. The rep doesn't blindly pursue his own agenda, but instead moves purposefully, always sensing and responding.

The general fear is that if you tell your reps to take control by being more assertive, they're going to jump over the middle of the continuum and move straight to aggressive. But in reality, we find that almost never happens. More often than not, reps will continue to gravitate to the passive end of the continuum rather than move to the right at all. They get stuck seeking to resolve tension with the customer, rather than maintain it. ●

## **The Manager and the Challenger Selling Model**

So far we've focused on the rep skills and organization capabilities required to implement the Challenger Selling model. But anybody who's ever attempted to execute large-scale change within a sales organization will know there's one glaring admission to this story: the frontline sales manager.

If you don't get front-line sales managers on board, the initiative will fail. Whether it's changes to comp plans, the CRM system, the sales process, or more basic skills and behaviors, it always comes back to the manager. The front-line sales manager in any sales organization is the fundamental link between strategy and execution — this is where change initiatives and sales transformations live or die.

### **The Importance of Management Fundamentals**

As it turns out, management fundamentals account for roughly one-fourth of sales manager success. These are the foundational skills that are necessary for success in any management job, irrespective of function. Yet interestingly, we also found that performance on these attributes does not fall along a spectrum but tends to be binary. Either you're reliable or you're not. You have integrity or you don't. And that, in turn, tells us that these are inherent traits you should be looking for in the people you hire, not skills you want to be developing in your staff over time.

Put another way, great reps don't necessarily make great managers. You can't just excel at sales to be a great sales manager, you've also got to excel at management. Yet that is exactly how most companies still source new front-line management talent. This approach to hiring is the root cause of many organizations' high manager failure rates. Not surprisingly, our analysis of manager performance indicates that a handful of managers fail on at least one of these management fundamentals.

### **Selling, Coaching, and Owning**

When we ran the analysis, we found that the attributes contributing to manager excellence fall into three high-level categories: selling, coaching and owning. This last category is all about the various aspects of business ownership that senior leaders like to see in managers — the extent to which they run their territory as if it were their own business.

We see that the same skills that matter most for manager success are the exact same skills that we found to

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matter most for rep success: “Offers the customer unique perspectives,” “Tailors the offer to the needs of customers,” “Is comfortable discussing money.” This implies that your best managers are likely to come from your Challenger ranks, and it helps explain why top-performing managers are heavily sought after for the support they can provide on the largest, most complex deals — deals where the Challenger skills, as we have seen, are most needed.

### Innovation is the Key to Sales Manager Performance

At 29 percent, sales innovation is the single biggest attribute contributing to world-class sales manager performance — more important than selling skills and much more important than a manager’s ability to allocate resources. While coaching is a close second at 28 percent, what’s so interesting about sales innovation is that, unlike sales coaching, which has received a huge amount of time and attention over the last five years, it isn’t something that most sales leaders have ever really thought about in any systematic fashion before.

Sales innovation is the missing link in terms of fully realizing the benefits of the Challenger Selling Model. Even armed with the best teaching pitches and honed capabilities for tailoring and taking control — even with strong sales managers who coach to these behaviors — many deals will still not happen. While the Challenger Model increases the likelihood that deals will move through the funnel, beating the status quo is a hard task. Customers are reluctant to change. The requirements for consensus continue to expand. Decision makers will continue to choose “no decision” even over a good decision.

This is where the innovative manager comes in. Armed with the ability to innovate at the deal level, the manager can help the rep avoid “no-decision land” more often than the rep — even a Challenger rep — can on her own. It’s a critical capability in the battle to sell increasingly complex solutions to understandably ever more reluctant customers. ●

### Implementation Lessons from the Early Adopters

Close observers of our research could make the argument that Lone Wolves have the highest *probability* of being high performers — and technically, they would be correct. While Lone Wolves represent the smallest percentage of the overall sample of sales reps (at 18 percent), a full 25 percent of all high performers fall into

the Lone Wolf profile — in other words, of all the profiles, the chances are greatest that a Lone Wolf pulled out of a crowd would actually be a high performer. But jumping from this observation to the conclusion that all reps should be Lone Wolves is a folly.

An all-Lone Wolf sales force follows no pattern. By definition, Lone Wolves don’t follow any process or set of rules aside from their own. That makes it impossible to model and replicate their behaviors across the sales organization. The top performers in this kind of environment may do well, but there’s no way to bring your core performers up to their level in the same manner.

Lone Wolves also struggle in the collaborative, team-based environments required to bring more complex solutions to customers. As a vice president of sales from a high-tech company recently told us, “In our organization, we are moving rapidly to having to sell as a team instead of selling individually. Lone Wolves are a cancer in an environment like this.”

### Start Now

The Challenger Selling Model is a commercial transformation. Getting it right requires significant changes to the way sales and marketing interact, to the kind of tools you arm your reps with, the sort of reps you recruit, the kind of training you deliver to them and the way managers interact with them. Getting this right is hard.

It’s not all bad news, however. Moving now means changing the way your reps interact with customers before your competitors do — and the data is very clear about what customers want. While the competition sends out Relationship Builders equipped to have only fact-, feature- and benefit-focused conversations, your Challenger reps are leading with insights, teaching customers about problems they didn’t know they had. While the competition focuses its energies on *finding* customers, you will be out there *making* customers. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *The Challenger Sale*, you’ll also like:

1. ***The Perfect Salesforce* by Derek Gatehouse.** Gatehouse argues that sales is about people, not a process. Learn how to find the perfect people for the right type of sales job.
2. ***Snap Selling* by Jill Konrath.** Konrath describes a new era in selling, one in which fewer calls can win more sales. Readers learn the four SNAP rules to increase success.
3. ***Rainmaking Conversations* by John E. Doerr and Mike Schultz.** Learn a proven system for leading masterful conversations that fill your sales pipeline.