



Gartner for Sales Leaders

The Sense Making Seller

How High-Performing Sellers Help Today's Overwhelmed Buyers

EDITED BY

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The Truth About Information

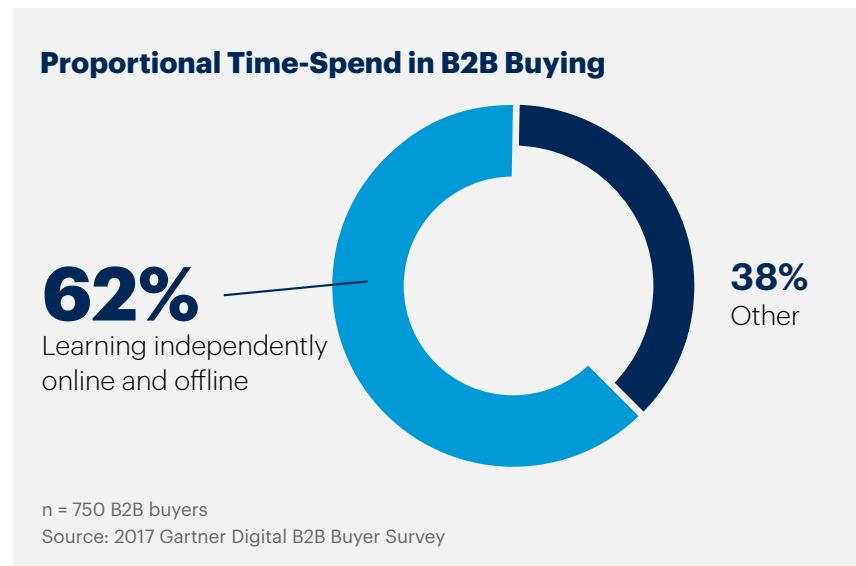
Emma, a chief human resources officer at a midsize technology company, is searching for a human capital management system to boost talent, analytic capabilities and enable real-time performance conversations across the workforce. Like most buyers today, she conducts her own research, sets up a few demo calls and then arrives at an impasse — as every program claims to be the “only option” and has strong but contradictory collateral on improving employee experience. She begins to wonder whether the investment — and the potential career fallout — is worth the risk.

Eventually, Emma speaks with Wei, a sales rep who helps her make sense of her requirements. Each time he speaks with Emma, Wei verifies how comfortable she is with the information she has to move forward in the buying process. As needed, he connects Emma to third-party sources to back up his claims and helps her sort through the competing information she has encountered, instilling confidence in the information she has about the purchase and helping her implement the new product offering.

Wei’s approach to help Emma through the purchase process represents a large commercial opportunity for sales reps — and it’s what Gartner terms Sense Making. These reps consciously work to differentiate themselves by helping buyers navigate, prioritize and, ultimately, make sense of all the information they encounter to make a large purchase with little regret.

Why does having an “information plan” like this matter? Buyers today have more access to information, making it easier than ever to avoid sales reps until late in the buying journey. However, this same information is also causing customer confusion and delayed, downgraded or even abandoned purchases. So the question sales executives with ambitious growth targets need to solve is this: “How is our customers’ inability to buy affecting our organization’s growth goals?”

What customers learn affects whether they purchase, what they purchase and how happy they are with that purchase. In fact, when customers find the information they received during the purchase process to be of high quality, they are 26% more likely to make the purchase all sales reps covet: a high-quality, low-regret deal. Gartner defines a purchase as high-quality, low-regret when it is of a large, complex solution where the customer doesn't settle for a smaller, cheaper option or status quo, and at the same time, doesn't feel bad or regret the purchase. Today's customers embark on a "learning journey" when they set out to make a purchase — and 62% of that learning takes place outside of conversations with sellers. Sales leaders face an uphill battle to deliver value to customers to win time and influence.



The problem is the volume of high-quality information. "We now live in a world where insight is likely more table stakes than a differentiator," says Brent Adamson, Gartner Distinguished VP.

55% of surveyed customers say they encounter an overwhelming amount of trustworthy information during the purchase process.

44% struggle with the fact that information from various suppliers, while all seemingly trustworthy, was contradictory.

This misalignment only adds to the difficulty in an already difficult purchase process. When customers are overwhelmed, they are far more likely to make a smaller purchase — or do nothing at all — to play it safe.

"We now live in a world where insight is likely more table stakes than a differentiator."

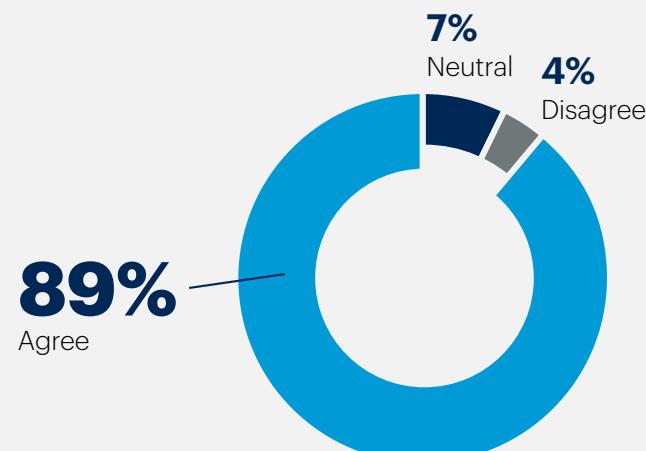


Brent Adamson
Gartner Distinguished VP

The World Is Crowded With Good Information

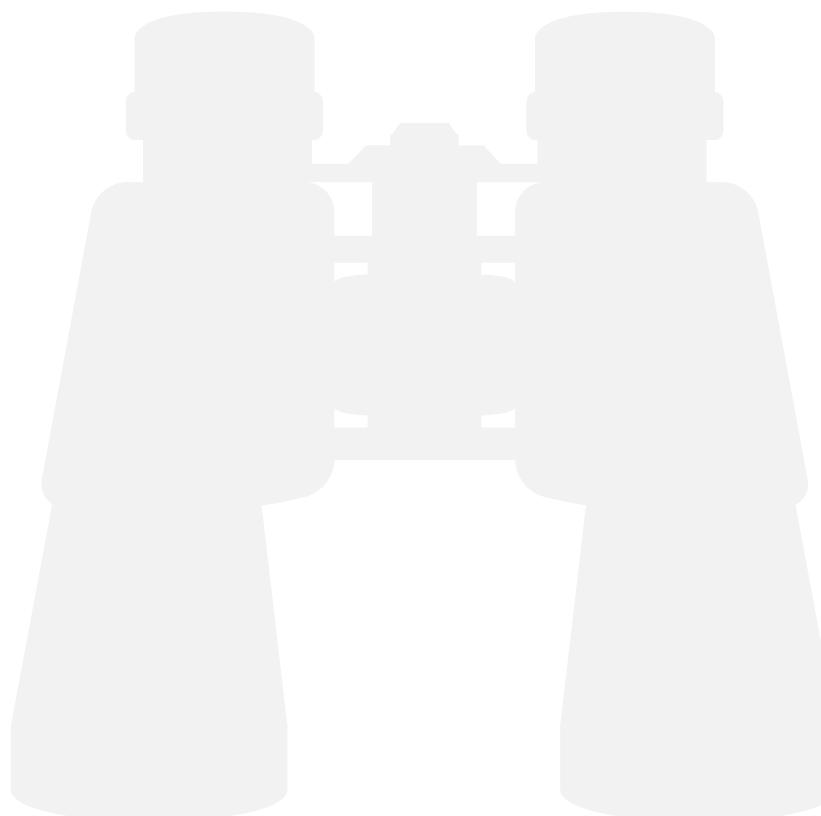
The information we encountered as part of this purchase decision was generally of high quality.

Percentage of Buyers



n = 1,174 B2B buyers
Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

As they try to cope, Gartner research finds that today's customers spend 15% of buying time trying to reconcile or deconflict information. If you figure a buying cycle could drag on for 12 to 24 months, that's two to four months spent trying to make sense of information that could drive a purchase. For suppliers, the proliferation of information — not just information, but good information — hasn't helped either. Rather, it's expanded competition to include sales reps, the web, competitors, industry associations and anyone who claims to have an informed opinion.



How Information Helps and Hurts Deals

Impact on Closing a High-Quality, Low-Regret Deal When Clients Agreed With the Statement



n = 1,174 B2B buyers

Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

a "High-Quality Sale" is defined as the customer: 1. Did not settle for less ambitious solution, or 2. Purchased a premium offering relative to the base offering.

b "Regret" is defined as: "The offering we ultimately purchased is failing (or failed) to meet our expectations."

Note: Customer data controlled for trust in supplier, supplier brand, expected ROI, prior relationship with supplier, prior purchase experience and price-to-value ratio.

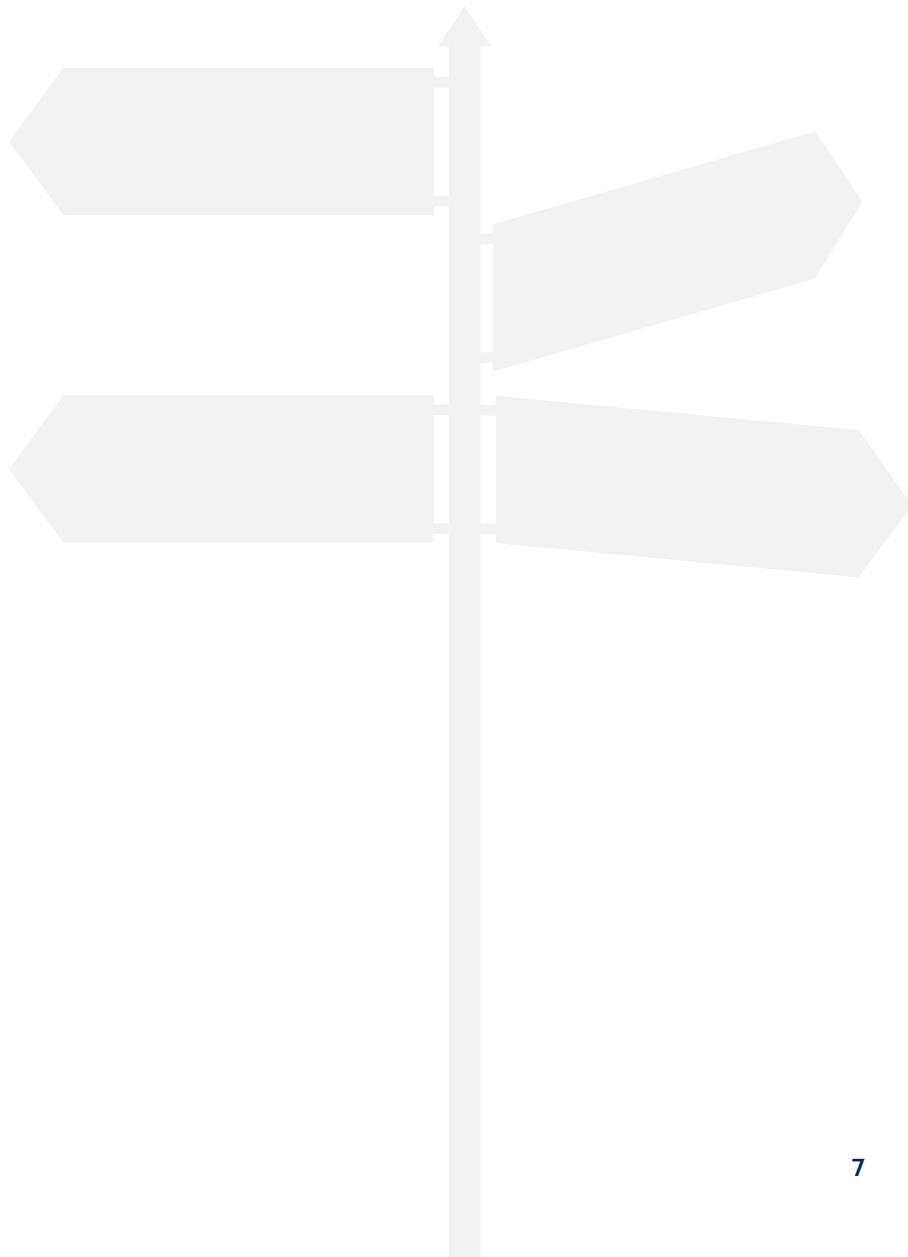
"In short, the key for sales is ... it's no longer an information quality problem, rather a quantity one," says Cristina Gomez, Gartner Managing VP. There is too much high-quality information out there for customers to make sense of. And while having high-quality information may be a prerequisite to being competitive, it's no longer a differentiator in a sea of other good information.

"In short, the key for sales is ... it's no longer an information quality problem, rather a quantity one."



Cristina Gomez

Gartner Managing VP



SECTION 1

The Way Forward



Reduce Skepticism and Build Customer Confidence

Based on a survey of more than 1,000 B2B customers, a clear lesson emerges about managing customers through the buying journey: When customers overcome their inherent skepticism of sellers and feel more confident in the information they encounter, they are more likely to make the deal all sellers aspire toward: a high-quality, low-regret deal.

"In many ways, today's high-quality deals are less about what customers know, and far more about how they feel about what they know," says Adamson. Sellers already pay a "skepticism" penalty just for being a seller. Besides doubting the obvious self-interest of every seller, customers may become increasingly skeptical when they suspect that the seller is withholding information, contradicting claims made by other suppliers (or their own organization), or suggesting that the best solution happens to be their solution. This penalty must be overcome as customers who are highly skeptical of an individual rep's claim, whether it appears inaccurate or incomplete, are 1.5x less likely to make a high-quality purchase. On the flip side, when sellers are able to increase customer confidence in the information, they are 1.6x more likely to make a high-quality purchase with little regret.

Customers feel confident when sellers help them to:



Determine the right questions to ask themselves and their suppliers



Identify which information matters most in their purchase decision



Identify consistent patterns or themes in the information, despite origin, they encounter during the purchase

"In many ways, today's high-quality deals are less about what customers know, and far more about how they feel about what they know."



Brent Adamson

Gartner Distinguished VP

Three Seller Approaches to Sharing Information With Customers

Looking at sales reps' behaviors today, Gartner identified three distinct seller approaches to managing information. Surprisingly, these approaches — how these sellers behave, their skills and their attitudes — are very different from one another, but one clearly outperforms the others when it comes to reducing skepticism and increasing confidence: Sense Making. Why?

Giving, Telling and Sense Making

Approaches to Engaging Customers With Information

Based on Cluster Analysis



Giving

"I can get you a lot more information on that."

Primary strategy:

- Believes comprehensive information is generally better.
- Promptly responds to customer requests for information.



Telling

"Let me tell you what you need to know."

Primary strategy:

- Shares his/her own perspective with buyers.
- Bases information on extensive personal experience and knowledge.



Sense Making

"There is a lot of information — let me help you make sense of it."

Primary strategy:

- Guides customer to evidence.
- Prioritizes simplicity over comprehensive detail.

n = 1,174 B2B buyers
Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

SECTION 2

Encourage Sense Making



Why Sense Making Pays

A Sense Making approach is more effective because sellers acknowledge the difficulty customers experience in making a purchase and provide a way forward. They help customers prioritize perspectives, qualify trade-offs and contextualize — often reconcile — competing perspectives. In this role, they become a much-needed guide. Sellers who practice Sense Making don't tell customers what to believe, but rather help them to develop a mental framework to make their own decisions.

"While the giving approach focuses on more, those who practice Sense Making focus on less. In essence, Sense Making sellers have an information strategy, not just a deal strategy," says Gomez. "Sellers today have to figure out what to disclose when, and put what they're sharing into the broader information context the buyer encounters." Because of their approach, sellers who focus on Sense Making are best at reducing buyer skepticism of the seller and increasing buyer confidence in information.



Unfortunately, only 24% of sellers consistently apply a Sense Making approach in helping customers with information.

"While the giving approach focuses on more, those who practice Sense Making focus on less. In essence, Sense Making sellers have an information strategy, not just a deal strategy."

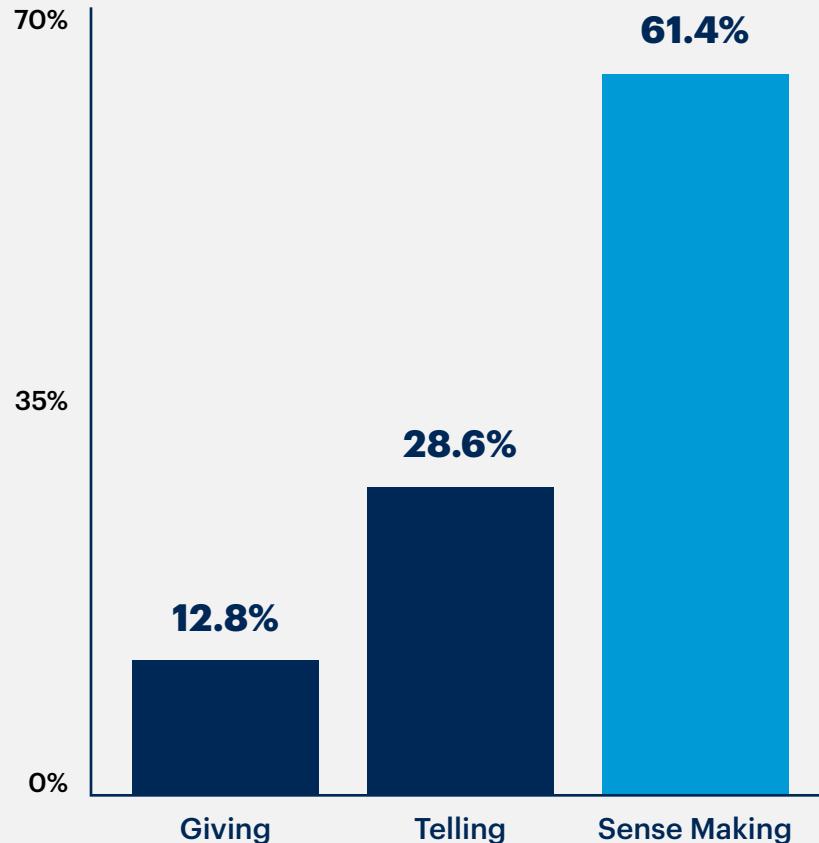


Cristina Gomez

Gartner Managing VP

Sense Making Approach Reduces Skepticism, Builds Confidence

Percentage of Buyers Who Were Not Skeptical of Seller Approach

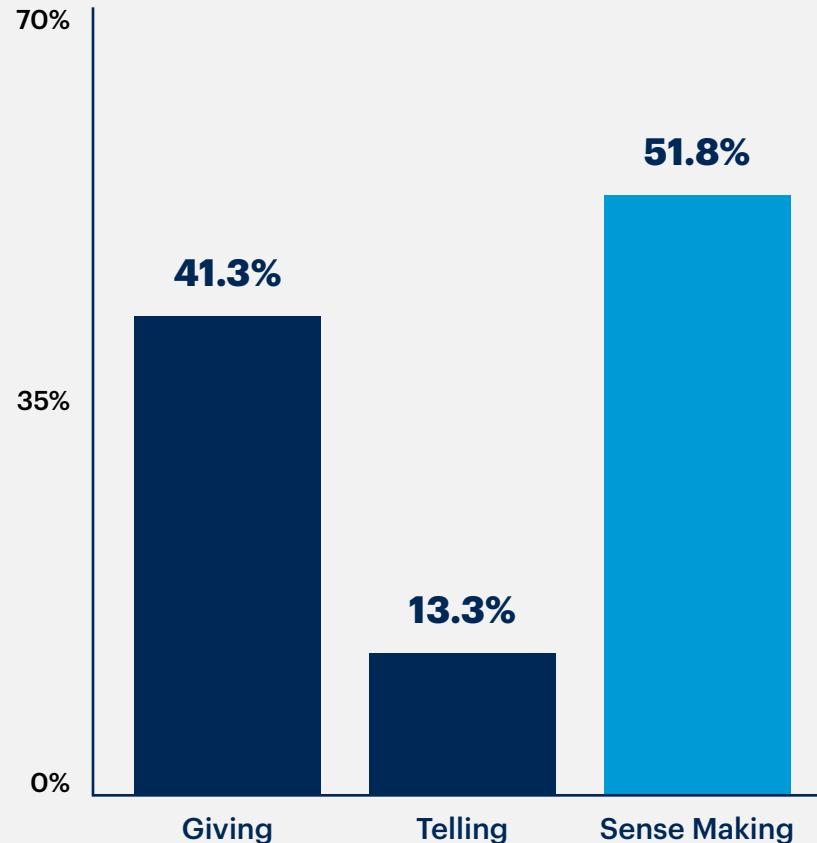


n = 1,174 B2B buyers
Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey



Buyers are less skeptical when a Sense Making approach is used.

Percentage of Buyers Who Felt Confident in Information by Seller Approach



Buyers are more confident in the information delivered by reps using a Sense Making approach.

Out of 10 completed deals, eight were high-quality when the sales rep used a Sense Making approach. The telling approach closed only five, and the giving approach only three. The telling approach is more successful than the giving approach, but only because sellers using this approach are less likely to overwhelm the customer with additional information. Despite the intentions of giving more to boost credibility in the eyes of the customer, each time sellers bring more information to the table, with little guidance on how it fits or why it matters, they are actually making it harder for a customer to buy.

Sellers who take a telling approach, while they are likely known as subject matter experts and very confident in their own knowledge, fail to transfer this confidence to their customers. Their confidence seems to backfire, likely because customers want a second opinion to verify what the teller said. Or, perhaps they already have trustworthy information but it conflicts with what the expert is saying, and the expert doesn't even know the customer has that information — they never asked. Given that three-quarters of sellers today don't use a Sense Making approach with customers, it's vital to start developing the right capabilities within the sales force to close the gap.

The Sense Making Approach Is More Likely to Win High-Quality, Low-Regret Deals

Out of 10 Deals, the Number of High-Quality, Low-Regret Deals Varies by Seller Approach

Giving

3 out of 10



Telling

5 out of 10



Sense Making

8 out of 10



n = 1,174 B2B buyers

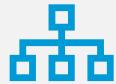
Source: 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

*Seller approach was derived from 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey about seller behavior.

Eight out of 10 sense makers closed a high-quality deal.

Drive Sense Making

Key Attributes of a Sense Making Approach



Connect to relevant resources

Diagnose customers' information needs and provide curated sources/tools, helping them feel that they know all the relevant information.

- Connect customers to information they are unlikely to encounter on their own.
- Default to data and evidence when interacting with customers (as opposed to stories and opinions).
- Admit knowledge limits, and connect to answer.



Clarify information complexity

Reduce complexity of the information environment by filtering and processing information for customers.

- Proactively provide information about issues customers are likely to face in buying process.
- Deliberate about sharing information not already made available to customer through company's website.
- Help customers work through purchase decisions by sharing tools that enable buying.



Collaborate in customer learning

Help customers evaluate quality of information and arrive at their own understanding about difficult issues.

- Help customers identify questions they didn't think to ask.
- When faced with difficult considerations, help customers arrive at their own understanding.
- Encourage customers to independently verify information provided by sellers.

n = 913 B2B sellers; 1,174 B2B buyers

Source: Gartner Deal Performance Diagnostic; 2019 Gartner Buyer Survey

Sense Making in Practice

Dealertrack

At Dealertrack, a division of Cox Automotive, the head of sales felt that sellers had a limited view into how customers were buying, making it hard for them to close deals. Sellers also faced competitive headwinds as customers were hearing conflicting information about the company in the marketplace. The head of sales realized it was imperative to make sense of the information they put in front of their customers — and reps.

Through a better understanding of customer behavior, collateral was developed to help sales reps engage customers. Reps were given a framework to clarify the buying journey for customers and included questions to ask to uncover ways to instill customer confidence at key points in the buying process. These confidence-verifying questions allowed the company to not just account for purchase progression but actually advance it more quickly and easily.

Citrix

Just as customers are overwhelmed with information, so are sellers. Citrix, a multinational IT company, helps simplify the seller's role. The company's sales reps struggled to navigate the company's internal content library of several thousand sales enablement assets to find the right collateral to share with customers. To increase seller productivity and enhance the quality of customer interactions, sales enablement leaders at Citrix developed a sales enablement platform that uses a small number of customer attributes to recommend relevant content for a given customer as well as the most effective method for delivering it.



Conclusion

Sellers who adopt a Sense Making approach know how to engage customers with information the right way to build their confidence and reduce skepticism, leading to high-quality deals. They accomplish this during preparation and customer interactions by:



Connecting customers to relevant resources



Clarifying the complexity of information



Collaborating in customer learning

To foster the Sense Making approach in your sales organization, implement these three steps:

1

Ensure your current talent management strategy reflects Sense Making behaviors.
Determine the key competencies and skills of this approach and integrate them into your competency model as well as training and enablement initiatives for sellers.

2

Embed Sense Making tactics into deal review and coaching. Day-to-day interaction between sales managers and frontline sellers provides an excellent opportunity to develop a Sense Making information approach. Sales managers should be prepared to assist sellers in diagnosing customer information challenges and helping customers make sense of a high volume of information.

3

Attract and screen for sales candidates who take a Sense Making approach. Online job postings and descriptions are the first opportunity to attract or discourage promising candidates. Check that your hiring process — from job descriptions to hiring manager interview guides — prioritize Sense Making potential.



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