

The Behaviors and Skills Sales Leaders Care Most About – and How to Measure Them

Contents

- 03 | Introduction
- 05 | **The Most Impactful Selling Behaviors at Each Stage of the Buying Cycle**
 - 05 | **Stage 1:** Engaging with Prospects
 - 07 | **Stage 2:** Prospecting and Qualifying Leads
 - 09 | **Stage 3:** Negotiating
 - 11 | **Stage 4:** Closing Deals
- 14 | **What Sales Leaders Measure Today and Why That Isn't Enough**
- 16 | **The Gap Between Desired Behaviors and Sales Metrics**
- 20 | **Effective Learning Methods to Build Key Skills**
- 23 | **The Takeaway:** Measure Sales Behaviors that Create Credibility, Trust and Rapport *and* Sales Results
- 24 | About This Research

Introduction

The global pandemic has changed the selling environment. As companies postpone the return to the office, remote buying and selling is the preferred way of doing business now and in the future.

As B2B professionals navigate the realities of working from home, salespeople need to blend traditional selling skills with new capabilities to engage, prospect, negotiate and close deals with buyers virtually. Sales leaders understand what the winning sales behaviors are in this environment, but they are measuring something entirely different.

To investigate this disconnect between the behaviors sellers need to succeed in the digital realm and the behaviors companies actively measure, ValueSelling Associates and Training Industry surveyed 464 sales leaders and sales enablement decision makers to find out what matters most at each stage of the buyer journey.





Interestingly, our research shows that the behaviors identified to be the most impactful at each stage of the sales cycle have a common thread running through them: authenticity and strong human-to-human connections. The ability to establish credibility and trustworthiness, as well as to develop and maintain a positive rapport with buyers, are essential for successful sales performance in every organization and are critical to closing deals and building long-term relationships in a virtual selling environment.

And yet, rarely are these qualities measured.

In this research report, we identify the sales skills and behaviors that lead to increased sales results and how to measure them.

The Most Impactful Selling Behaviors at Each Stage of the Buying Cycle

Sales training is about changing behaviors by empowering professionals with the right sales skills. Our survey asked sales leaders to identify the selling behaviors that matter most when engaging with buyers in virtual interactions.

They told us the most impactful behaviors at each of the four stages of the buying cycle are:

Stage 1: Engaging with Prospects

Establishing credibility and trustworthiness is rated by 61% of sales leaders as the top behavior for engaging with prospective customers in a virtual selling environment. **Developing rapport with people** is rated

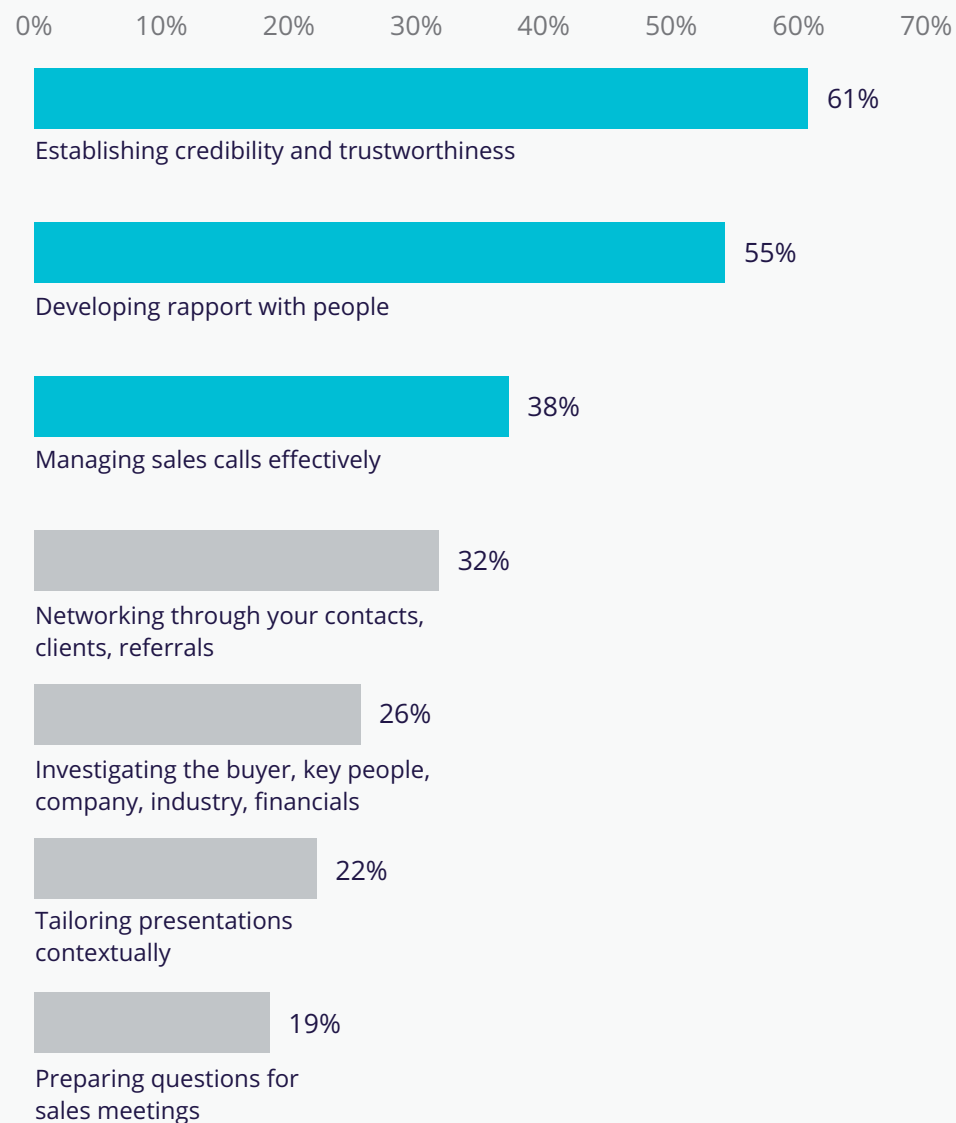
the second most important behavior by 55% of those surveyed. And **managing sales calls** effectively scores as the third most impactful behavior by 38% of sales pros (Figure 1).

Let's dive a little deeper into the credibility and trustworthiness components. After all, prospects are unlikely to want to buy from people they don't trust, so training salespeople to communicate in ways that generate these bonds is a critical component to any frictionless buying experience.

For example, spending a lot of time making sure prospects understand your goods and services, yet failing to connect those solutions to the prospect's needs creates an information imbalance that becomes apparent during introductions. Whether

Establishing credibility and trustworthiness is rated by 61% of sales leaders as the top behavior for engaging with prospective customers in a virtual selling environment.

FIGURE 1. Essential Sales Behaviors for Engaging with Customers in Virtual Selling



initiated by a referral or a cold call, sales professionals have limited time to quickly establish themselves as a trusted resource. To keep the conversation flowing, salespeople need to spend the bulk of time gaining an understanding of the buyer's business challenges that must be tackled.

This comes from receiving information more than relaying it—at least during initial talks. If a conversation goes well, the salesperson will naturally be asked questions that allow them to discuss product offerings without it appearing like a pitch.

That's why good sales training, whether preparing for in-person or remote engagements, includes ample time to help sales and marketing professionals create a compelling—and concise—credibility statement. When practiced artfully, sales reps can use these techniques to quickly build confidence with even the busiest of executives.



Stage 2: Prospecting and Qualifying Leads

The most essential behavior for prospecting and qualifying leads in virtual selling is **asking good questions and active listening**, according to 56% of sales leaders (Figure 2).

This behavior is the heart of value-based selling, and it is required more than ever in virtual selling where non-verbal cues are difficult to detect. Listening attentively rather than talking incessantly allows salespeople to uncover the prospect's needs much faster.

Being **tenacious in follow-up** is ranked as the second most important behavior by 39% of sales leaders. Consistently dedicating time to B2B outbound sales prospecting, being persistent, and using multiple channels to reach people are necessary behaviors to finding new leads and securing meetings with potential customers.

Today's sales professionals, however, understand theoretically what it takes to land a meeting and make the sale, but

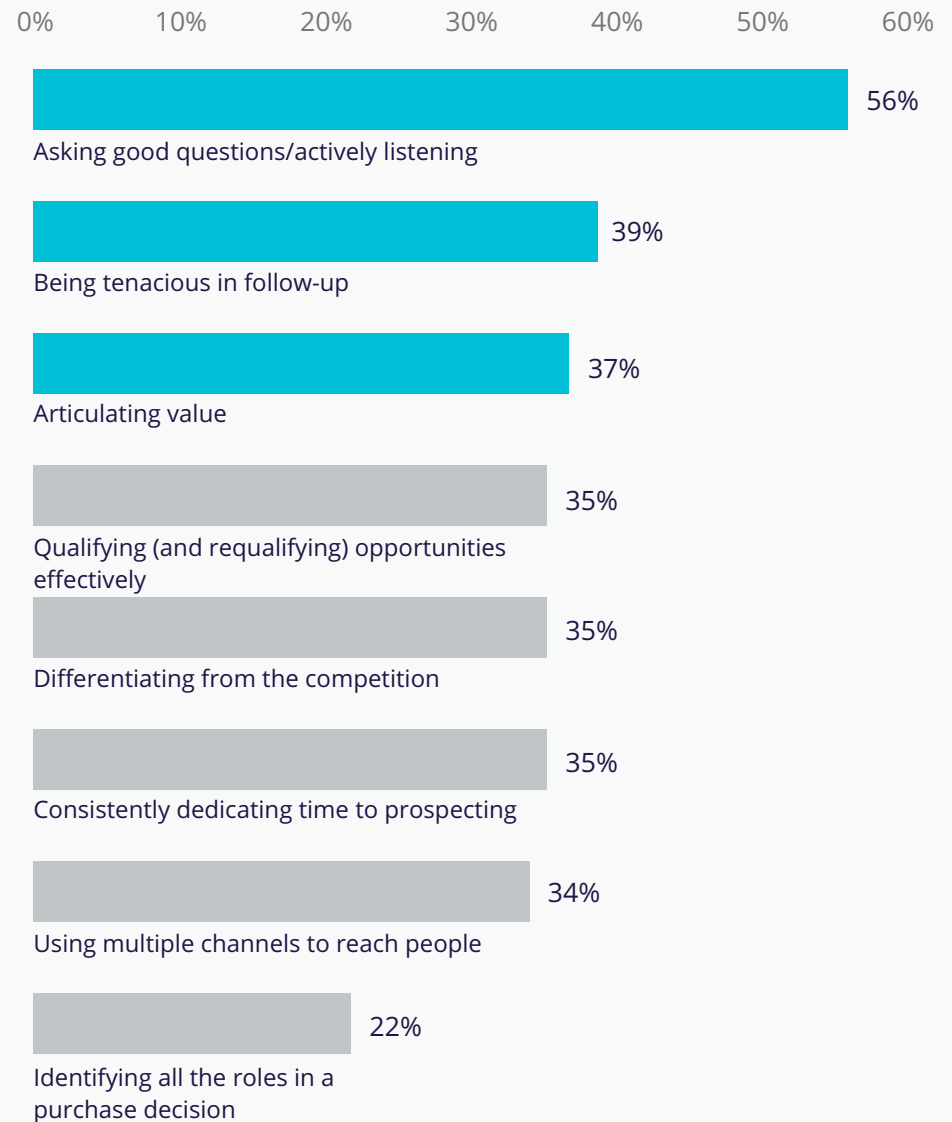
fall short in practicing that knowledge. According to the ValueSelling "[B2B Prospecting Challenges From The Front Lines](#)" research report, 53% of sales pros admit they are quick to quit cold calling, 48% confess they are afraid to even pick up the phone, and 60% admit they lack organized or consistent prospecting efforts. Fear and frustration are prime culprits among those who give up too quickly—and at a time when more persistence is critical to succeed.

Additionally, 37% of sales leaders say **articulating value** is an essential virtual sales skill. When sales teams truly grasp how to sell and communicate value to the prospect—and receive proper training on doing so—they come closer to achieving quota.

Opportunities typically stall when prospects are not fully qualified, and oftentimes the value component is missing. If the sales professional never discusses the measurable value to the client's business, the sale is positioned as a "nice to have" but not a "must have."

In today's world, buyers compete for capital, and each purchase decision must be justified. This is where communicating value becomes vital to a successful sale. By understanding how your product creates value for their business, the client can better compete for the funding they need to solve their problems and elevate your project over others.

FIGURE 2. Essential Sales Behaviors for Prospecting/Qualifying Leads in Virtual Selling



Stage 3: Negotiating

The most necessary behaviors for negotiating with customers are **maintaining rapport with buyers** (48%), **handling objections** (42%), and **quantifying value to the buyer** (42%) (Figure 3).

As a sales rep, if you think about your solution as an investment by the buyer, you are in a prime position to focus the conversation on value, not price. If, however, you communicate price *before* understanding how the buyer values the

investment in your offering, you are at a disadvantage. The key is to refrain from sharing price until you know what the buyer believes they will get in return from their investment.

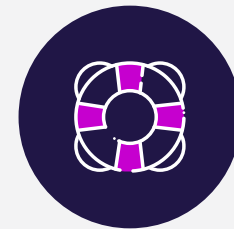
What defines a successful negotiation?



A win-win outcome. Both the salesperson and buyer feel good about the outcome. No one is taken advantage of.



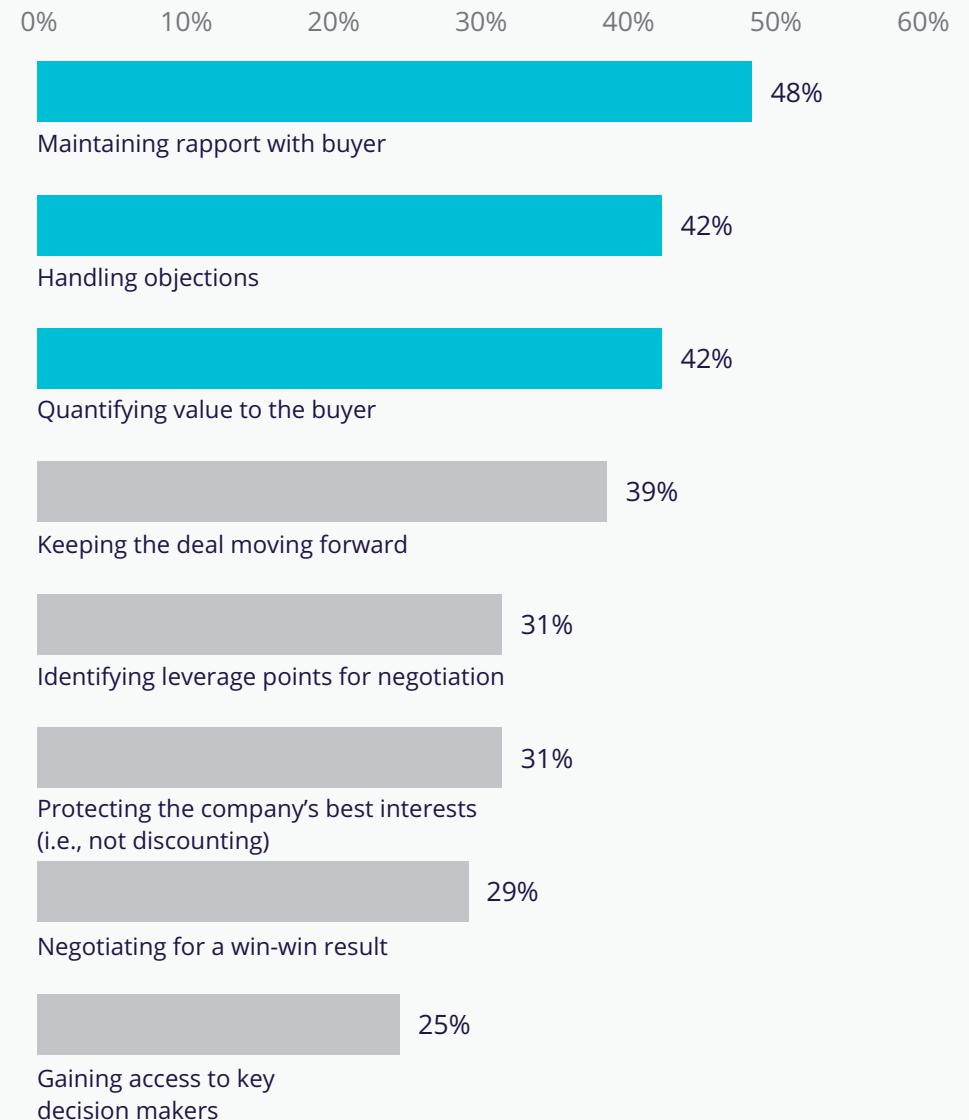
Reached in an efficient manner. Knowing the clear lines of empowerment and structured internal processes will ensure a smooth negotiation process.



Preserves the relationship. If a negotiation gets confrontational, maintain composure and focus on what the buyer is saying, not the aggressive way they're saying or typing it.

It's imperative to completely understand the quantified value that the customer acknowledges in doing business with you and if that value is larger than the investment you're asking the buyer to make. For a buyer with a million-dollar headache, a \$100,000 aspirin is an excellent deal. If a buyer has a \$10,000 headache, a \$100,000 aspirin is ridiculous. Ask questions to address business value and return on investment (ROI). Then, use the answers to uncover pain points or problems. By clearly connecting to the business metrics your prospect wants to address, they can build their case for buying your solution.

FIGURE 3. Essential Sales Behaviors for Negotiating with Customers in Virtual Selling



Stage 4: Closing Deals

Maintaining relationships with existing customers (56%) was the most cited essential sales behavior for closing deals (Figure 4). To keep customers loyal, you need to be a responsive problem solver who serves as a point person for others in your organization. The best sales reps are truly invested in their customers' success. It's key to customer retention.

Ensuring a smooth transition to a service team (40%) ranked as the second most essential sales behavior for closing deals. A customer's impression of a company is shaped by multiple touchpoints across several departments. The handoff between direct sales, inside sales, subject matter experts and customer service should be seamless.

A promise made in the sales cycle can get lost once the prospect turns into

a customer and other teams become involved. This miscommunication leads to dissatisfied customers, and as a result, long-term customer relationships are lost.

Leading sales organizations are adopting a single sales methodology throughout the organizational ecosystem so that every department that interacts with the customer post-sale speaks the same language and provides a frictionless experience.

Establishing the buyer's metrics for success (34%) is another essential behavior to maintain customer relationships. Every sales pro knows to speak to the client's pain points, but few realize that every organization has pain that it's not interested in alleviating. At the end of the day, prospects need a



FIGURE 4. Essential Sales Behaviors for Closing Deals in Virtual Selling

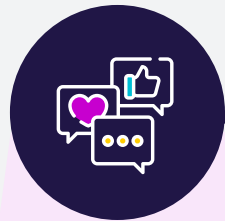


compelling reason to invest in a new solution. The solution: tie your offerings to key business drivers already on an executive's radar. The return on investment (ROI) must be calculable, demonstrable and impactful enough to create urgency.

Another way to help your prospect envision what success will look like is to uncover the personal value for the buyer. How can the buyer personally benefit from getting the deal done? For example, let's consider a prospect who is looking at an automation tool to integrate into their customer relationship management (CRM) system. If they no longer have to ask team members to manually input data, their team will be happier and more productive, reflecting positively on the prospective buyer.

The 12 Critical Sales Behaviors for Connecting with Prospects

Our survey respondents identified these behaviors as crucial for sales success in today's complicated selling environment.



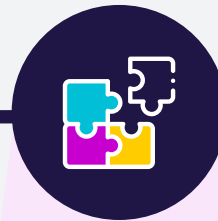
Engaging

- Establishing credibility and trustworthiness
- Developing rapport
- Managing sales calls effectively



Prospecting/ qualifying

- Asking good questions/active listening
- Being tenacious in follow-up
- Articulating value



Negotiating

- Maintaining rapport with buyer
- Handling objections
- Quantifying value to the buyer



Closing

- Maintaining relationships with existing customers
- Ensuring a smooth transition to service team
- Outlining what success looks like for the buyer

Interestingly, all of these behaviors indicate that authenticity and strong human-to-human connection is what differentiates top performers from the rest of the pack. In other words, successful sales cycles are founded on credibility, trust and rapport.

What Sales Leaders Measure Today and Why that isn't Enough

While 98% of respondents measure their team's sales performance in one way or another, their understanding of sales effectiveness is most often tied to sales outcomes—only 25% are directly measuring sales behaviors.

Sales leaders' understanding of sales effectiveness is mainly based on sales coaching reports (57%) and supervisor ratings (55%) (Figure 5). And we often see sales success attributed to market circumstance or luck, versus sales skills alone.

The danger hidden here is that coaching reports are influenced by supervisor-rep interpersonal dynamics. They are not entirely objective, despite a sales leader's best efforts. Supervisor ratings, meanwhile, are most often tied to a single metric:

Only
25%
of companies
measure sales
behaviors

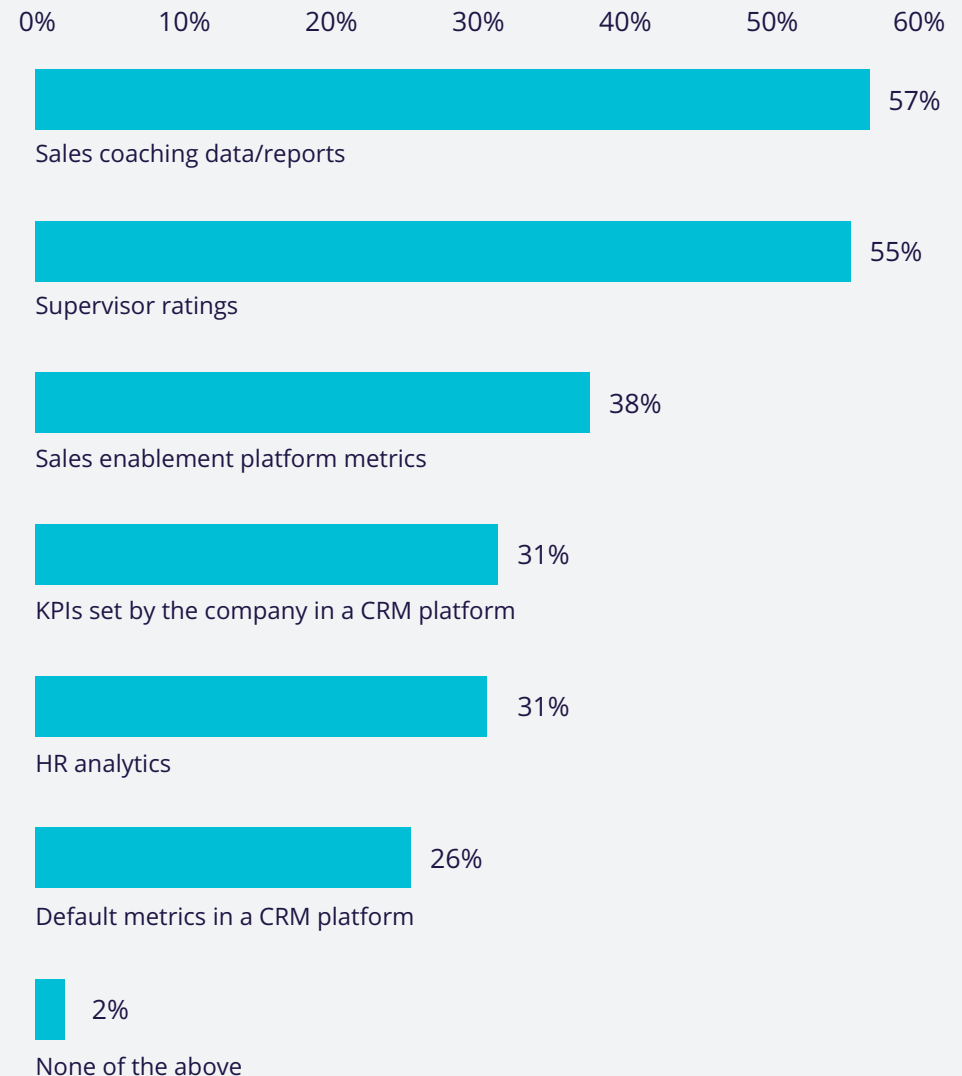


“Did you hit your number or not?”

Many leaders favor lagging indicators, such as increased revenue and margins, transaction size and number of deals won.

That means 75% of respondents are driving down the interstate with their focus fixed on the rear-view mirror. By contrast, the other 25% take a more cohesive view and monitor sales behaviors, which are leading indicators. For instance, if you track your team’s prospecting behavior and see that reps are blocking out time on their calendars, making more phone calls, and writing more follow-up plan letters, that’s a good indicator that a healthier revenue pipeline is on the horizon.

FIGURE 5. Data Sources for Measuring Sales Effectiveness



The Gap Between Desired Behaviors and Sales Metrics

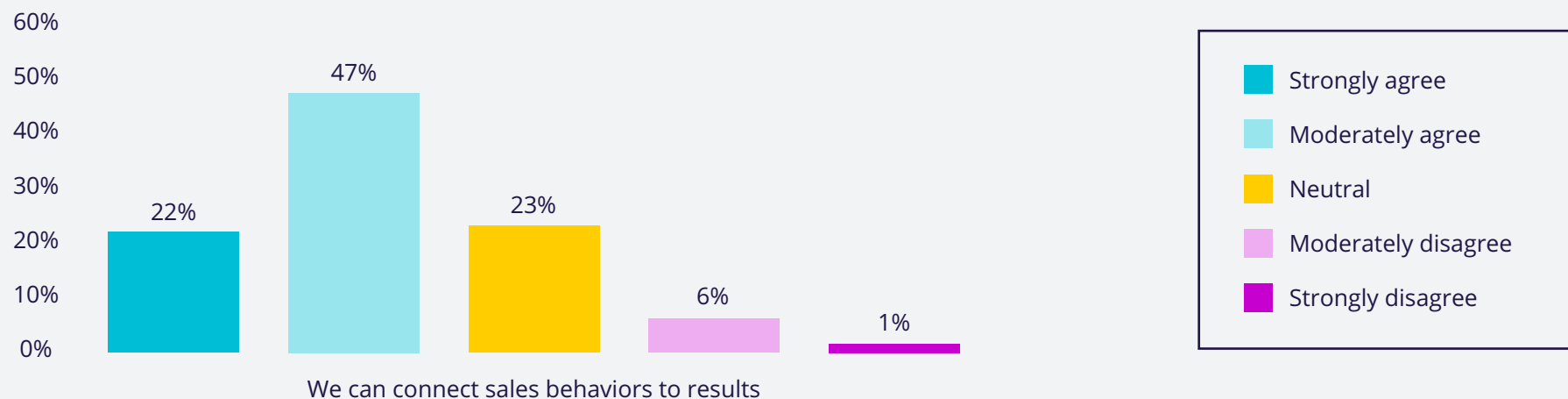
Many sales organizations run into a disparity between how they want salespeople to act and the sales outcomes they're striving to achieve. The only way to know whether a sales training initiative was successful is to measure it—both by keeping an eye on selling behaviors *and* sales results. Without

both measurements in place, it's difficult to diagnose what is and isn't working.

Are companies able to connect sales behaviors to sales results? A majority of organizations, 69%, say yes; 23% don't have a strong opinion; and a mere 8% say

no. Of the companies that are able to see this connection, only 22% strongly agree that they can do so. In other words, there's still work to do for companies that aren't able to tie behavior with results, as well as for those that aren't doing so consistently (Figure 6).

FIGURE 6. Ability to Connect Sales Behaviors to Sales Results



This is evidence that focusing on building credibility and trust is a vital part of the recipe for increased sales results. Through investment in behavior-based skills, sales teams can build trusted, long-term partnerships with customers.

To maximize the investment in sales training, organizations must actively take steps to measure the behaviors that matter

most to ensure their training is working. Without effective measurement practices in place, organizations lack insight into the performance of their salespeople and whether they are properly equipped with the skills they need to be successful.



How to Measure the Sales Behaviors that Matter Most

To accurately measure sales behaviors that build authentic relationships with buyers, think through the stages of the sales cycle and the selling behaviors that build credibility, instill trust and develop rapport with buyers.

Build Credibility With Buyers

One of the highest-rated sales behavior for engaging with buyers in virtual selling is “establishing credibility and trustworthiness.” Credibility and trust go hand-in-hand.

Here are three things to measure for credibility:



Credibility statements. Use a conversational intelligence tool, such as Gong and Chorus.ai, to analyze the first few minutes of initial sales calls. Ensure your sales reps use credibility statements to introduce themselves, your company and your company's areas of expertise. They should also reference similar companies that you've helped and explain why your offering provides a unique advantage.



Reputable online presence. A LinkedIn study found that the completeness of a seller's LinkedIn profile is a primary determining factor to a salesperson's success in today's virtual selling world. When buyers are considering if it's worth their time to take a meeting with a salesperson, the first place they often look is at the LinkedIn profile to see if the person appears credible and trustworthy. This resource offers 20 steps to a better LinkedIn profile.



LinkedIn's Social Selling Index score. Social selling creates conversations about your product and services that authentically can produce sales conversations. LinkedIn measures four elements of your social selling efforts and offers ways to improve them.



Instill Trust With Buyers

Trust can be a squishy word and difficult to measure accurately. Yet, deals are made when buyers trust sales reps. You achieve trust by communicating honestly. And, when combined with metrics that demonstrate business value, your trust factor increases. One way sales leaders can measure trust is to count the number of value-based stories their sales reps use in conversations with buyers.

At ValueSelling, we teach salespeople to tell value-based stories with confidence, empathy and authenticity. Value-based stories are the best way to connect with prospects and have a meaningful conversation—while building credibility, trust and rapport.

The most captivating piece to develop in your value-based story is measurable outcomes. These are the quantifiable metrics and value produced by your service, product or solution. Examples include a leading hospital that increased patient satisfaction scores by 12% in eight months and a global consumer goods company that reduced capital expenditures by 15% in six months. With these measurable values, your story will grab an executive's attention.

Develop and Maintain Rapport With Buyers

Most sales leaders in our survey identified developing and maintaining relationships with buyers as one of the most important sales behaviors for engaging, negotiating and closing deals with customers in a virtual selling environment (stages one, three and four of the sales cycle).

To precisely measure rapport, your customer relationship management (CRM) data needs to be accurate and up-to-date. Require your sales team to provide detailed notes on the buyer organization's problems, why your solution is the best match and the expected return on investment.

As mentioned above, salespeople can differentiate themselves by uncovering the personal value for the buyer. As your team works through the sales process, they can uncover how the buyer may personally benefit from getting the deal done and use this as a competitive advantage.

Effective Learning Methods to Build Key Skills

For many companies, training a remote sales force was one of the top challenges during the global pandemic. Only 49% of organizations were “always effective” or “frequently effective” at providing **training on selling remotely and/or virtually** (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7. Virtual Sales Training Effectiveness

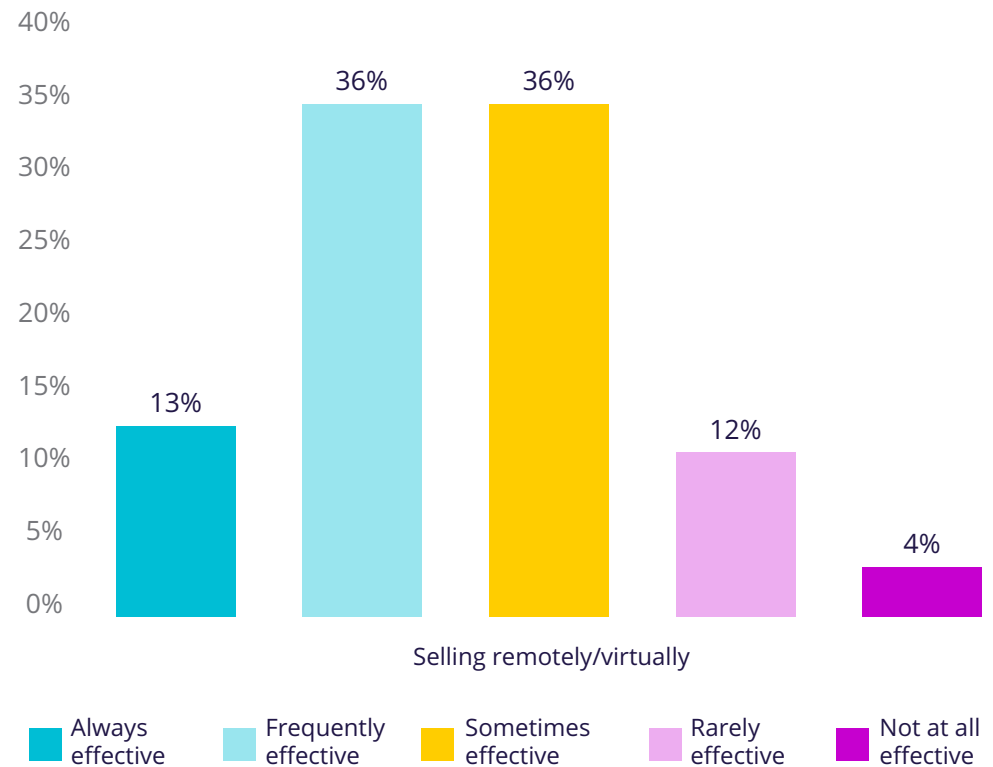
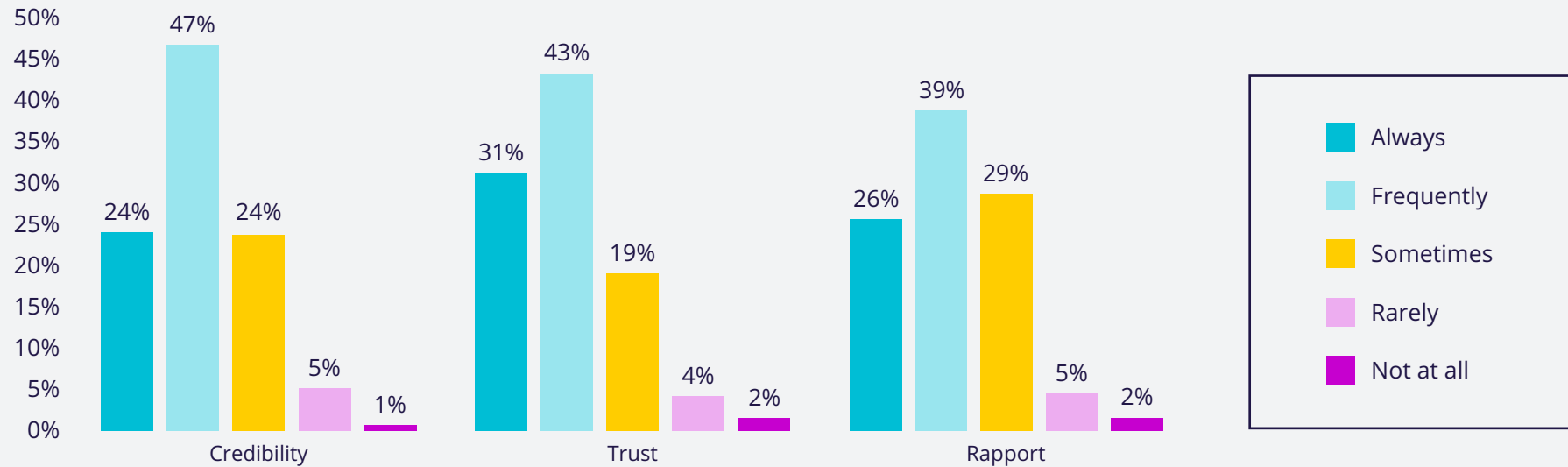


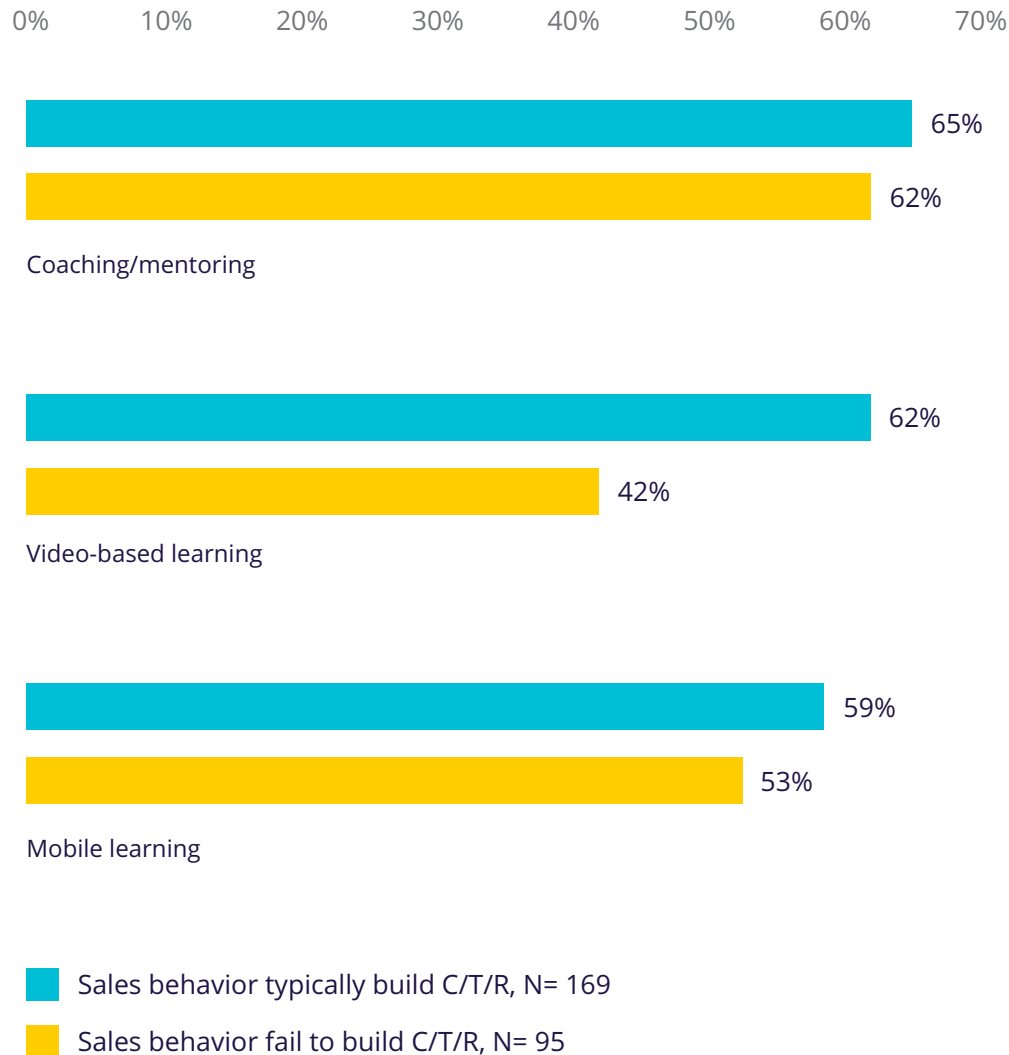
FIGURE 8. Current Perceptions of Building Credibility, Trust and Rapport with Buyers



The sales process is driven by connection. Given that face-to-face selling has been impacted, it's imperative that selling mimic human interaction as much as possible. In the end,

people buy from people. So, while technology can aid and abet, respondents cited the ability to **build credibility, trust and rapport** as essential in the current environment (Figure 8).

FIGURE 9. Top Training Methods that Build Credibility, Trust and Rapport Behaviors



Our research identified coaching and mentoring, video-based learning and mobile learning as the most effective learning methods to build credibility, trust and rapport (Figure 9). Notice that there's not much difference between the sales practices that build and fail to build credibility, trust and rapport? With many sales training programs offered online, it has never been easier for training and development managers to offer access to thousands of videos, lessons and elearning content. When confronted with such an array of sales training programs, give priority to quality content that teaches the behaviors and skills that matter most to driving sales results.

The Takeaway: Measure Sales Behaviors that Create Credibility, Trust and Rapport *and* Sales Results

Ultimately, sales training is part of a systematic change management process, not a one-off event. Companies need ongoing training and development that aligns with the changing goals of the business.

With the shift to a remote work environment, human connection—establishing and building credibility, trust and rapport with buyers throughout the buying cycle—is critical to closing deals and building long-term relationships in a virtual environment.

Developing these essential sales skills is one half of the puzzle. Organizations must also have effective measurement practices in place to ensure they're supporting the right behaviors that lead to increased sales results.



About This Research



About ValueSelling Associates, Inc.

ValueSelling Associates, a leading global sales training company, offers a practical methodology for selling on value, not price. The ValueSelling Framework® is a proven formula that simplifies the complex B2B sale, and the Vortex Prospecting™ program provides a repeatable process that increases connections and conversions to the revenue pipeline. Once trained on the ValueSelling method, organizations grow revenue and increase productivity. Since 1991, thousands of professionals around the world have chosen ValueSelling Associates for customized training, coaching, and consulting to drive sales results.

For more information, visit www.valueselling.com.

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