

Delivering Sales Velocity in Today's Market

A Data-Driven Evaluation of the Most Productive Sellers

Commercial productivity has been steadily declining, and it's not simply a result of macroeconomic conditions. Consensus requirements have never been higher and buying behaviors have never been more conservative. Most sellers are not equipped for it. This is the stark reality that underlies today's commercial environment, and it undercuts hopes that deal velocity will accelerate when market conditions stabilize. The upshot is that some sellers are seeing continued success, and the conditions driving their success are transferable. The bad news is that most sellers and sales managers are taking the wrong approach.

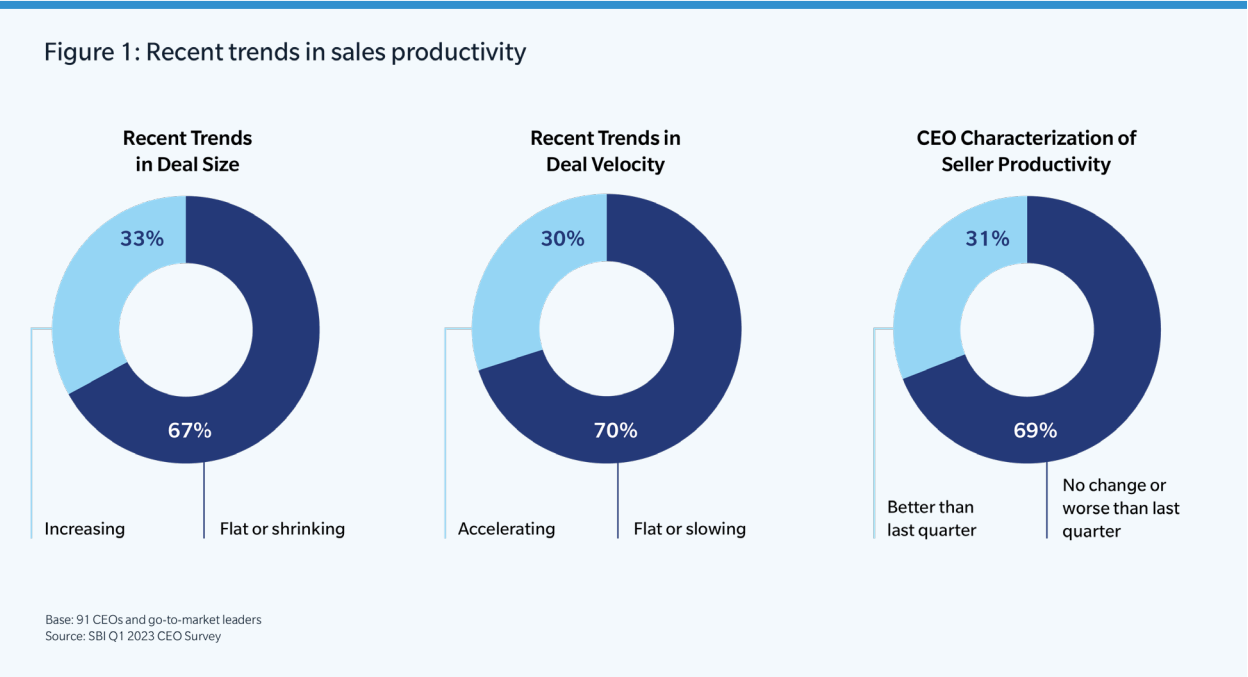
The Unrelenting Evolution Of Buying Behaviors

According to our Q1 2023 CEO Survey, nearly 70% of those surveyed report flat or declining commercial productivity. Trends in deal size, deal velocity, and general characteristics of seller productivity reflect these findings. Across the board, executives are seeing reasonable pipeline but not velocity and conversion (see Figure 1).

There are a number of developments on both the buying and selling sides that suggest this flatlining is a trend, rather than a short-term result of the market adjusting to changing business and economic conditions.

On the buying side, growing risk aversion has preceded market instability and will certainly outlast it:

- **Buying groups continue to grow.** This is in part due to the soft economy as well as the emergence of new roles over the past few years, including risk management, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and information security



to name a few. The ease of virtual buying has aided this trend, with a veritable “Brady Bunch” of buyers and sellers now joining sales calls via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc.

- **Approval requirements and evaluation criteria continue to be stringent.** The economic and regulatory environment has put risk management front and center, adding evaluation criteria to purchases and raising requirements for approvals.
- **Operating complexity continues to deepen.** As firms adopt more technologies, integration becomes a challenge not just for new software purchases, but for any purchases that will influence technology, systems, or workflows.
- **Solution complexity continues to increase as well.** This results in more cross-functional implications and approaches and more stakeholders in the buying group.

On the selling side, there is a steady decline in seller readiness:

- **“Battlefield” hiring and promotions during the Great Resignation left sellers ill-prepared.** Our joint survey with the Top Percentile Collective in early 2022 found average seller attrition rates of 27%. At that time, leaders were focused on getting people in seats and territories covered. They now find themselves churning out under-performers, leading to more seller inexperience in the short term.
- **Seeking efficiency, organizations underinvested in seller skill enhancement.** Only 44% of sellers report regular coaching from their managers, and only 26% report any increase in emphasis on skill development within their sales organizations.
- **Selling dynamics within organizations are increasing in complexity.** As they navigate uncertain markets, companies are evolving revenue models and packaging, creating more complex go-to-market teams with multiple buyer contact points, and increasing sophistication and complexity of their solutions.

Despite these challenges, we know that some sellers are finding their way to productivity. Our analysis identified roughly a quarter of sellers (24%) with accelerated cycle times relative to their peers. Understanding how these sellers are approaching today’s dynamics, and what makes them different, was key to our research.

From Skills to Approaches, a Data-Driven Search for Seller Productivity

Sellers are humans; they have things they are good at, things they like to do, things they ignore, and things for which they go through the motions. Through our experience conducting hundreds of talent assessments for sales organizations, we have developed a robust and evolving inventory of seller skills and behaviors on which we assess talent. Using this inventory allows us to better understand the skills and behavioral combinations that better-performing sellers exhibit.

To do this, we surveyed 325 B2B sales reps, sales development reps (SDRs), and sales managers across industries, asking them how strongly they perform across 97 distinct sales behaviors. We provide a sampling of those behaviors, organized by sales competencies, in Figure 2.

Figure 2: SBI's sales competency and behaviors framework

Adopting Sales Processes

- Learns about the structure of and changes in a buyer's company and industry
- Learns the dynamics of the buying decision team (BDT)
- Prioritizes buyers' readiness to act quickly, even if it's a smaller deal
- Regularly documents account and opportunity planning

Acquiring Product Knowledge

- Shares surprising viewpoints with buyers
- Is plugged into product updates and is able to refine talk track quickly
- Fully understands company's product strategy
- Teaches buyers how their peers use solutions
- Only provides the information that buyers request

Managing Sales Support

- Upholds regular cadence of sharing and brainstorming with customer success teams
- Quickly shares and jointly addresses difficult buyer situations with technical team
- Invites peers to calls when stuck in order to "change the channel"
- Openly shares challenges with manager

Generating Customized Insights

- Shares new information to reengage non-responsive buyers
- Reposts marketing information on social media
- Tailors outreach when private messaging on a social platform

Negotiating

- Helps buyers secure additional funding from other areas of their organization
- Ensures negotiation is easy and low risk

Generating Referrals

- Identifies customer referrals that will be most impactful to the buyer
- Uses referrals sparingly and strategically
- Maintains a referral pipeline

Justifying Costs

- Uses visual tools and frameworks with the buyer
- Tailors value explanation to each role in the BDT
- Minimizes time on cost justification

Applying Tenacity

- Sets the pace of interactions with buyers rather than letting them do so
- Establishes a plan to win over buyers who are difficult during initial touchpoints
- Never hesitates to share point of view with buyers

Utilizing Marketing Programs

- Upholds regular cadence of sharing marketing content with buyers
- Upholds regular cadence with marketing team to understand what will resonate with buyers

Developing The Business Case

- Outlines needs for business case data before asking the customer for their data
- Uses public resources to build draft business cases
- Focuses on facts in business case, rather than anecdotal information
- Knows what the buyer needs before they ask and steers them in that direction

Establishing Executive Sponsorship

- Reviews BDT dynamics with manager or trusted peer
- Sends insights to buyer's executive sponsor
- Is not of the opinion that it's critical to involve buyer's executive sponsor

Handling Objections

- Shares difficult objections with manager to figure out next steps
- Is confident using client data when handling objections
- Works to make it as easy as possible for the buyer to close

Source: SBI, Inc.

We conducted a rigorous statistical analysis, or factor analysis, on these seller responses to identify combinations of behaviors which naturally co-present in sellers. These combinations of behaviors, which we call "seller approaches" provide a statistically validated summary of how sellers engage with buyers. We identified four distinct approaches through this analysis.

Sellers Are Showing Four Distinct Approaches

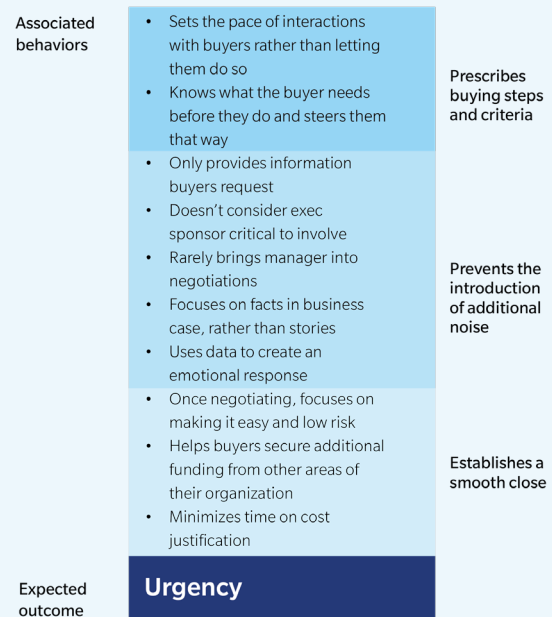
The typical seller has no shortage of tools and guidance available to them. But our experience finds that they'll rely on tested approaches that have been successful for them, whether that's the result of guidance from their direct manager or strict adherence to a leadership-endorsed sales playbook. Regardless of the source, repetition and habit are the bedrock of a seller's ability to manage a territory and pipeline that might otherwise feel unmanageable. Our research has uncovered four distinct sales approaches: Narrowing, Provoking, Translating, and Anticipating.

The Narrowing Approach: Driving Buyer Urgency

Narrowing the sale is the most prevalent approach we found, with 34% of sellers demonstrating it as their primary approach. Narrowing does exactly what the name suggests: Sellers carefully narrow a buyer's set of considerations and progress them through the buying process by prescribing the criteria and next steps. They remove alternatives and potential distractions and encourage a quick close.

In an environment where buying groups are getting larger and more indecisive, sellers who apply the Narrowing approach are seeking to drive urgency among the buying group. They encourage them to avoid blind alleys and work to build trust in themselves as a true authority with the best interests of the buyer in mind and the most knowledge about what the buyer truly needs (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: The Narrowing Approach



Base: 325 sales reps
Source: SBI 2023 Seller Skills Survey

The Provoking Approach: Driving Reconsideration

The second approach we found — Provoking the sale — attempts to reframe how customers perceive their business issue(s). This approach takes advantage of the steady growth of insight-based selling and high-quality thought leadership to engage pipelines. These sellers prioritize tailoring outreach on social platforms, conducting targeted follow-ups, and aligning tightly with marketing teams to ensure they have the latest messaging and insights to share with customers (see Figure 4). Additionally, they are engaging the buyer with ideas, hoping to keep a broad pipeline interested and disrupt customers into their funnel.

The Provoking approach was the least common among the group of sellers we evaluated, which is likely due to the inherent difficulty of this commercial tactic, whereby sellers are attempting to meaningfully challenge customer thinking. Even so, nearly one-fifth (19%) are using this as their primary approach with buyers.

Figure 4: The Provoking Approach



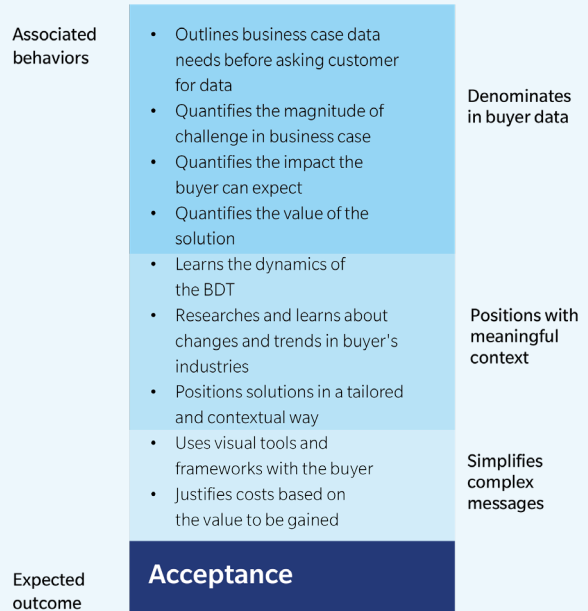
Base: 325 sales reps
Source: SBI 2023 Seller Skills Survey

The Translating Approach: Gaining Buyer Acceptance

A quarter of sellers in our sample are taking the Translating approach. This approach centers on a customer-centric point of view, denominating the purchase from the customer’s vantage point. These sellers tend to emphasize data, which leads them to quantify the challenge, impact, and value of the solution in the buyer’s language and terms. They keep their business cases and presentations as tailored as possible. They also invest significant time understanding the dynamics of the buyer’s company and industry, including its evolution and relevant changes (see Figure 5).

Sellers who apply the Translating approach are trying to cut through delays by driving faster customer understanding and acceptance of a new solution. These sellers think less about selling products and instead focus on supporting their customers with change management. They operate with a deeply empathetic perspective for the customer — doing so in a way that helps reduce buying friction.

Figure 5: The Translating Approach



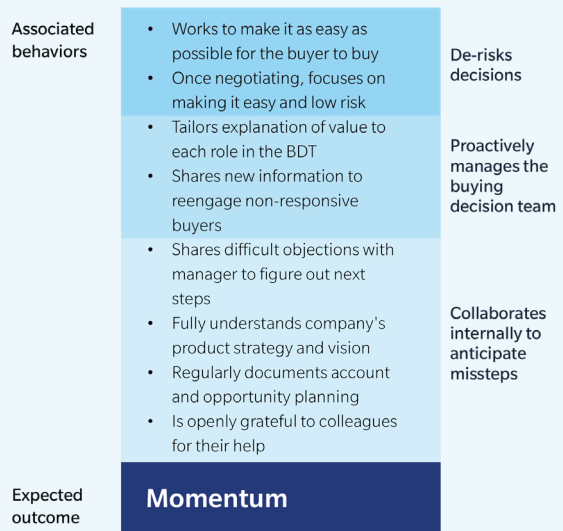
Base: 325 sales reps
Source: SBI 2023 Seller Skills Survey

The Anticipating Approach: Maintaining Momentum

The final approach among sellers is the Anticipating approach. We found that 22% of sellers are emphasizing this approach to help customers see around corners in the buying journey. They focus on making the buying process as low risk as possible and collaborating with others to plan their approach in advance (see Figure 6).

Sellers who apply the Anticipating approach are planning for potential obstacles and removing them, countering buyer inertia by generating momentum. They anticipate the obstacles that are coming and work to remove them before they become an issue. These sellers are deeply collaborative and seek out peer and manager advice in order to stay a step ahead of the customer. Unsurprisingly, these sellers thoughtfully use account and opportunity planning to think through likely issues and roadblocks.

Figure 6: The Anticipating Approach

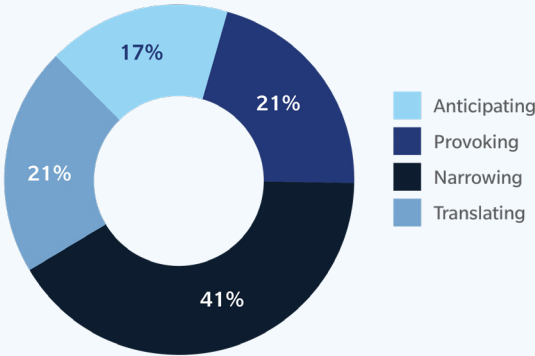


Base: 325 sales reps
Source: SBI 2023 Seller Skills Survey

Push-Based Sales Approaches Are Losing

The Narrowing approach, or the most common seller approach to the commercial dialogue today, has a natural appeal in today’s environment. More than a third of sellers are emphasizing this approach as their primary selling motion. This is unsurprising for a number of reasons:

Figure 7: Sales manager emphasis across seller approaches



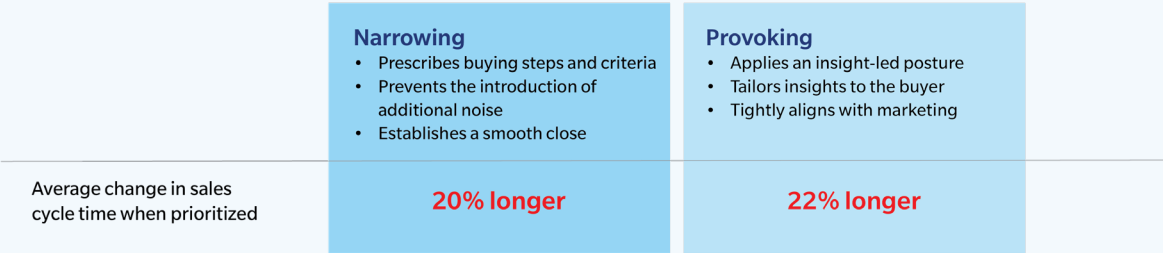
Base: 325 sales reps
Source: SBI 2023 Seller Skills Survey

- **Narrowing can counter buyer distraction.** There are countless distractions taking up time on buyers’ calendars today with new insights, innovations, and opportunities to partner on. And buyers are busier than ever with just getting their work done, leaving them with multiple off-ramps on the buying journey.
- **Narrowing can also counter buyer indecision.** With larger buying groups and sustained pressure to control costs and manage risks, there are always doubts waiting to emerge. The Narrowing approach seeks to channel and directly challenge those doubts.
- **Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Narrowing the sale is the preferred approach among sales managers.** More than 40% of surveyed sales managers primarily emphasize the Narrowing approach, channeling it directly to their reps with a focus on pipeline and deal reviews (see Figure 7).

However, it’s worth noting that the most common approach among both sellers and sales managers is having a counter effect: The Narrowing approach is slowing deals down. In an era when sales productivity is already suppressed, pushing customers for velocity is backfiring. Consistent execution of the Narrowing approach leads to a 20% extension of sales cycle time. Put simply, the more a seller prioritizes Narrowing the sale, the longer their deals take to close.

On the other hand, the Provoking approach takes even longer. Sellers who prioritize this approach see their sales cycles increase in length by 22% (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Productivity improvement from mastering each sales approach



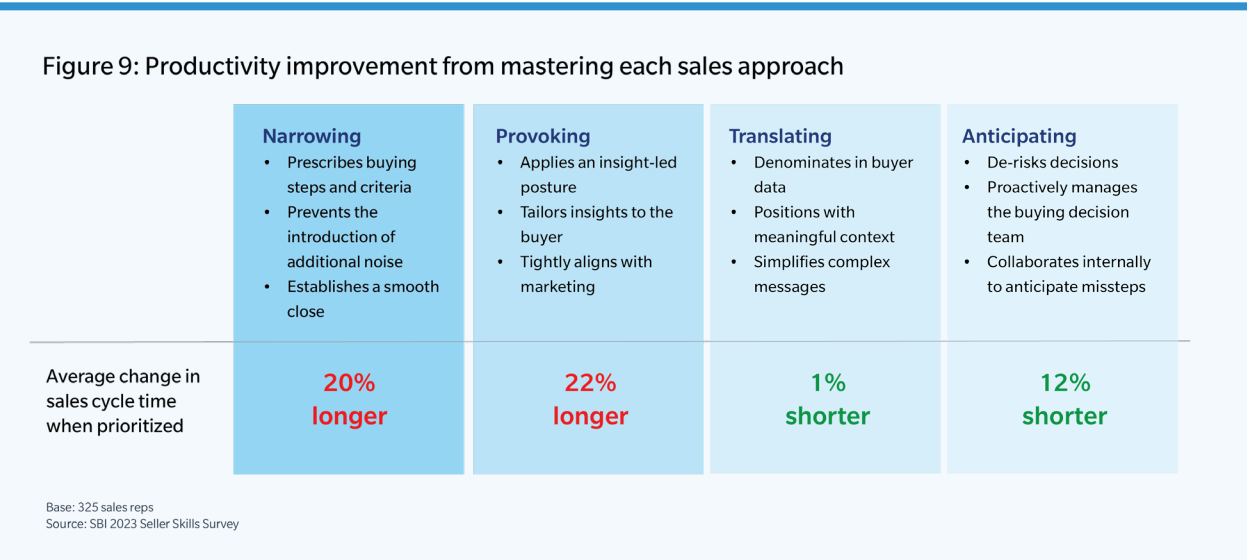
Base: 325 sales reps
Source: SBI 2023 Seller Skills Survey

The common thread among the Narrowing and Provoking approaches, which is leading to their ineffectiveness in today’s market, involves what we refer to as push-based methods. These approaches are focused on pushing the seller’s process (Narrowing) and their ideas (Provoking) onto the buyer. While the intent is admirable and logical — keeping the buyer interested and focused — the outcome is having the opposite effect: Buyers end up feeling resistant and confused when sellers use these approaches.

While the Narrowing and Provoking approaches may work well at isolated points in the sales engagement cycle, they inevitably extend other milestones. In today’s environment of risk aversion and consensus building, sellers who push buyers to ignore their concerns (via the Narrowing approach) will more so create a feeling of mistrust and tension than logic and expediency. Similarly with Provoking, while buyers may find value and connection early on in the buying journey from the ideas that sellers bring them, the continuous push of those ideas instead overwhelms the information-overloaded buying group, which is looking for clarity and idea acceptance.

Pull-Based Approaches Are Winning

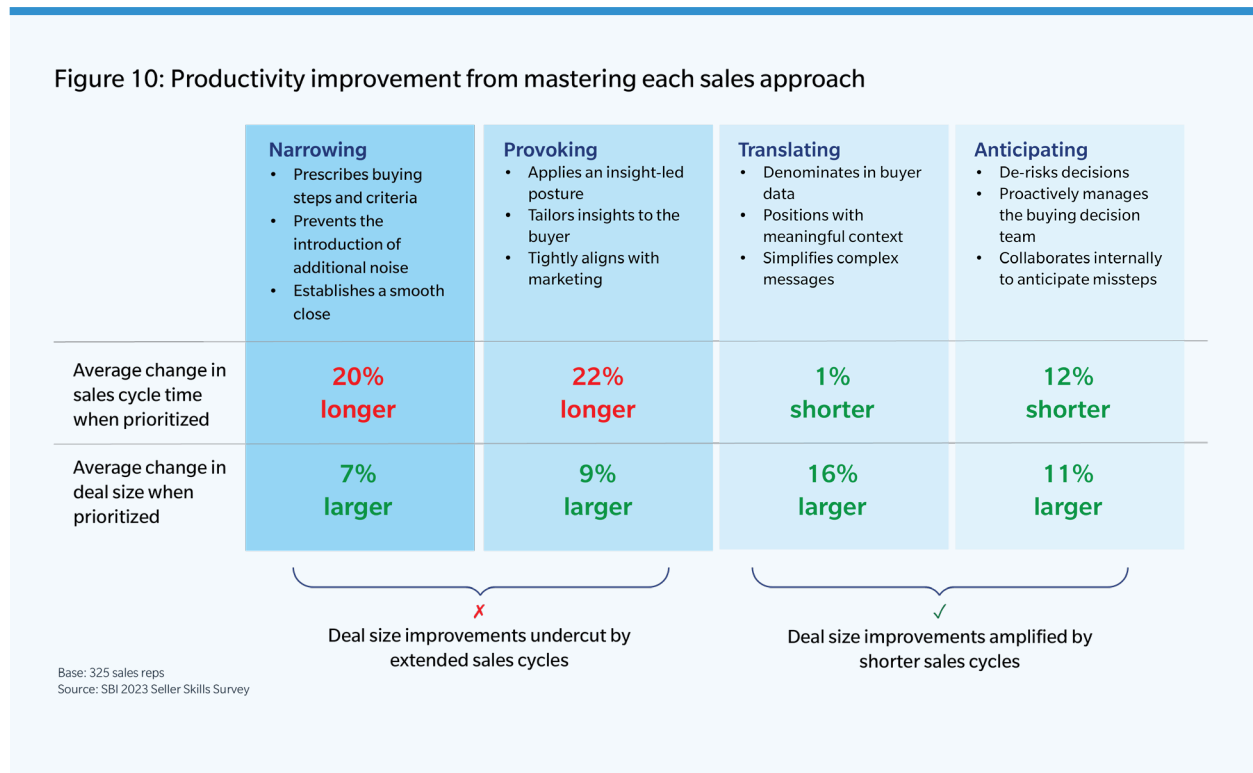
Sellers who are seeing deals close faster are intensifying their focus on Translating and Anticipating approaches. Sellers who seek data-driven confirmation in their buyer engagement (Translating) and proactively manage and mitigate buyer obstacles (Anticipating) realize shorter sales cycles (see Figure 9).



The Translating and Anticipating approaches represent a core difference in the commercial dialogue: A focus on “pull-based” engagement minimizes the chances for incorrect interpretations and ensures that every part of the conversation matters to the buyer. The conversation is deeply empathetic to the buyer’s context and process, which accelerates sales cycles by enabling buyers to envision their own successes on projects. This stands in contrast to the Narrowing and Provoking approaches, which focus buyers on the information and process that sellers push on them.

An additional benefit to the Translating and Anticipating approaches can be found in the value they provide across the entire buying journey. Narrowing and Provoking may provide value late and early in the buying journey, respectively. However, Translating and Anticipating can be deployed with positive returns through the entire journey. This freedom allows sellers to maintain a consistent posture throughout, reducing the skill burden and mental energy wasted from deploying different approaches across buying stages.

Translating and Anticipating bring more than just greater deal velocity to the sellers who deploy them. They are also providing greater increases in deal size. Narrowing and Provoking drive a respectable 7% and 9% improvement in deal size, respectively. However, Translating and Anticipating see a 16% and 11% improvement, respectively (see Figure 10). These approaches are building trust among buyers that is paying off in larger and faster commitments.



It is worth acknowledging that sellers who gravitate more toward the Narrowing and Provoking approaches do see improvement in their productivity, which leads to two noteworthy implications:

- **Driving sellers to adopt any form of commercial discipline and consistent approach is going to have benefit.** Too many sellers have yet to develop their own thesis on how to approach a deal, leading them to haphazard deal structures. It is exceedingly difficult to be great at all of these approaches, and it’s certainly not viable as a sales methodology. Strong coaching and enablement programs that organize sellers are better than nothing at all, even if less effective than following the most productive approaches we’ve outlined above.
- **The behaviors associated with the Narrowing and Provoking approaches do carry some value.** This is effectively a story of “majors and minors.” Our findings clearly show that it’s fine to be a C student with Narrowing and Provoking approaches, as long as the practice is consistent. However, sellers need to prioritize excellence in the Translating and Anticipating approaches if they want the biggest deals in the shortest amount of time.

Embed Translating and Anticipating Approaches Across the Sales Infrastructure

The good news about the Translating and Anticipating approaches is that they are rooted in fundamental seller skills and behaviors. As such, there is opportunity for sellers who don't naturally take to these approaches to transition to them. But it will require three levels of support from sales leaders to get them there.

- **Level 1 — coaching.** It starts with sales managers and how they interact with sellers. As we have mentioned, more than 60% of surveyed sales managers are focused on the wrong selling approaches. Sales leadership teams need to help their managers change the conversation with their teams. It is less about where deals are and how to push them forward, and more about how sellers are pulling buyers' needs into the conversation.
- **Level 2 — enablement.** Sales leaders can help sales managers by reenforcing the Translating and Anticipating approaches in the resources they make available to sellers. This involves embedding high-productivity sales approaches into their sales playbooks, sales training, and other support materials.
- **Level 3 — expectation setting.** What leaders signal to sellers is paramount. Sales leadership teams must document and explain what the Translating and Anticipating approaches mean for role expectations and evaluations.

Delivering Sales Velocity

Consensus buying and buyer risk management aren't going away anytime soon. Seller approaches need to adapt. Pushing a sales process that's defined by its intent to close down buyer pursuits, or wow them with insights, creates a tension and aversion that sellers will be challenged to overcome. Pulling in the buyer and using their data, context, process, and concerns builds the credibility and trust that is necessary for them to commit faster and more deeply to your solution. Sales velocity comes from consistently and dependably deploying the right selling approach across the entire buying journey.

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WHY SBI?

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About this study

SBI surveyed 325 sales professionals across industries. Roughly 25% of respondents came from organizations with less than \$1 billion in annual revenue, and 75% came from organizations with more than \$1 billion in annual revenue. There was a similar split of private-equity-sponsored and venture-backed or public companies. The survey was fielded in March 2023.