



# How COVID Changed the Sales World Forever

7 Substantial Changes Triggered  
by the (Clearly Permanent) Migration to a Virtual Medium

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## INTRODUCTION: A Rapidly Changing Landscape

In the Spring of 2020, as the business world moved abruptly into the virtual environment, it was immediately apparent that this would have important implications for the sales profession. Initially, most companies perceived the impact as rather narrow, and limited to the presenting issue, which was the urgent need for salespeople to rapidly master their virtual selling platform. However, with the passing of time, it has become increasingly clear that the changes to the sales profession will be substantially more far-reaching than first thought, and almost certainly permanent. COVID will profoundly change sales – a fact that most companies are still only just beginning to comprehend.

In this paper, I outline the seven ways in which the “pivot to virtual” will most significantly impact the sales function. These forces are organized within the framework of **Sales MODEL, Sales MEETING and Sales MESSAGE.**

Each of the forces under discussion here are already being observed in the wild. However, it should be noted that A) things remain very fluid this early in the migration, and we cannot yet know how these forces will ultimately play out (For example, early research showed that people had an initial enthusiasm as their meetings moved into Zoom or Webex, but that this was rapidly replaced by overall fatigue as the novelty wore off. This “Zoom rejection” might gather momentum). And B) It’s already clear that these forces will manifest in completely different ways in different industry settings.

**Hence, the purpose of this article is to lay out the forces that are shaping the future of sales, suggesting some of the ways they may impact your business, with the hope that you will consider and debate their specific application in your world.**

The good news is that – on balance at least – these changes are more positive than negative in nature: as long as sales organizations are able to adapt effectively.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Sales Model: Potentially dramatic changes to our most basic organizing frameworks

**1 New Coverage Models - Efficiency and leverage:** The time savings resulting from reduced travel are substantial in many industries, with these savings often being compounded by a trend toward shorter customer meetings. Consequently, some companies are seeing substantial excess in sales capacity, which, if permanent, will create the option of covering their customer base with fewer salespeople (potentially up to 40-50% fewer people in some cases). In addition to these substantial **sales efficiency gains**, given that the eliminated salespeople are more likely to be weaker performers, this adds the intriguing possibility of simultaneous **sales effectiveness gains**, as strong/star performers are leveraged across the entire customer base.

**Buyer-Seller Alignment:** The traditional concept of sales territory ceases to be relevant as sellers become geographically uncoupled from the buyers they serve. This creates a set of hitherto unimagined possibilities surrounding the “matching” of sellers to customers. At a minimum, it may be possible to organize the sales force around a deep matching of industry/segment specialists to customers. More interestingly, it may now be possible to match based on behavioral, demographic or interest-based criteria. Both scenarios have the potential to substantially improve outcomes.

**2 Transformed Sales Economic:** If market coverage can be achieved using a substantially smaller sales force, then the ratio of total revenue/total sales expense definitionally falls, and in turn, so must customer acquisition cost. This impact is seismic, as hitherto uneconomic customers/segments may now become viable economic prospects. This will increase market size for most companies and have profound impact on their segmentation and targeting models.

**3 Coaching:** Research suggests that sales coaching is the single activity most highly correlated with over-performance, yet for practical and economic reasons, the powerful tool of the coaching “ride along” has fallen into disuse in recent times. However, in the virtual world, any sales conversation can be virtually coached, which puts sales’ most powerful performance improvement tool back in the toolbox. (Interestingly, it is known that many sales managers struggle to coach effectively, but the virtual world also makes it possible to “bypass” managers by creating a new breed of specialist sales skill coaches who can observe and coach any salesperson, anywhere in the world. This model promises substantial coaching benefits with minimal impact on sales management.)

### Sales Meetings: Different Environment, Different skills

**4 Meetings Matter More:** Some companies are finding it more difficult to get sales meetings with customers. Where this is the case: 1) The cost of an ineffective meeting skyrockets. Organizations can no longer tolerate their sales force’s traditional tendency to “undervalue” sales meetings, either through insufficient preparation or weak messaging. 2) Companies must improve their ability to obtain customer meetings. As much as companies have upgraded other areas of the sales function, most have done very little to upgrade their strategies and messaging in this area.

**5 New Skills Required:** In the virtual world even the most experienced salespeople have been thrown off balance. A wide new skillset must be developed in order to succeed. The baseline skill is mastering the “mechanics” of the online web platform – how to mute, screen sharing, etc. But the far deeper issue is that selling, an inherently SOCIAL process, has suddenly moved into an ASOCIAL environment. These new social dynamics require the adoption of a more complex range of new skills. In the virtual environment, sellers now must know how to:

- Account for and minimize customer distraction
- Adapt to customers’ reduced mental bandwidth/capacity
- Generate interactivity that de facto was present in face-to-face meetings
- Manage time and conversation consistent with shorter and more restricted meetings
- Modify their meeting preparation, in particular limiting any room for “linguistic imprecision”
- Offset the deadly loss of social cues and feedback in a virtual sales call

In addition, sellers are also reporting another important loss: the live selling’s “hallway” conversations are no more. Sellers will need to create innovative back channels (such as LinkedIn) to re-establish this vital source of customer intelligence.

### **Sales Messaging: Responding to a New Set of Rules**

**6 Modified Messaging for Evolving Buying Groups:** Anecdotal evidence suggests that customer “buying groups” are growing in size, with new players appearing earlier in the sales process. It becomes essential to broaden the scope of the sales conversation to accommodate the wider interests of this expanded buying group.

**7 Sales Messaging: “Getting your arrow through a narrower window”** Fortunately, one of virtual selling’s most urgent problems is also relatively straightforward to solve: the modifications you need to make to your core messaging. In a socially distanced and distracted environment, in which meetings may also be shorter, major structural changes are required in your message: chief among these are simplicity, engagement and documentary support.

- a. Extreme Simplicity** – Messaging must be radically simplified. Sellers must exercise the discipline to tell a story that fits within the mental bandwidth of Zoom-fatigued customers at 3:00 in the afternoon.
- b. Intentional Engagement** – Messaging must be engineered to be intentionally engaging. Our most critical challenge is to secure the customer’s focused attention. The primary way this is achieved is through an in-depth focus on the customer’s problem.
- c. Documentary Support** – The limitations and distractions of the virtual meeting room mean that the richness and value of the conversation itself is diminished, which places a far higher burden on the “leave-behind” document to carry the value proposition to the customer. To succeed in the new order, sellers must move far beyond standard slide decks. For any sales message to be truly effective, it must both persuade and equip the buyer.  
**In the virtual environment, the leave behind document is the seller’s most critical tool for equipping buyers to on-sell their solution.**

### **Conclusion:**

The big mistake companies are making is to underestimate the changes wrought by the move to virtual, and as a result, simply aiming to replicate their live selling model in a virtual environment. This is a catastrophic mistake: **if you try to replicate your old “live” sales model, you will fail. Future success requires that your entire sales model, meeting and message must be fundamentally ADAPTED for the new post-pandemic environment.**

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# THE SALES MODEL

## 1. A Transformation of Sales' Organizing Frameworks:

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### 1.1 Deployment/Coverage Models

The first thing to understand about the virtual sales model is its potential impact on coverage models and capacity, deriving from dramatic changes in the nature of the buying/selling process. At the most basic level, many companies are already observing **substantial time savings** stemming from an elimination of travel, and in heavy-travel sales models (technology, industrial, healthcare), the avoided travel time, which can be as high as 40%, is creating an immediate and substantial increase in sales capacity. This creates a dilemma which many of our clients are now facing. While the freed-up time might allow for an increase in a range of neglected value-creating activities (such as better call prep, or heaven forbid – better work-life balance), economic reality suggests that companies are now fundamentally overstaffed, and will consequently “redraw” their models of account loading, either increasing the numbers of customers covered with no increase in headcount or, more likely, maintaining current levels of customer coverage with significantly reduced headcount.

Beyond simple travel time savings, in some industries structural changes in buyer behavior are amplifying this effect. The most significant change here is that **the majority of companies we've spoken to are reporting that sales meetings are getting significantly shorter**. As we will see later, this has profound implications for the structure of sales messaging and sales meetings – but for now it simply adds to the unexpected increase being created in sales capacity.

[One further force increasing capacity is that while most companies are reporting that securing sales meetings is either unchanged or even somewhat easier, some companies are reporting that it is getting harder, and in some cases a lot harder. Several leading pharmaceutical companies are seeing data which shows that while the length of sales meetings with physicians has slightly increased, the NUMBER of meetings their reps are securing

has plummeted. In one case, from 6-8 in a day, to 2-3 IN A WEEK. The pharma case is both extreme and unusual, stemming from some distinctive changes physicians are making in their daily behavior: rather than seeing multiple reps between patients across the day, it seems they are simply scheduling a far smaller number of virtual meetings late in the day. In this case, the additional reduction in total meeting numbers is creating an alarming level of sales overcapacity.]

If the changes driving this capacity increase are permanent, the implications are remarkable. If sales reps have more time because they don't travel and are being granted shorter customer meetings, simple mathematics suggests that it may be possible for a selling organization to achieve the same market coverage with substantially fewer people (up to 80% fewer in the pharma case). Even in more typical situations, basic modeling suggests that for a travel-heavy sales organization, it might be possible to reduce a team of 100 salespeople to about 50-60 with no loss of customer coverage. Furthermore, **beyond these sizeable efficiency gains, assuming the lowest sales performers were eliminated, this creates the intriguing possibility of additional sales effectiveness, as you leverage your team's strongest performers across a wider customer base. Consider the impact on your business if your customer base could be covered by fewer people, each of whom performs at a substantially higher average level.**

Of course, any dramatic headcount reduction at this stage would be premature, given we do not know when, or to what extent, live meetings will return. However, virtually all observers in this space, as well as every client we have spoken to, believe that there is no going back to “normal.” Virtual selling seems poised to become the dominant model on a permanent basis. For now, sales leaders need to monitor and be prepared to act on required changes in coverage models. As one sales leader told me, “We don't know where this is going: but we for sure can't afford to run the same team if they're idle 40% of the time.” We will return to the specific topic of sales economics later.

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## THE SALES MODEL

### 1.2 Alignment, “Territory,” and a New Dawn for Subject Matter Experts:

Still within the theme of organization, the traditional concept of Territory may no longer be relevant. For the first time in history, sellers have become completely geographically uncoupled from the customers they serve. This is a more significant development than it may first appear, because this development presents several intriguing strategic possibilities regarding new models of alignment, and particularly the prospect of “matching” salespeople to customers in hitherto unimagined ways.

Most obvious is the ability to create better industry/vertical alignment; that is, a world in which all customers could be matched with sellers who deeply understand their specific industry and business context. Subject matter experts have always played an important role in sales success, and as solutions have become more complex, specialists have become disproportionately more important in matching those solutions to customers, frequently improving win rates when deployed (by finally solving for customers’ single biggest complaint as shown by research: that “the people who sell to me do not understand my business.”).

The problem is that industry/customer-level experts are expensive, but more importantly they are hard to scale. That is no longer true: industry specialists can now, subject only to practical limitations of time zones and language, be in any “room” in the world in which they are needed. One of our industrial clients employs an unassuming but legendary Irishman who, by all accounts, knows more about batch-process pharmaceutical manufacturing than almost anyone else alive. Their challenge has always been that ideally, he’d be in every meeting of substance they have, wherever it is in the world; but they can’t have that for a whole host of practical (and humanitarian!) reasons. That is no longer the case; as of today, within reasonable limits, it becomes perfectly possible to place him in ANY meeting anywhere in the world, with the reasonable expectation that his expertise will consistently drive improved sales outcomes.

It’s easy to view this issue superficially. Certainly, the virtual world makes it easier to “helicopter in” specialists to help account teams with an existing pursuit because those meetings are now virtual... but that is simply a more efficient application of the pre-COVID model. **The deeper, and far more strategic application here is that it may now be possible to actually organize the sales function entirely on the basis of subject matter matching.** What would be the implication on sales outcomes if your organizing framework allowed every customer to be aligned with sellers who possessed genuine expertise in their business?

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*And perhaps most interesting: if we take this idea to its logical conclusion, a virtual sales model may create the potential for “hyper-specialization:” subject matter experts who focus on an extraordinarily narrow area of customer type. This would have been completely impractical in the pre-COVID world, because that model cannot scale; there would never be enough customers in any reasonable geography to justify the specialization. But no longer: when all selling is virtual, having an expert in “mid-size, family-owned, fast-growth construction firms” becomes a practical possibility.*  
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### 1.3 Beyond the Vertical: Behavioral or Interest-Based Matching

Some years ago, several leading technology and industrial companies pioneered “executive sponsorship” programs in which truly strategic accounts were paired with a “matched” executive sponsor. The underlying concept of executive sponsorship wasn’t new, but the design of these programs had an interesting new twist, which is why they got some coverage in the business press: sponsors were matched to customers based on personal/interest-based criteria (think: customer CEO loves single malt whisky and fly-fishing... so the supplier sponsor is selected based on these two honorable interests... and a friendship is formed). What was notable in these programs was that they tended to be more successful than similar programs where the matching was based on the more traditional basis of simple functional alignment.

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## THE SALES MODEL

The idea of matching sellers to buyers based on personal criteria has an inherent appeal, and such criteria might include interest, gender, ethnicity or a host of other possibilities (I notice, as a Brit, that I have a distinctly deeper connection with my customers who happen to be British). But as appealing as this concept is, deploying this model at scale in the wider sales organization has been historically impossible for two critical reasons: A) any form of geographic territory organization made it impossible: scotch-drinking fly fishers don't all live in the same zip code (well, outside of Montana at least... there seem to be quite a few of us here), and B) the data required to do the matching simply didn't exist, and the burden of manual research meant that it would never be possible at scale. But neither of these barriers now exist. Virtual selling removes the geographic limitation, and now allows at least the possibility of matching sellers with buyers based on fit. Equally importantly, we are clearly on the verge of a genuine revolution, as sales moves into a new, data-driven era, which would absolutely make "fit-based matching" a practical possibility. I'm only beginning to understand the possibilities here, thanks to several recent conversations with leaders at LinkedIn, and it's already apparent that even a modest investment in LinkedIn could open up a vast new horizon of unimagined deployment and matching opportunities.

### 2) Transformed Sales Economics:

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The essential economics of sales derives almost entirely from the coverage models described above, and at the highest level, sales productivity is calculated as the ratio of total revenue/total sales expense. If the virtual world allows for more efficient coverage models (more customers are served by fewer salespeople), and if these savings in people are further compounded by significant **actual cost savings** stemming from reduced customer travel AND reduced internal travel (we've seen several examples this year where taking the sales conference/kickoff virtual has created staggering savings), then we can expect that sales economics will be utterly transformed.

All companies understand the fundamentals of these economics and have always sought to drive down cost of sales, which is why the "inside sales" model has been such a popular pursuit in recent years. But if, as now seems to be the case, the entire extraordinarily expensive "outside sales" organization has essentially become a de facto "inside sales" team, this will have seismic implications. Chief among these is that at many companies, **these changes in sales economics have the potential to significantly reduce the overall cost of customer acquisition... and that will make hitherto uneconomic customers now economic.**

(By the way... one related headache we will all be dealing with is that there may no longer be any meaningful distinction between inside and outside sales. Those functions will need to be untangled and redefined.)

Historically, customer value was the determining factor justifying face-to-face sales effort: I would fly anywhere for a million-dollar deal, but I wouldn't drive across town for a thousand dollar deal. But if the cost of customer acquisition falls (and especially if that's accompanied by falling cost of service delivery), this has profound implications for overall targeting and segmentation strategy, as smaller, lower revenue or geographically remote customers become economically viable. This will be an important question for Marketing and Sales to jointly monitor. At my own company, Oratium, we have seen this first-hand. We fix companies' sales messaging by transferring an entirely new, brain science-based messaging model to them. Our traditional face-to-face sales and delivery model meant that this was primarily an offering for US-based Fortune 500 companies. But now, courtesy of virtual selling and virtual product delivery, our addressable market has radically expanded across two dimensions: we can now economically target companies of almost any size, as well as those located in any geography. The post-COVID world has probably increased our economic target market one hundredfold.

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## THE SALES MODEL

### 3) The Return of Coaching:

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Data and studies consistently show that sales coaching is the single activity that is MOST highly correlated with sales over-performance. And yet, paradoxically, the “ride-along” withered and essentially died a decade ago, when high cost of the activity collided with ever more time-oppressed sales managers. But again, this is an area where the virtual world creates another profound and positive change. Now, by virtue of the web conference platform, ALL sales meetings are theoretically coachable (whether that’s done live or based on recordings “for quality and training purposes”). This change suggests that one of the most powerful tools available for boosting sales force performance is now available to be put back in the toolbox of every sales organization that wants to use it. Clearly, making full use of this tool will mean organizations overcoming the twin challenges of “will” and “skill.”

**Will**—In order to capitalize on this opportunity, companies will need to do a lot more than simply give their verbal support to the idea of more coaching. They will need to do the hard work of redesigning the workflows of their sales managers, to create the time and space that they will need to make this coaching possible, and they will need to create systems of leadership and accountability to make sure that the activity is being embraced.

**Skill**—Having created the time and systems, it won’t be nearly enough to hope that your managers coach effectively, because they won’t. The many studies in this field have all unflinchingly shown that most sales managers coach extremely poorly (when they are doing any coaching at all). One path forward is for companies to equip their managers to coach effectively, and for many this will be the right approach. We have already built a program, “Coaching Effectively in the Virtual Environment” with promising results.

However, the new world again offers a potentially different (and more interesting) model, as companies will now also have the option of developing an entirely new breed of “specialist coaches,” whose only job is to coach field salespeople. This is an intriguing model that has been seen to work in the past on a limited basis, but which is now made possible at scale by the completely virtual environment. Subject again only to limitations of time zone and language, a **specialist sales-skills coach can now literally and practically observe and coach any salesperson, operating anywhere in the world.** This model has several appealing features, but in particular: A) it is non-disruptive to the sales managers; their jobs do not need to be fundamentally redesigned, and B) it allows companies to develop true coaching specialists – to find and cultivate really talented coaches and put them in the place where they have most leverage to use that skill.

In terms of coaching quality, this model might be more fruitful than adding another requirement to the already over-burdened sales manager (and certainly it avoids the hassle of redesigning their job).

It takes time to build the skills and culture of an outstanding coaching program, but the sales performance rewards are huge. More importantly, the conditions now exist for it to be possible.

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## THE SALES MEETING

### 4. Meetings Matter More

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As discussed earlier, some industries are reporting that sales meetings are getting harder to secure, and particularly the C-level meetings that we know can really move the sales dial. Beyond pharmaceuticals, we've heard the same challenge expressed by senior leaders at IBM and other leading technology and industrial companies. While this challenge is not universal, where it is the case, it is of singular importance. If a sales organization loses access to customers, the consequences would be disastrous.

As we try to understand what is taking place within this new customer behavior, **several sales leaders have told us that the critical issue here appears to be a supplier's RELEVANCE in the eyes of the buyer. An early hypothesis is that in a post-COVID world, buyers may be making MORE meeting time available for issues that they care about and LESS time for issues that they do not.** It's surely significant that Cisco told us they are not seeing any greater difficulty engaging with customers, given that they are among the world's best at enabling remote working. Or, as another healthcare leader told me: "It depends on the seniority/experience of the rep and the level of solution/innovation they offer. COVID vaccine reps from Moderna are getting full access..." (No surprise there!) The conclusion here is that while there is no single pattern in how easy or hard it is to get a meeting, the importance of staying relevant to the buyer is unquestionably becoming more critical. If your sales meetings are getting harder to generate, there are two important implications:

**First, the cost of an ineffective meeting is much higher.** When meetings become more rare, everything must be done to maximize their effectiveness. Of course, it's reasonable to assert that we've always believed that "a customer meeting is a terrible thing to waste," and that consequently our salespeople have always sought to maximize them... and certainly

that SHOULD be the case. But if we're really honest, we all know that is far from true. All too often salespeople go into meetings woefully unprepared. They don't understand their customer at a deep level (nor sometimes even at a superficial level) and they frequently build a sales story that is weak, generic, and disconnected from the customer's problem. In theory, the relaxed, "gunslinger" view of sales should have been eliminated long ago, but in practice most companies continue to tolerate it. It's reasonable to suggest that in the post-COVID world, undervaluing any reasonably promising sales meeting is a luxury that cannot be tolerated.

**Second, we need to raise our performance on getting the meeting.** The poet Dylan Thomas penned the words, "do not go gentle into that good night." So it should be for us. Just because customers are more resistant to granting us meetings doesn't mean we should simply accept that as our new reality. Our job is to find improved means to GET the meeting, to win the "calendar competition." Most companies, stuck in their old models, need to profoundly up their game in this area. Three strategies are known to bear fruit:

**1) Use the access/influence you already have with C-Level executives** at the customer to secure meetings with more junior buyers. Nothing will open the door for a meeting better than the "blessing" of the C-Suite. Where you're able to leverage this, do so.

**2) Demonstrate "thought leadership."** Evidence supports the idea that customers are more likely to take a meeting with an organization they view as an innovative and a leading thinker in the field. Research has shown that over time customers have become less motivated by meetings just to have a quick "check in" to see how things are going. This was true pre-COVID, but now appears to be substantially more so in a highly Zoom-fatigued virtual world. But if the salesperson brings real value, thoughtfulness, and insight, their ability to crack a busy executive's calendar will increase substantially.



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## THE SALES MEETING

**3) Radically improved “get the meeting” messaging.** All companies know that they must build compelling messaging for their sales meetings, but it’s surprising how often they neglect the messaging specifically aimed at securing the meeting in the first place. But in today’s world, this messaging becomes significantly more important. In late 2020 we were building a custom e-learning for an industrial client, “Mastering the Virtual Sales Conversation.” But interestingly, as the scope of the product evolved into early 2021, the client asked us to modify the training to specifically address a problem they were beginning to see: how to design the messaging needed to secure the meeting.

### 5. New Medium... New Social Rules... New Skillset

Full disclosure: the key skills discussed below are fully developed in our new training resource “Designing and Delivering the Virtual Sales Conversation.” Details available here:

<https://elearning.oratium.com/pivot>

One thing has become apparent as this migration to virtual has unfolded. Even the most seasoned salespeople have been thrown off-balance by the need to conduct meetings in the virtual space. While most traditional sales skills do still apply, meeting success now hinges on the application of an additional, and entirely new layer of skills and practices. At a minimum, salespeople need to master the “mechanics” of the virtual platform, which includes a range of sub-skills from technology fluency to simple e-meeting protocols (lighting, height of laptop camera, optimizing sound).

However, as perplexing as these technology basics have been to most salespeople, there is a far more daunting challenge lurking in the shadows. Selling is almost unique among the professions in that it is an entirely social process: a complex and delicate “ballet” of moves and countermoves between buyer and seller. **And that highly social process has just moved into a thoroughly “asocial” environment, an environment with an entirely different set of social dynamics. This is the most profound**

**challenge that virtual selling presents to the front-line sales professional.** In a very real way, once a seller has mastered their technology platform, their problems are only just beginning. In order to navigate these new social norms, they will be required to master new skills in at least three areas.

**A) Customers have become highly distracted,** which means engagement is ever more difficult to achieve. Salespeople are now required to design entirely new approaches to secure engagement, and in particular learn how to engineer interactivity. In most traditional sales meetings, interactivity was all but guaranteed, but in the virtual world customers are more apt to become passive and “inert,” and if there’s one thing that hasn’t changed about sales, monologues are where deals go to die. “Designed interactivity” has become a critical new sales skill.

**B) Customers’ intellectual bandwidth is lower:** research already shows that it is harder and more tiring to take in new information on a virtual platform. When we add the fact that sales meetings are generally becoming shorter, this means that the amount and complexity of material that the salesperson is now able to discuss is seriously reduced. They must learn to focus and simplify (this has major implications for message architecture – see discussion #7).

**C) Salespeople are experiencing a substantial loss of feedback or “social cues”** from the customer. All great salespeople have high social IQ and are adept at reading how the customer is responding to the conversation. **The “socially sterile” virtual meeting can rob a salesperson of much of this customer reaction, creating the clear potential for sales to stall.** In addition, this same socially flat environment is making it harder to build trust (since COVID hit, the most frequent question we’ve been asked is: “how do I build trust with my customer?”). Salespeople must now adopt a particular set of new communication skills, known to correlate with the creation of trust.

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## THE SALES MEETING

Most recently, clients have begun talking about an additional new problem they're seeing. In the old world, as all salespeople know, the informal pre- or post-meeting conversation was an invaluable and seemingly irreplaceable source of customer intelligence. This has literally vanished; today, the Webex ends, and you're out. Salespeople will need to develop new solutions to restore this line of communication or lose it. One possible approach is to use LinkedIn connections to at least get some back-channel access to key players to replicate the informal conversation, and I have a recent poignant example of this working. A sales conversation

I led had taken a slightly odd turn, but I have a decent relationship with one of the key players, so shortly after the meeting, I sent her a private LinkedIn message: "What was up with Stewart?" - A back-channel message which, as it turned out, surfaced a critical issue that I needed to understand, and which would otherwise have likely remained hidden. LinkedIn has, quite literally, become my virtual hallway.

Selling is a social process. The challenges presented by its move into an asocial environment are hard to overstate. We have entered a season where an entirely new skills toolbox needs to be developed.

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## THE SALES MESSAGE

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### 6. Buyer Groups are Mutating, Requiring Message Modifications

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Evidence is early and sparse here, but anecdotally we're hearing that buying groups are growing in size, and in particular, that new faces are appearing earlier in sales pursuits. It seems that the main driver of this is simple convenience: virtual meetings now make it practical for a secondary player or decision influencer to join a meeting, in a way that would never have been economic when the meeting was live. Where this is the case, messaging will need to adapt, and specifically it must **broaden** to more fully reflect the wider priorities of the more diverse buyer groups we are seeing.

Ironically, this is the one change in messaging practice that appears to be driven by virtual selling but that, in fact, was already a priority in a pre-COVID world. Oratium has always taught that sales messaging should intentionally address the needs of the broader buying group, which allows the first-meeting attendees to more

effectively engage those other stakeholders at later decision meetings. However, in today's new world, if these additional participants are showing up in these meetings, this makes the need for "message broadening" both more obvious and an even greater imperative.

### 7. "Narrower Windows" Require Tighter Messages

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As sales meetings move into the virtual space, customers are more distracted, their ability and desire to focus falls. If they are also granting you shorter meetings, this all requires some major structural changes to messaging itself.

#### **Doctrine #1 - Extreme Simplicity**

As one technology sales VP recently put it to me "when you fly to a customer for a meeting you typically get at least 2 hours, and probably lunch before or a beer afterwards. Today, we are getting 45 minutes on average."

**Many companies are seeing a substantial reduction in time in front of the customer.** When you factor in the fact that "Zoom fatigue" is proven and real, you have to conclude that your messaging must now be radically simplified and streamlined.

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## THE SALES MESSAGE

**The problem is that the size of the gap between current message bloat and the level of simplification that's needed is enormous.** Most companies simply do not have the discipline – or the tools – to boil their messaging to the level of simplicity that the new medium requires.

### Doctrine #2 – Intentionally Engaging

As important as this new level of simplification is, the greatest thing that messaging must do is solve for high levels of customer distraction. **In the virtual environment, our highest priority – and most difficult challenge – is to gain the customer's focused attention.** Earlier, we introduced the critical concept of “relevance.” If your story or solution is seen as low relevance, you are almost guaranteed to be sidelined by an already distracted customer. The solution here falls squarely on the shoulders of one critical messaging practice: messages must be emphatically problem-centric. They must be

deeply rooted in a customer business challenge or they will be consigned to the “irrelevant” trash bin. This has always been important, but it gets substantially more so in the world where customers are highly selective about which meetings they take, and then highly distracted in those meetings when they occur.

### Doctrine #3 – Documentary Support

The limitations and distractions of the virtual meeting room mean that the richness and value of the conversation itself is diminished, which places a far higher burden on the “leave-behind” document to carry the value proposition to the customer. To succeed in the new order, sellers must move far beyond standard slide decks. For any sales message to be truly effective, it must both persuade and equip the buyer. **In the virtual environment, the leave behind document is the seller's most critical tool for equipping buyers to on-sell their solution.**

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## CONCLUSION

There's a larger concept underpinning this entire discussion. The big mistake companies are making is to underestimate the changes wrought by the move to virtual, continuing to believe that this is no more than a question of “platform mastery.” As a result, many are seeking simply to replicate their live selling model in a virtual environment: essentially to just do what they've always done – just do it over Zoom or Webex. This is a catastrophic mistake, which a

metaphor will explain. Disney's original animated *The Lion King* movie runs 1 hour 29 minutes. But when performed as a stage show aboard a Disney Cruise ship it's 27 minutes long. Same characters, same plot, same outcome; but an entirely different creative treatment. It works because they understand that you don't try to **replicate** the film, book or play when you move it to a new medium; you have to fundamentally **adapt** it.

**The lesson is clear, because the same is true in sales:**

**If you try to replicate your old live sales model, you will fail.  
Future success requires that your entire sales model, meeting and message  
must be fundamentally ADAPTED for the new post-pandemic environment.**