

A blurred photograph of a modern office hallway with large windows. Several business professionals in suits are walking, their figures out of focus to convey a sense of motion and activity. The lighting is bright and cool-toned.

SELLING THROUGH VOLATILITY

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SUCCESSFUL SALES ORGANIZATIONS CAN'T AFFORD TO PANIC. INSTEAD, THEY NEED A PLAN.

Now that the consensus probability for a recession in the United States in 2025 is essentially a coin flip, American businesses find themselves losing confidence.

Goldman Sachs, J.P. Morgan, and the Peterson Institute all estimate a roughly 50% chance that the economy will fall into a recession, with global impacts.

This outlook stands in stark contrast to the start of the year, when many economists and analysts believed that a recession in the U.S. was unlikely.

This heightened risk is not just a problem because it suggests that businesses will step back from spending. It's a problem because the increasing risk of a recession dramatically changes the calculus of buying decisions. Buyers demand stronger proof of ROI, with elevated levels of risk avoidance. The criteria for success grows more onerous. Higher-level stakeholders increasingly involve themselves in purchasing decisions.

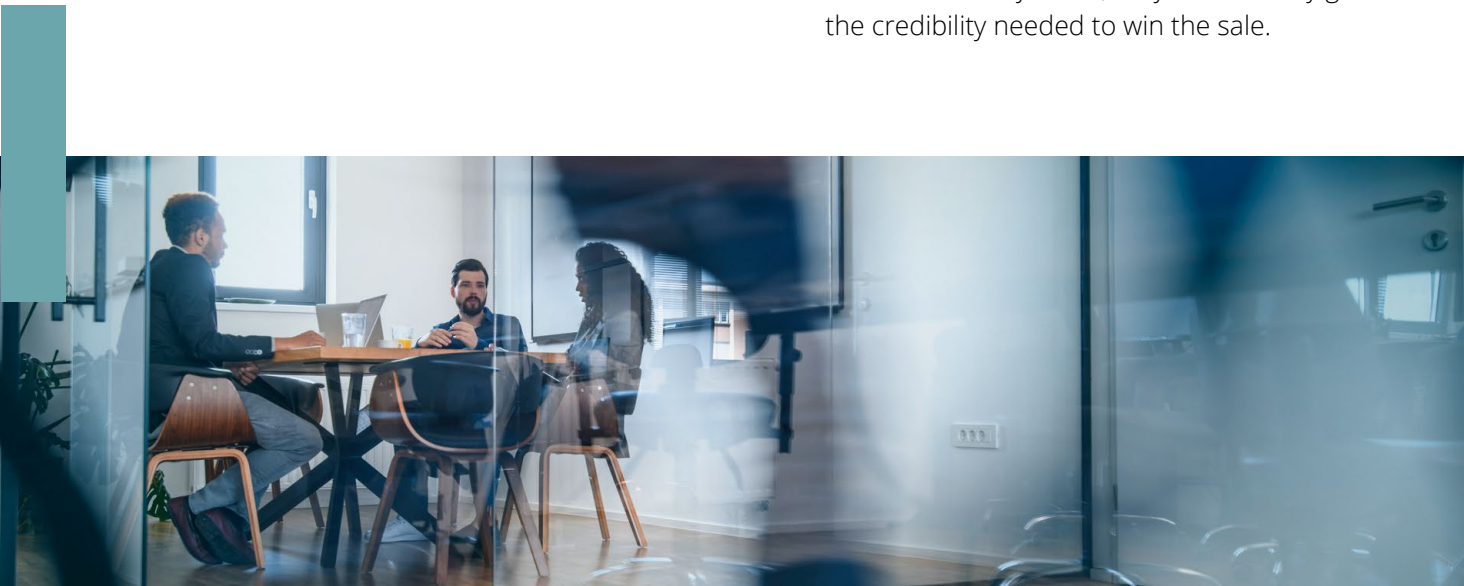
Many sellers have seen these challenges before, but rarely at this intensity and so early in the sales cycle.

For most, the sales strategy outlined at the start of the year doesn't account for this setting. Therefore, sellers and sales leaders need to focus on how to approach an unexpectedly volatile selling environment.

While economic turbulence will persist, the good news is that many businesses will need solutions because of this uncertainty. Effective sellers will be able to reposition their solution to address these new concerns.

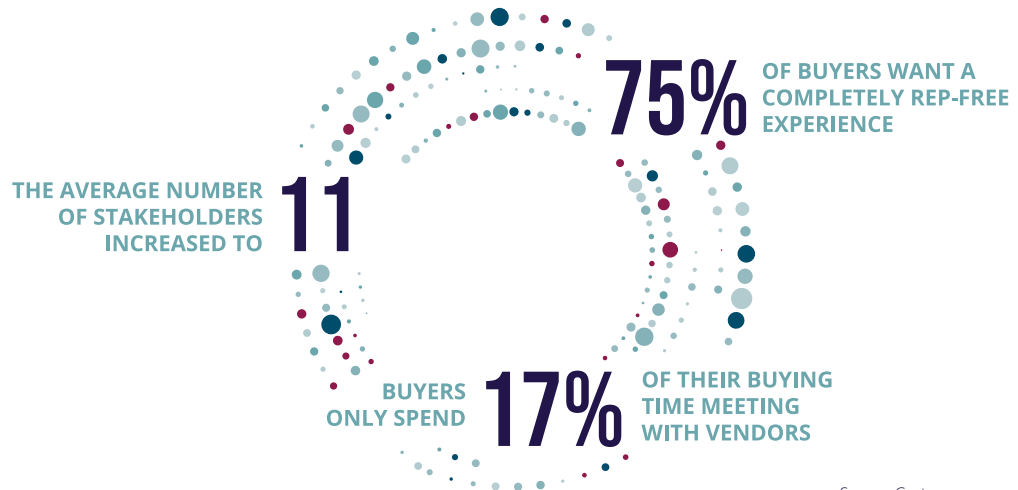
In an environment with minute-to-minute change, buyers and businesses ascribe more value to sellers who can provide a clear, cohesive, and cogent point of view on their industry.

Sellers have an opportunity to become that voice. When they do so, they immediately gain the credibility needed to win the sale.



THE BUYING-SELLING CHAOS SPIRAL

When making a B2B purchase, stakeholders now seek the convenience they experience as consumers.



Source: Gartner

In its Future of Sales 2025 Report, Gartner noted that:

- ▶ The average B2B buying group includes 11 stakeholders, and that number can flex as high as 20
- ▶ Buyers spend more time researching independently online than they do with meeting with potential suppliers (17%)

And that's if they spend time with sellers at all—75% of buyers want a seller-free buying experience.

On average, buyers make initial contact with a seller when they are 57% of the way through their purchase process. This means they spend more than half of their time researching information, setting requirements, and reviewing pricing options—and *not* engaging with sellers.

As buyer groups grow, their ability to come to a consensus drops precipitously. Research in "The

Challenger Sale" showed that the likelihood of a purchase decreased as the size of the buying group expanded. Just 31% of buying groups with six or more stakeholders indicated they would make a purchase in six months—compared to 60% in buying groups of three or four.

Sellers have *less* time to convince *more* people that they need to spend their increasingly limited budget on your company's services and solutions. Those stakeholders also seek the convenience they experience in their lives as consumers. Plus, bringing them to consensus on next steps, much less a purchase decision, gets harder and harder.

These are systemic problems that exacerbate the challenges of selling through volatility.

FLATLINING PERFORMANCE, PLUMMETING CONFIDENCE

What does this increasing complexity mean for sales success? This means your sellers can spend more than half a year on a deal that ultimately goes nowhere.

Of the more than 500 B2B sellers we surveyed for our 2025 Selling Challenges Research Study, 48% cited buyer indecision as the top challenge in winning active opportunities. Sixty percent noted difficulty in gaining buyer commitment as the biggest negotiation hurdle, while 68%, when reviewing the challenges of closing, cited “buyers failing to follow through on agreed-upon actions.” It seems that, when faced with economic uncertainty and by-the-minute changes in economic forecasts, B2B buyers in particular default to a frustrating “wait and see” approach.

Buyer confidence, a better leading indicator of what sellers can expect to encounter in the months ahead, creates even more anxiety. The latest

April [consumer confidence ratings from the University of Michigan](#) showed confidence plummeting to its second-ever lowest rating. The numbers are changing fast, too, with a dip of 30% just since December.

Americans also expect inflation to balloon over the coming year. In April, consumers expected year-ahead inflation to rise to 6.7%, a high not seen since 1981. Expectations matter, because consumers who expect inflation to increase are more likely to curb spending.

Indecision, falling buyer confidence, and looming macro factors make buying considerably more difficult today.

The seller has a responsibility to simplifying the buying process for the customer. Doing so requires the specific set of capabilities that follow.



NAVIGATING AN ERA OF SHAKY CONFIDENCE

In 2009, Challenger researched what sets the most successful sellers apart from the rest. When we studied the top 20% of performers at the height of the Great Recession, we found that Challengers outperformed their peers—even in that uniquely difficult economic crisis. They won by deploying a specific set of skills: teaching, tailoring, taking control of the sale, and using constructive tension.

We also know that the fundamental skills underpinning consultative selling succeed through challenging economic headwinds. In this environment, the most successful sellers also know how to pinpoint drivers of pain and use consultative selling skills to show how a changing economy only makes that pain more intense. They must work toward building consensus in a collaborative way that's sensitive to uncertainty but mindful of the cost of delay. By leaning into consultative selling behaviors and Challenger skills, sellers earn their position as trusted advisors ready to help buyers navigate volatile markets and changing tariff policies.

To do that, sellers must also understand the psychology affecting buyers' decisions. More than ever, we'll see buyers prefer the status quo and choose inaction over disruption. Command of concepts like prospect theory equips sellers to identify the source of the buyer's risk aversion and address it effectively. Swift trust theory prepares sellers to accelerate the trust-building process that must precede any sale. Sellers need to understand other behavioral psychology concepts like choice architecture, sunk cost fallacy, and contrast theory, which apply unseen but substantial influence over a buyer's decision-making—and in doing so, will unlock urgency and win more.

Sales leaders also can't keep pointing their finger at the economic climate or shrugging at the complex landscape they now work in. Instead, they need to focus on equipping sellers with proven skills and behaviors that can win in any economic environment.

SEVEN SKILLS FOR UNLOCKING SUCCESS IN UNCERTAINTY

Sales leaders looking for a competitive edge in uncertain economic times must address the following:



HYPERFOCUS ON DEAL QUALIFICATION



DELIVER A COMPELLING COMMERCIAL INSIGHT



FLEX NEGOTIATION SKILLS



PROACTIVELY ADDRESS CUSTOMER CONCERNS



DRIVE URGENCY BY ARTICULATING THE COST OF INACTION



ASK RECESSION IMPACT QUESTIONS



FIGHT THE FEAR OF MESSING UP

Let's unpack what that means in practice.



HYPERFOCUS ON DEAL QUALIFICATION

When the economy drives risk aversion, sellers must intensify their deal qualification skills. In short, they need to focus on finding the right buyers—the ones who are serious about buying. They need to identify those opportunities that will allow them to access the decision-makers early in the pursuit. Without early access to this group, the seller cannot collaborate with stakeholders on the buying vision. This is also the time to accurately judge the level of indecision in the buying group, which we'll detail in a bit. From there, sellers must ask:

- ▶ Can I offer strong business impact to this account?
- ▶ How valuable is this account to my organization?

There's no time to waste, so sellers must assess and disqualify early and often.



DELIVER A COMPELLING COMMERCIAL INSIGHT

Commercial insight teaches buyers to see their business problems in a new light, using empathy, storytelling, data, and business metrics to reframe their thinking toward making a change. It requires sellers to actively push against a buyer's status quo and expose the flaws in their understanding of their business problems.

Learning something new about their business and hearing a compelling reason to take action are statistically significant drivers of changing a buyer's direction. That's the heart of how sellers need to educate their buyers on why they need to disrupt their status quo.



FLEX NEGOTIATION SKILLS

In our 2025 Selling Challenges research, sellers cited gaining the buyer's commitment to taking specific action on specific dates (60%) as their top concern in negotiations. That's unsurprising, because indecision tends to follow uncertainty. To navigate this hurdle in the negotiation phase, sellers must empower buyers by emphasizing urgency and articulating the cost of delay. Flexing these negotiation skills now also means getting even more comfortable with difficult pricing conversations. This is an economic moment where sellers are likely to encounter price resistance, discount requests, and other changes that can quickly amount to a missed bottom line. Between tariff supply chain squeezes and continued inflationary pressure, customers bring more scrutiny to their spending. Protecting price and maintaining profitability was their second-biggest worry, at 53%.

Instead of discounting, sellers must quantify the value of a solution while using exceptional EQ skills needed to maintain their relationship with the customer throughout the ups and downs of a tense negotiation process. Sellers should be able to use these skills with stakeholders at varying levels of seniority, because in a challenging economy, purchasing decisions often consolidate and move up. Despite growing buying group numbers, fewer people have the authority to spend. Sellers need a clear plan for articulating value and a range of skills to protect or even increase the financial value of the sale. Those skills include converting customer demands to needs, building stakeholder consensus, reinforcing value, and setting next steps.



PROACTIVELY ADDRESS CUSTOMER CONCERNS

Too many sellers make the mistake of treating current customers as a source of future revenue. In reality, uncertain economic conditions likely push these customers to reduce spending as they prepare to weather challenges. When the economic outlook is questionable, it's even more important for sellers to initiate proactive conversations that emphasize the value their solution has provided, and will continue to provide, to the customer's business. It's all too easy to mistake a silent customer for a content one. In fact, often the reverse is true; customers grow quiet when they struggle with internal priorities or bad news for a supplier. Getting ahead of this struggle offers sellers the chance to position their solution in the new context of current economic conditions and show how they can address emerging needs.



DRIVE URGENCY BY ARTICULATING THE COST OF INACTION

The distance between a verbal yes and a signature has never been further apart. Raise your hand if your sellers heard any of the following reasons in the last year after a buyer showed not just interest, but intent:

- ▶ "My budget got cut so I have to make some really difficult decisions on how to spend."
- ▶ "We're focused on another initiative this year—so unfortunately this is not a priority."
- ▶ "I have a new executive, and I need to sell her on sponsoring this purchase."

Or maybe sellers don't hear anything at all.

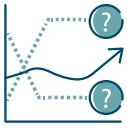
One of these responses can be the result of economic uncertainty, but ultimately, each of these creates an opportunity for your sellers to re-engage buyers in a stalled deal and ignite their sense of urgency, without any influence from macroeconomic conditions. One effective way to do this is through calculating and articulating the cost of inaction. This simply means attaching meaning to deal delays.

In our Selling Challenges research, 40% of sellers said they struggle to motivate buyers by articulating cost of inaction. The first step is to quantify the cost of the status quo. Use their own data to show them, and then, divide the total cost of the status quo—say, the cost of repairing outdated equipment—over the projected number of days left to close the deal. By attaching meaning to delay, sellers show that not deciding is also an (expensive) choice. Anchoring their business to the status quo assumes that change isn't necessary. In reality, changing headwinds will result in increased risk and more potential impact to revenue.



ASK RECESSION IMPACT QUESTIONS

Every customer will react to and plan differently for an economic downturn. As a trusted advisor, it's a seller's job to understand how a possible recession might change profitability—or lead to unexpected opportunities. Remember that a recession might not mean tightening in every area of business. Customers might move up plans to adopt new processes or technology (think generative AI) to increase efficiency. Sellers only gain these insights when they ask questions. Doing so can reveal a change in business priorities and may uncover both challenges and opportunities for the business relationship. Asking these questions does more than reveal the customer's new set of needs, it also puts the seller on the ground floor of the change happening within the customer's business.



FIGHT THE FEAR OF MESSING UP

In “The JOLT Effect,” Dixon and co-author Ted McKenna noted that 44% of no-decision deals could be attributed to a preference for the status quo. But their research uncovered something more troubling: that fear of failing drove 56% of buyers in no-decision losses to choose nothing. We saw this play out in our 2025 Selling Challenges research, too: our nearly 500 respondents highlighted buyer's unwillingness to commit as the biggest challenge throughout the entire sales cycle. Buyer indecision was the biggest overall threat to winning active opportunities (48%), and the biggest threats to closing a deal emerged were customers who won't commit or won't follow-through (68%) or are simply indecisive and opt to do nothing (62%).

As a sales leader, your job is to support your sellers in addressing the key factors that drive these fears. Empower them to show buyers how the pain of change is less than the pain of the same—and then how to ultimately mitigate the risk and fear that keeps buyers from committing to your sellers.

This is also the time for sellers to leverage their status as trusted advisors to support buyers with a collaborative plan. In our Selling Challenges research, 60% said their biggest challenge was gaining buyer commitment to specific, time-bound actions. At this point, the seller's questions and guidance throughout the sale should help them see the buyer's potential roadblocks and sidestep them. They should bring the buyer into the process of solving their pain with a co-created plan, rather than just buying a solution.

IN UNCERTAINTY, LEAN ON SKILLS AND BUYER INSIGHT

Economies rise and fall, and the challenges that sales leaders must navigate in 2025 and beyond are very different from the ones that industries faced in 2001 and 2008.

Despite a slight blip at the start of the pandemic, the global economy experienced robust economic growth over the last decade, powered by low interest rates and easily accessible capital, for several years. After the upheaval of 2020, people became spendy in their personal and work lives. But with geopolitical forces, trade wars, and

inflation heating up, that phase is clearly over. B2B sales organizations must shore up the fundamentals to navigate this challenging time.

It's never too late to bring discipline to your sales team, executing a sales process that works. By embracing seller skills such as commercial teaching, negotiation strategies, and mitigating indecision, sales organizations can thrive, even in an economy and world as unpredictable as the one we now face.

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