



Will Old Be New Again?

How trust, relationships and phone skills have become imperative

The pandemic changed how businesses sell, market and support enterprise customers. Instead of the 300,000-mile-per-year road warrior, we now have the 30-meetings-per-week Zoom warrior.

But is this as new as it seems? During the pandemic, we saw a return to the high-touch mindset, reminiscent of the 1980s. Then, sales teams worked in phone banks, while local teams would visit companies in person to make big, multimillion-dollar deals. Often, executives would be called in for the big close.

Now, executives have become more involved with meetings, forging personal relationships with customers and employees alike at a rate that has not been achieved in many years. And despite the lack of face-to-face meetings, go-to-market customer-facing teams have learned to provide a human touch to customers, becoming more business partner than service provider.

But many organizations struggle with questions of culture and leadership. How can you build a truly great remote client team? How can you create a culture? How do you build trust over Zoom?

Spencer Stuart interviewed executives from companies of multiple sizes and industries about how these changes will affect business into the future.

Virtual selling will stay

Video conferencing and collaboration tools were a boon for executives. These tools helped making sales and delivering services to customers faster and more efficient than ever.

Many executives boasted of having best-ever quarters throughout the pandemic. One executive said that they did 10 meetings a week with the C-suites of their clients instead of their usual two when they had to travel, a change they hoped would stay long after the pandemic. Why? It works, and they get much broader client participation.

For example, a CEO of a content management system company said that the first time his company used Zoom to demo its product, it was their shortest ever sales cycle. By 2021, their typical sales cycle had shrunk from 190 days pre-COVID to 60 days during the pandemic.

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This CEO noticed that more senior people were involved on both sides of these calls, which made for faster sales cycles. “Normally, they would rely on their teams to do all the research and summarize all the findings,” he said. “But they want that business solution as of yesterday, so they're getting involved and quickly taking a decision.”

A hybrid model

Executives now see the benefit of video conferencing, which has meant shrinking travel and entertainment expenses. Executives believe that this will continue for years.

“I won't be doing 300,000 miles,” said a chief revenue officer of a SaaS organization. “I'll probably be traveling half as much as I was.”

Most executives agreed that executive travel will never go back to how it was pre-COVID. Many believe that their companies will adopt a hybrid model, using video conferencing far more often and only traveling when necessary.

But soon, some sales teams will likely get back on the road, executives said. It's difficult to read body language and get a feel for the client over a video call, many noted. They seem to feel that the human touch is missing, which could spell the return of what one executive called "purposeful travel."

We'll be keeping our eye on how executives plan to meet and travel in 2022 and beyond.

Phone skills are back

More screen time will mean digital burnout, many executives fear. But one chief sales officer said that he believes that this will mean the return of phone skills — a sales throwback — whether the potential deal is \$1,000 or \$2 million.

Making an old-fashioned sales call as simple as "Hey, I'm reaching out" could set an organization apart, he said. There are other old-fashioned ways that salespeople can cut through the virtual clutter, he said, including sending hand-written notes.

And even on video, the fundamentals of phone skills are imperative. Zoom meetings, like the phone conversations of the old days, need to have direction. A few executives said that successful teams meet together before a meeting with customers to hammer out points of focus. They want to ensure that they are on the same page, even from afar.

Customers buy based on the product and its value, but also based on the trust they have in the firms from whom they are buying and the culture of those firms. Therefore, many of those interviewed noted the importance of building the culture of these teams on the phone. To build team culture, many believe it will be important to get the youngest/newest phone-based team members back to the office, as the shadow, bullpen mentoring has not replicated in the virtual world. We note that culture work previously used exclusively for top-team effectiveness might be well-suited for shaping culture throughout the organization.

Back to the office or back to a local/regional team model? It depends.

For many employees, remote work has been a pleasant surprise — for others, it's been confusing and lonely.

This presents the leadership and culture question of our time: Should we come back to the office? Should we create go-to-market teams that are much more local so that we are not dependent on air travel?

All executives struggled with how to introduce or sustain their culture amid a fully remote workforce, though some were thrilled that they could now feel more comfortable hiring regionally.

One executive, a chief sales officer of a training and risk management organization, said that he sees three categories of employees with potentially different views on remote work: new hires, entry-level hires and self-motivated employees.

New hires will need some time to come into a shared space and get acclimated to the company culture, he said, while entry-level hires are likely working their first job out of college — they're eager to get out of their apartment and come into an office.

But self-motivated employees tend to love the freedom of working remotely. The challenge, he said, will be to find ways to transmit the culture, knowledge and leadership skills from the self-motivated employees — typically veterans who have been with the company for years — to the first two groups.

While all executives we spoke with have implemented virtual interviewing and onboarding — giving them the capabilities to hire anyone, anywhere — they all struggle with how to link these dispersed employees into the culture. One executive noted that creating a virtual culture felt like hosting a TV show, which made him uncomfortable.

Gone are the days of windshield time and happy hour: So, what can possibly replace those touchpoints? Some executives have suggested virtual happy hours, assigning a mentor or returning to a hybrid schedule — working two days in the office and three from home, for example.

Decisions to leave or join firms are being significantly predicated on three things: the agility of the firm and how they led through the pandemic and their future direction; decisiveness (but optionality) on the back-to-work status as it impacts their home life; and the ability to learn and grow.

“Video calls are great, we can get a little bit of that,” said a chief sales officer. “But [we need] some team-building every couple of weeks, maybe a session where everyone's in the office at some point in time. Because I'm an old guy, but I learned a lot by listening to the guys beside me when they were doing things, because they were older, wiser, and they'd been around the block way longer than I had.”

There is a tremendous amount of growth and churn in customer-facing organizations across the technology sector right now. Decisions to leave or join firms are being significantly predicated on three things: the agility of the firm and how they led through the pandemic and their future direction; decisiveness (but optionality) on the back-to-work status as it impacts their home life; and the ability to learn and grow. So, what does this mean for the board and senior leaders?

Leadership potential is as important to assess as is leadership history. Because, for most executives, we only have one year of leadership performance in a virtual world versus five to 20-plus years in the legacy world, it is not as effective as it once was to consider leadership performance only in a non-virtual context. Benchmarking and science are crucial to assessing leaders today.

Onboarding and culture infusion are still best done in person. Three-quarters of those we interviewed are looking at opening more satellite offices to build local cultures and teams for drop-in team meetings or clusters of exclusively phone-based resources. Yet, very few went as far to say they would bring back the concept of fully regional teams with company cars.

Customers and employees alike demand trust

Without face-to-face meetings, finding new ways to earn the customer's trust has become essential, a prominent software executive said. One way to earn trust is to become more business partner than provider.

“I see the sales cycle changing a little bit and I don't see it ever going back. Buyers are going to want access to power just as much as sellers do.”

“The buyer now wants to know who has the power to make sure implementation of the software does what it's supposed to do,” he said. “I see the sales cycle changing a little bit and I don't see it ever going back. Buyers are going to want access to power just as much as sellers do.”

More than power, he said that customers want to be taken care of. You're no longer able to shake someone's hand, nor are you able to look them in the eye. For this reason, he believes that companies must hire salespeople who truly believe in and are motivated by the company mission.

“Because I'm not signing a half-million-dollar contract unless I know the guy that I'm signing it with is in the boat with me,” he said. “And it's harder to convey that with technology than in the room.”

Another executive noted that customers now want more of his time, even after a deal is closed. Customers now know how easy it is for an executive to get on a video call and answer any questions they may have.

The ability to establish trust with employees became even more crucial during the pandemic. Every executive said they were doing more town-hall meetings, more one-on-one calls and more spot subject calls than they ever had, and it still doesn't seem to be enough. Without the buzz in the hallways, employees are thirsty for constant information exchange and access to their respective leaders. It appears, the ability to communicate effectively in these settings was and will continue to be a differentiator.

While meeting was simple during the pandemic, when everyone had a glut of time, how will executives manage their busy schedules in a post-pandemic world? This goes back to the earlier comment about being decisive about the executive-access model, recognizing that the model may need to evolve on a quarterly basis.

The traits for these times

With customer trust and relationships on center stage, many executives said that they want to hire leaders who are empathetic, willing to learn and focused on driving customer success.

The pandemic was a time of learning how to use new software and communication tools. One executive recalled conducting video interviews in which dogs were barking, backgrounds were messy, and faces were taking up the whole screen. These potential employees clearly hadn't adapted to the times, he said.

Executives have honed their own traits, too. Many found that employees responded well to regular-but-informal communication, even picking up the phone just to say, "hello." They also found themselves becoming more communicative, transparent and vulnerable with customers and employees alike.

"I've spent more time talking about my personal experiences over the last 13 months than I ever thought possible," said a sales leader at a multinational software company. "There was a window of time when I felt like people didn't want to hear any of that stuff. Now, I'm finding I get feedback after every one of the times I do it or any one of my leaders does it that people want to hear more."

Interesting enough, cultural leadership traits such as results-focused, learning-oriented and purpose-driven that had previously been associated with successful digital leaders are now the greatest asks for the go-to-market leaders in sales, customer success and service. We expect that will continue as organizations respond to the changing demands of their clients and teams.

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