

TRANSFORMATION OF MARKETING AND SALES ROLES IN B2B COMPANIES: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The evolving landscape of B2B marketing and sales faces multifaceted challenges spurred by digital transformation, AI integration, efficiency measures, and the pandemic's shift from personal to virtual interactions. These changes prompt a reevaluation of departmental functions and collaboration between marketing and sales, impacting the education of future managers. This study delves into the roles of marketing and sales in technical B2B companies and their implications for higher education. Three investigations were conducted: analysis of 150 job ads, four focus groups, and a quantitative survey (N=114), exploring marketing-sales interfaces. Findings stress the need for enhanced digital skills and customer-centricity in marketing education. Marketing and sales professionals require heightened analytical prowess for managing extensive customer data. Evolving job titles like customer relationship manager and omnichannel marketing manager denote a growing fusion between departments, focusing on individual customers rather than on target groups as suggested by classic marketing textbooks. Lead generation, once exclusive to sales, now spans both realms, yet disparities in perceptions lead to potential conflicts. Curricula should emphasize direct customer interaction for marketers and analytical depth for sales, enabling effective digital negotiations while preserving customer relations. Lastly, educational institutions should reconsider the traditional division between marketing and sales in curricula, fostering a more cohesive and collaborative mindset among future managers.

Keywords: *Marketing education, sales and marketing functions, marketing-sales integration, marketing curricula, sales education.*

1. Introduction

This study examines digitalization's impact on marketing and sales in industrial B2B firms and its implications for marketing and sales in higher education. It highlights the growing importance of technical and digital skills for managers in these fields, accentuated by the increasing digitalization, notably accelerated by the recent global pandemic. (Fabrizio & Vo, 2023; Rodrigues, Takahashi, & Prado, 2021). Empirically, the research focuses on industrial B2B entities, which encompass companies involved in producing and delivering goods and services, including specialized software for industrial purposes. This sector represents around 80% of businesses in Europe according to Eurostat. (2020). The presence of B2B-focused marketing and sales positions in Austrian job listings underscores their significance in the local market. However, there remains a gap in understanding digital capabilities within B2B sectors (Herhausen, Miočević, Morgan, & Kleijnen, 2020), as well as the ability to break down disciplinary silos between marketing and sales in education calling for further exploration in these areas.

2. Digital technologies in marketing

Digitalization transforms B2B marketing, enabling platforms that enhance firms' capabilities and foster value co-creation in the market (Kim & Moon, 2021). Technology revolutionizes marketing, emphasizing customer relations and the service economy, reshaping traditional approaches and urging the bridging of knowledge gaps (Lilien, 2016). Marketers leverage technology to build personalized connections, anticipate needs, and offer tailored solutions. Digital data provides profound insights into consumer behavior, guiding data-driven decisions to optimize strategies. The digital realm blurs the lines between marketing and sales, allowing marketing to take on roles historically attributed to sales across industries. Yet, a definitive understanding of digital innovation's precise impact on marketing remains elusive. The complexity and evolution of these concepts hinder a comprehensive grasp of their effects on present marketing practices. The potential use of artificial intelligence (AI) in personalized B2B

marketing strategies is anticipated, signaling advancements in this field (Chen, Jiang, Jia, & Liu, 2022). The question remains as to what extent universities are already prepared in their teaching for these dramatically changed practical requirements.

3. Interplay of marketing and sales in B2B companies

Kotler and colleagues (2006) outlined the historical tension between marketing and sales, citing marketing's customer disconnect and sales' short-term focus. Decades of discourse have scrutinized their blurred boundaries in B2B settings (Le Meunier-FitzHugh & Piercy, 2009). Recent scholarship forewarns of digitalization potentially shifting responsibilities from sales to marketing, reigniting conflicts (Baycur, Delen, & Kayışkan, 2022; Khan & Basak, 2021). Traditionally, marketing crafts strategies for broad audiences, while sales nurtures individual relationships and closes deals. Digitalization transforms collaboration, yet debates persist about the impact of integrating these functions (Rouziès & Hulland, 2014). This high level of technology-driven interdisciplinarity also poses significant challenges for universities.

4. Marketing and sales in higher education

The lag between evolving employer demands and business curricula arises due to the rapid evolution of the knowledge economy, which outpaces management education's adaptation in universities. This discrepancy becomes pronounced, particularly in the case of AI education, due to AI's interdisciplinary nature, posing challenges for cross-disciplinary integration in academic settings (Sollosy & McInerney, 2022). In academia, despite numerous academic programs available in Europe labelled "Marketing and Sales", the challenge lies in the disconnected teaching of marketing and sales. The segregation between these fields in education perpetuates silos that affect graduates' mindsets, while companies focus on cross-departmental collaboration to enhance efficiency (Markovitz, Long, Fain, & Sandler, 2021). Another issue pertains to students' inadequate inclination toward quantitative analysis within marketing education. Many students hold misconceptions about the mathematical rigor required in marketing programs, resulting in limited exposure to data-centric study content, a crucial need in modern industries (Flight, 2021; Miah, Solomonides, & Gammack, 2020).

This research employed a tripartite approach comprising job ad analysis, focus groups, and surveys to delve into the evolving requirements and overlaps between marketing and sales roles.

5. Methodology

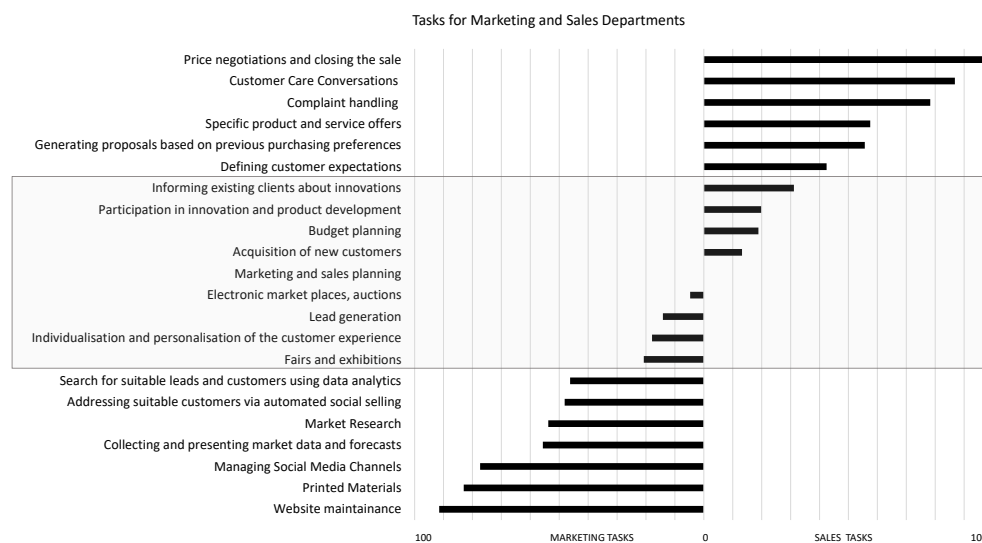
Initially, a comprehensive analysis of 150 recruitment advertisements sourced from three popular job platforms (karriere.at, willhaben.at, LinkedIn) provided insights into evolving job requirements. The job advertisements were analyzed and categorized based on several key themes, such as *Interconnection between Sales and Marketing Roles*; *Fusion of Sales & Marketing Jobs*; or *Technological Proficiency*. Subsequently, a series of focus groups engaged experienced marketing and sales professionals from B2B companies, extracting deeper insights into evolving job roles, functions, and the impact of digitalization on daily operations. Guiding set of questions was developed, encompassing several key inquiries, such as: *How is the alignment of sales and marketing structured within your company? How do you foresee the evolution of collaboration between sales and marketing? What were the most significant changes observed within your department?* Four focus groups with 3-6 people each were administered. Lastly, a quantitative study targeted marketing and sales professionals, gathering 114 responses that assessed the changing landscape of tasks, digitalization-induced changes, and anticipated future developments in their domains. The interviews were done online with a structured questionnaire and mostly scaled questions. The respondents were distributed as follows: 15% in top management, 12.5% in sales management, 13.3% in marketing management, 11.7% in marketing staff, 16.7% as Key Account Managers, 8.3% in sales staff, and the remainder held various positions. 90% of the respondents originated from B2B companies, 70% from international corporations, 31.7% from large enterprises, and 25% from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Of the respondents, 59.2% were male, 39.2% were female (with the remainder choosing not to specify). The most prominent age groups were between 19 and 25 years old (8.3%), 26 and 30 years old (26.7%), 31 and 35 years old (24.2%), and 36 and 40 years old (16.7%).

6. Findings

The *job ads analysis* highlighted a surging need for digital marketing skills like SEO, web design, and programming, alongside vital analytical competencies in business analytics and data management for marketers as well as for future salespeople. Notably, there is an increasing number of job titles like *customer relationship manager*, *customer success manager*, *customer onboarding manager* and *omnichannel manager*, which underscore the merging of marketing and sales, prioritizing individualized customer focus. Lead generation, once a sole sales task, now spans both departments, emphasizing the evolving synergy. Among analyzed marketing roles, 56% include elements of sales, focusing on sales strategies, pricing, and customer interaction. Conversely, 28% of open sales positions call for traditionally marketing related activities, such as collaborative strategies, product positioning, and introducing new products. KAM positions largely link to sales, aligning with its current placement in the sales department. However, 50% showcase ties to marketing, involving campaign creation, document design, and even integration within the marketing team. This suggests a potential future shift of KAM towards marketing or a bridging role, aiming to enhance customer satisfaction through joint marketing-sales efforts.

The *focus group investigation* uncovered enduring divides between marketing and sales, with sales dominating, undermining marketing's value. Strategies like cross-departmental rotations were mentioned to be essential for integration. The emphasis on digitalization, including AI and CRM tools, is critical for survival. Various digital marketing tools and skills, such as SEO, Google analytics, and graphic design, underscore technology's role in cost-saving and problem-solving. Marketers need advanced technical skills and a customer-centric approach. Misconceptions about sales overtaking marketing persist despite both departments being crucial. Most respondents agreed that AI and CRM tools underscore the necessity of closer collaboration, especially for tailored products. Sales prioritizes revenue, while Marketing focuses on R&D, and the significance of personal contact in B2B relationships remains evident. The imperative for enhanced collaboration between marketing and sales was emphasized by both marketing and salespeople, still highlighting the current dominance of sales over marketing, but recognizing the latter's pivotal role in product promotion and strategy. Addressing this divergence involves potential job rotations while maintaining distinct departmental functions. Marketing, often confined to stereotypes, needs recognition for its strategic role in paving the way for sales success. Collaborative training initiatives and either physical proximity or structured meetings were mentioned as an avenue to enhance their joint efforts. Ongoing efforts for improved collaboration between sales and marketing departments necessitate changes like smaller teams and reciprocal trainings. While their complete dissolution isn't expected, improved communication and cooperation are deemed valuable, particularly for production and product management. Suggestions to discard stereotypes and elevate marketing's strategic role aim to align with a leadership (and compensation) model emphasizing joint objectives for improved market readiness.

Figure 1. Tasks allocated to marketing or salespeople.

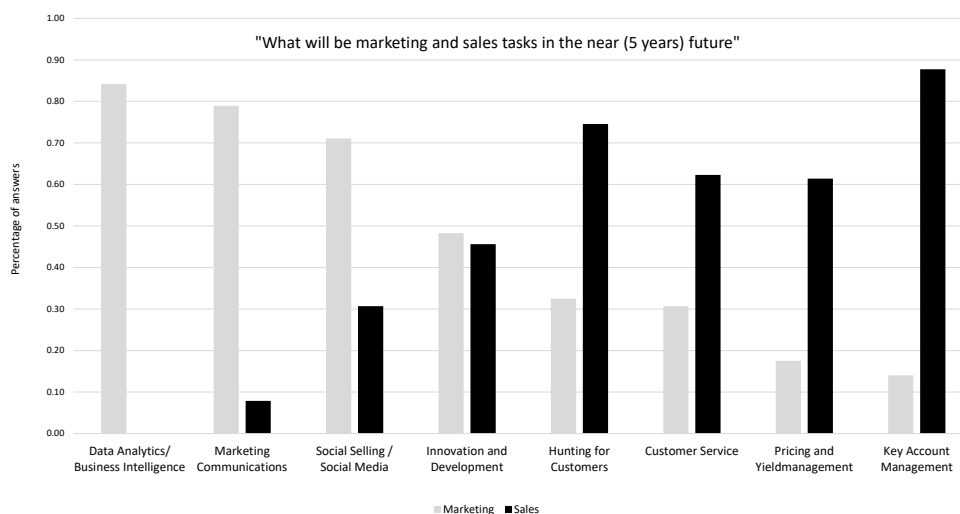


The *survey* highlighted defined tasks like marketing and sales planning, customer acquisition, lead generation, and involvement in innovation and product development (figure 1). While certain areas of responsibility were distinctly attributed to expected roles, numerous tasks lacked clear delineation

within these assignments Tasks marked in the gray area of figure 1, lack clear singular assignment, potentially leading to operational inefficiencies and conflicts, necessitating focused managerial attention to address such challenges. Alternatively, these areas could represent an opportunity to demand and foster systematic collaboration between marketing and sales. Moreover, they present potential for greater integration between disciplines in the academic education of marketing and sales.

In forecasting the competencies expected from marketing and sales departments in the next 5 years, trends indicate a demand for diverse skills. Marketing personnel are anticipated to possess analytical skills, data management expertise, social selling, and social media management abilities. Conversely, sales staff are projected to excel in prospecting, customer service, price and yield management, and key account management (Exhibit 2). Notably, "Social Selling" predominantly falls under marketing, reflecting the growing acceptance of social media in B2B sales. This trend signifies marketing's specialized proficiency in leveraging social platforms for sales endeavors.

Figure 2. Future perspective: Tasks required from marketing and sales departments in 5 years.



Lastly, the examination of the level of integration between marketing and sales, based on Kotler's (2006) categorization and measurement instrument, revealed an integration level of 66.8 (of max 100). This indicates a positive understanding of collaboration between marketing and sales departments, however with potential for improvement. This observation suggests that organizations are recognizing the need for specialized roles that bridge the gap between the two functions and facilitate a more integrated approach. The potential for reaching an integration of marketing and sales lies in the development of shared processes or business funnels designed to manage and measure revenue-generating activities.

7. Implications for higher education

The studies emphasize the importance of integrating technological and digital competencies into marketing and sales related curricula. Institutions can introduce specialized courses focusing on pertinent digital technologies like big data analytics, social media management, and AI-driven marketing strategies for both marketing and sales disciplines. Interdisciplinary collaboration among professors from diverse fields and across academic units of varying disciplines could mirror contemporary corporate organizational structures. Universities can facilitate joint projects or collaborative initiatives among these fields, fostering practical experience similar to real-world business interactions. For example, rotational programs or collaborative projects between marketing and sales classes can deepen students' understanding of their interdependence. To address industry demands, institutions should offer training in analytical skills, social media management, and customer-centric competencies. Incorporating practical training, internships, or case studies that mirror industry requirements can better prepare students. Preparing for future trends entails instilling adaptability, agile thinking, and an understanding of emerging technologies. Universities must equip graduates to navigate evolving industry landscapes effectively. Encouraging faculty to research the impact of digitalization on marketing and sales dynamics can contribute to thought leadership. By integrating these implications, higher education institutions can produce agile professionals well-versed in the evolving realms of marketing and sales, especially in the context of digital transformation.

8. Limitations and avenues for future studies

While this research delved into a specific B2B industrial setting, caution must be exercised when generalizing these results to other domains like services, retail, or B2C sectors. Future studies encompassing these sectors might yield more holistic findings. Additionally, the study utilized mixed methods with relatively small sample sizes. A larger sample, particularly in the quantitative survey, could enhance the robustness of findings and bolster the reliability of conclusions. Acknowledging that this research transpired post-COVID, the pervasive influence of the pandemic, including accelerated digitalization, might have skewed results toward an overly optimistic view of digitalization's impact. Subsequent studies could explore long-term effects beyond immediate post-pandemic dynamics.

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