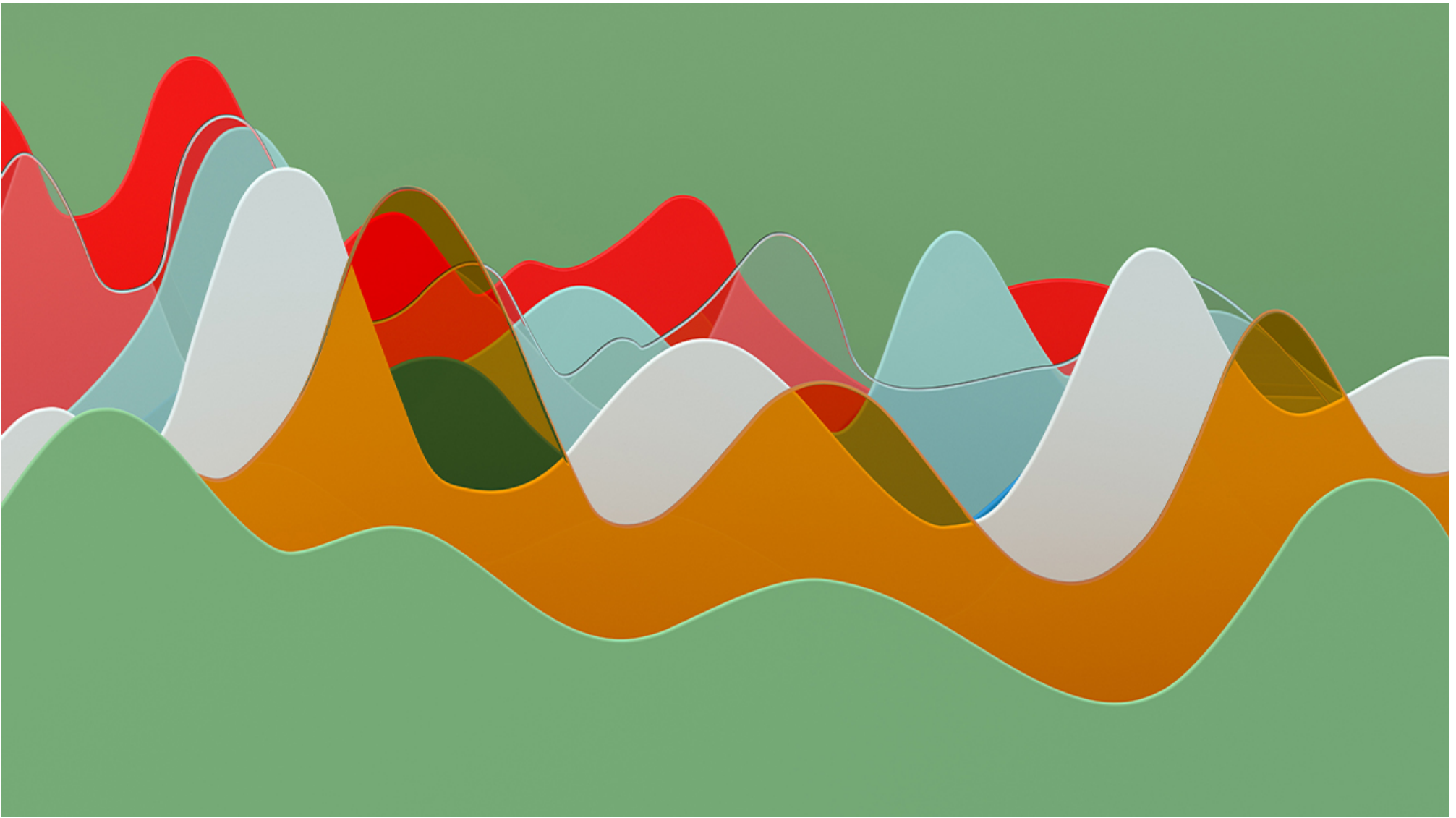


SALES

# 4 Things Sales Organizations Must Do to Adapt to the Crisis

by [Andris A. Zoltners](#) , [PK Sinha](#) and [Sally E. Lorimer](#)

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The coronavirus pandemic has struck at the very heart of what makes sales organizations tick. Sales leaders are asking: What should we do now to keep our field-sales organization safe and productive? And what does this mean for the future of selling?

The answers vary across industries, as captured vividly by a recent Goldman Sachs headline, “Light at the End of the Tunnel or an Oncoming Train? Depends on Where You Are Standing.” Some industries, such as transportation, hospitality, and real estate, have suffered immensely and are facing an existential crisis. Others, such as teleconferencing, online learning, and virtual private networks (VPNs), are experiencing a sharp upturn in demand. In between, most industries are experiencing a demand slump. The direct and knock-on effects are continuing to reverberate through companies and industries.

Faced with these challenges, sales organizations need to *refocus, retool, retrench*, and, in most cases, to prepare for the eventual *rebound*.

## **Refocus**

A defining characteristic of the buyer’s mindset is deep uncertainty. At the very outset of the refocusing process, sellers acknowledge that uncertainty and adapt with flexibility. Once employers and salespeople have moved beyond the acute concern about personal safety, business continuity will come to the fore. Companies will have to reconsider what customers now value, and what the sales organization’s role in delivering that value can be.

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Buyers in industries that are not seriously impaired or are seeing a spike in demand will still need help from salespeople. Buyers in immobilized industries will want



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salespeople to assist with revising past orders and delivery schedules, and with developing contingency plans. As business deteriorates and many customers face the specter of bankruptcy, previously booked business will no longer be secure.

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Even when customers are buying, sellers may be unable to deliver on past promises. It will be easier for salespeople to deal with repeat customers who are familiar with the company and the value it offers, and already know how to work with the sales team. Outreach will also be easier with digitally savvy customers who prefer video and digital interaction to in-person meetings, and with informed customers who need limited assistance from salespeople.

If and while customers are preoccupied, especially in temporarily hard-hit industries, sales organizations can focus on activities that prepare for future success. These include activities such as generating leads and account prioritization and planning.

As the situation changes and new information emerges, a nimble mindset will be essential for adapting rapidly.

## **Retool**

With the mandate for social distancing, even field salespeople now have to work remotely, using online video, social selling, email, and more. (Within days of the pandemic declaration, the number of Zoom meetings at our consulting firm, ZS, shot up from 4,000 to 11,000 a day.) We estimate that, well before work-from-home directives, most field salespeople were communicating with customers digitally more than half of the time. This was enabled by the increasing quality and ubiquity of digital-communication technologies, along with the growing majority of buyers and

sellers who are digital natives. Digital connection works especially well with repeat customers, and buyers who are well-informed. Still, many field salespeople and buyers have shunned digital channels and aids, either because they could or because they missed the technology train.

That will have to change. The current crisis will force even the technology-challenged to migrate to video platforms such as Zoom. We are seeing this already in people's personal lives.

## **Retrench**

Ravaged industries such as travel and entertainment have already laid off many salespeople. Some of these jobs will never return. Downsized sales organizations must redeploy field-sales efforts to key customers and sales activities while boosting the use of digital self-service and inside sales channels. Eroding sales will constrain companies' ability to pay salespeople incentives, which often represent a large portion of salespeople's pay.

A few companies are following a courageous path. Before the Covid-19 outbreak, the London-based bank HSBC had announced staff reductions, which included sales jobs. When the pandemic hit, the bank temporarily paused these layoffs. How long companies in hard-hit industries can continue to support their people while keeping their business viable remains to be seen.

## **Rebound**

It's hard to look beyond the urgent steps needed to respond to the current economic freeze. But however long it takes, the situation will eventually improve, and most companies will rebound. Some trends that were already affecting sales organizations before Covid-19 are likely to accelerate as companies bounce back. And many changes to personal selling implemented during the crisis that look temporary now will become permanent.

**More Digital Selling.** Even before the pandemic hit, most field sales contact with business customers already used digital channels. With the extended forced virtual-only communication period, even slow adopters of technology are changing. The virality of digital usage is accelerating the climb up the digital learning curve for customers, salespeople, and entire sales organizations.

**Fewer Field Salespeople, More Inside Salespeople and Customer Success Managers (CSMs).** In recent years, growth in the number of jobs for both inside salespeople and CSMs has far outpaced growth in jobs for field salespeople. These trends will accelerate as companies rebounding from the pandemic seek to match sales efforts with the way their customers want to buy. Inside sales roles reduce sales costs and align well with digitally savvy and informed buyers. CSMs encourage customer loyalty and retention by helping customers realize ongoing value. CSM numbers are increasing as companies expand focus on growth from existing customers, especially in complex environments.

**New Success Profiles for Field Salespeople.** With the shift to digitally enabled buying and selling, more-informed customers expect salespeople to add value beyond what websites provide. As the use of digital tools and analytics grows, field salespeople will need more than interpersonal skills. The old profile of a winning salesperson as a rugged individualist is giving way to a new profile: a team player who can collaborate with others.

**A More Digitally Savvy Sales Organization.** Practically every aspect of the sales organization will accelerate down the path of digital value and innovation. Sales managers will become more comfortable coaching and managing remotely. Sales organizations will leverage technology to make sales recruiting, training, and other programs more effective and efficient. We expect many field sales organizations will emerge from this difficult time with a digitally savvier sales culture that is well-positioned to drive future success.

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**Andris A. Zoltners** is a professor emeritus at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. He is a cofounder of ZS Associates, a global business consulting firm, and a coauthor of a series of sales management books, including *The Power of Sales Analytics*.

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**PK Sinha** is a cofounder of ZS Associates, a global business consulting firm. He teaches sales executives at the Indian School of Business and is a coauthor of a series of sales management books, including *Building a Winning Sales Force*.

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**Sally E. Lorimer** is a marketing and sales consultant and a business writer for ZS Associates, a global business consulting firm. She is a coauthor of a series of sales management books, including *Sales Compensation Solutions*.

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