Do you need change or sales transformation?

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Mercuri International's research and my own practical experience point in the same direction: understand how your customers buy and build your sales model accordingly.

Since 2023, many B2B companies have seen sales slow and margins shrink. Higher interest rates and a weak economy hit some industries hard. Others faced increased competition or new customer expectations and buying behaviors. After a round of cost cuts, the next step is often the same: invest in growth and transform sales. Move from reactive order-taking to proactive selling and grow the customers you already have.

Most of these transformations don't deliver. Only 12% of sales leaders say they kept productivity up during a transformation, according to Gartner. McKinsey found that more than half of the value lost in transformations is lost during implementation.

When companies come to us, the request often sounds like this: "We need our sellers to be more proactive. Can you run a two-day training?" Or "we want to double our revenue in the next 5 years – we need sales training" It's rarely that simple. Training can improve how sellers sell within the sales model you have. That's change.

A transformation changes the model itself: how you lead, steer, organize and reward sales, so that the new way of selling becomes the natural one.

Depending on what you are trying to achieve, you need to figure out and structure the problem first and then think about the solution. Seems like many companies get this wrong.

I've worked in strategy and business development for more than 15 years. Mercuri International's research and my own practical experience point in the same direction: understand how your customers buy and build your sales model accordingly.

This is where many companies get things mixed up. They try to solve sales challenges through sales training alone.

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The two-day fix

The pattern is familiar. Leadership spots a problem in sales: lower sales, pressure on margins, a new offering that won't sell or new ambitions like doubling revenue, increasing growth rate, selling solutions. The conclusion comes fast: the sellers need training. Book two days, send the team, done.

It's usually not that easy. Not because the training is bad, but because the logic is.

One finding in the Sales Efficiency Study III (Mercuri International, 2013) was that how often sellers received sales training had no significant effect on growth. On margins, the effect was slightly negative. An uncomfortable finding for someone working in sales development. Training does work when the sales model already fits how customers buy and the gap is genuinely a specific skill. But what I see is that the problem is rarely isolated to just one skill or a specific behaviour.

Knowledge doesn't change behaviour. A seller can leave a sales training course understanding value-based selling and be back to old habits within weeks. The CRM, KPIs, processes, pipeline meetings and managers still reward the old way of working.

So, despite the training, you get the old behaviour and the old results.

Another challenge with the two-day training is management. When managers aren't involved before, during and especially after the training, little or nothing happens. Managers need to take ownership of the change or transformation, and they need the right support and experience to lead it. Not all of them have that. When managers do their part and support the new behavior, the results follow. Think of behavior as the leading indicator and results as the lagging indicator.

Training can definitely improve skills and new behaviors in the sales organization if done correct. But it is important to understand that it is best suited if the issue is a skill and behavior issue, the buying logic and sales model are a match and other areas supporting this are already optimized.

What changed my mind: how much buying logic matters

What I've changed my mind about most is how much buying logic matters. Put simply: how do your customers buy? The buying logic is how the customer buys. The sales logic is how you sell to match it or what we call the sales model.

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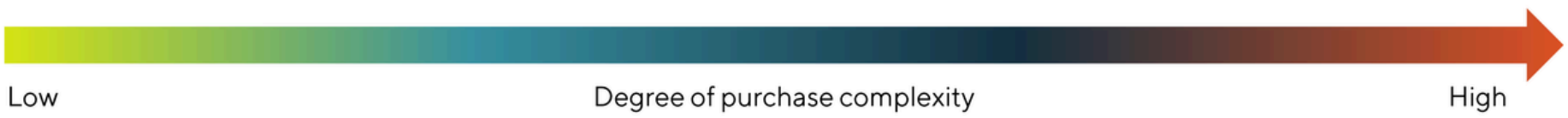
	Transactional	Traditional	Complex	Distributed
BUYING LOGIC	Automated low-risk routine purchases (I do it myself)	Routine purchases with low risk (I need some advice)	High risk, complicated purchases (I need high levels of advice)	Strategically important purchases (we need several experts)
THE OFFER	Standardized offers	Packaged offers	Customized solutions and values beyond the product	Transformation Tailored solutions Strategic core competence
DECISION TIME	Minutes to hours 0-1 decision maker	Hours to days 1-3 decision makers	Days to months Multiple decision makers	Months to years Multiple, often decision-making committees
BUYING CRITERIA	Price, performance, simplicity, speed, user friendliness	Price, performance, simplicity, speed	Trust, impact of solution, risk management, expertise & advice	Vision, brand, values, deliverability



The four buying logics. Source: Mercuri International Research.

Our research separates four logics: transactional (self-service), traditional (smaller deals, short cycles), complex (many stakeholders, cycles of months) and distributed (large deals run as projects over months or years).

If customers want tailored solutions, see high risk, need a lot of advice, and the implementation affects many people, they are buying according to a complex buying logic. That for example require different sellers, different steering and different KPIs than fast standard deals (traditional sales). In short, a different sales model.

Mercuri's Decision code report (2026) puts numbers on it. Complex deals involve 6.8 people in the buying process, up from 2.1 in our 2007 study.

They affect 231 people in the customer's organization, compared with 53 for traditional purchases. In these deals, 77% of buyers fear implementation will take longer or cost more than expected, and 55% fear employees will resist.

Many people know this intuitively. The research gave me a way to name it. With clients I keep seeing the same mismatch: a sales model, KPIs and training built for one logic, while customers buy in another. Most sales models are built for traditional sales, because that's the logic most organizations know.

Our efficiency study also shows that companies in complex sales that steer based on customer value grow about 8 percentage points faster.

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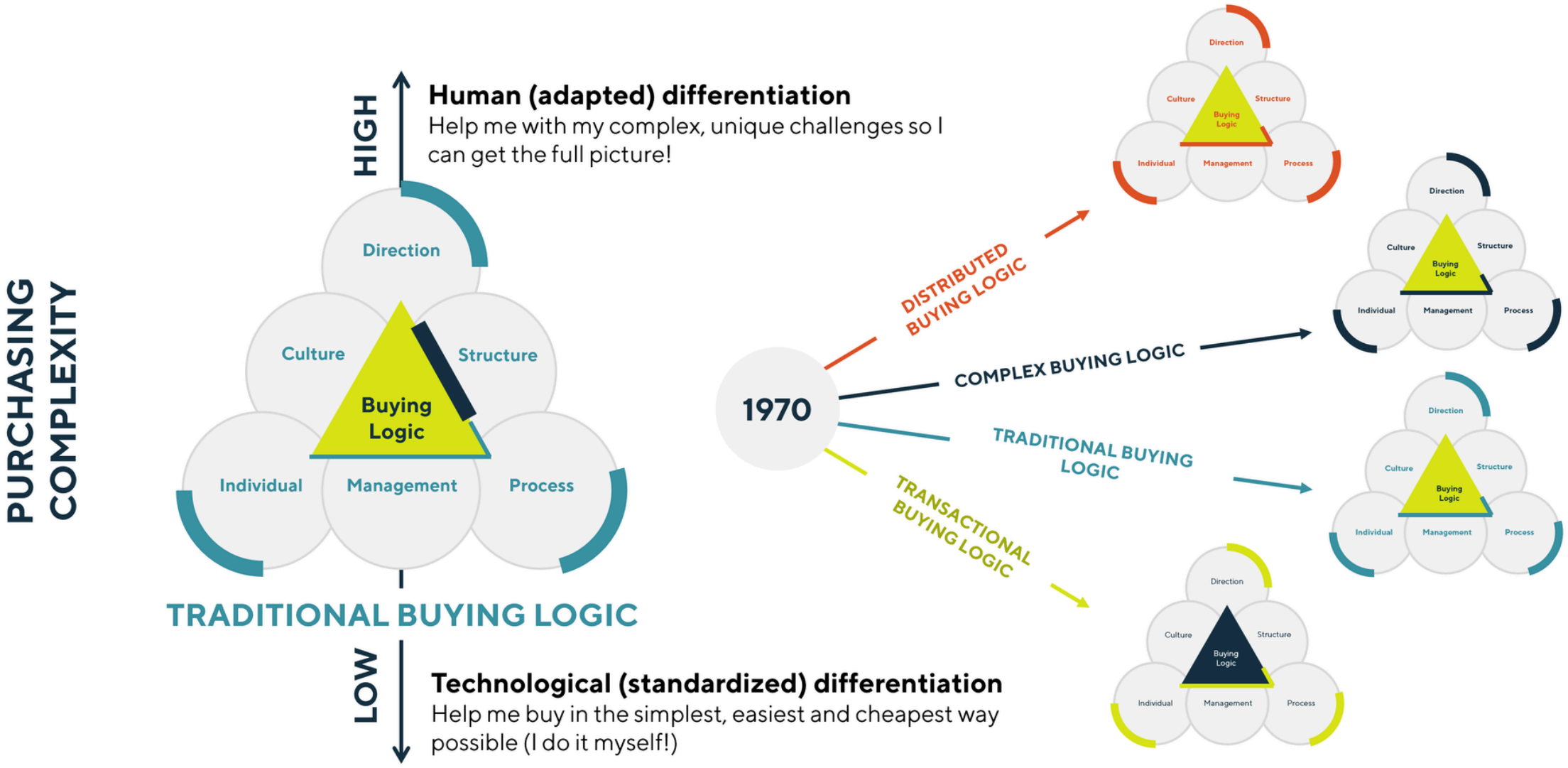

Sales is polarizing towards transactional and complex logics. Source: Mercuri International Research.

My colleague Henrik Frohm has written about the cost of getting this wrong in “Segment by how customers buy, not how much they buy”. He describes semi-complex deals, where the way you sell doesn’t match the way the customer buys. Cutting their share from 40% to 20% raised operating margin by at least three percentage points.

It matters more now. According to Gartner, 61% of B2B buyers prefer to buy without a sales rep, yet they still want a seller’s input on whether a solution is the right fit.

Mercuri International’s 2021 Future State of Sales survey expects transactional and complex sales to grow, while traditional sales is expected to remain stable.

If you don’t know how your customers buy, you’ll train for the wrong logic.

A useful question when thinking about change or transformation is: How is your revenue split across the four logics today, and how should it be split in 3–5 years? Most clients we ask have most of their revenue in traditional sales, while expecting transactional and complex sales to grow.

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Change or transformation? It depends on how your customers buy

Not every sales problem needs a transformation. If your customers still buy the way they used to, your sales model may only need adjusting: more training, a sharper process, better coaching, the right KPIs.

That's change: making the current sales model work better. It's hard enough.

A transformation is needed when the buying logic itself shifts, or when you want to sell in a way your model wasn't built for. Then no amount of tuning will close the gap. You need to change the model itself.

In the article "Customer Segmentation: The key to profitable growth", Henrik Frohm wrote about an account manager in manufacturing with more than 50 customers. He spent almost as much time on the smallest accounts as on the largest, worked hard, but saw no growth. A segmentation analysis showed that one mid-sized customer bought four times more from competitors than from him. His share of wallet was 20%, compared with a potential of at least 40%.

The problem wasn't effort. He was selling the traditional way, through activity and volume, to a customer who bought in a complex way, with long-term needs and a business case to make. Once he aligned his approach with how that customer bought, he grew the business within a year.

Now picture that mismatch across a whole sales organisation: key account managers spending their time on deals customers would rather buy online, or field sellers trying to win complex deals with a traditional approach. Either way, it's expensive.

From a management perspective, the triggers for a transformation might look like this:

- **Margin squeeze.** Prices are under pressure and costs are rising. Often the root cause is a mismatch: complex value sold the traditional way ends in discounts, and simple deals handled by expensive sellers eat the margin.
- **Increased competition.** When competitors, including low-cost ones, make your offer look interchangeable, customers move toward transactional buying. Either you make buying easy, or you differentiate on value, which is a complex sale.

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- **New growth targets.** If growth has to come from share of wallet in existing customers or from new segments, you're often selling into a different buying logic than today.

- **A new strategy or offering.** Moving from products to solutions and services, or toward standardized offers customers can buy online, changes how customers buy from you.

On the surface, each of these looks like a management problem. Underneath, they all point to the same question: does your sales model still match how your customers buy?

Use the comparison on the next page to decide which one you're aiming for. Start with the buying logic. If your customers still buy the way your sales model was built for, you're looking at change.
If the logic has moved, or you want to win in a new one, you're looking at transformation.

Most companies that ask us for training are really asking a bigger question.
If the answer is change, training and coaching may be enough. If it's transformation, training is one ingredient.

A sales transformation isn't something you send your team to. It's something you lead them through, week by week, customer by customer.

In an upcoming follow-up article, I'll explore what a sales transformation involves and how to approach it: the sales excellence model, why transformations fail, and what successful ones have in common.



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Change vs. Transformation

Know which one you need. It depends on how your customers buy.

Change

Do things better

Make the existing operating model work better.

WHEN

Your customers still buy the way they did.

FOCUS

Sharper skills, process, KPIs and coaching. The operating model stays the same, it just works better.

EXAMPLES

- Close a specific skill gap with training
- Tighten the sales process
- Clarify KPIs and pipeline reviews
- Coach on real deals

ROLE OF TRAINING

Can be the main lever.

OUTCOME

Sell better.

Transformation

Do things differently

Create a new future state and operating model, aligned with how your customers buy.

WHEN

The buying logic has moved, or you want to sell in a way your model wasn't built for.

FOCUS

Redesign how you lead, steer, organize and reward sales, so the new way of selling becomes the natural one.

EXAMPLES

- From product sales to value-based solution selling
- Move simple deals to inside sales or self-service
- Redesign roles and customer coverage
- New KPIs and incentives that follow the customer's decision

ROLE OF TRAINING

One ingredient in the operating model.

OUTCOME

Sell differently.

The buying logic decides

Transactional
Self-service, standard offers

Traditional
Smaller deals, short cycles

Complex
Many stakeholders, months

Distributed
Projects, months to years

Low buying complexity — High buying complexity

Change improves how you sell within a buying logic. Transformation realigns the operating model when your customers move to another logic, or when you want to win in a new one.

Common triggers for transformation

- Margin squeeze
- Increased competition
- New growth targets
- New strategy or offering
- Customers buying differently

Training can lead to change.

A new operating model, matched to how customers buy, leads to transformation.

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