



CIOs Transformed Overnight— Now, Sales Teams Must Catch Up

For years, the corporate world has witnessed the evolution of the CIO position to be more business-oriented—a continual transition which has brought with it increasing influence and responsibilities.

Then came 2020 and the global pandemic.

Disruptive changes—whether a pandemic, a recession, a regulatory mandate, or a breakthrough in technology—are notorious for accelerating in-flight trends.

In an extremely short period of time, incremental shifts have become abrupt conversions:

- A growing proportion of employees had been migrating out of offices into remote environments. Now, three quarters of CFOs expect to move previously on-site employees to remote work post-COVID-19¹.
- Customer experience has been increasingly digitized over the past decade. Now, even consumers 65 and older (traditionally lower adopters) plan to continue their newly acquired online shopping habits².
- Virtual business meetings and video conferencing were already growing in popularity. Now, the anticipated market growth has increased almost five-fold³.

This is also the case with CIOs blurring the lines between technology and business:

Technology and “the business” are no longer just merging—today, technology is the business.

In a recent earnings call, Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella noted that “*We have seen two years’ worth of digital transformation in two months.*”

Like the trends above, this is a permanent change. Many expect notable shifts in reporting structure, putting more CIOs directly under CEOs.

That puts pressure on IT leaders to adapt to their current firefighting responsibilities and simultaneously prepare for a more entrenched, strategic role going forward.

¹ Dignan, Larry. 2020. “CFOs looking to make remote work, telecommuting more permanent following COVID-19, says Gartner survey.” ZDNet (<https://www.zdnet.com/article/cfos-looking-to-make-remote-work-telecommuting-more-permanent-following-covid-19-says-gartner-survey/>).

² Morgan, Blake. 2020. “Customer Experience Mindset In A Post COVID-19 World: An Infograph.” Forbes

(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/blakemorgan/2020/04/27/customer-experience-mindset-in-a-post-covid-19-world-an-infograph/#359069cb3d0e>).

³ Wadhani, Preeti and Saloni Gankar. 2020. “Video Conferencing Market size worth over \$50bn by 2026.” Global Market Insights (<https://www.gminsights.com/pressrelease/video-conferencing-market>).

For tech sales, this brings both challenge and opportunity. Sellers also need to operate in two dimensions: today's unprecedented environment and the new blended world of tech and business. Without intentional change, sales organizations may find that the experiences and relationships they deliver are no longer sufficient to meet buyers' new expectations.

We asked 102 senior IT executives, who manage billions of dollars of budget, what gets a salesperson access to their busy schedule, given current needs.

Rank-ordered below, these requirements have both short- and longer-term implications. Consider: (1) How do I meet and exceed this standard during the current crisis? (2) What does this mean for how I engage in the long term, and for what my contacts need from me going forward?

SENIOR IT EXECUTIVES RECOMMEND:



UPGRADE YOUR MESSAGING



EXPAND HOW YOU QUANTIFY RESULTS



RETHINK 'DISCOVERY CALLS'



ENHANCE YOUR BUSINESS VALUE



SELL WITH AGILITY

#1 UPGRADE YOUR MESSAGING.

Due to their increased scope, IT executives are inundated with identical-looking emails, calls, and slide decks. Solution providers need to be careful to deliver messaging which helps spur the thinking of their CIO contacts, versus just cluttering their inbox. Studies show that buyers reward sellers who provide the targeted messages, content, and guidance needed to make purchase decisions easy⁴. With the changes to the CIO remit, that will require new and more specific messaging, designed for individual contacts and circumstances.



IN THE SHORT TERM: BE CONCISE

Without in-person events and drive-by office introductions to spur connections, sellers have resorted to massive amounts of virtual outreach (social, email, phone). The sheer volume has left IT executives overwhelmed. They are increasingly intolerant of generic emails, boilerplate slides, and vague content. Our surveyed executives were passionate about defending their time. They want shorter, and more relevant, communications.

“It’s hard because we are so busy. I have to be judicious in my time utilization for outside requests. BUT, if the value proposition is real, I can find the time.”

– Senior IT Executive and Emissary Advisor

TRY THIS OUT

Conduct a content inventory (collateral, decks, email templates) and revisit your messaging frameworks. You’ll likely uncover a trove of disconnected messages, underutilized content, and bloated slide decks. Flag opportunities to crisp up content and messages and retire outdated material.

⁴ Adamson, Brent. 2018. “Win More B2B Sales Deals.” Gartner, Inc. (<https://www.gartner.com/en/sales/insights/b2b-buying-journey>).



WHERE TO GO NEXT: FOCUSED, TAILORED MESSAGING

In addition to brevity, rework messaging for purpose. *Where are we in this customer's buying process? Are we trying to help them move forward, to narrow choices? Or backward, to revisit a bigger picture? What does this specific person need in their specific situation?* IT executives shared that with their larger scope of responsibilities, they have less time (and no interest) in doing the work of making connections between sellers' products and their worlds.

"Throwing a random 'here is my product' in a LinkedIn invite, and [making] me connect the dots to my needs is a waste of my time."

- Senior IT Executive and Emissary Advisor

TRY THIS OUT

Build out a library of vertical and persona-oriented messaging for use by both sales and marketing. Sellers and account-based marketers can use account and contact insights to tailor those messages for the right person, at the right time. Make sure to focus on the broader mandates of IT executives—the ultimate enterprise goals—and not just the IT efficiencies.

#2 EXPAND HOW YOU QUANTIFY RESULTS.

Justifying ROI with a business case is a standard part of most sales processes. But the IT executives we surveyed said they now need more than the typical analysis. Business cases have commonly come in two forms: a marketing case study from another client, and a calculator for “what if” assumptions (used in the late stages of a sales process). Today, buyers want business cases early and often, with the seller refining them as the buying process continues. They also want outcome projections to be tied to their specific business metrics.



IN THE SHORT TERM: BRING THE BUSINESS CASE EARLY

In the current environment, our buyers need earlier insights into quantitative impact. Although roughly half experienced budget cuts, most dodged drastic reductions. Still, they have cost pressures resulting from notably increased project loads. “Cost savings” is the critical metric they want to see modeled.

“Everyone is trying to cut costs and optimize operation. If you are offering a nice-to-have service, better save your time. No one will listen to you.”

– Senior IT Executive and Emissary Advisor

TRY THIS OUT

Generate a concise point of view, and relevant case studies, to illustrate potential productivity or cost impact in the very first communication. Recalibrate as conversations continue with more specific analysis and a larger range of metrics.



WHERE TO GO NEXT: CONTINUOUS BENEFIT ANALYSIS

While cost savings carry outsized weight in the immediate term, that certainly won't be the only way solutions are evaluated, particularly when it comes to renewals or expansion. IT executives will want to see a range of impacts and clear connections to overarching business initiatives. Clarifying those objectives and commitments throughout the sales process puts solution providers in a better position to track progress after the sale.

IT Projects Compete for Budget:

45% kept budget

70% kept or increased project load

Emissary IT Buyer Snapshot, Summer 2020

**TRY
THIS
OUT**

Revisit templates and invitation lists for quarterly business reviews and other account management milestones. Ensure that briefs capture a broad view of impact to the business. Consider linkages to brand reputation, impact on the customer experience, product mix, fulfillment, and even social and community commitments. It may well be that contracts you signed a year ago will be evaluated for renewal using vastly different criteria.

#3 RETHINK "DISCOVERY" CALLS.

Discovery calls are a hallmark of consultative selling, used to validate assumptions, understand objectives, and clarify buying processes. The problem is that the new IT executive has a heightened need for strategy and a much lower tolerance for waste. They are tired of having meetings where the whole purpose is to create value for the seller.

With 59 percent of IT buyers spending less time with sellers, a salesperson can't afford to squander hard-to-come-by touchpoints. Discovery meetings need to be evolved to spend more time on problem solving and less time on basic questions.

Most IT Executives Are Spending Less Time with Sellers:



Emissary IT Buyer Snapshot, Summer 2020



IN THE SHORT TERM: “DO YOUR HOMEWORK”

Innumerable Zoom calls have shone a harsh spotlight on low-value sales conversations, poorly constructed slide decks, and loose call management. Combined with an overtaxed and admittedly impatient IT executive, this creates the potential to permanently reduce your standing in an account. The most common transgression, according to our IT executives, was a lack of preparation.

In fairness, this may be a case of unrealistic expectations. After all, in business-to-consumer sales, people have gotten used to the idea that selling organizations know all about you (search for something on your laptop, and it will be all over your social media feeds). Unfair or not, IT executives assume that by the time you get to them, you have solid context for their situation.

“Make it personal. Generic distribution lists where you don't earn the connection don't work right now.”

– Senior IT Executive and Emissary Advisor

TRY THIS OUT

Give sellers mechanisms to build a comprehensive picture before their first client interaction. Help sellers to map out organizational and personal needs, and to define business linkages to your value proposition and expectations. Clarify the client's culture and communication style. It's a heavier lift than you may be used to for early-stage sales. But it pays dividends in opportunity size and deal acceleration.



WHERE TO GO NEXT: USE CALLS TO DIFFERENTIATE YOURSELF

Being well prepared for a “discovery” meeting is a minimum standard. But it won’t be good enough to keep sellers in front of business-embedded IT executives. Sellers need to think of every interaction as a chance to demonstrate unique value. Even discovery calls are an opportunity to dialogue, brainstorm, process information together, and problem-solve.

TRY THIS OUT

Map the customer experience for customer touch-points, from initial outreach to conversion into an opportunity. Identify where you can make the biggest impact on decision makers. What do you need to accomplish in a discovery call? When should you demo, share the capabilities slide deck, or leverage thought leadership? Consistent excellence requires call planning and opportunity management discipline.

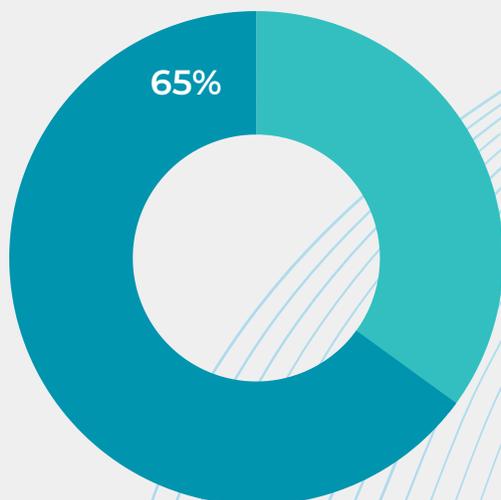
#4 ENHANCE YOUR BUSINESS VALUE.

As IT buyers are thrust into an unpredictable business context, so too are their sales partners. Sellers should consider how familiar they are with their client's business environment, not just their IT environment. How do your clients make money? How do they stack up against their competitors? How are they changing their business models?

With this as context, you can provide value above and beyond the use case of your product. For example, you may be able to connect them to helpful information, help them solve a talent gap, or explain solutions in business, finance, or marketing terms to help with an internal sale.

Our buyers shared that technical credibility is needed to secure the deal and implement—but business credibility is needed to get you in and expand the relationship over time.

Reset the strategy, reprioritized initiatives:



Emissary IT Buyer Snapshot, Summer 2020



IN THE SHORT TERM: LEVERAGE YOUR NETWORK

Almost two thirds (65 percent) of the IT executives we surveyed said that their organizations had reset or reprioritized their strategic initiatives based on new realities. For much of this, there is no playbook. Sellers can still help by leveraging networks. IT executives perceive that, too often, sellers lapse into using social media as an “ask” (connect with me, refer me to someone, come to my virtual event). But the power of social is in the “give.”

“Come with knowledgeable and actionable advice as to how you can better my current business, especially in this new normal.”

– Senior IT Executive and Emissary Advisor

TRY THIS OUT

Encourage sellers to poll peers and clients to gather insights about handling current challenges (such as headcount shortages), their innovative workarounds, and the lessons learned. Collect these stories at the business level, not just about implementation of your product. Share with clients and prospects. They are looking for advice.



WHERE TO GO NEXT: BRING SYNTHESIZED INSIGHTS & DATA

The path to the elusive “trusted partner” relationship is more than just connections. IT executives are being rapidly pulled into broader business challenges. They may be asked to assist with a customer experience redesign, to work with HR on technology adoption, or to help fuel product development with analytics. That new strategic territory is where solution providers have the best chance to differentiate themselves.

TRY THIS OUT

Equip sellers with the data and research to be seen as experts. Provide vertical and account insights, create content for social use, and promote mentoring. Mine internal and external resources for thought leadership. Sellers can foster long-lasting relationships with business executives by keeping them abreast of new points of view that they may not have the time to fully explore on their own.

#5 SELL WITH AGILITY.

Buyers have increasingly large areas of responsibility and influence. The complexity in their world often leads them to give conflicting guidance: “No fluffy slides, I need to see the detail.” “Don’t feature-dump; give me the highlights.” For sellers, it can be hard to know what to do when. They must become agile, rather than following a rigid sales roadmap.

The best way to facilitate a buying process may be more transactional in nature (e.g., sending collateral), and at other times more strategic (e.g., co-developing an executive team brief on a new trend). Sellers must gauge their clients’ situation and be fluid. In today’s environment, this translates into simultaneously managing both short-term and long-term perspectives.



IN THE SHORT TERM: THINK IMMEDIACY

Due to the uncertainty of the economic environment, many buyers told us that they are atypically short-sighted now. Our buyers cautioned against trying to sell overcomplicated solutions. They are looking for things that offer a very near-term return, that can be implemented in a brief period, and that take into account the immediate shifts in their companies.

“More than ever, efficiency and solutions that can multiply the impact of headcount are important. Agility and setup time and costs are key as well.”
– Senior IT Executive and Emissary Advisor

TRY THIS OUT

Craft explanations and proposals to emphasize simplicity in the near term and lay the foundation for more complicated use cases in the future. Don't always assume large-scale implementations are off the table, though. It is still a seller's duty to help clients prepare for what's next. That is where agility comes in.



WHERE TO GO NEXT: THINK STRATEGY

Some buyers may not be able see out more than 30 days into the future. But that doesn't mean that sellers shouldn't be working against a longer timeframe. The lesson learned by many was that those with a more adaptable and modern approach to IT were able to adjust to new requirements much more rapidly. Intuitively, executives know they need to think about their next set of realities. For example, one thing that most organizations will be addressing as a current and a future priority is "digital transformation." Most lack the strategies, approaches, and people to flesh that out completely.

TRY THIS OUT

Help clients get ahead of "next normal" needs. Identify the larger, more strategic initiatives that will take shape in the coming months. Invest the time now to work with stakeholders on plan design. Anticipate the challenges and identify places where your organization has unique capabilities. Find opportunities to be seen in an advisory capacity on big-picture initiatives.

TOP AREAS OF EXECUTIVE INTEREST RESULTING FROM CRISIS:



DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION



CLOUD APPLICATIONS



COLLABORATION TECHNOLOGIES



SECURE REMOTE-WORK INFRASTRUCTURE

WHAT NOW?

**Messaging. Business cases. Sales calls.
Business value. Agility.**

These recommendations may not seem wholly different than what sales and marketing leaders have been striving for over the last several years. You can see evidence in the rapid growth of account-based marketing and formalized sales enablement functions.

The key is that most organizations were already struggling to consistently hit the mark with their buyers. Now, when you layer on the changes to IT that are taking place (almost literally overnight) in organizations, there is a risk of an even greater gap between increasingly strategic IT buyers and their solution-provider sellers.

There is also tremendous potential for much stronger selling relationships if organizations can rally quickly around these heightened buyer expectations.

ABOUT EMISSARY

Emissary is a human intelligence network that connects enterprise sales and marketing professionals directly to a community of over 12,000 talented senior and C-level executives with recent experience at their most important accounts.

Leveraging the Emissary network will enable you to shorten your sales cycles, close more deals, and build positive long-lasting relationships with your clients and prospects—because you've gathered the tacit knowledge on their challenges and needs.

The data in this paper was collected in a survey of 102 Senior IT Executives regarding the COVID-19 response at their current organizations. The study and analysis were conducted in June of 2020.

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