

Business survival is dependent on sales resilience

By [Louise Robinson](#)

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In January last year, the African Development Bank forecast 3.9% economic growth on the continent for 2020. However, the rapid onset of the coronavirus shifted the focus to one of business survival.



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Today, many countries are battling a second wave of infections. If companies are to overcome the current challenges, they need a dynamic sales function built on traditional best practices and enhanced with technology-driven innovations to harness the available opportunities.

Salespeople have predominantly relied on meeting their leads face-to-face. As events of the past several months have shown, this must evolve to overcome the limitations that lockdown conditions have placed on them. But it is not a case of digital transformation replacing this human-driven process. Instead, it is about leveraging the advantages of each tactical intervention to create a compelling sales narrative.

Considering that e-commerce on the continent could cross the \$75bn mark by 2025, it is easy to be tempted to shift towards a predominantly digital model when it comes to sales. But while people are happy to buy groceries and clothes online, more expensive solutions still require a direct, human-driven approach.



The sales game will evolve in 2021, but how do we adapt?

Louise Robinson 10 Dec 2020



While each African country requires a unique approach, the overarching sentiment is that business need to focus on their core strengths and increasingly rely on outsourced services to assist with identifying high value leads for those solutions customers are not likely to buy through e-commerce platforms.

Changing skills

An African Union report published in June estimated that nearly 20 million jobs in both the formal and informal sectors were threatened with destruction. As conditions worsened, the prognosis has become more dire. Considering that Africa is demographically the world's youngest continent, the potential to reinvent sales practices with technology-rich processes with which the youth are familiar with, cannot be ignored.

Salespeople must look at upskilling themselves in the current environment to thrive in the future business landscape. This sees communication requiring more meaningful human engagement and not less. While the means to do so might be different, the people-centricity will remain.

Of course, use of video conferencing solutions like Zoom and Microsoft Teams have increased exponentially over the past year as meetings and customer engagements go the digital route. However, it is not a silver bullet to address all interaction needs.

Best of both worlds

International research highlights how more than three quarters of buyers and sellers are now preferring digital self-serve and remote human engagement over face-to-face interactions. This only intensified after the hard lockdowns in many countries ended.

Even though digital is seen as the new normal of engaging, it is still critical to centre these practices on personalisation through human contact albeit via telephonic or video calling means. Firing off an email or an instant message might be more expedient, but the salespeople truly looking to elevate themselves must bring that sense of individualism to their outreaches.

The McKinsey research echoes this sentiment as video and live chat have emerged as the dominant channels for interacting and closing sales especially with business-to-business customers. It has found that the amount of revenue generated globally from video-related interactions has jumped by 69% since April 2020.

Selling via these technology platforms require a unique skill set. It is quite an art to get a 'feel' for the customer using only a Webcam and chat screen. Salespeople are required to certainly embrace these new tools but still need to understand the best ways to get in touch with the right people. This is where outsourced specialists become critical to point companies in the right direction whether that is through digital or traditional means.

Shifting focus

An important step in this regard is for companies to provide their customers with a sense of clarity of their service offering. During Covid-19 some services are no longer available while newer ones could have been developed especially during the hard lockdown. Again, this is where constant communication with customers will be part of the lifeblood of the reinvented organisation. They must be kept aware of how changing lockdown levels could impact on service delivery, product

availability, and the like. Perhaps more importantly, being in touch with customers helps to reassure them that the company is still active and looking at different ways to deliver services.

That is not to say the transition to more digital-centric sales technologies will be an easy one. As companies are under pressure and forced to retrench staff, those salespeople still active must be able to do more with less. But instead of working harder, the limited resources must be applied in smarter ways.

The way ahead will be to combine traditional methods with more technology-led solutions. This will assist organisations to enhance the sales function to be more reflective of a post-Covid-19 world. And providing the guiding light on the continent will be the unique conditions of each African country that will require a completely bespoke approach.

ABOUT LOUISE ROBINSON

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