

Sharpening Your Competitive Edge During the Pandemic



THE BROOKS GROUP

The clock is ticking on 2020.

When we originally released this whitepaper during the summer of 2020, our insights, research, and experiences were indicating that the Next Normal – the period of business realignment created by the COVID-19 pandemic – was upon us.

This was to be the time that sales organizations emerged from the shock-and-awe of the lockdowns and quarantines, applied their new learnings, and resumed sales activity with new techniques and tools to cope in a changed marketplace.

As the end of 2020 rapidly approaches, it is clear that the K-shaped economic recovery being experienced across the nation has indeed impacted the sales landscape as well. For each company that is freezing budgets, laying off workers, and cutting back on vendor services, there is one that is hiring, acquiring, and buying as a result of a more robust-than-expected market for their product or service.

As sales leaders, this dichotomy compounds the struggles that 2020 has wrought. Though experiences have varied, there are several points upon which most sales leaders agree – namely, that new account acquisition needs to increase, and time to close buyers needs to decrease, in 2021.

The Survey Says...

Throughout the early days of the pandemic, The Brooks Group conducted a Sales Leader Survey to gauge, in real-time, the impact of COVID-19 on goals, human resources, and market forces.

Recently, we returned to these leaders to update our findings and to see what, if any, progress remains to be made, in 2020, and how their current experiences shape the advice we shared earlier this year.

Though some companies have made a significant recovery (the new data indicated that nearly one in three sales leaders expected to finish the fourth quarter of 2020 at or above target), most sales leaders indicated that their



sales formula will need to continue to be tweaked well into the new year in order to effectively profit as the pandemic drags on.

Insights for a Changed World

Here at The Brooks Group, we have spent the past seven months gathering insights and working directly (albeit, virtually) with our clients to prepare them for the changed reality.

Along the way, we have gathered data, insights, and expertise that have helped put the pandemic into context, and – we believe – can help provide wayfinding to you through the fog of a future that still holds a great deal of uncertainty.

This playbook – designed to offer advice to sales leaders who must continue to balance the company’s needs with the pandemic’s realities – covers three themes:

- The Right Team
- The Right Skills
- The Right Sales Approach

With the proper people, plan, and insights, we believe you can position your sales pros, and your business, for the best possible outcomes.



Right Team

Shopping for Sales Professionals

Like it or not, there’s been no better stress test on the efficacy of your sales team than the current crisis. Likely, you as a sales leader have made some keen observations about the abilities of your current lineup of sales professionals, based upon how they have managed their activities through the pandemic.

Our surveys found that nearly half of sales leaders would consider replacing the weakest 10 percent of their sales performers right now – a reflection of the need for solid “A” players to face a transformed sales landscape.

For those needing to trade up, it’s a buyers’ market right now – with a plethora of talented and well pedigreed sales professionals available who have simply found themselves on the short end of the numbers game.

Upskilling during turbulent times, indeed, has precedent. A Harvard Business School study indicated that, across the past three recessions, 9 percent of companies made strategic investments, including human capital, and came out better as a result of progressive thinking.

Here are some ways to take advantage of the current talent glut, according to the [Harvard Business Review](#):

1. Target three to five great players you would have liked to have hired over the past five years and check in to gauge their current status.
2. Set up a task force to source potential candidates.
3. Interview and check references remotely with the same rigor you would in person.
4. Go out of your way to motivate the best candidates – rolling out the red carpet and making your top executives available for one-on-one chats.



5. Don't ignore the sourcing, retaining, and development of in-house talent, with an eye toward a promotion or shift for someone who has shown stellar performance during the crisis.

Sales for the Non-Sales Oriented

The most insightful enterprises understand that everyone on the payroll has a hand in sales success. Never has this been more important than during COVID-19. To ensure the public's safety, many companies are limiting visitors, including sales professionals, to their facilities.

However, your customer service representatives, parts and repair teams, and service technicians serve essential functions in keeping your clients up and running in the near term, whether through in-person or virtual means. Preparing these colleagues to be our eyes and ears to the needs of our clients can leverage their visibility for the benefit of our buyers and our bottom line.

Here are a few tips to help engage your service-oriented team members in the battle for dollars:

- **Communication is Key:** Align with your service professionals prior to client contact, so they understand the expectations going in. Perhaps they will encounter an opportunity for a capital sale when they go out – for example, if a repair would only serve to provide temporary relief from a larger problem. Your service personnel need to be able to translate this back to the organization in an impactful way.
- **Leverage their Spirit of Caring:** Most service or technical personnel embrace their roles because they want to help, and to share their expertise with people. Interestingly, that's not that far off your mission as a professional, either. Though your service personnel may not see themselves as "salespeople," they certainly understand the concept of doing what's best for our customers. Prepare them by having them ask good questions, make suggestions, and follow through on expectations.
- **Trust is Critical:** In these times when our buyers are making hard decisions about expenditures, it's important to be seen as genuine and trustworthy. That's why it's important for all team members to be seen as supportive of our clients'

realities. Trust will arise from clear communication, empathy, and a focus on how to provide the ideal outcome for your clients' current needs.

- **We're All in This Together:** Ultimately, our mission in these uncertain times is to help people to the greatest ability in this environment. Remember – our success is directly tied to that of our buyers, so now is the time to make sure those buyers have what they need to fulfill their mission, for the greater good.

Protect Your “A” Players

It's never been more critical to retain your top sales performers right now. Though cash-strapped organizations may need to continue to scale back compensation and bonuses, it can be a fool's errand to be penny wise with your sales lifeblood (considering the market conditions for A players we discussed earlier).

So how can you slap some “golden handcuffs” on your top performers, and ensure their ongoing satisfaction so they will continue to headline your sales organization?

- **Guarantee their future compensation based on 2019 numbers:** Most businesses understand that 2020 has been an anomaly unlike any we've experienced. Protecting your top performers' downside can go a long way toward reassuring skittish nerves.
- **Increase commission percentages:** With sales harder to come by, it might be advisable to provide more upside reward for good deals. Perhaps apply this to new deals, or to deals of a certain threshold. This will inspire your hungry sales pros to get even hungrier.
- **Transparency at all levels:** With so much dynamism in the markets, and within most companies, bring your top performers into the fold – informing them ahead of time of changes or new areas of focus so they can feel valued – and not shocked or surprised.



Right Skills

Respecting New Boundaries for In-Person Visits

As the COVID-19 crisis lingers, it seems that unannounced “drive-bys” and “drop-ins” of old will be seen as relics of the past.

Expectations of buyers, whether we like it or not, have changed – and if you find yourself in the position of visiting your buyers' physical location, your visit will need to be more planned, more purposeful, and more substantive in nature.

Here's how to determine whether what you have to say rises to the level of an on-site visit, or whether a virtual contact would be adequate:

- **Risk Versus Reward:** Though it may be tempting to resume face-to-face activity, the cost, right now, could outweigh the benefits. It's critical to qualify and prioritize the right opportunities for face-to-face meetings, and to plan accordingly. Tire-kicking is best conducted virtually.

- **Have Something to Say:** The old “buddy seller” approach of “just checking in” to see how it’s going is destined to fail. Being prepared for ANY sales meeting today should involve a healthy bit of pre-call planning, a customer-focused agenda, and a desire to present true solutions that deliver value to the investment of time during the interaction.
- **Be a Trusted Advisor:** Delivering enhanced value can go beyond simply what your company is offering. Offer to deliver a market-driven needs assessment that draws from real-world, current day experience.
- **Know the Rules:** If you are indeed invited to your buyers’ site, make sure you are completely clear on their requirements for visitors. Be prepared for masks, social distancing, temperature checks, and other protocols that may be required.

Reading People Virtually

With virtual selling expected to linger well into 2021, it’s likely that you have become resigned to the fact that Zoom, Teams, and other video conferencing assets will be your go-to tools. But digital tools do have limitations – namely, the inability to replicate the inputs we typically gather in person.

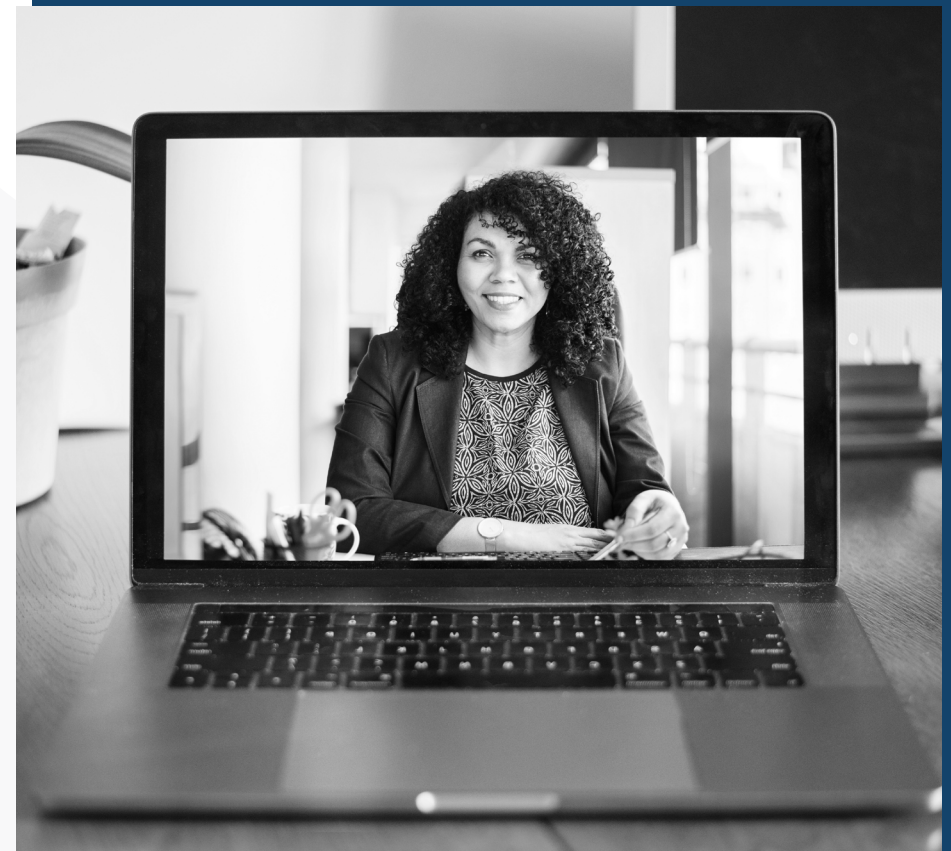
Sales professionals thrive off reading body language, adept at using certain cues like a flinch or a fidget to their advantage, and using the dynamics of the room as data points that make us more effective at closing deals.

So how can we ensure humanity remains a part of their interactions, and how can we be sure they are picking up on that psychological data which is so critical to the sale?

- **Commanding Attention:** Multitasking is rampant during virtual sales calls. To combat this, encourage your sales reps to ask more questions – probe deeply to get to the heart of the matter. It’s perfectly appropriate to query on things like: I’d like to make sure I am communicating clearly about my offer — what do you think about it? What do you think of what I said? Do you have any specific concerns about the details of our product

or service? Do you mind if I share my screen to show you some visuals around our offer?

- **Interpretation is Everything:** Whether the buyer is using the camera or not, now is the time to listen closely to the nuances in their voice – not just what they’re saying, but HOW they’re saying it. Heightening awareness of those nuances will help your sales pros sharpen their attention and inform a successful response.
- **Caring is Sharing:** We all crave attention, and we’ve all been thrust into a difficult situation with unique challenges that are affecting us in unique



ways. It's ok for sales pros to start the call with a little bit of a sympathetic ear – a little kindness can go a long way, especially given that we're all experiencing this together.

Avoiding Random Acts of Sales: Shifting the Conversation

It's a stark and time-tested reality: Under stress, we are not our best selves. This is true for individuals, for teams, and for organizations.

In times of extreme stress, like what we've experienced throughout 2020, any sort of weaknesses that we've had in our sales techniques are magnified substantially. Add in the pressure that comes with fewer prospects, more competition, and diminished revenue, and it's little wonder that many sales pros are engaging in the kinds of bad habits that give rise to what we call "Random Acts of Sales."

Avoiding these pitfalls requires a specific and deliberate focus on both pre-call planning activities and execution. Here are some steps you can take right now to get your team working efficiently:

- **Shift from Empathy to Intentionality:** Though a sympathetic ear is still appreciated, avoid being generic with your approach. Be prepared. Slow down and ask good detailed questions, to make sure your salespeople understand what it is prospects are looking for. When we deliver our Virtual IMPACT Selling® training at The Brooks Group, we call this the Probe step -- where discovery occurs. Be honest, open, and communicate.
- **Protect Price:** Succumbing to price pressures is a panic response – one which can come either from management insistence downward, or from the salesperson up, as they consider their personal cash flow needs. Though some companies are pushing very hard to move inventory to keep cash coming in the door, it can create a catastrophic vortex that can ultimately reset pricing expectations for your clients and sink gross margin for the foreseeable future.
- **Listen to Current Trends:** Understand what's happening in real time, as currently as you can -- whether that's through social media or via other



means. Make sure your sales teams are sharing information regularly, so you can have a holistic view of what your customers are saying. Likely what is setting the pace today, won't necessarily be tomorrow.

- **Look for the Triggers:** What will make conditions right for customers to pull the trigger on a purchase order? Typically, this will be more than simply a price discussion – it will delve into things like your ability to deliver at their desired quantity; payment terms; their customer demand cycles; and other signals that your buyer is ready to make a deal.
- **Use Realistic Goals and KPIs:** Finally, make sure your KPIs aren't driving your sales representatives to make bad decisions. We see some sales leaders who are adjusting KPIs from the number of physical meetings, to a more attainable measure called "total touches" – something that can be quantified via voice, video, as well as face-to-face (or, mask-to-mask, as the times would indicate).

Right Sales Approach

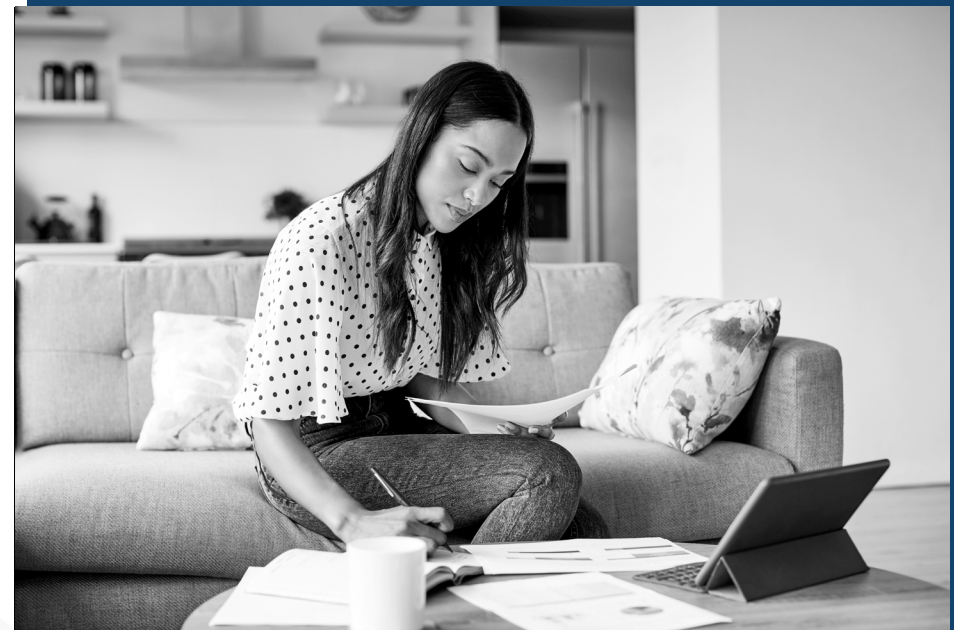
Value-Based Selling and Determining TCO

As a result of COVID-19, businesses most impacted by the shutdown are tightening their belts and watching every penny. As a result, we are seeing more chief financial officers (CFOs) or another delegate of the corporate finance team participating in buying conversations.

In fact, participation in sales calls by CFOs is up 91 percent over pre-pandemic levels, according to an analysis of sales calls by Chorus.ai. This landscape has given rise to the importance of a detailed ROI discussion around the products and services that you offer.

In our conversations with sales executives, and in our own experiences, here are the keys to having a value-based conversation with your buyer:

- **Know the Audience:** Unlike your usual buyer, finance professionals will likely have different motivations as they consider your offering. If you are able to make some quick assumptions based upon their role



within the organization, you can get a handle on their wants, needs, and motivations around the purchasing decision. Use these assumptions to create a few focused questions that you can ask to get to the heart of their perspective.

- **Know the Big Picture:** It is likely that there is more motivating their decision than just price. Use the conversation to talk about things like how your offering can improve efficiency or improve total cost of ownership for their products.
- **Know the Pain:** The CFO is likely dealing with strained budgets, slow sales, and supply chain interruptions due to COVID. Any assurances you can provide that your offering can help keep their business pointed forward, productive, and efficient, will be useful in getting past the price conversation.
- **Enlist Your Advocate:** Your existing contact likely is still a strong ally. Leverage this advocate by asking them if they can provide some



enlightenment on what is most important to the CFO. What are his or her big concerns are going to be? What are their most important priorities in terms of this purchase?

How to Evaluate Virtual Learning Options

About 53 percent of companies are looking to virtual training to upskill their team to face today's unique challenges. But we have found that there's a right way, and a wrong way, to deliver training in today's dynamic landscape.

Simply shifting in-person training into the world of Zoom – and compelling people to sit still for two days of instruction; or taking a generic approach to sales training, without regard for the nuances of the company's business model, sales landscape – can be as bad as delivering no training at all.

Here are a few things to look for when choosing the right virtual sales training provider:

- **Built for Virtual:** It can be highly ineffective to take a two-day, in-person class, and deliver it over Zoom for two days. In a best-case scenario, salespeople typically can focus for about two hours at a time, with frequent breaks and plentiful opportunities for interaction. Also, make sure the structure and format embraces the kind of experience that is optimized for the realities of at-home, computer-based learning.
- **Skill Delivery:** There is a special skill to instructional delivery via virtual means. Not only should your virtual facilitator have the specialized training needed to ensure the training is successful, but you should ask: Do you have a producer or technical contact to ensure a flawless experience, and to troubleshoot problems? Are your tools accessible across a broad variety of platforms? Also, does your facilitator and design team know how to mix the right formula of content, visuals, graphics, and interaction to keep things focused and compelling? Do you have things like breakout rooms, quizzes, and chats?

- **Customized for You:** During these times, the best training for you and your sales team incorporates information that is truly focused on helping you to move the needle now. That should involve customized content designed for the variables of your business, market, or vertical, and pre-work that incorporates your company's goals and aspirations into the mix.

The Brooks Group's VILT Way

Virtual instructor-led training, indeed, can be an incredibly effective way to upskill your sales team to meet the challenges of the existing sales landscape. But it requires a nuanced approach to remote training delivery that we at The Brooks Group call The VILT Way.

Leveraging The Brooks Group's 40 years of expertise in delivering customized sales training, The VILT Way reflects our commitment to designing focused and compelling training content to the unique virtual learning strata.

Benefits of The VILT Way:

- Right-sized instruction, delivered in short, interactive modules with frequent, focused interactive activities
- Specially-trained virtual instructors who have a particular expertise in maximizing virtual tools for training success
- Gain insights and learn techniques today, that you can put into practice immediately

Real-time feedback used to adjust topics, approach, and group interactions based on real-world conditions



SIDEBARS

A Pandemic's Impact on Sales Success

Though 70 percent of sales leaders indicated they finished the previous quarter behind plan, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Nearly one in five sales leaders were trending ahead of plan in the third quarter — a remarkable feat; and one in three expected to finish the fourth quarter in the black.

This increasing optimism can be seen in 2021 sales plans, which are trending higher; in fact, 42.5 percent of sales leaders indicated their sales plan will be higher next year, compared with 35 percent who were setting their sights lower than in 2020.

However, sales cycles have been measurably lengthening for a 60 percent of companies, with only 15 percent seeing deal velocity increase. Those deals that do close are smaller for more than half (55 percent) of companies.

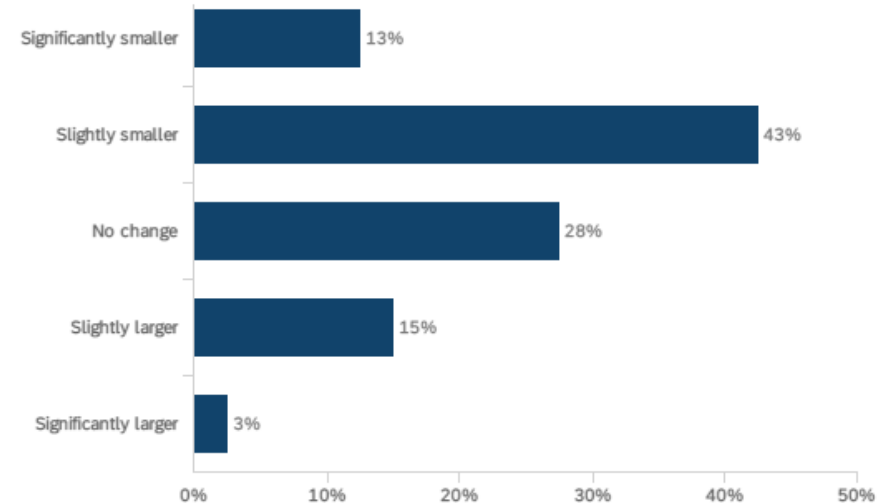
Other findings:

- 33% are considering a realignment of sales territories in 2021
- 47% are considering increasing quotas for 2021
- 51% are updating sales KPIs in some manner in 2021

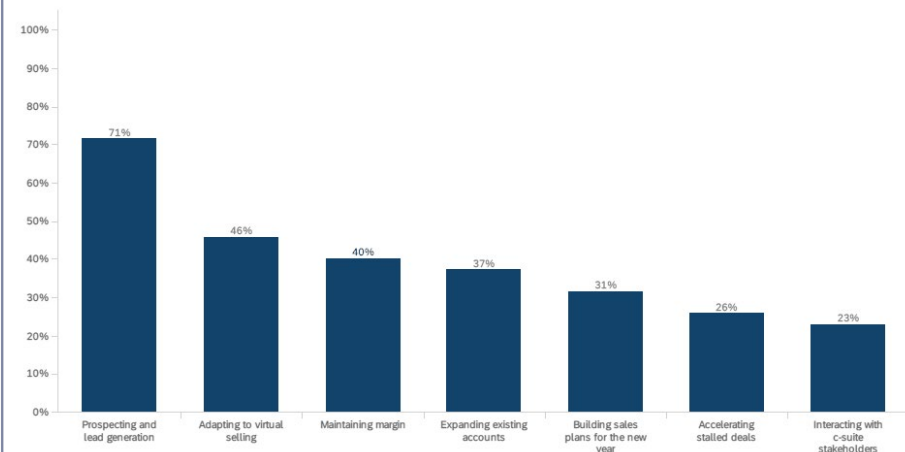
2020: Limping Across the Finish Line

With a quarter traditionally known for slowing sales activities, the fourth of 2020 is sending a particular chill across the sales landscape. Most sales leaders who responded to our survey identified the following challenges as the year heads to a close:

How has your average deal size changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic?



What are your top 3 sales challenges for the remainder of this year?



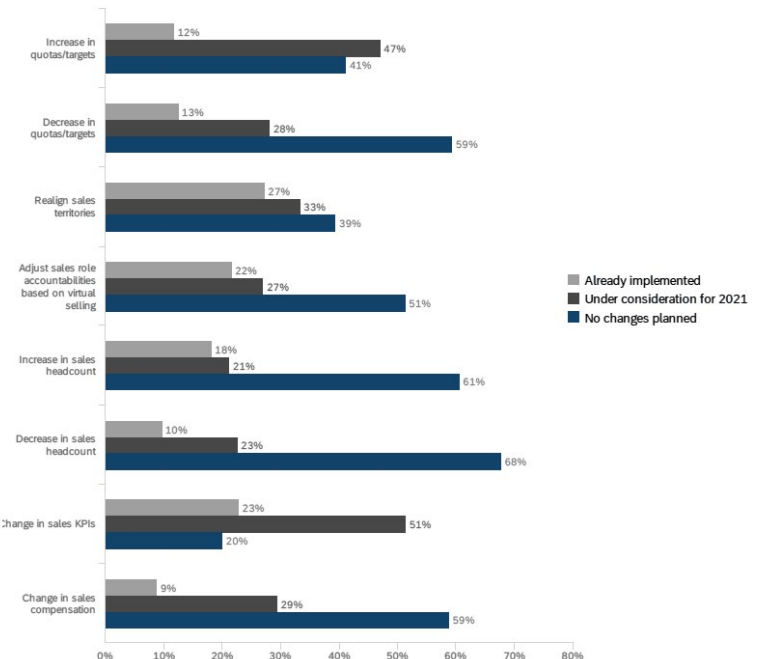
- 71% of those surveyed said they were focused on prospecting and lead gen activities in the fourth quarter
- 46% of sales leaders will redouble their efforts on how to best adapt their people and processes to virtual selling
- 40% of sales leaders are trying to crack the code of how to protect the margin on their products and services

Priorities for 2021

Though a return to robustness has already started for some companies, most remain on the lookout for ways to optimize their sales organizations to manage through the new reality. Some ways companies plan to cope with the impacts of COVID-19:

- 58% need more calls and meetings to close the sale.
- 60% are facing more customer requests for concessions and discounts.
- 66% see a greater need to communicate value and expected ROI to buyers. ■

What changes has your sales organization implemented (or are they considering) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?



About The Brooks Group

Founded in 1977, The Brooks Group is an award-winning B2B sales training company focused on bringing practical, straightforward solutions to your sales force selection and training challenges.

The Brooks Group provides a suite of proven sales and sales management development programs, industry-leading reinforcement tools, and best in class assessments.

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