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Commerce Operations

Your Sales Team Shouldn't Have to Process Every Repeat Order

B2B buyers increasingly want to place routine orders themselves. That doesn't make sales representatives obsolete. It makes the work they're doing—and the work they shouldn't have to do—worth examining.

A customer needs another 40 cases of the same product ordered last month. The price hasn't changed, the delivery address is already on file, and the order is well within the customer's usual purchasing terms.

The customer emails a sales representative.

The representative checks the price and availability, enters the order, and sends back a confirmation. Later, the customer calls to ask when it will ship. The representative checks the system again.

Nothing about the transaction required negotiation, product expertise, or an established personal relationship. Yet the salesperson was involved in almost every step.

Multiply that experience across hundreds of accounts and thousands of orders, and a familiar problem emerges: a company can employ experienced salespeople while using a substantial share of their time to perform routine administrative work.

Digital self-service offers an alternative. But the objective shouldn't be to remove salespeople from the purchasing process altogether. It should be to make their involvement valuable rather than mandatory.

That distinction matters because B2B buyers want two things that can sound contradictory: more independence and better access to knowledgeable people.

Buyers want to do more themselves. Until they need help.

Gartner's May 2026 research found that 67% of surveyed B2B buyers preferred a sales-representative-free experience, while 70% preferred a fully digital, self-service experience.

Yet 69% preferred consulting representatives to validate AI-generated insights.

The survey covered 645 B2B buyers in August and September 2025. Its findings concern B2B purchasing broadly, rather than specifically repeat ordering among US wholesalers. Even with that distinction, they challenge the idea that businesses must choose between digital commerce and personal selling.

Buyers appear to be making a more practical distinction: when they know what they need, they want to get on with it. When they face uncertainty, they want informed assistance.

Earlier Gartner research reinforces the point. In its June 2025 survey announcement, the firm reported that buyers favored self-service for general information and learning, but preferred seller input for decisions requiring contextual understanding, such as evaluating whether a product or service suited their company's needs.

This distinction is easy to recognize in everyday distribution.

A purchasing manager who routinely orders standard maintenance supplies may not need a conversation. An engineer sourcing a replacement component for unfamiliar equipment may need someone who understands technical compatibility, lead times, and alternatives.

Both customers may buy from the same distributor. Both may even be the same person, purchasing different products on different days.

The mistake is to design a single buying process for every situation.

A company that forces routine customers to speak with salespeople creates unnecessary delays. A company that forces every complicated purchase through an online checkout risks losing the judgment and reassurance that make customers confident enough to buy.

The more useful model gives buyers independence when the decision is straightforward and access to expertise when it isn't.

What distributor order data reveals

A recent wholesale benchmark helps illustrate how that division can work.

The 2026 B2B E-Commerce Benchmark Report from WizCommerce analyzed anonymized order and customer data from more than 250 wholesalers using its platform between January 2025 and July 2026. Distribution Strategy Group reported the findings in October.

Among wholesalers generating at least $15 million annually, ecommerce accounted for 63.5% of digitally captured orders, compared with 36.5% written by representatives.

For companies with less than $5 million in annual revenue, the pattern was reversed: ecommerce accounted for 34% and representatives for 66%.

But order counts tell only part of the story.

At 75% of the wholesalers studied, the average website order was worth less than half the average representative-written order.

These figures do not establish that a particular percentage of all US distributor revenue should come through ecommerce. The dataset covers companies using a specific platform, and the order-channel figures concern digitally captured orders, not necessarily every transaction across each company.

Nevertheless, the observed difference between website and representative-written order values is informative.

It is consistent with a business model in which customers place smaller, familiar orders independently while representatives remain involved in larger or more complicated purchases.

Order value alone cannot tell us why. Large accounts may receive more representative attention. Particular products may require consultation. Pricing practices, customer habits, and how orders are recorded may also affect the results.

We should therefore resist the easy conclusion that large orders belong to salespeople and small orders belong online.

A substantial repeat order may be perfectly suitable for self-service. A small order involving an unfamiliar technical component may require considerable assistance.

The better distinction is not the size of the order. It's how much judgment the transaction requires.

The hidden work behind a familiar order

Most distributors can identify the activities that consume time without making a sale any more likely.

A customer emails a list of SKUs. Someone looks up the account's prices. Another employee checks availability. The order is entered into the ERP. A confirmation is prepared. If something is unavailable, the customer receives another message.

Some of these steps are necessary. The question is which require human intervention.

Consider a hypothetical distributor processing 120 routine orders per working day. Suppose staff spend an average of eight minutes per order on avoidable administrative activity: entering already-known information, checking account data, sending standard confirmations, or relaying information available elsewhere in the business.

That is 16 hours of administrative work per day, equivalent to 4,000 hours over 250 working days.

These are illustrative assumptions, not an industry benchmark. Nor do 4,000 hours automatically translate into 4,000 hours saved. Customers might continue calling, exceptions might still require attention, and the new system would have operating costs of its own.

But the exercise reveals why routine ordering deserves attention.

A distributor doesn't necessarily need more salespeople to handle more transactions. It may need to reduce the amount of human work attached to each transaction.

Even more importantly, the time released has to go somewhere useful.

A salesperson who no longer enters routine orders could spend that time visiting accounts, identifying neglected customers, following up on quotations, recommending suitable alternatives, or helping customers plan larger purchases.

Or the salesperson might simply continue working the same way, with a little less paperwork.

The operational benefit depends on what changes after the administrative work disappears.

There is broader evidence for this problem of converting efficiency into results. Gartner reported in May 2026 that AI tools were saving sellers an average of 4.8 hours per week, yet 72% of sales organizations reported low reinvestment of the saved time into higher-value activities.

That research concerned AI-enabled sales productivity, not ecommerce self-service. The underlying management lesson still applies: freeing capacity is not the same as using it productively.

A distributor introducing self-service should decide in advance what representatives are expected to do differently.

Self-service has to work with the customer's actual account

A conventional online store presents a product, a price, and a checkout process.

B2B transactions aren't always that simple.

A customer might have negotiated prices, volume discounts, special payment terms, purchasing permissions, multiple delivery locations, or a set of approved products. Orders may involve case quantities, minimum quantities, delivery cutoffs, or quotation requirements.

If the online store cannot accommodate those arrangements, customers will continue calling or emailing.

Imagine a wholesale customer with three locations.

The purchasing manager orders standard stock every week. Each branch has different delivery instructions. Head office negotiates prices, while individual branch managers have authority to purchase only within defined limits.

If the customer can sign in, view the correct prices, choose an authorized delivery location, and repeat a previous order, much of the routine work can happen without a representative.

But suppose the website shows the standard list price rather than the customer's negotiated price. Or it allows a buyer to order for a branch without the necessary purchasing authority.

The customer must then contact somebody to resolve the problem.

The business has acquired a digital channel without eliminating the manual work it was supposed to reduce.

This is why useful B2B self-service depends on more than a customer portal.

The storefront needs dependable access to account data, commercial rules, product information, and order status. In businesses where the ERP holds those records, the ecommerce system must exchange information with it reliably.

It also needs to support exceptions without forcing customers to restart the entire transaction through another channel.

An item being unavailable, a delivery date changing, or a customer requesting a price review should not turn an otherwise useful digital experience into a dead end.

A strong self-service system doesn't eliminate exceptions. It makes routine work straightforward and sends exceptional work to the right person with enough context to resolve it.

Sales representatives still have important work to do

There are several reasons a customer might benefit from a human conversation.

One is uncertainty about the product itself.

A maintenance manager ordering a familiar replacement filter may need no advice. The same manager choosing an alternative for a discontinued component may need someone to confirm compatibility and availability.

Another is commercial negotiation.

Customers arranging substantial annual purchases, requesting exceptional terms, or changing their supply agreements may need a representative with the authority and knowledge to negotiate.

A third is account development.

An experienced representative may recognize that a customer is purchasing only a small portion of the relevant product range, or that a change in the customer's operations creates a new requirement.

The representative can investigate those opportunities rather than merely wait for the next order.

There are also problems that customers reasonably expect a person to resolve: disputed deliveries, unexpected shortages, urgent requests, and situations in which standard rules produce an unsuitable result.

None of these tasks requires the representative to be the person who enters every routine order.

In fact, there is a reasonable argument that excessive administrative involvement can weaken sales performance. The more time a representative spends processing transactions already decided by the customer, the less attention remains for situations in which expertise might affect the outcome.

This does not imply that every distributor should eliminate transactional selling. Some customers prefer placing orders through a familiar contact, and others have purchasing requirements that make personal assistance valuable.

The point is to offer different ways to buy without assigning unnecessary work to either party.

Why salespeople may resist a system that makes their work easier

Self-service can be presented as an obvious improvement while creating understandable concerns inside the sales team.

Representatives may worry about losing commission credit when an established customer starts ordering online. They may fear that reduced order contact will weaken relationships. Some may see the new channel as management's first step toward reducing the sales force.

These concerns cannot be solved by explaining how convenient the portal will be for customers.

A business needs to decide how its sales model will work when an account purchases through several channels.

If a representative develops an account and the customer subsequently places repeat orders online, does the representative continue to receive credit for those sales? What happens when a new customer registers without contacting a salesperson? Who owns a relationship when service, inside sales, and field sales all participate?

There is no universally correct commission model. Some businesses reward account ownership. Others emphasize new business or contribution margin, and many combine these approaches.

But the rules need to be explicit.

If representatives lose compensation whenever customers use self-service, the organization has created an incentive to discourage adoption.

Equally, if representatives are rewarded for every order processed, regardless of their contribution, management may struggle to redirect effort toward higher-value activities.

The transition therefore requires decisions about compensation, account responsibility, customer communication, and performance measurement—not just software training.

Managers also need to make the new expectations practical.

Telling representatives to focus on relationships is insufficient. They need useful account information, visibility into buying patterns, timely reminders, and clear opportunities to act.

A salesperson should be able to identify customers whose purchasing has declined, quotations awaiting a response, or recurring needs that haven't been addressed.

Otherwise, the administrative work may disappear without a credible replacement for how the representative spends the day.

Let customers move between digital and human channels

The strongest buying experience often combines self-service and assisted selling in the same customer relationship.

Consider three transactions involving one customer.

First, routine replenishment. A branch manager orders familiar stock from an approved catalog at the account's negotiated prices. The customer sees availability, selects a delivery location, and places the order independently.

Second, product advice. The same customer needs a substitute for a discontinued component. A representative checks technical requirements, discusses alternatives, and prepares a quotation. Once the products and terms are settled, the customer can approve or place the resulting order through the digital channel.

Third, an urgent exception. A confirmed order is delayed. The customer checks its status online and contacts the account team because the delay threatens an important production schedule. The representative already has the order details and can coordinate a resolution.

These situations require different combinations of automation, information access, and human judgment.

The critical feature is continuity.

Customers shouldn't have to explain their account from the beginning whenever they switch channels. Representatives shouldn't need to search through separate email threads to discover which products the customer considered, what price was quoted, or whether an order has already been entered.

That requires the online channel and the sales operation to work from consistent commercial information.

Gartner's 2025 research found that 69% of surveyed B2B buyers encountered inconsistencies between information on a supplier's website and what sales representatives provided.

This is a reminder that offering more ways to buy is not enough. The information customers receive through those channels also needs to agree.

How to tell whether the change is working

An increase in ecommerce revenue is encouraging, but it is not sufficient evidence that the business has become more productive.

A customer may place the same order online instead of sending it to a representative. That increases reported ecommerce sales, but not necessarily total sales.

The real gains may be found elsewhere: reduced administration, fewer avoidable errors, faster confirmations, improved customer convenience, or additional sales capacity.

Before launching or expanding self-service, a distributor should establish a baseline.

How many orders are handled manually? How many require straightforward repeat entry? How much time do representatives and customer service employees spend checking status or answering routine account questions? How often are orders corrected? How much selling time remains after administrative work?

After implementation, the business can compare those measures with actual performance.

The more informative indicators include the share of eligible orders completed without assistance, administrative minutes per order, order exceptions, repeat customer adoption, correction rates, and the amount of representative time spent on commercial development.

It's also worth examining customer outcomes. If online adoption rises but customers experience incorrect prices, missed delivery promises, or more difficult exception handling, the business may have improved one metric while damaging the relationship.

And the sales team should not be judged merely by how many orders have moved out of its hands. The purpose is to improve what representatives contribute, not to make their involvement appear unnecessary.

A better use of both technology and people

B2B ecommerce has often been treated as an alternative to traditional selling. For many distributors, a more productive view is to regard it as a way to separate transactional work from relationship work.

Customers should be able to complete predictable purchases without depending on an employee's availability. Sales representatives should be able to intervene when their experience, judgment, or commercial authority makes a difference.

Getting there requires more than adding a shopping cart. Account-specific terms need to work online. Product and order data need to be reliable. Representatives need visibility into what customers are doing. Compensation and ownership rules need to support the new arrangement.

The result isn't necessarily fewer salespeople. It can be a sales organization with more time to sell, backed by a buying experience that respects customers' time.

The first question for a distributor considering self-service is therefore a simple one:

How many of the orders our salespeople handle today actually need a salesperson?

The answer may reveal more opportunity than another round of sales training, another CRM dashboard, or another campaign to generate leads.