

The Next Best Thing to Being There



*How to Dramatically Improve
Your “Virtual” Sales Calls*

In partnership with
 **XANT**

THE INTERNATIONAL
Journal of **Sales**
Transformation



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Overview

In the 60s and 70s, the Bell phone system had a catchy commercial slogan I remember to this day: “Long distance. It’s the next best thing to being there.” It was all about extolling the virtues of connecting with far away loved ones via super expensive long distance phone calls.

It made me wonder if that still rings true today when it comes to how inside sales reps—and increasingly outside ones—are spending more time connecting with prospects and customers remotely versus face-to-face.

In a recent survey conducted with XANT, we asked more than 300 inside and outside salespeople about their “virtual” sales conversations. On average, 61% of respondents conduct at least half of their meetings over the phone or web. A significant slice—37%—conduct 75% or more of their conversations in non-face-to-face environments.

Whether it’s inside or outside sales reps, one thing is clear: virtual sales calls are a big deal. But are they “the next best thing to being there?”

There are a lot of opinions and schools of thought about how to succeed in these environments. But there hasn’t been much research. That’s what we set out to change.

In collaboration with the International Journal of Sales Transformation and Dr. Nick Lee, a professor at Warwick Business School, we conducted a research simulation designed to answer one pivotal question: *How can you be the most remarkable and compelling in phone or web conference selling environments?*

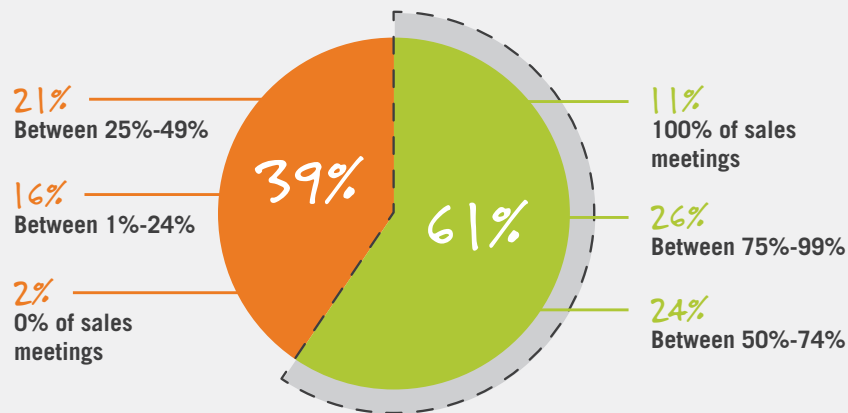
This report, produced in partnership with XANT, covers that research and all its implications. The results break with much conventional wisdom about selling in these environments—and chart a new path forward for engaging prospects and customers when they’re not face-to-face with you.



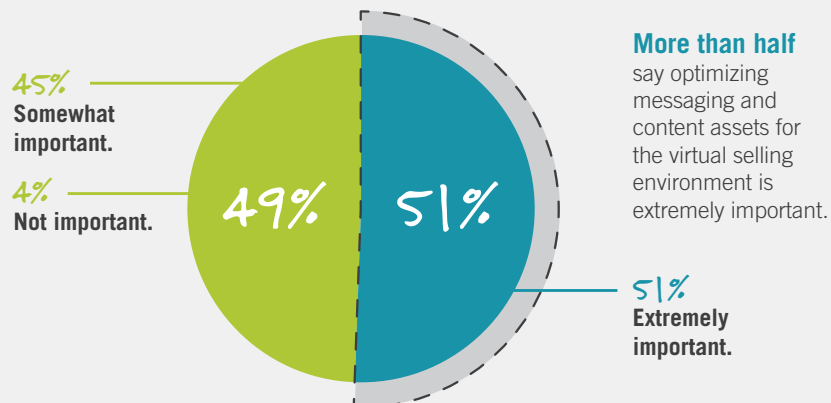
A Shifting Environment

Many companies are expanding inside sales teams and decreasing the number of “feet on the street.” **Today, the majority of salespeople conduct more than half of their sales calls in non-face-to-face environments.** And, there’s basically an even split about the importance of optimizing messaging and content for these selling situations.

What percentage of your sales meetings in a typical sales cycle take place over the phone or by conference call versus in-person/face-to-face?



How important is it that your messaging and content assets be optimized for the virtual selling environment—supporting phone calls and web-based meetings?



Gabe Larsen

VP of Growth, XANT



5 Steps to More Meaningful Conversations

Only **60% of inside sales reps** are hitting quota today, despite the fact that inside sales reps report an average of 36.9 phone calls per day. But just making cold calls is not enough—B2B sales has become fiercely complex with multiple decision makers, diverse product ranges, and aggressive competition. Today, the world’s best companies are using a combination of AI-powered sales tools and best practices to increase the number of quality conversations.

- **Respond to inbound leads immediately** - Organizations still struggle to respond to inbound inquiries. Using artificial intelligence, reps can automatically place incoming inbound leads at the top of the queue.
- **Prioritize top leads:** Reps struggle to know which contacts to pursue. Using technology and data to score leads and then prioritize them can drive better conversations and conversion rates.
- **Right time, right method:** Not knowing when to call or the best method to engage a prospect limits conversations. With AI companies can understand what day, time, and method drives optimal contact rates.
- **Be efficient with prospecting:** Only 35% of reps' time is spent selling. Using AI-infused sales cadence tools, reps can add efficiencies like having emails automatically sent at optimal times.
- **Track what's working:** Most reps can't see what is and isn't working. Using sales and insight tools, reps can see which sales plays are driving success and do more of those to help hit their quota.

The “Virtual” Barrier

What exactly is the best approach for being remarkable and compelling in these environments? Do you simply modify existing engagement techniques to a phone or web conference environment? Or does it demand a total rethink in terms of message delivery?

There are a few schools of thought. At a basic level, the approaches include:

1. Verbal-only

Try to “reduce friction” by keeping the conversation verbal only and not directing prospects and customers to web links, apps, or other visual storytelling aids for fear of reducing their willingness to participate

2. Web Link with PowerPoint

Ask prospects and customers to go to a web link to show them some form of traditional PowerPoint presentation deck to help tell your story

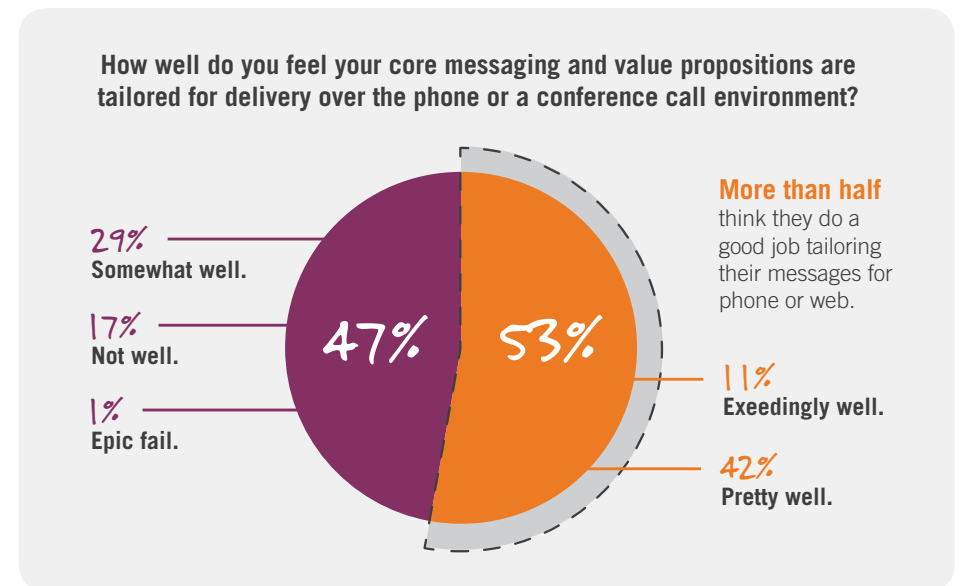
3. Dynamic Visual Storytelling

Use interactive visual storytelling over the web, in the form of virtual demonstrations of your solution, dynamic visual builds in PowerPoint, or even have the salesperson “hand-draw” simple images using a whiteboard app

4. Active Customer Participation

Ask prospects and customers to grab a piece of paper and pen and hand-draw certain concepts described by the seller that help illustrate your core message—moving them from passive observer to active participant

For all the potential cost savings and productivity gains, the expansion of inside sales teams can create engagement challenges due to the virtual barrier between seller and buyer. Even so, **more than half of survey respondents think they do a good job tailoring their messages for these environments.**



But is this confidence misplaced? There's evidence to suggest they're not using the approach they think will have the most positive impact. Read on to learn about a disconnect between belief and action.



Tim Riesterer

*Chief Strategy & Research Officer,
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The Picture Superiority Effect

Confidence in a visual storytelling approach—if not usage—tracks with our hypothesis ahead of the study. We believed that some form of visual storytelling approach will be more effective than a verbal-only one. This is not only based on the Picture Superiority Effect, a research-backed concept affirming that pictures are far better than words at getting people to remember what you're telling them. It's also based on past **research** we conducted with Dr. Zak Tormala, an expert in messaging and persuasion and (separately) a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.

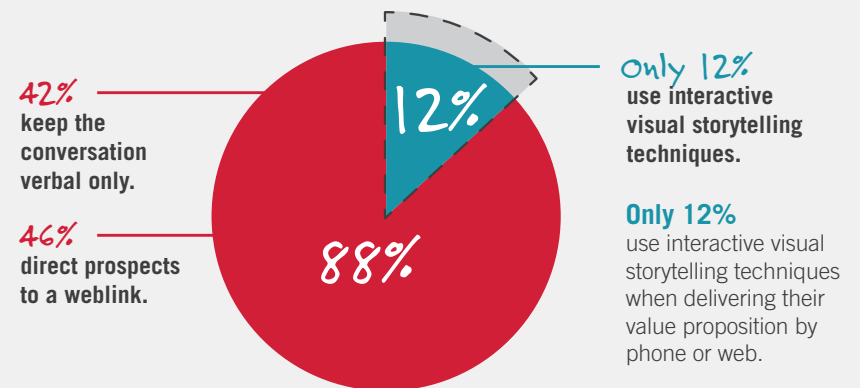
That study revealed that simple, concrete, hand-drawn visuals on a whiteboard outperformed two types of PowerPoint presentations in the areas of recall, engagement, presentation quality, credibility, and persuasion. Our main point then was that simple, concrete visuals are more effective in face-to-face presentations than traditional (and ubiquitous) PowerPoint techniques. We also extrapolated that these results could apply to the visuals salespeople use in online sales calls. That research and its key implications are the jump-off point for the study covered in this report.

The reluctance to use visual approaches in these environments, despite some belief in their effectiveness, is especially interesting given that more than half of respondents believe they're doing well at tailoring their messaging and content to these situations. It makes you wonder whether the confidence might waver a bit as salespeople consider a new (and possibly better) approach.

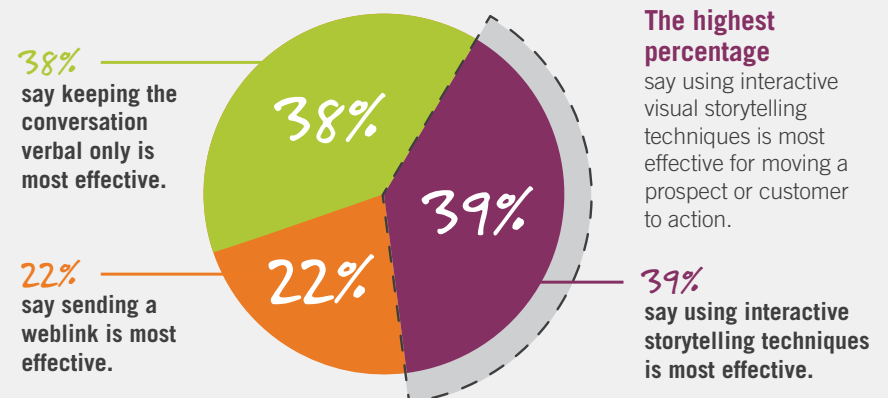
Least Used, Most Effective?

Interactive or “hand-drawn” visuals are not much of a factor in these non-face-to-face environments. **Only 12% of respondents use interactive visual storytelling techniques.** But get this: the highest number of respondents rate it as the most effective approach for telling their story and moving prospects and customers to action. What's more, **64% believe using interactive storytelling techniques would make a material difference**, either significantly (28%) or modestly (36%).

Which of the statements below best reflects how you deliver your value proposition with prospects and customers by phone or web conference?



Which approach is most effective at delivering a story and moving the prospect or customer to action?



The Case Study That Inspired the Academic One

Here's the story of how this research idea incubated:

A company that sells a \$10,000 coaching product to marketing and sales leaders relies strictly on inside salespeople to drive business and close leads—and to do so *in one 45-minute call*. Salespeople have a verbal script that includes a six-pronged persuasion technique following Robert Cialdini's research (The Six Principles of Persuasion from his book, *Influence*).

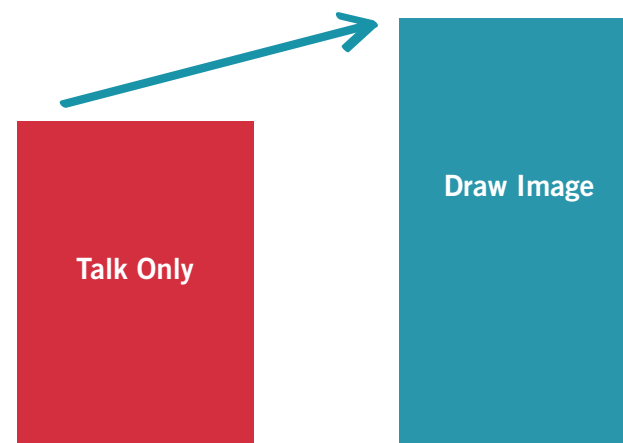
The company was adamant about not using any visuals conveyed through drawings or web links, believing it would create "too much friction" that would negatively affect the call. Corporate Visions worked with them to develop a simple, concrete visual story modeled on our Why Change storytelling framework, designed to create urgency and convince prospects to break from the status quo.

Not only were they asked to share the visual. They also asked prospects to draw the visual themselves during the conversation, adding maximum "friction" potential to the interaction.

Turns out, the new visual story requiring the prospect to draw had an immediate positive impact relative to their previous verbal-only approach, increasing their sales by more than 24% the very next month.

While a very promising single example, the approach needed to be tested in a more rigorous research simulation to generate more empirical data and to see how it holds up across different B2B scenarios. That research is covered on the pages to come.

24% Increase in Registrations MoM AND YoY



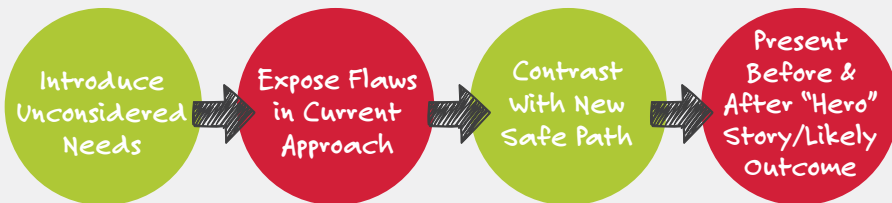
The Research Simulation

The simulation put four messaging conditions to the test in a “virtual” selling environment:

- **Listen Only**
- **Listen and Watch Only**
- **Listen, Watch, and Take Notes**
- **Listen and Draw as Directed**

Participants—800 in total—were divided randomly into the four conditions and instructed to imagine themselves as executives at a food processing company. The intent of the message in all conditions was to set up a face-to-face meeting with the participants and their fellow executives to discuss the purchase of an organic processing system to help them capitalize on growing demand for organic foods. They would do so by making the shift from large-batch to small-batch production, which requires more flexible processing techniques and lower labor and material costs.

Why Change Story Model



As with the case study covered on the previous page, the message followed the Why Change story model. While the message was conveyed in different ways across the conditions, the substance of the message was the same for all of them.

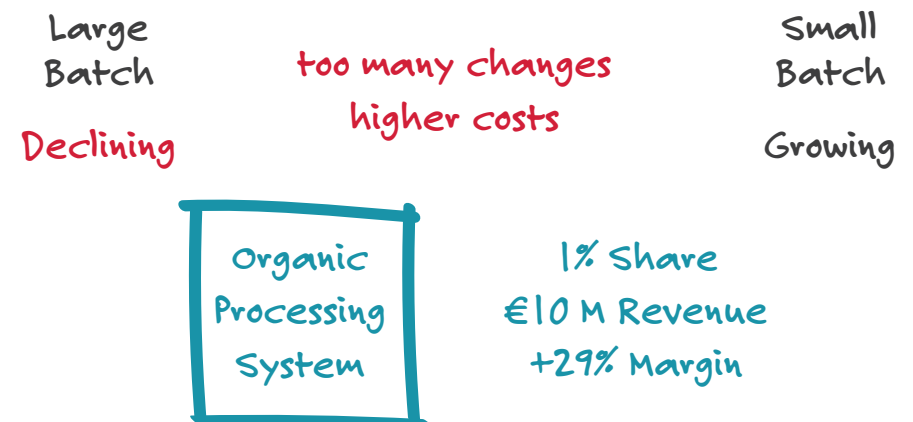
The Visual Story

For participants not in the Listen Only condition, the visual story participants experienced relied on simple, concrete images that emphasized the decline of large-batch processing and the growth potential of small-batch processing.

Per the visual below, negative factors such as higher costs and excessive changes were drawn in red, while positive outcomes associated with the organic processing system, such as increased market share, revenues, and profit margin, were rendered in blue.

The visual story relied on simple, concrete images that emphasized the decline of large-batch processing and the growth potential of small-batch processing.

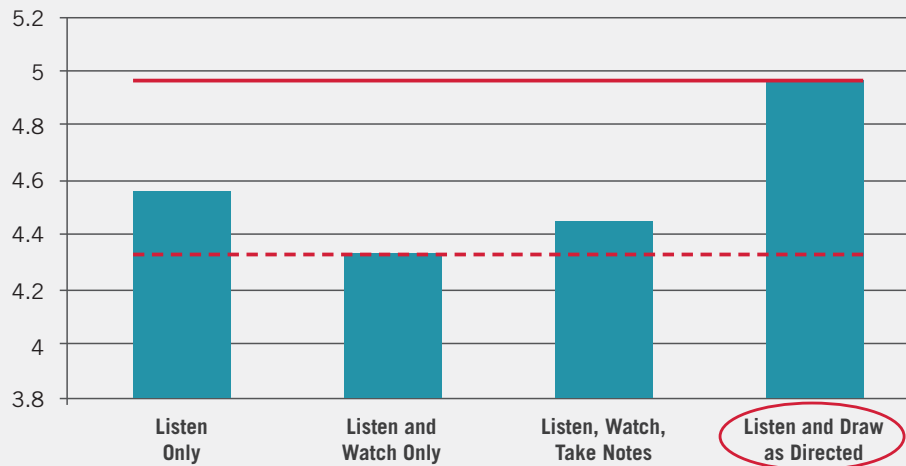
The simple, concrete visual used in the study



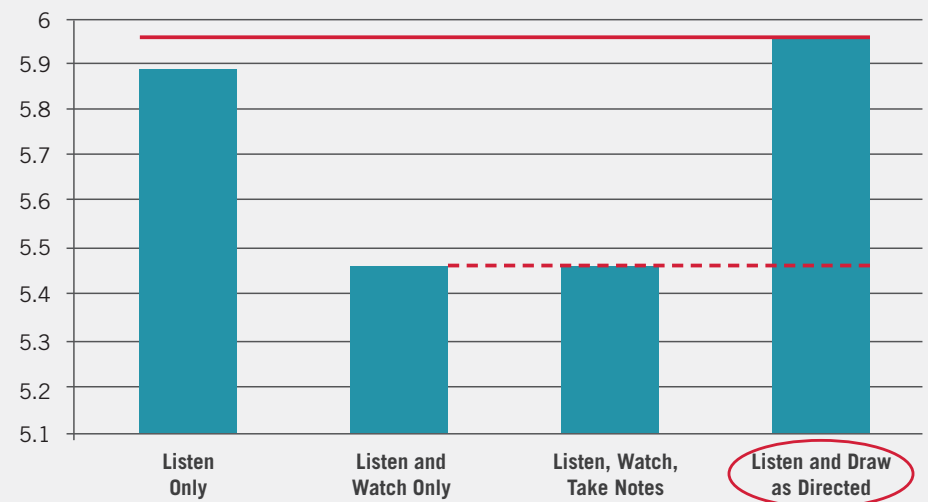
The Results: Attitude/Disposition Measures

Participants in each condition answered a series of numerically valued questions that were then combined to create a composite index for each area assessed. Across key attitude and disposition measures such as uniqueness, trusted advisor status, how compelling the call was, and how likely it was to produce a meeting, the Listen and Draw approach consistently performed the best. Interestingly, the Listen Only approach held its own against the others and consistently outperformed the Listen and Watch approach—which regularly finished last by a wide margin.

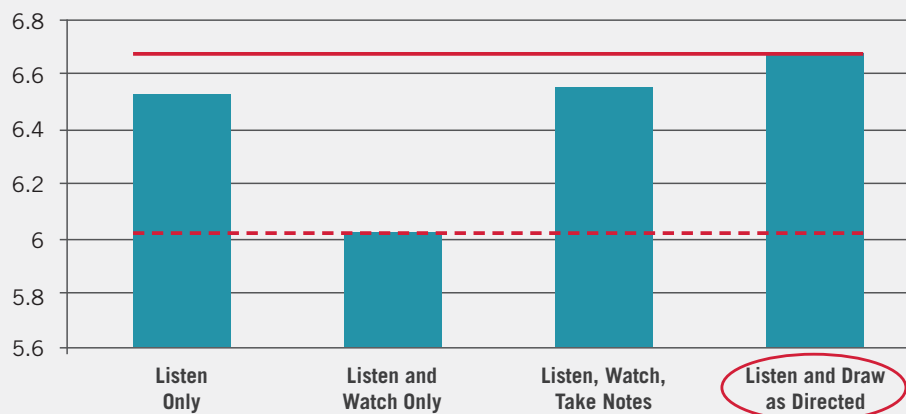
Different or Unique Content



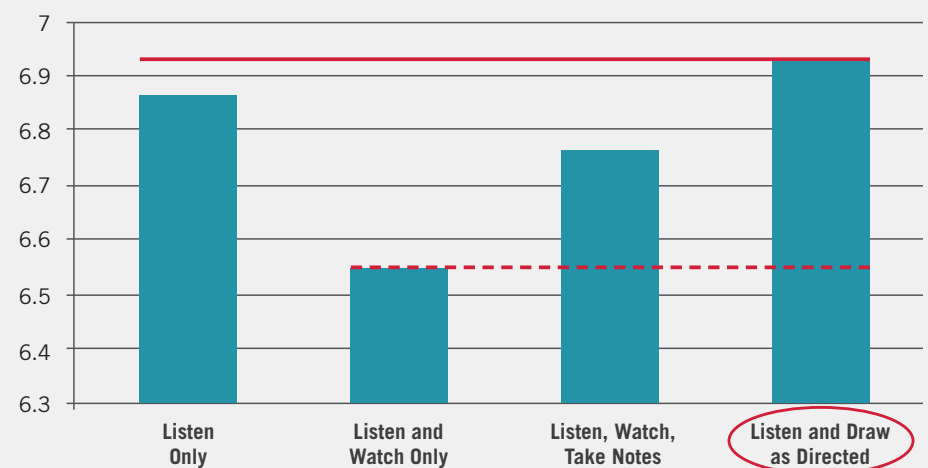
Likely to Consider Vendor a Trusted Advisor



Compelling Message



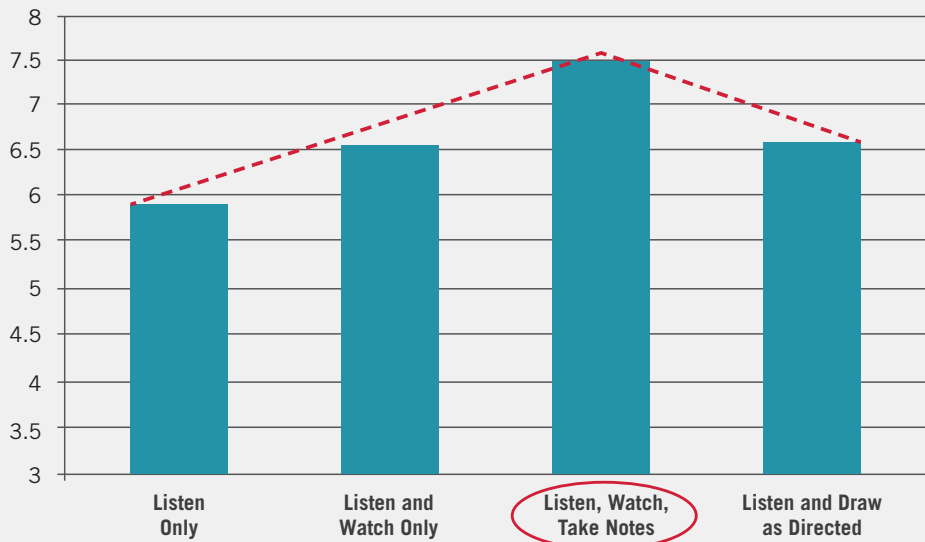
Likely to Meet with Seller



The Results: Recall/Retell Measures

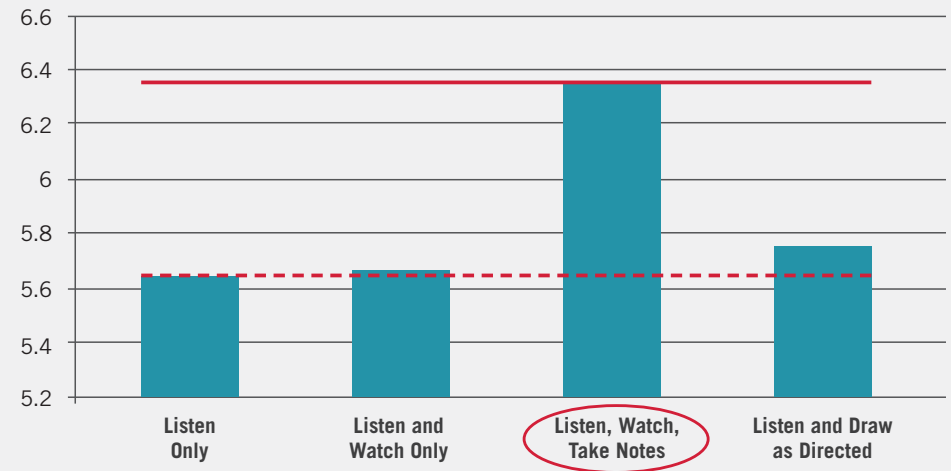
The study also assessed the recall and retell-ability of the various conditions—both key indicators of how remarkable and memorable the call was. In this case, the Listen, Watch, and Take Notes condition—the most experiential in the study—was a convincing winner across areas like confidence in recall, number of correct recalls, and confidence in retelling the story to colleagues. In fact, in the simulation, you see essentially the same curve between the confidence in recall and the actual recall, with the Listen Only condition lagging far behind in both areas.

Confidence in Information Recall



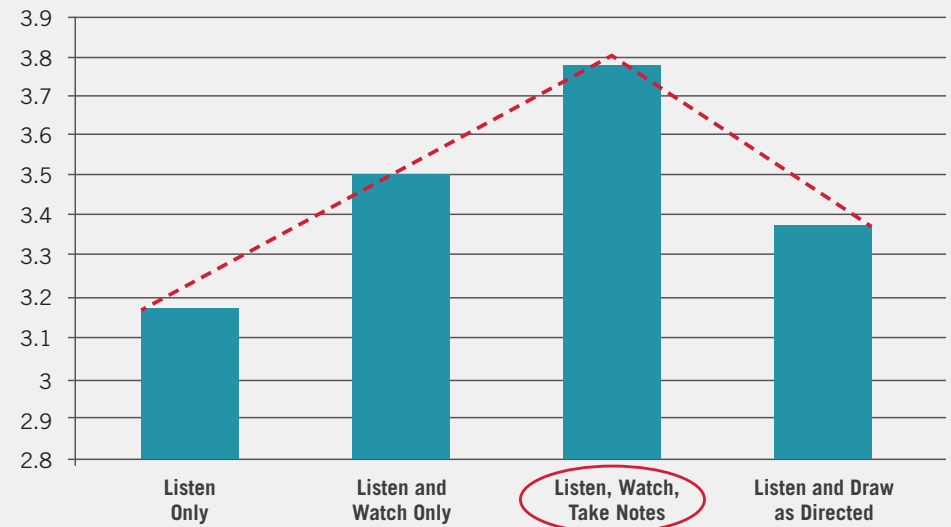
The ability to recall and retell the story to others involved in the decision is critical to setting up the next meeting. Here it seems the more experiential the better.

Confident You Could Retell Story to Colleagues



Participants in the most experiential of the conditions felt significantly more confident in their ability to retell the story to others.

Number of Correct Recalls



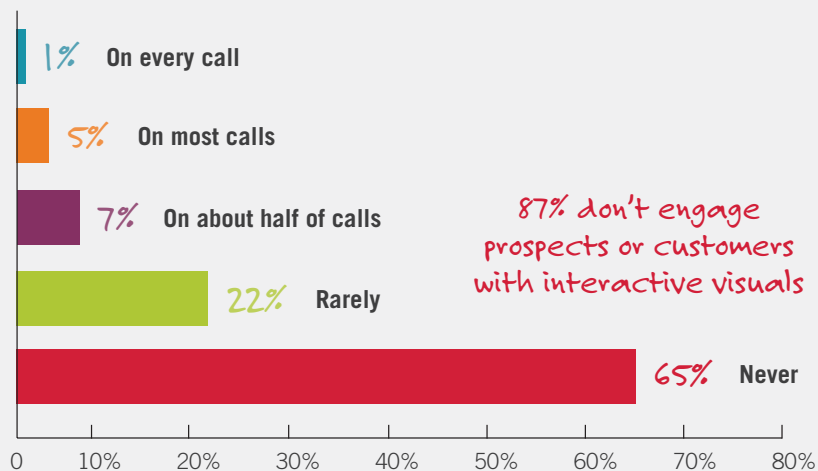
When actually tested on recall, participants felt more confident and they actually did recall more in the more experiential condition.

Conclusion

The research reveals that interactive visual stories are vital to engaging your audience, increasing favorable attitudes toward your story, and improving recall. Salespeople need to “get beyond passive” when it comes to engaging contacts in these environments. Getting your listener participating in some way—whether by taking notes or drawing a simple, concrete visual as directed—can give you an edge.

Incorporating these storytelling techniques into your non-face-to-face meetings is going to demand some behavior changes from salespeople. According to the survey conducted by Corporate Visions and XANT, 87% of respondents engage prospects or customers with visuals either rarely or never. In other words, the majority of reps aren’t using the engagement techniques that research proves to be most impactful for getting meetings and moving your deals forward.

How often do you ask prospects and customers to hand-draw visuals over the phone?



Gabe Larsen

VP of Growth, XANT



Never Miss Your Targets Again

A key trend in sales is the mounting expectation for predictability. And yet, the way many organizations sell and forecast is overly subjective. Despite sales reps spending an average of 2.5 hours per week on forecasting (more so for managers), only 46.5% of deals close as forecasted. And 79% of sales organizations miss their forecasts by more than 10%. To reverse these trends, sales reps and managers need to assist human judgment with data and science. Business intelligence can help sales teams unlock the five keys of predictable revenue:

- 1. Optimize rep behaviors** - Know who top performers are, and how to coach the entire team to replicate their success
- 2. Measure pipeline value in the right way** - A full pipeline isn't always a healthy pipeline. Predictive analysis can show which deals are on track to close and which are pipeline stuffers
- 3. Know what to look for in the past, and learn from it** - Artificial Intelligence for sales can analyze your data and apply knowledge from the past to drive future growth
- 4. Capture what has changed and know why it matters** - Most companies review pipeline changes on weekly pipeline calls, but they rely on Excel spreadsheets for it. Real business intelligence tools can show a dashboard updated in real time
- 5. Don't forget transactional and bluebird deals** - Some deals are just hard to predict, especially the further out you go from the end of a period. Predictive sales systems evaluate these kinds of deals in your historical performance analysis automatically



About Corporate Visions

Corporate Visions is a leading marketing and sales messaging, content, and skills training company. Global B2B companies come to us when they want to:

- **Create Value** – Break the status quo and differentiate your solutions from competitors
- **Elevate Value** – Build a more effective business case to justify executive decisions
- **Capture Value** – Maximize the profitability of each deal
- **Expand Value** – Renew and expand existing customer revenue

corporatevisions.com



About XANT

offers the industry's leading AI-fueled sales acceleration platform powered by Neuralytics™, a predictive and prescriptive self-learning engine that drives revenue growth. The XANT platform can increase revenue up to 30 percent in just 90 days, for companies who employ sales teams.

XANT has received numerous industry awards including CBInsights award for Top 100 AI Startups, the 2017 Alconics Award for Best Artificial Intelligence Application for Sales and Marketing, as well as Forbes Cloud 100 list and CNBC Disruptor 50.

We accelerate sales for enterprise customers like Bank of America, CA, Caesars Entertainment, CenturyLink, West Corp., T-Mobile, Microsoft, Waste Management, and Workday.

Authors and Researchers



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Tim Riesterer is Chief Strategy & Research Officer at Corporate Visions. In that role, he sets the direction and develops products for the company. His books, **Conversations That Win the Complex Sale** and **The Three Value Conversations**, focus on improving market-ready messages, content and skills that marketers and salespeople can use to win more deals.



Dr. Nick Lee  

Nick Lee is a professor of marketing at the Warwick Business School in Coventry, UK. He has spent nearly 20 years drawing from social psychology, cognitive neuroscience, economics, and philosophy, to develop insights into salespeople and selling.



Joe Collins 

Joe is a Senior Consultant at Corporate Visions. His unique perspective is grounded in six years of experience on the finance side and seven in sales—in which he helped capture over \$25 million in new revenue. With an MBA in Global Business Management, Joe has trained over 3,000 sales professionals on five different continents.



Gabe Larsen  

Gabe Larsen is an international sales consultant with over 15 years experience. He is vice president of XANT Labs, the research and best practice arm of XANT. The Labs unit works to uncover insights in the sales industry which help sales reps close more and bigger deals, faster, using machine learning technology in the process.