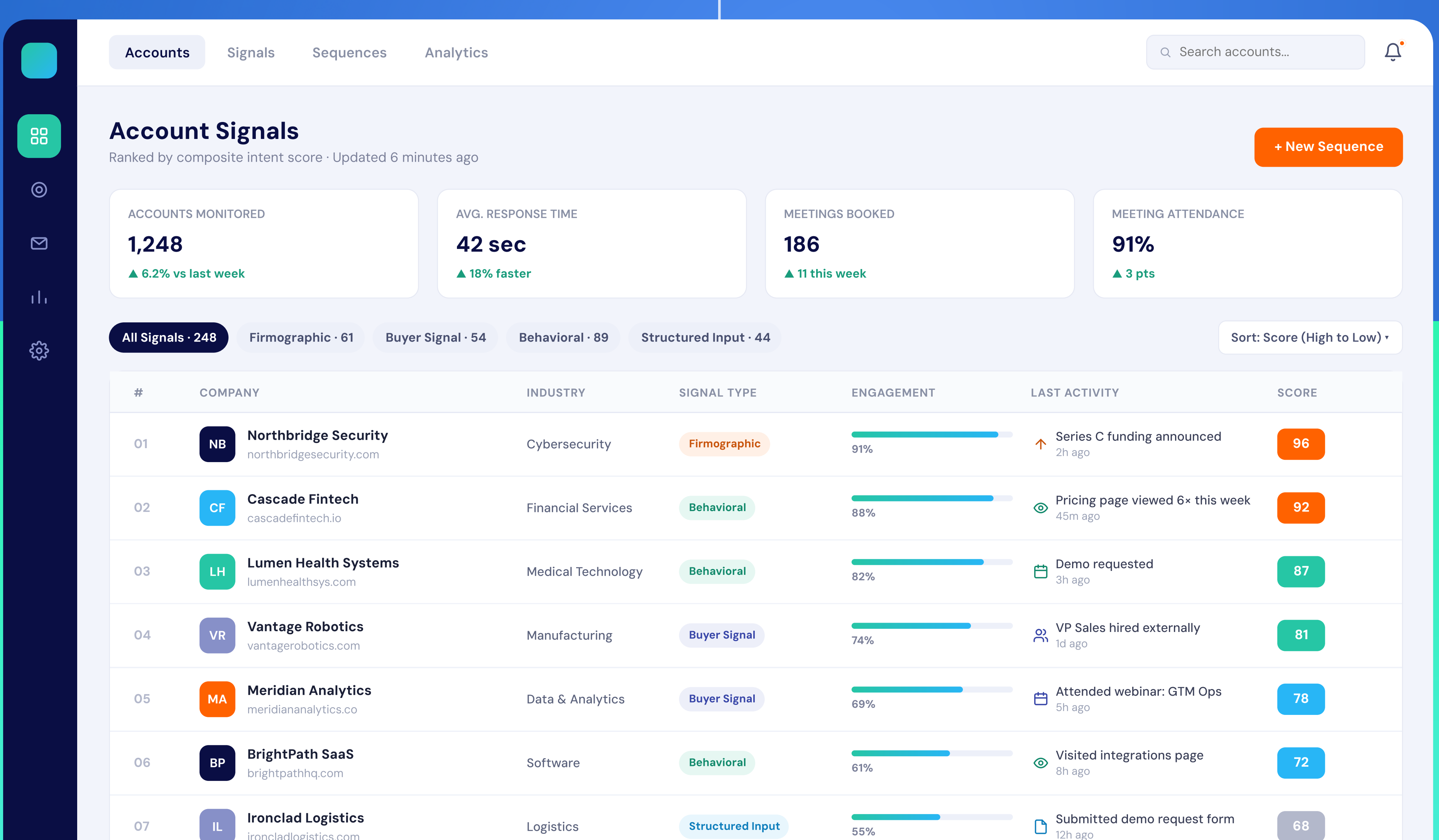
demandDrive

eBook

# State of Sales Development 2026-2027 Report

A look at the forces reshaping sales development, the execution gaps holding teams back, and what a future-ready SDR function looks like.

- Precision Outbound
- Speed-to-Lead
- AI-Enabled Workflows
- Elevated Quality Standards
- GTM Engineering



# What's inside

Insights from the demandDrive team for sales leaders looking to modernize their sales development function, accelerate their time-to-value, and achieve greater pipeline predictability in an ever-changing, highly competitive market.

# Executive summary

Sales leaders walked into 2026 carrying the same complaints they have been raising for three years: pipeline is volatile, AEs say the leads they get are not good enough, and SDR teams are missing quota or grinding to hit it. Hiring is hard and approving headcount is harder. Forecasts are unreliable enough that finance has stopped trusting them.

What changed is the environment around those complaints. Buyer journeys are increasingly digital. Inboxes are saturated with low-quality, AI-generated outreach. Tool stacks have ballooned, with more than half of CRM implementations failing to deliver. The gap between top-performing SDR teams and the rest is widening, and the businesses on the wrong side of it are increasingly pulling their outsourced programs back in-house out of frustration.

**The teams pulling ahead are not just using more technology or more outreach; they're using both *more deliberately*.** They're starting with targeted outbound and scaling it with AI, instead of starting with scale and trying to improve targeting later. They're responding to inbound in under a minute, because the conversion math at that speed is unforgivingly clear. They're treating RevOps as the integration layer that ties sales, marketing, and technology together, not as a separate function that owns dashboards. Lastly, they're recognizing that the strategy-to-execution gap, not the tools, is what most often breaks pipeline.

This report walks through the five forces reshaping sales development: **precision outbound, speed-to-lead, AI-enabled workflows, elevated quality standards, and GTM engineering**. It outlines the execution gaps that are costing teams pipeline today, the metrics worth tracking in a faster-moving market, and what a future-ready sales development function looks like. Written for sales leaders trying to decide where to invest their budget for the highest return, this report brings together third-party research and insights from conversations between demandDrive and clients, technology partners, and members of industry associations.

## Key takeaways

- **Pipeline volatility is structural,** not cyclical. Cautious buyers, longer cycles, and saturated channels mean traditional forecasting and traditional outbound both need to be rebuilt.

- **Spray-and-pray outbound is no longer a viable strategy.** Precision outbound, built on real buying signals and ranked account prioritization, is what is working.

- **Speed-to-lead is a huge structural advantage.** Teams that respond within a minute convert at hundreds of times the rate of teams that take an hour.

- **AI amplifies whatever foundation it sits on.** Teams without clean data, clear processes, and aligned definitions will move faster in the wrong direction.

- **RevOps and GTM engineering** provide the integration layer that determines whether the rest works. Cross-functional alignment on definitions, routing, ownership, and metrics is now the difference between teams that hit pipeline targets and teams that miss them.

# The sales development landscape today

Sales development teams are facing several pressure points. Some are internal, others are the result of external market conditions, and some are created by the technology meant to make their lives easier.

## Market dynamics are tumultuous

Every business needs a reliable, predictable sales pipeline to thrive. But the state of world markets is making it more difficult to build that pipeline. Ongoing inflation, trade uncertainty, and tariffs continue to put pressure on businesses to grow revenues as operational costs rise. As a result, many businesses are adopting a do-more-with-less strategy, cutting staff and demanding more from those that remain.

## Reps are under more productivity pressure

In the current environment, effective sales development operations are becoming more urgent and more challenging. Pressure to meet profit margins means sales teams must deliver more qualified leads in less time. Internal SDR teams are facing customers who expect to receive faster and higher quality service on their own terms, 24/7. Meanwhile, volatile market conditions make buyers more difficult to convince.

Research has previously suggested that many reps find themselves bogged down with administrative work instead of selling, and as a result less than a third expected to be able to meet sales quotas.

## Technology has become a double-edged sword

Unfortunately, the technology meant to help sales teams solve these issues often does the opposite.

Many businesses have taken a scattershot approach to technology deployment, simply adding tools as they appear without a coherent, overall strategy or even an eye to effective integration. Constant pressure to use the latest and greatest tool means teams are often getting overwhelmed by the influx of the very tools meant to simplify their workflows.

In addition, many internal sales development teams still struggle with cross-domain integration and coordination, particularly between sales and marketing. In most cases, the technology meant to address the integration challenge is exacerbating it, as businesses end up with disconnected tech and tool sprawl. Without a clear strategic direction and clearly established processes, lifecycle stages, and ownership, teams are working with more tools and unclear responsibilities, with no one person accountable for leads progressing through the funnel. The result is obvious: dropped leads, which, in turn, poisons the well of reporting systems.

Constant switching between tools is also a significant drag on productivity, cutting workers' efficiency by as much as 40%. But not all tools are useless or counterproductive, and sales teams can't afford to cut the tools they use and need. Audits must be conducted to identify which tools are providing value and which aren't, but businesses are often too focused on moving fast to allocate the necessary time.

Constant pressure to use the latest and greatest tool means teams are often getting overwhelmed by the influx of the very tools meant to simplify their workflows.

## Buyer journeys are increasingly digital and AI-enabled

Shrinking attention spans, access to instant Internet answers, and the availability of a massive number of peer reviews has incentivized buyers to manage their own path through the buyers' journey. One survey found most buyers are nearly 70% through the sales process online before they engage with a vendor, and 80% of the time they're the ones initiating contact. In fact, 85% of buyers in that survey had already established their purchase requirements before reaching out. As a result, sales funnels and pipelines are no longer carefully curated journeys; every step along the path from awareness to purchase must be structured to enable a self-guided buying process.

The role of websites in the buying process has also changed greatly with the advent of AI. Today's buyers are no longer conducting their buying research with keywords, but using natural language to search for tailored answers to specific questions. In many cases, buyers aren't clicking through search results to a vendor's website, but simply scanning AI-generated summaries, forcing businesses to adapt content to match the new search paradigm. In this new reality, traditional search engine optimization (SEO) has been joined by answer engine optimization (AEO) as businesses try to rank higher in these summaries.

Every step along the path from awareness to purchase must be structured to enable a self-guided buying process.

## Large-scale outreach has created new barriers

AI has also made it easier than ever for businesses to rapidly spool up large-scale outreach programs that bombard prospects daily with phone calls, instant messages, and emails. Unfortunately, purely tech-driven, haphazard bulk approaches are not delivering the results businesses expect or need. Buyers are being constantly flooded with noise, and cutting through that noise is more difficult than ever.

## The performance gap is wider

In this competitive environment, the gap between the highest and lowest sales development performers is growing. This gap is less attributable to individual capabilities and more often comes down to technology. But rather than simply having or using the best tools, the key difference between leaders and laggards is in the way the technology is applied.

Top performers understand that effective use of AI, automation, and CRM technologies can deliver huge savings in time and effort for SDR teams. In a 2025 study, 97% of teams said AI is driving measurable ROI for them, particularly in forecasting and analytics. Typically, these top performers are taking a strategic approach to tech integration, focusing on using technology to pivot, reducing their dependence on headcount and automating many manual tasks.

### Some of the most effective uses of GTM tech for SDRs include:

- ☑ Automating research to generate ranked lists of prospects in less time
- ☑ Target prospecting and account prioritization based on meaningful metrics for more effective outreach
- ☑ Automating personalized account outreach at scale

Businesses that still rely on manual research, prospecting, and engagement are often working with poor, unclear, or nonexistent metrics on which buyers to target and when. Many rely essentially on luck and continual effort to get the right message in front of the right prospect at the right time. This is impossible to do consistently, particularly with the kind of high-quality outreach needed to get buyers' attention in a competitive market.

# Execution challenges are limiting growth

This evolving sales development landscape highlights critical execution gaps for many businesses.

## Churn rates and specialization

In this environment, high churn rates in SDR teams and the inherent limitations of SDR ramp-up time create an execution gap and an internal challenge to predictable pipeline. A business that needs six months to bring SDRs up to full effectiveness will suffer at minimum a six month delay every time an SDR leaves the team, assuming an equally effective team member can be hired immediately.

Further complicating this problem is the growing need for specialization. SDR has often been treated as an entry-level role, requiring only some basic soft skills to get started, with reps building skills on the job. But industries like finance and medicine have always required domain-specific knowledge, and the importance of this appears to be growing. One survey found that vertical-specific expertise in SaaS, medical technology, and B2B financial technology improved conversion rates by as much as 32%.

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## Ineffective use of automation in outbound

With technology drastically lowering the bar to conduct outreach, volume has simply exploded across every channel. When it was expensive or difficult to initiate automated outbound, being able to do so strategically, effectively, and at scale was a competitive differentiator. But automated outreach is now inexpensive and easily applied, making it relatively cheap for virtually any business to rapidly target hundreds or thousands of prospects a day.

### This “spray-and-pray” approach is ineffective for 2026 buyer behaviors:

- ❌ Excessive market noise means customers don’t open or listen to messages unless they have reason to
- ❌ Improved filters for unwanted communications block unfocused messages from getting through
- ❌ Rising customer expectations on the quality of information means low-effort outreach simply won’t engage
- ❌ Challenging economic conditions means customers need more convincing, not just in volume but in quality of justification for their spend

## Marketing and sales alignment

In addition to churn rates, ongoing misalignment between marketing and sales continues to stymie the sales development process. While the technology exists to facilitate automatic handoffs between marketing and sales, many teams still find they struggle with slow speed-to-lead for inbound inquiries. Meanwhile, longstanding research has shown companies that engage prospects within five minutes are 100 times more likely to connect than those that take 30 minutes.

Slow **speed-to-lead** is one of the major reasons many teams are having so much difficulty moving marketing-qualified leads (MQL) to sales-qualified leads (SQL). Why are teams struggling to respond quickly to inbound leads?

In some cases, it starts with mismatches between departments. If marketing and sales have different definitions and performance metrics around what counts as a qualified lead, their lead handling and prioritization will be disjointed.

Many businesses also lack **clear routing rules for leads** once they've entered internal systems. The temptation is often to blame the CRM system, but more commonly the culprit is the process architecture.

Without an overall strategic direction based on company-wide metrics, teams end up with unclear lead routing, inconsistent definitions, and poor data validation. This, in turn, often makes for poor lead ownership and governance. As a result, leads end up falling through the cracks, either because nobody picks them up, or because they get assigned to reps who are already overloaded.

Cross-department agenda setting and shared definitions remain the exception, rather than the norm. Often, individual departments set and use their own metrics, with little or no insight into other departments' goals and metrics. This makes both sales and marketing more difficult and less efficient, but is particularly an issue for marketing, which often struggles to prove its impact on revenue. Inconsistent definitions or breaks in the chain (such as a loss of marketing influence when a lead is converted to a contact in an existing account) make it hard to track leads' progress across touchpoints. No cross-department visibility makes it difficult to monitor lead movement; this misalignment and lack of coordination can obscure or even completely conceal marketing's role in sales development.

## Visibility and accountability

Many businesses also face significant visibility and accountability gaps, particularly when it comes to early-stage funnel. With buying cycles getting longer and more unpredictable, this makes reliable pipeline prediction that much more difficult.

The average B2B buying cycle is already nearly a year long and involves an average of 11 people. **A slowdown at the top of the funnel may take some time to manifest in slowing sales, and by then any correction will take time to generate downstream improvement.**

Inconsistent reporting and performance metrics also contribute to this problem for many large businesses. Basic questions like "how many leads do we have at a given point in our pipeline?" become impossible to ask when marketing and sales don't qualify leads according to the same criteria or using the same terms and definitions. Visibility issues create tracking issues. Many businesses lose track of leads during hand-offs from SDRs and AEs because AEs and SDRs are using the same terms to talk about different things, or different terms to refer to the same thing.

## Strategic approach

Many of the execution gaps outlined above can trace their origin back to the lack of a clear, consistent, overall outbound strategy. Without an overall direction set by leadership and tied to clear market goals, individual departments are often left to their own devices.

**Falling back on best practices for their own domains, each defines success differently:**

- ☑ **Marketing isn't selling,** so they don't look at sales metrics

- ☑ **Sales isn't interested** in building awareness or credibility, so they don't track engagement or clickthrough

When each department has its own internal definition of success, departments end up in friction with one another. Priorities conflict, departments argue over why leads were dropped, and messaging misalignment results in a fractured customer experience.

# Where leading companies are investing

In response to these conditions, today's forward-thinking organizations are investing in five core areas.

## 1. AI-enabled precision outbound

The alternative approach to spray-and-pray requires data-driven target selection at scale. Businesses will need the capability to capture timely, relevant, and usable data to build out the lists needed to execute targeted outreach.

Given the sheer volume of data that technologies can capture, businesses risk flooding SDR teams with meaningless noise if they aren't careful and strategic about the data they gather and how they use it.

Businesses must first determine the signals that indicate a buyer is approaching the moment where they'll outgrow their current solution and need what the business is selling.

### This includes

- **Firmographic signals** like funding announcements, rapid headcount growth, sales org expansion, and tech stack changes
- **Buyer signals** like strategic hires, earnings call language, and social engagement
- **Behavioral signals** like website visits, pricing page views, and demo requests
- **Structured inputs** like segmented target account lists and inbound leads

The most effective businesses will use AI to continuously monitor these signals and enrich prospect data at scale for more accurate prioritization, targeting, and personalization without manual effort. Major industry players like OpenAI, for example, are using tools like Clay to automate research to scale their lead enrichment.

With the right leads identified and richer data available, companies can deliver personalization beyond simply inserting a contact's name into an email. Rippling, for instance, was able to double email performance with personalization at scale.

## 2. Speed-to-lead as competitive advantage

Timing is going to be the second significant differentiator. Top performers in the SDR space have always understood the value of timing when it comes to effective closing. Buyers have so many capabilities to investigate when considering vendors that they won't wait around for sales teams. And in modern markets, with increasingly diverse and specific signals in different industries, generic signals are going to be decreasingly reliable. While this has always been true in specialized industries, it's increasingly also the case elsewhere.

As response windows shrink, response time is going to be a significant competitive advantage and businesses will need to consider how they structure their SDR processes and architecture to optimize it. Approximately 72% of B2B buyers expect to receive 24/7, always-on customer service, and response times under 60 seconds can increase conversions by nearly 400%.

Smaller SDR teams can't simply bootstrap their way to this kind of response time. **Operational requirements for speed are fundamentally structural.** Large businesses in particular need strategic alignment from the top-down to ensure everyone connected to the sales ecosystem understands their role within it. Cross-department alignment on definitions, goals, approaches, and targets ensures that leads are properly identified immediately so they can be routed faster. This infrastructure then enables integrated information and tech stacks that can be used to automatically surface the right information to the right person at the right time.

## 3. AI-enabled workflows

While AI tools are introducing significant and powerful new capabilities for SDR teams, those tools are also creating new challenges, some of which are a direct consequence of how powerful they are. While there is a great deal of disagreement about the ultimate impact, utility, and cost-efficiency of various tools and AI in general, a broad look at industry discussions and consultations cements a fundamental truth: improperly used, AI tools only amplify existing inefficiencies.

Refinement will happen for businesses that understand that the foundation of effective SDR operations remains human. AI undoubtedly has a significant role to play in sales development, but where many businesses fail is in trying to use it to replace human skills. To use AI properly, businesses must build teams that understand their product, the value it provides, as well as what the market is looking and listening for. From there, AI is best applied to handle time-consuming, cost-of-doing-business tasks like identifying prospects, creating ordered lists for outreach, and scoring and rating leads. Even better if it's connected to the intelligence layer: a synchronized, centralized repository of all business data that is integrated with a full suite of tools, which ensures the AI tool is working with up-to-date business data at all times and can update whatever it needs to, wherever it needs to, providing the entire organization with coherent and consistent information and updates.

**Practical examples in SDR workflows may include:**

- ☑ **Routing and scoring prospects** using digital body language, such as website engagement, content consumption, email response patterns, and firmographic fit to route prospects to ideal specialists.
- ☑ **Dynamically personalizing website and email copy** using data from the intelligence layer to generate meaningful personalization tied to each prospect's actual activities and pain points.
- ☑ **Enabling comprehensive coaching** by analyzing all customer calls to generate the most common competitive mentions, recurring objections, and identifying which talking points align with advancement.

Another possible use for businesses with sufficiently clean data and robust integrations is to turn AI tools into a search engine for internal business data, letting SDR teams dynamically evaluate pipeline with natural language queries. Dashboards and reports are standard operating procedure today, but for many businesses these are more of a necessary evil than a useful system. Living out of CRM dashboards and using them to build out quarterly or annual reports is going to make it difficult for many businesses to keep pace with rapidly changing pipeline. The complexity of modern datasets undermines the accuracy and usefulness of these more general predictions, but makes specific, targeted queries both achievable and useful.

## 4. Elevated quality standards

As the SDR role ceases to be an entry-level position, AI is also well-positioned to take on the role of training new hires to improve the quality of sales development processes.

One of the biggest impacts of growing AI adoption and usage in the SDR market is reinforcing the value of human skills and interaction. This is happening as reports indicate that many outreach channels that have been declared dead are anything but; many SDR teams are seeing more success than ever with traditional email, cold-calling via the actual telephone, and by attending in-person trade shows and events.

Crucially, technology is often what gives sales teams the time back they need for these human-centric approaches. Anthropic, for example, leveraged Clay automations to triple its enrichment coverage and save teams four hours per week, with no manual work.

By vastly lowering the barrier-to-entry, AI has made it so that simply existing in a given channel is no longer sufficient. Competitive marketplaces mean businesses either need to raise quality or lower costs to compete. Today, SDR reps take as long as six months to get up to speed on best practices, product features, pain points, and so on. They typically learn by trial-and-error, sometimes requiring managers to step in to correct bad habits they've picked up along the way. Reduced budgets limit the ability to improve training to create more experienced sales teams. AI coaching models trained on organizational and product datasets will likely see greater use in training new sales reps, bringing them online faster with fewer errors and increasing the quality of their work with every tool in their arsenal.

Some businesses are already putting this into practice and seeing results. BillGO, for example, reduced ramp time by 20% and tripled its onboarding capacity using AI.

## 5. GTM engineering

None of these improvements to operational efficiency are possible without technology integration, an area where many businesses continue to struggle.

Tool sprawl was already a problem before widespread AI adoption. As major AI companies continue to ramp up efforts to monetize their tools, tool sprawl is going to increase, creating more inefficiencies and more costs.

The monetary cost of sprawl is one thing. But the arguably greater costs are divided attention and focus for SDR teams, and a lack of consistent information across the business. While the SDR market has recognized the need for tech integration, teams still tend to blame their CRM when integration fails even though the problem is actually a flaw in strategy or process. The CRM is probably capable of doing what it's supposed to, but the processes, definitions, hand-offs, and governance framework are not structured to give sales teams what they need. Inefficiencies and messy data continue to interrupt everyday workflows.

Investment in GTM engineering may be the solution. GTM engineering is the discipline of designing, building, and automating the technical systems that power a go-to-market motion. It covers everything underneath the sales and marketing strategy (e.g., data pipelines, signal detection, enrichment workflows, scoring models, and delivery mechanisms) in a coherent strategic framework. Hex put this principle to good use and was able to increase their inbound win rate by 50% while consolidating their tech stack.

> Teams still tend to blame their CRM when integration fails even though the problem is actually a flaw in strategy or process.

# Key metrics and benchmarks

## Which benchmarks and metrics are still worth looking at?

More data is available than ever before, and metrics can be tracked in a vastly more granular way, with more data points and finer time scales. But not all metrics are meaningful. And with markets moving faster and less predictably than ever, businesses can't afford to waste time wading through useless datasets to find useful insights.

Businesses must be more selective, precise, and strategic about which metrics they attend to. Vanity metrics have always been an issue in sales development; expect them to become even more so in 2027. Even formerly useful and meaningful metrics may not keep pace with modern markets, which can lull businesses into a false sense of security. Traditional sales pipeline KPIs, such as 3x coverage, are often lagging indicators which may conceal a budding crisis until it's too late to quickly correct. Others, like stage-by-stage conversion rates, still have some use but cannot be trusted too far. They may indicate where a deal falls through but not why, making it difficult to identify the problem that needs correcting.

In other words, it's not always clear what information means, even if the information itself is accurate. This can make accurately forecasting pipeline health challenging, and businesses must be careful about what they evaluate and how they interpret the data.

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## Pipeline health indicators

The need for cleaner and more specific data does not mean that generic pipeline indicators must be completely abandoned. But the increasing specialization happening across industries means many businesses that used to be able to solely rely on generic data may need to look at building new datasets that are more specific to their situation. These datasets will consider factors like the current state and health of their industry, the size of their organization (both in absolute terms and relative to major industry players), and the characteristics of their target market.

Consider an industry like cybersecurity, for example. Two businesses selling the same kind of software might have very different pipeline indicators. If one, for example, is targeting Fortune 100 companies with enterprise-grade software, it can and should have very different conversion metrics from another targeting individual developers. The important thing is businesses must understand the specific ICPs, key buyer personas, and early signals that indicate intent for their market.

**Given the fast-paced market of 2026, businesses should pay close attention to leading indicators, including**

- [x] **Response time for inbound leads**
- [x] **Meetings booked**
- [x] **The ratio of meetings booked to meetings attended**
- [x] **Average time-to-productivity for new SDRs**

Tracking these metrics will give businesses more time to adjust if SDR efforts aren't producing results. Lagging indicators like closed deals, revenue, lead conversion rates, sales cycle length, and churn length shouldn't be ignored, but businesses must be aware that these indicators will come too late to avoid pipeline slowdown or congestion.

Building more precise pipeline metrics and closely tracking them to ensure sales development teams aren't blindsided by rapid changes in the market is inherently a strategic problem. Organization-wide alignment around useful and accurate metrics depends on a top-down understanding and elucidation of the specific business model, sales process, buyers' journey, and revenue goals.

## Essential B2B sales development KPIs

Individual businesses will want to evaluate their own place in the market to decide the specific metrics they should, and can, home in on. But in general, the prevailing market conditions in 2026 point to a few general standouts:

- **Accuracy and efficiency metrics:** Expanded reach into new markets or personas and conversion-time from lead to opportunity.
- **Quality and conversion:** Efficiency between meetings booked and closed-won revenue.
- **Velocity and time-based metrics:** How long leads take to convert, and how much internal time is being spent or saved on management, administration and training.

## Outbound vs. inbound SDR performance

Cross-department integration and alignment of data is also important. But businesses shouldn't lose sight of the differences between departments. Though they might use the same metrics and definitions to enable clean and accurate data flow, that doesn't mean success looks the same for each.

This is particularly true for outbound vs. inbound sales development. All else being equal, SDR teams will likely default to focusing on inbound sales. It's simply easier to work with warm leads than cold ones, and teams are going to likely have more success in less time for less effort. But outbound is more than a necessary evil. Without consistent outbound, inbound doesn't happen. For businesses in finite markets or with strong competition, it's not enough to offer a valuable option and wait for sales to come to you. Proactive outreach will be the difference between success and failure.

While inbound and outbound can and should use the same metrics, businesses should recognize that outbound requires more touchpoints, legwork, and time. Scoring should reflect the greater effort required and inherently higher failure rate of outbound sales development. Naturally, inbound leads are warmer than outbound ones and can be expected to have a higher conversion rate. Businesses might therefore see lower performance in their outbound, but they shouldn't misread a difference in ROI as proof that outbound isn't working.

# What good looks like in 2026-2027

Effective sales development may feel like it's undergoing a radical shift in 2026. But in many ways it's more of a reset than a revolution, a back-to-basics approach that looks to refine processes rather than fundamentally change how the sales process works.

To cut through the huge volumes of noise flooding the digital marketplace, businesses will need a strategic reorientation of their sales development efforts, whether those are in-house or external. Simply existing in multiple channels will not be enough. Content creation has become the low-hanging fruit of sales development: even extremely small businesses can create text, video, and graphics as needed for low cost.

## Strategic AI

The dot com bubble should be instructive for today's situation. At first, the race was to simply get online, and then being online was enough. That was AI in 2025. The bubble collapsed when it was no longer sufficient just to have a website presence. Once the market started to mature, websites needed to be effective marketing and sales tools. That's how AI fits into sales development in 2026. It's not enough to just use it; it needs to be strategically applied in the most impactful areas.

Making the right decisions along the way will depend on using the right data. Businesses must home in on the meaningful buying signals to be looking at. Simply responding to inquiries won't be enough. To facilitate this, businesses can take advantage of refinements and improvements to AI that let it multiply the value of human work. Using an AI tool integrated into a clean database and CRM tool can surface timely insights to sales teams, letting them execute effectively on signal-informed outreach.

> It's not enough to just use AI; it needs to be strategically applied in the most impactful areas.

## RevOps and GTM engineering

Businesses are increasingly investing in RevOps and GTM engineering to achieve this strategic orientation, data-driven decision-making, and AI-enhanced workflow.

Market research suggests many businesses see this approach as an integral component of their market strategy, with one 2025 study noting that:

**73%**
of companies have a dedicated RevOps spot in the C-suite

**98%**
of companies surveyed say the function has grown in scope since 2024

**94%**
of companies surveyed say RevOps is receiving more attention from senior leadership

RevOps and GTM engineering are closely related. RevOps is the discipline that connects sales, marketing, and customer success teams around one system of data, processes, and reporting. The job of a RevOps team is to remove friction from the revenue engine. GTM engineering is the technical craft of building the automated workflows, integrations, and tooling that put that foundation to work in daily execution.

The unified approach to systems and processes that these disciplines enable creates cross-functional integration that does more than simply ferry data from one system to another. The result is effective and automatic data-sharing between departments, with all teams working with the same underlying definitions and terms.

Ultimately, it enables SDR teams to shorten response times and focus on more valuable work, like nurturing leads, or booking and attending meetings. And when teams are all working from the same datasets and towards the same KPIs, alignment is a natural consequence, rather than something management needs to try to impose.

## Higher standards for SDRs

How SDR teams provide value in the changing landscape is likely going to change. While ultimately their goal is still simple (sell), how exactly they accomplish that is not going to look the same as it did in 2025. SDR teams will continue to shift from being order-takers to strategic contributors, with discovery and strategy phases to produce ICP definitions, maps of buyer personas, and channel recommendations before any work begins.

**SDR agencies will become more integrated with their clients.** Rather than simply creating leads and stepping back, their success metrics will need to align to business goals for their clients. Real-time or near-real-time dashboards that show pipeline generated, quality of opportunities, and influenced revenue will go from being competitive differentiators to table-stakes expectations from buyers.

What all this means is that SDR teams are going to have to prove their worth in a more measurable and visceral way, and take greater responsibility over the success of the sales pipeline. **Delivering proactive problem-solving and optimization** based on performance data and integration with internal RevOps, and providing strategic direction will be key differentiators for SDR agencies and teams alike.

SDR teams will continue to shift from being order-takers to strategic contributors.

# Building a future-ready sales development function

Creating a path to sales development success requires businesses to take real stock of their current situation and strategic objectives. Different businesses will have different gaps in their SDR processes for various reasons and it's necessary to accurately identify what these gaps are and why they exist before meaningful corrective action can be taken.

## Building for success

Ultimately, the path to sales development modernization in many ways resembles the modern buyers' journey. Different businesses will enter the process at different places, but mainly follow the same flow. Along the way, all businesses should ask key questions to ensure the sales development function being built is future ready:

1. **Build out strategic foundations,** including ICPs, buying committee maps, lifecycle stages, and lead scoring models that lay the groundwork for sourcing, prioritizing, and working leads. Key questions to consider:
    - **What is our overall strategy?**
        - Are we launching a scale-based strategy that emphasizes being competitive in volume as well as quality?
        - Or are we homing in on a tightly focused, account-based marketing strategy specially designed to focus on the highest value accounts?
    - **Who is our target audience, and what does it expect from us?**
        - Does it need multiple meetings to walk through different elements of our offering before we even approach a sales stance?
        - Or are we simply matching solutions to problems?

2. **Achieve operational excellence** using sales engagement platforms to orchestrate personalized and scalable outreach and surface the right content, messaging, and coaching to reps when and as needed. Key questions to consider:
   - **How are leads being tracked, and which metrics are we considering?**
     - Do these align with how our target audience behaves?
   - **How are leads being defined and routed?**
     - Are our processes consistent and effectively integrated?
     - Where do we tend to drop leads?
   - **How is ownership being defined and enforced?**
     - Is lead ownership clear at every stage?
     - What does accountability look like?
3. **Improve operational efficiency** using AI tools and specialized orchestration platforms to handle repetitive, data-heavy work. Key questions to consider:
   - **How is data being validated, and which processes do we use to ensure clean handoffs?**
   - **Which tools do we use?**
     - Which tools do we have that reps aren't using?
     - How well integrated are our various tools?
     - If integration were better, would we need all of these tools?
4. **Improve talent and capability** by building out rigorous, standardized processes that new reps can plug into and shortening ramp time for new reps with AI-powered training.
5. **Optimize effort** with accurate measurement by connecting systems and ensuring data integrity, then establishing review cadences to keep sales development teams synchronized and coordinated.

## In-house vs. outsourced

Finally, when it comes to sales development, the build vs. buy paradigm must be considered. Many businesses are outsourcing the sales development process. In fact, the outsourced sales development industry is projected to grow significantly, reaching nearly $4 billion overall market valuation by 2032.

But each has its merits. Fierce competition between market players, broken processes that frustrate pipeline development, and bad internal incentives that see many departments focusing on their own metrics over company goals, have created significant pipeline challenges that may be difficult to fully resolve internally. Conversely, complete outsourcing has its own challenges. Strategic alignment is crucial, and that isn't always easy to achieve when contracting outside agencies.

**In 2026, the market and technological forces at play favor a hybrid or outsourced approach for businesses suffering from:**

- Disconnects between strategy and execution
- Data conflicts being the norm, not the exception
- Technology that feels like more of a burden than an asset
- Consistently unreliable forecasting

In these situations, agency support isn't just helpful, but essential. As internal sales leaders carry more responsibility for setting targets and strategy in faster-moving markets, more are turning to external partners for the execution layer: the tech stack, the workflows, the day-to-day pipeline work. Holistic GTM partners that can sharpen the strategy and bring a battle-tested execution model already in place will accelerate time-to-value in an environment where both are in short supply.

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