KNOWLEDGE HUB ARTICLE

B2B e-commerce boosts sales efficiency, but creates a hidden risk

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online ordering can make it easier to sell more often to existing customers. But if businesses move the wrong purchases online, they risk losing the advice that helps customers buy well.

A customer who needs to reorder familiar supplies may not want to arrange a sales visit. An online account makes the purchase quicker, and the salesperson can spend time on more demanding work. That sounds like an easy win for business-to-business (B2B) sales.

But some purchases are not simple reorders. Customers may need help choosing the right product, understanding a specification or avoiding a costly mistake. When those decisions move online without the right support, convenience can come at a price.

Research by Roland Kassemeier, Sascha Alavi and Johannes Habel shows why B2B businesses need both digital convenience and human advice. Their study found gains from online ordering alongside a warning sign: a greater share of sales revenue was returned by customers.

More orders, but not necessarily more customers

The researchers studied an industrial distributor selling tools, fixings and related products to business customers. It introduced an online ordering channel in one market, while salespeople and telephone-based sales support continued to operate.

The researchers examined records for 845 salespeople across two neighbouring markets over two years, comparing the period before and after the launch. One of those markets already had online ordering, providing a point of comparison.

After the launch, salespeople in the newly digital market generated more invoices per customer than the comparison would suggest. In other words, the business was doing more transactions with the customers it served.

But the study did not find a clear overall increase in the number of different customers buying from each salesperson. More frequent transactions and a larger customer base are not the same thing. A successful online channel may help an existing customer buy more easily without automatically bringing in new customers.

Where convenience can undermine advice

A well-designed online channel is a good fit for a routine purchase. Yet it cannot always replace a conversation about a customer's requirements.

In the distributor's records, the proportion of sales revenue not returned by customers fell after online ordering was introduced. The researchers used this as an indirect sign of lower-quality consultation: an unsuitable purchase is more likely to be sent back. Returns can occur for other reasons, so the finding does not prove that every extra return was caused by missing advice.

The team also ran an online experiment in which salespeople decided how to handle different customer requests. Once online ordering became available, participants could handle more requests within the same time allowance. However, they were less successful at choosing a sales channel suited to each customer's needs.

That second result came from an online experiment, not from observing real customer purchases. Together, the two studies point to the same management challenge: making buying easier is not enough if the wrong customers are left without guidance.

One digital channel, different effects on salespeople

Not every salesperson benefited in the same way.

Those who had previously been more successful at winning new customers saw stronger gains in the number of customers they served. Salespeople who had worked at the distributor for longer generally saw smaller gains in invoices per customer, but were better able to limit the decline in the share of revenue not returned.

This does not mean that experienced salespeople resist technology or that newer colleagues give poor advice. It means the effect of a new channel depends partly on the skills and selling habits already in place. A single instruction to “move customers online” will not necessarily work equally well across a sales team.

Why sales incentives matter

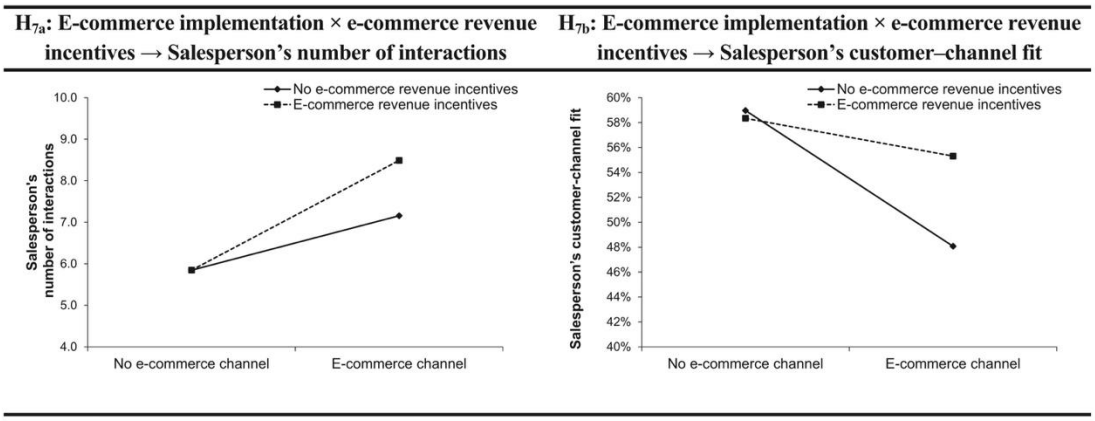
In a further online experiment, the researchers ran separate tests of two ways to support online selling. In one test, a manager's message explained the benefits of using several channels. In the other, purchases completed online qualified for the same small reward as purchases handled through existing channels. Each intervention was assessed against its own comparison group; the message and the incentive were not compared directly. In the manager-message test, the message did not produce a clear improvement in how many customer requests participants handled or how well they matched channels to customer needs. In the separate incentive test, rewarding online sales led to stronger gains in requests handled and better matches between customer needs and sales channels than leaving online sales unrewarded.

This was a test of incentive eligibility in a simulated sales exercise, not a trial of different commission rates in live businesses. It nevertheless raises a practical question: if salespeople are expected to support online ordering, does their pay structure give them a reason to do so?

The broader lesson is not that digital sales should replace personal selling. It is that the two should support each other. Customers should be able to complete straightforward purchases quickly, while advice remains available when the stakes or complexity are higher.

Practical Takeaways for Sales Leaders

1. **Match the channel to the purchase.** Make repeat orders easy online, and build a clear route to a salesperson or specialist for complex decisions where advice can prevent mistakes.
2. **Check whether incentives support both channels.** Review how salespeople receive credit for online orders, rather than assuming they will promote a channel that may reduce their rewards.
3. **Measure volume and quality together.** Monitor invoices per customer and the number of buying customers separately, alongside returns; adjust coaching to different salespeople's experience and customer portfolios.



Notes: Plotted one standard deviation below and above the mean.

Why rewarding online sales matters. In a simulated selling exercise, rewarding purchases handled online helped participants manage more customer requests and choose channels better suited to customer needs. The findings do not establish what commission rates would work in real businesses.

Research Snapshot

Study: Roland Kassemeier, Sascha Alavi and Johannes Habel, "Implementing e-commerce channels in business-to-business selling," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 43 (2026), 750–771. DOI: 10.1016/j.ijresmar.2025.10.003.

Evidence: A two-year comparison involving 845 salespeople at one industrial distributor, plus online experiments involving 551 participants. The main sales analysis used a smaller matched sample. The findings concern this business setting and simulated sales decisions; they do not establish how every B2B business or commission scheme will perform.

ABOUT

ABOUT THE SALES EXCELLENCE HUB

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Sales Excellence Hub

The Sales Excellence Hub is based at Warwick Business School and connects sales professionals, business leaders, and academic researchers to support evidence-based sales practice.

The Hub aims to transfer knowledge from academic research into sales practice, helping organisations and sales leaders address current challenges in areas such as sales management, incentive design, revenue growth, digital transformation, AI, professional development, and the future of the sales profession.

Through events, research, reports, and partner collaboration, the Sales Excellence Hub provides a platform for discussion, learning, and the development of actionable insights for the sales community.

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