

# The Later-Stage Sales Engineer

How Self-Service, Review Sites, and AI Search Are Reshaping B2B Technical Buying

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## Executive Summary

### The Core Change

B2B buyers no longer wait for vendors to educate them. They research independently, form shortlists using AI chatbots and peer review platforms, and reach internal consensus on a preferred vendor before engaging any seller. By the time a Sales Engineer joins an evaluation, the buying team has already completed the selection phase. What follows is validation, not discovery.

This is not incremental. It is a structural shift in how technical buying decisions are made.

#### FORCES ACCELERATING THIS SHIFT

##### Why It Matters Now

- AI search now functions as the first point of vendor discovery for a growing share of B2B buyers. As of early 2026, 51% of B2B software buyers begin purchasing research in an AI chatbot rather than a search engine (G2, April 2026). AI chatbots are now the single most influential source in vendor shortlisting.
- Review platforms have displaced analyst firms as the most trusted information source at multiple buying stages. Public product reviews rose from being consulted by 13% of buyers in 2021 to 31% in 2024 (G2 / TrustRadius, 2024).
- Buyer autonomy has accelerated. The 6sense 2024 Buyer Experience Report found buyers engaged sellers at approximately the 70% mark of their journey. The 2025 update shows this shifted to around 61%, meaning buyers are engaging somewhat earlier, but overwhelmingly because they want to evaluate vendor AI capabilities, not because seller influence has increased. In 95% of cases, buyers still purchase from their Day One shortlist.

### The Likely Impact on Sales Engineering

Sales Engineers (SEs) are entering evaluations later than ever, into a buyer environment shaped by AI summaries, peer reviews, and prior competitive exposure. Discovery is compressed. Technical assumptions arrive pre-formed. The first SE interaction is no longer the first proof moment. Buyers may already hold views about product capabilities, limitations, pricing, and competitive positioning that were formed outside vendor-controlled channels and that may be incomplete, outdated, or AI-synthesised.

The SE role is shifting from early-stage technical educator to late-stage assumption tester, trust builder, technical validator, and risk reducer. For SE leaders who have not adjusted their operating model, discovery quality is declining, proof assets are misaligned, and SEs are being reduced to reactive demo resources.

### **The Main Strategic Recommendation**

SE organisations must build technical credibility and proof before the buying conversation starts. That means SE, product marketing, content, and customer advocacy operating as one system to shape the dark funnel: the buyer research that happens before any form fill, any meeting request, and any first call. The vendors that influence this phase will own the shortlist. Those that do not will spend their SE cycles validating decisions already made by someone else.

This is consistent with the Apex Edge Sales Engineering principle that Sales Engineering is a revenue discipline, not a support function. Technical Wins are built on proof, commercial leverage, and human trust, and all three must be present before the first meeting, not just during it.

## Market Overview

### The Rise of Self-Service Buying

B2B buyers have always done research. What has changed is the quality, depth, and independence of that research, and the degree to which it shapes purchasing outcomes before any seller is involved.

**Source-backed finding:** The 6sense 2024 and 2025 Buyer Experience Reports, based on responses from over 4,000 buyers across North America, EMEA, and APAC, found that buyers engage sellers at approximately the 60–70% mark of their buying journey. They initiate contact themselves in over 80% of cases. By the time they reach out, 81–94% have already ranked a preferred vendor, and 85% have largely established their requirements.

**Source-backed finding:** The Gartner survey of 632 B2B buyers (August–September 2024) found that 61% prefer an overall rep-free buying experience. A follow-up Gartner survey of 646 buyers (August–September 2025) found this had risen to 67%. In the same 2025 survey, 45% reported using AI tools during a recent purchase.

Self-service is not a workaround. For most buyers, it is the preferred method.

### The Role of Review Sites and Communities

**Source-backed finding:** G2's longitudinal research shows that public product review websites were consulted by 13% of buyers as a primary source in 2021 and by 31% in 2024. Review sites now outrank analyst firms at every stage of the buying journey. Peer-generated content is trusted more than vendor-generated content, even when buyers consume more of the latter by volume.

**Source-backed finding:** A March 2026 G2 survey of 1,076 buyers found that review site citations are the primary trust signal that makes buyers accept AI chatbot recommendations. G2, Gartner Peer Insights, Capterra, and TrustRadius are among the most cited sources in AI-generated responses to B2B buying queries.

Review site reputation is no longer a marketing concern alone. It shapes whether a vendor appears on the AI-generated shortlist at all.

## The Impact of GenAI and AI Search on Vendor Discovery and Shortlisting

**Source-backed finding (April 2025, G2):** GenAI chatbots (17.1%) and software review sites (15.1%) were the top two sources influencing vendor shortlists in G2's 2025 Buyer Behaviour Report, ahead of vendor websites (12.8%), market research firms (10.6%), peers and colleagues (8.9%), and salespeople (8.8%).

**Source-backed finding (April 2026, G2):** In a subsequent G2 survey, 51% of B2B software buyers now begin research in an AI chatbot rather than Google, up from 29% seven months earlier. 71% rely on AI chatbots for software research. 69% report having chosen a different vendor than initially planned based on AI chatbot guidance, and one in three purchased from a vendor they had never previously encountered.

### INTERPRETATION

AI search is not a supplementary research channel. It is fast becoming the primary entry point for vendor discovery, and it operates entirely outside vendor-controlled content. A vendor with strong review site presence, clear technical documentation, and credible third-party coverage is more likely to be surfaced in AI outputs. A vendor without these is at risk of not appearing at all.

## The Decline of Vendor Control Over Early-Stage Buyer Education

**Source-backed finding:** 6sense research found that 83% of the buying journey happens in spaces vendors do not control, including AI search, peer reviews, analyst content, and professional forums. G2's Tim Sanders has described the current shift as a third compression era: the Yellow Pages compressed the market into a printed directory; Google compressed it into a first page of results; AI chatbots are compressing it into a single synthesised answer.

Vendor-controlled content, gated assets, early outreach sequences, and SDR-led prospecting are losing influence at the very stages where they were most effective.

## The Continued Importance of Human Seller and SE Interaction

This structural shift does not eliminate the SE role. It redefines it.

**Source-backed finding (Gartner, 2025):** Gartner found that B2B buyers are 1.8 times more likely to complete a high-quality deal when they engage with supplier-provided digital tools in combination with a sales representative, rather than independently. Self-service digital purchases are more likely to result in purchase regret.

**Source-backed finding (Gartner, 2024):** 48% of B2B buyers enter the process with a preferred vendor already in mind, but the same research notes they still seek seller input for contextual fit, risk reduction, and validation of complex technical decisions.

#### **INTERPRETATION**

The SE who adds distinct value in the late-stage validation phase, who surfaces assumptions, tests technical fit against actual environment constraints, translates risk into commercial language, and equips the internal champion, will remain commercially essential. The SE who arrives to deliver a standard product demo to a buyer who already thinks they know the answer will struggle to move the needle.

# Buyer Behaviour Shift

## How Buyer Behaviour Has Changed

Buyers are now arriving at the first vendor meeting with pre-formed views. They have read peer reviews, queried AI assistants, consulted independent communities, and in many cases narrowed a shortlist before anyone in the vendor's revenue organisation was aware the account was in-market.

The first SE interaction is not the first proof moment. In many cases, it is the first moment at which the vendor has the opportunity to confirm, challenge, or correct assumptions formed elsewhere.

Buyer Behaviour Change	Evidence Signal	Impact on Sales Engineering	Commercial Consequence
Buyers engage sellers later in the journey	6sense (2024): buyers engage at ~70% of journey; (2025): ~61%, primarily to evaluate AI capabilities	Reduced discovery window; SE enters a pre-shaped evaluation	Less opportunity to influence requirements or reframe the problem
Buyers form shortlists before first contact	6sense (2025): 94% of buyers ranked preferred vendors before first contact; 95% purchased from Day One shortlist	SEs are validating, not educating; competitor positioning already formed	Vendors not on the Day One shortlist win in fewer than 5% of cases
AI chatbots are the top shortlisting influence	G2 (April 2025): GenAI chatbots (17.1%) ranked above salespeople (8.8%) as shortlist influence; G2 (April 2026): 51% start research in AI chatbots	AI output shapes technical reputation before SE engagement; SE cannot correct AI inaccuracies in real time	Vendors with weak AI presence risk shortlist exclusion before any human contact
Review sites outrank analysts and vendors	G2/TrustRadius (2024): review site usage rose from 13% (2021) to 31% (2024) as primary source	SE credibility is partly pre-judged by public review sentiment	Negative or thin review presence damages technical perception before the first call
Buyers arrive with established requirements	6sense (2024): 85% have largely set requirements before engaging sellers	Discovery is compressed; SEs face narrower scope to explore real needs	SEs may miss true drivers; solutions get shaped around incomplete or AI-summarised requirements

<b>Buyer Behaviour Change</b>	<b>Evidence Signal</b>	<b>Impact on Sales Engineering</b>	<b>Commercial Consequence</b>
Majority prefer rep-free experience	Gartner (2024): 61% prefer rep-free; Gartner (2025): 67% prefer rep-free	SEs must prove distinct value quickly; tolerance for generic product pitches is low	Sellers who provide generic information that buyers can find elsewhere will be filtered out earlier
Buyers use AI to change vendor choice	G2 (April 2026): 69% chose a different vendor than planned based on AI guidance	AI recommendations are reshaping competitive positioning in real time; SE may face objections rooted in AI output	A competitor's AI presence can displace an incumbent at the shortlisting stage
Inconsistent information damages trust	Gartner (2024): 69% of buyers found inconsistencies between vendor website content and sales rep information	SEs must align closely with marketing messaging; inconsistency is a disqualifier	Trust loss at the first contact compounds the credibility gap buyers arrived with

# Sales Engineering Impact

## Later Entry, Narrower Surface Area, Higher Stakes

Source-backed finding (6sense, 2024): 81% of buyers already have a preferred vendor at the time of first contact. When a vendor is not the preferred vendor, SEs are playing a catchup role with limited runway.

Source-backed finding (Gartner, 2024): Sellers should offer unique guidance and act as a sounding board, not provide generic information buyers can find elsewhere.

The SE capability model needs to shift accordingly.

SE Capability	Evidence Signal	Impact on Sales Engineering	Commercial Consequence
Technical discovery	Open-ended exploration of needs; educating buyers on solution possibilities	Assumption surfacing; identifying hidden or AI-derived beliefs; testing decision criteria	Discovery stays shallow; SE validates pre-formed requirements rather than uncovering real ones
Demo and proof delivery	First proof moment; structured product walkthrough for buyers new to the category	Contextual validation against buyer-stated criteria; challenging assumptions with evidence; reinforcing review site reputation in real time	SE delivers product features to a buyer who already has competitive comparisons; proof fails to differentiate
Technical content strategy	Internal SE playbooks, customer-facing PoC documents	Contributing to publicly discoverable technical proof: documentation, benchmarks, community posts, review site responses	Buyers form opinions from competitor content; vendor technical depth is invisible before first contact
Competitive positioning	In-deal battlecards used during active evaluations	Pre-deal: understanding AI and review platform narratives about the vendor's product; preparing SEs to address AI-derived objections	SEs arrive unprepared for objections sourced from AI chatbot outputs or peer reviews rather than direct competitor claims

<b>SE Capability</b>	<b>Evidence Signal</b>	<b>Impact on Sales Engineering</b>	<b>Commercial Consequence</b>
Champion enablement	Equipping an identified champion with internal presentation assets	Equipping champions earlier with pre-engagement proof; ensuring internal advocates have access to credible external validation	Champions lack third-party evidence to build internal consensus; SEs rely on unverifiable internal proof alone
Review and reputation management	Reactive: addressing customer concerns post-sale	Proactive: influencing review site sentiment and ensuring technical documentation is AI-indexable	Negative or sparse review presence undermines SE credibility before the first call
Discovery framework	Standard MEDDPICC-aligned questions for open evaluations	Assumption-testing questions designed to surface pre-formed views; probing for AI or peer-derived beliefs	Evaluation criteria accepted at face value; hidden competitor influence is not surfaced
Cross-functional collaboration	SE supports PMM with proof points and field feedback	SE actively contributes to public technical proof asset strategy; shares field learning about AI-derived objections	SE remains a reactive field resource; organisation continues to over-invest in late-stage assets

# Key Players and Influence Channels

## The Channels Shaping Buyer Opinion Before Vendor Engagement

It is worth stating explicitly: influence does not always equal accuracy. AI chatbots synthesise publicly available content, which may be outdated, biased, or incorrect. Review platforms reflect the experiences of vocal users, not statistically representative samples. Community content is peer-generated and unverified. SEs must be equipped to navigate the delta between what buyers believe and what is true.

Category	Examples	Buyer Influence	Vendor Control Level	SE Relevance
AI search and GenAI assistants	ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, Microsoft Copilot, Gemini	Very high and rising: 51% of buyers now start research here (G2, 2026); AI chatbots are the #1 shortlist influence	Very low: AI outputs are trained on public data; vendors cannot directly control what AI says	High: SEs must understand what AI says about their product and be prepared to address AI-derived assumptions
Peer review platforms	G2, TrustRadius, PeerSpot, Gartner Peer Insights, Capterra	High: review sites are the #2 shortlist influence and the #1 trust signal for AI recommendations	Moderate: vendors can respond to reviews, encourage customers to leave reviews, and influence sentiment over time	High: poor review site presence is a trust deficit SEs inherit on entry
Analyst firms	Gartner, Forrester, IDC	High for enterprise buyers; lower for SMB; analyst reports are publicly cited by AI (Gartner.com is among the most cited domains in B2B AI search outputs)	Low to moderate: vendors can influence through briefings, but reports are independently written	Moderate: analyst positioning shapes buyer shortlists, particularly in regulated or large-enterprise segments

Category	Examples	Buyer Influence	Vendor Control Level	SE Relevance
Peer communities	Reddit (relevant subreddits), Hacker News, Slack communities, Discord, LinkedIn groups, Stack Overflow	High for technical buyers; community sentiment is trusted precisely because it is vendor-agnostic	Very low	High: community discourse about a vendor's product shapes technical reputation in ways SEs rarely see
Vendor technical content	Official documentation, API references, engineering blogs, GitHub repos, developer portals	Moderate: buyers consume vendor content but weight it lower than independent sources	High: vendors control this entirely	Very high: SE influence on documentation quality, technical accuracy, and discoverability is direct
Open-source ecosystems	GitHub, GitLab, Hugging Face, NPM, PyPI	High for developer and infrastructure buyers	Moderate: vendors can contribute but cannot control community perception	High for technical products with open-source components
Customer references and case studies	Vendor-published case studies, customer testimonials, reference call programmes	Moderate: trusted but buyers know they are curated	High: vendors control selection and framing	High: SEs rely on references in late stages; quality and accessibility of proof assets matter
Independent technical creators	YouTube channels, Substack newsletters, LinkedIn technical influencers, podcasts	Moderate and growing: independent creators are perceived as vendor-neutral	Very low	Moderate: SE leaders can build relationships with credible technical creators
Product-led growth assets	Interactive demos, free trials, sandbox environments, freemium tiers	High for technical evaluators: hands-on access builds conviction independently	High: vendors control these	Very high: self-service product experiences reduce the SE's role in early-stage proof

Category	Examples	Buyer Influence	Vendor Control Level	SE Relevance
Marketplace listings and cloud partner ecosystems	AWS Marketplace, Azure Marketplace, Google Cloud Marketplace	Moderate and growing: marketplace presence signals credibility and commercial readiness	Moderate: vendors control listing content; ratings are user-generated	Moderate: marketplace presence and ratings increasingly influence enterprise shortlisting

## Forecast: 1 to 3 Years

### Scenario Assumptions

- AI chatbot adoption in B2B buying is measured from G2's April 2025 baseline (60% usage) and April 2026 update (71% usage).
- 6sense 2025 data shows the Point of First Contact shifted from ~70% to ~61% of the journey, primarily driven by buyers wanting to evaluate vendor AI capabilities.
- The base case assumes adoption continues at a moderate pace, without regulatory disruption or major trust events.

Scenario	Probability	Description	Implication For SE Leaders
Base case: Continued AI-mediated compression	60%	AI chatbot usage in B2B buying reaches 80–85% within 18 months. Review platforms deepen integration with AI outputs. Buyers continue to engage sellers at the 55–65% mark, but shortlists remain pre-formed. The SE role continues shifting toward late-stage validation, assumption testing, and technical risk reduction. Pre-engagement proof becomes a competitive differentiator.	SE leaders must invest now in public proof assets, AI-indexable technical content, and review site strategy. Discovery frameworks must be redesigned to surface hidden assumptions. SE, PMM, and content teams must operate as one system.
Accelerated case: AI-mediated buying becomes dominant	25%	AI agents (not just chatbots) begin completing early buying tasks on behalf of buyers: shortlisting, requirements gathering, initial RFP generation. Buyers arrive at the SE meeting with an AI-generated requirements brief and a ranked shortlist produced without human review. The SE's first interaction is with a buyer who believes the decision is already largely made.	SE operating models require urgent redesign. Proof assets must be machine-readable and AI-indexable. Discovery questions must assume AI contamination of requirements. SEs need explicit training in AI assumption forensics: identifying and correcting AI-derived beliefs with evidence.

Scenario	Probability	Description	Implication For SE Leaders
Correction case: Buyer trust recalibration	15%	A high-profile AI-mediated procurement failure, regulatory action, or large-scale AI hallucination event causes buyer trust in AI-generated recommendations to contract. Buyers increase reliance on analyst firms, peer communities, and direct vendor engagement. The Point of First Contact moves back to 55–65% of the journey, but human credibility becomes a stronger differentiator.	SE leaders who have invested in genuine technical depth, review site presence, and relationship-led reputation will benefit. SEs should not over-index on AI-optimised content at the expense of authentic technical credibility and peer trust.

### Forecast By Area

Area	2025 Baseline	12-Month Forecast	36-Month Forecast
Buyer use of AI search	71% use AI for research (G2, April 2026)	80–85% (estimate)	90%+ with agent-assisted buying emerging
Reliance on review platforms	Review sites used by 31% as primary source (2024)	35–40% (estimate)	40–50% with AI citing reviews as trust signal
Point of First Contact (% of journey)	~61% (6sense, 2025)	55–63% range	50–60% range; dependent on trust dynamics
SE workload mix	Predominantly late-stage demo, PoC, validation	Growing share of assumption testing, AI objection response, pre-proof asset contribution	Split model: some SEs focused on live deal execution; others on scalable proof and content strategy
Importance of public technical proof	Growing rapidly	Essential for shortlist inclusion	Table stakes for competitive vendors
Demand for interactive demos and sandboxes	Rising with PLG adoption	Significant growth: buyers want to self-verify before SE engagement	Standard expectation in technical software categories

All forecasts are estimates. They are based on observed trend trajectories in cited research and the interpretation of second-order effects. They should be treated as directional rather than precise.

# Opportunities and Risks

## Opportunities

**Earlier influence through public technical content.** Vendors who publish credible, indexed technical content, including architecture documentation, integration guides, benchmark results, engineering blogs, and open community contributions, will be surfaced by AI search and cited on review platforms. This is a pre-engagement competitive advantage that most SE organisations are not yet systematically pursuing.

**Stronger alignment between SE, product marketing, and customer advocacy.** The dark funnel requires cross-functional effort. SEs hold field insight into the assumptions, objections, and misperceptions buyers arrive with. That insight should feed directly into PMM content strategy, review site response playbooks, and AI-optimised technical documentation.

**Better use of technical proof assets.** AI-indexable proof, public case studies, reference architectures, and independently verifiable benchmarks are now part of the shortlisting infrastructure. Vendors who invest in these assets gain influence in the buyer's selection phase, not just the validation phase.

**Review-site strategy and customer evidence programmes.** Systematic review collection, response to negative reviews, and alignment of customer success with review timing can improve both direct buyer perception and AI-cited authority. This requires organisational investment, not ad hoc effort.

**Improved discovery frameworks.** SEs can develop question frameworks designed to surface hidden assumptions: what did you read before this call? What has your team seen about our product online? What has the evaluation team said about our competitors? These questions surface the dark funnel in real time and give SEs the information they need to validate or correct buyer beliefs with evidence.

Scalable demo, sandbox, and validation environments. Interactive demos and sandbox access allow technical buyers to self-verify during their selection phase, before the SE is involved. This builds conviction and improves the quality of the conversation when the SE does engage.

## Risks

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Early Warning Signal	Mitigation
Buyers shortlist competitors before vendor contact	9/10	9/10	Win/loss analysis showing first-contact bias toward competitors; deals where your vendor was not the first contacted	Dark funnel intent monitoring; early-stage content investment; review site strategy

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Impact</b>	<b>Early Warning Signal</b>	<b>Mitigation</b>
AI search misrepresents product capabilities	8/10	8/10	SEs reporting objections based on AI-cited feature gaps that do not exist; buyers arriving with incorrect product beliefs	Systematic AI prompt testing across major chatbots; AI-indexed documentation; proactive correction of public misinformation
Review-site perception damages technical credibility	7/10	8/10	Decline in review scores; SEs reporting that buyers raised specific reviews in calls	Systematic review collection programme; CS-aligned timing; SE contribution to review responses
SEs are reduced to late-stage demo resources	8/10	7/10	SE activity tracked predominantly in Stages 3–5; no SE involvement in content or proof asset strategy	Reframe SE value model; involve SEs in pre-engagement proof and content contribution
Discovery becomes shallow because buyers believe they are already informed	9/10	8/10	Short discovery calls; SEs accept buyer-stated requirements without probing; deal loss due to missed requirement or misaligned scope	Redesign discovery frameworks; train SEs to surface AI-derived assumptions; treat buyer statements as hypotheses
Product gaps become visible earlier through peer and public channels	7/10	7/10	Review site mentions of specific limitations; competitor comparison tables appearing in AI outputs	Product marketing monitoring of public technical perception; product team feedback loops from SE and CS field intelligence
Sales teams lose stage control and commercial leverage	8/10	8/10	High rate of first-contact deals where buyer sets all terms; compressed negotiation windows; late-stage price pressure	Pre-engagement brand authority; relationship-led account strategy; earlier multi-threading

# Strategic Insights

## What Leaders Should Do

The buying journey has been restructured. The organisations that recognise this and redesign their go-to-market motions accordingly will gain durable commercial advantage. Those that continue operating as if the SE's first meeting is the buyer's first serious research moment will lose ground to competitors who understood the shift earlier.

The following recommendations are addressed to the leaders who have the clearest levers to pull.

Recommendation	Owner	Why It Matters	First 90-Day Action
Redesign the SE discovery framework for assumption-led evaluation	SE Leader	Buyers arrive pre-informed; discovery questions designed for open exploration will miss the real conversation	Develop and field-test a set of assumption-surfacing questions; train SEs on assumption forensics; track what hidden beliefs were surfaced per deal
Build a public technical proof asset strategy	SE Leader & CMO & PMM	AI search and review platforms shape shortlists in spaces SEs cannot influence in real time; proof must be visible before the conversation starts	Audit current public technical assets; identify gaps versus competitor presence; assign SE-PMM ownership for content plan
Implement systematic AI presence monitoring	CMO & RevOps	Vendors need to know what AI chatbots say about their products today, not in six months	Assign someone to prompt major AI tools (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, Gemini) with buyer-style queries weekly; document gaps and errors; brief SE team on current AI narratives
Build a review site strategy with CS alignment	CMO & VP Customer Success	Review platforms are now the #1 trust signal for AI recommendations; thin or negative presence costs vendors shortlist inclusion	Map current review site scores; identify top customer advocates; align CS with a structured review collection programme; assign ownership of platform responses
Adjust sales process assumptions to reflect late-stage SE entry	CRO	If SEs are entering at Stage 2 or 3 in a process designed for Stage 1 entry, the playbook is wrong; assumptions about discovery depth and qualification completeness must be revised	Audit current deal data on Point of First Contact; identify median stage of SE engagement; update qualification criteria to reflect pre-formed buyer assumptions

Recommendation	Owner	Why It Matters	First 90-Day Action
Equip product teams with pre-engagement public objection intelligence	CRO & Product Leader	Product gaps are now surfaced publicly before SEs can manage them; product teams must treat public technical discourse as live field feedback	Create a feedback loop from SE to Product on AI-derived objections and review-based gaps; include in quarterly product review cycle
Invest in scalable self-service proof assets	SE Leader & Product Marketing	Buyers who can self-verify before first contact arrive better qualified and more convinced; interactive demos and sandboxes reduce SE effort per deal	Identify the top three buyer-side verification tasks currently handled by SEs in live demos; scope a self-service version of each

# Apex Edge Sales Engineering ApexIQ Mapping

## How This Shift Maps to the ApexIQ Framework

ApexIQ Blueprint defines Stage 1, Discovery and Qualification, as the stage where teams confirm problem, fit, and deal viability. The goal is to capture pains, early metrics, decision criteria, champion candidates, and competitive landscape, and to produce early artefacts: a discovery summary, requirement list, risk register, and MEDDPICC snapshot.

The buyer behaviour shift described in this report strikes here first. Stage 1 is where the vendor first encounters buyer beliefs, and those beliefs now arrive pre-formed. The gap between what buyers think is true and what is actually true is widest at this stage, the discovery surface area is most compressed, and the consequences of missing hidden assumptions are most severe.

But the damage does not stay in Stage 1. It travels downstream into solution mapping, validation, demo and PoC execution, objection handling, Technical Win confirmation, procurement readiness, and handoff. A discovery built on unexamined buyer assumptions produces a solution mapped to the wrong requirements, a PoC scoped against the wrong criteria, and a Technical Win that does not hold.

The fix begins at Stage 1. The proof assets that allow SEs to address those assumptions with evidence must be built before Stage 1 begins.

ApexIQ Dimension	Impact	Evidence	Recommended Response
Stage 1: Discovery and Qualification	Buyers arrive with pre-formed requirements, a ranked shortlist, and AI-derived technical views. The discovery window is narrower. Assumption surfacing is now the primary discovery task.	6sense (2025): 94% of buyers ranked vendors before first contact. 85% had largely set requirements before engaging sellers.	Redesign Stage 1 discovery questions to surface hidden beliefs. Treat buyer-stated requirements as hypotheses. Add assumption testing to the Stage 1 artefact checklist.
Stage 2: Solution Mapping and Validation	Buyers may present requirements that were shaped by AI summaries, peer reviews, or incomplete competitor comparisons. Fit-gap analysis must address AI-derived gaps, not just real ones.	G2 (April 2026): 69% of buyers changed vendor choice based on AI chatbot guidance. AI outputs do not always reflect product reality.	Train SEs to validate whether stated requirements reflect actual environment constraints or inherited external narratives. Include AI assumption review in the fit-gap process.

ApexIQ Dimension	Impact	Evidence	Recommended Response
Stage 3: Demo and PoC	Buyers enter this stage with competitive comparisons already formed. Demo success criteria may have been partially shaped by a competitor's self-reported benchmarks. The first proof moment is no longer genuinely first.	G2 (2025): review sites and AI chatbots are top shortlist influences; competitor technical claims are visible to buyers before any vendor interaction	Design PoC success criteria collaboratively with the buyer to surface and neutralise pre-formed criteria. Ensure proof evidence is independently verifiable, not just vendor-asserted.
Stage 4: Objection Handling and Technical Championing	Objections may originate from AI outputs, community posts, or negative reviews rather than from direct competitor engagement. SEs unprepared for AI-derived objections will misdiagnose the source and apply the wrong response.	Gartner (2024): 69% of buyers found inconsistencies between vendor website content and seller information, creating distrust.	Build an AI objection library: regularly prompt major AI tools as a buyer would, document the output, and create SE responses for common AI-derived technical mischaracterisations.
Stage 5: Technical Win	The technical win is harder to secure when buyer confidence was partly built on external sources that SEs cannot directly control. Competitor review site presence can undermine a technically sound evaluation outcome.	6sense (2025): the preferred vendor wins 80% of cases even after full evaluation. If another vendor holds preferred status on entry, the SE is working against momentum.	Ensure the Technical Win documentation explicitly captures which pre-formed assumptions were addressed, and how. This strengthens the champion's internal case and reduces second-order drift.
Cross-stage: Human Trust	The SE's ability to build trust has always been the catalyst in complex deals. It is now also the primary differentiator between vendors who were present in the buyer's research phase and those who were not.	Gartner (2025): buyers are 1.8 times more likely to complete a high-quality deal combining digital tools and human interaction than digital alone.	SE credibility must now be built before the meeting, through public technical presence, review site reputation, and community trust, as well as in the room.

ApexIQ Dimension	Impact	Evidence	Recommended Response
Cross-stage: Commercial Leverage	If SEs are entering later and the buyer has already formed a preferred vendor view, commercial leverage is reduced. Negotiation window is compressed. The cost of inaction case is harder to make if the buyer feels the decision is largely done.	6sense (2024): 84% of deals are won by the first vendor a buyer contacts, and that vendor is almost always the one the buyer already preferred.	SE leaders should work with CROs to flag opportunities where the vendor is not the preferred vendor on entry. These require a different playbook: more forensic discovery, stronger proof standards, longer timeline assumptions.

### Why This Starts in Discovery and Propagates Downstream

The core problem is not that SEs cannot deliver good demos. It is that the evaluation context within which they are delivering those demos has been partially shaped before they arrived.

Discovery quality at Stage 1 determines the accuracy of everything that follows. If the SE accepts buyer-stated requirements at face value without testing their provenance, the fit-gap analysis in Stage 2 will be built on unreliable inputs. The demo scope in Stage 3 will validate pre-formed criteria rather than real ones. Objections in Stage 4 will be misattributed. And the Technical Win in Stage 5 will either not reflect the real decision criteria or will leave residual doubt because hidden assumptions were never surfaced.

The fix begins at Stage 1. But the proof assets that allow SEs to address assumptions with evidence must be built before Stage 1 begins.

## Conclusion

### Structural Shift, Not Incremental Change

The evidence from Gartner, G2, 6sense, and TrustRadius, spanning 2023 through 2026, converges on a consistent conclusion: the B2B buying journey has been structurally reorganised. Buyers are more autonomous, better informed before first contact, and less willing to be educated by sellers at stages where they once depended on that education. This is not a temporary effect of pandemic-era digital acceleration. It is a durable change, now being reinforced and accelerated by AI search.

The 6sense Point of First Contact data (moving from ~70% in 2024 to ~61% in 2025, with the shift driven primarily by AI evaluation needs rather than increased seller influence) and G2's finding that AI chatbots now outrank salespeople as shortlist influences both point to a buyer environment in which seller and SE influence is being front-loaded into content, reputation, and community trust before any human interaction occurs.

### What SE Organisations Risk If They Do Not Adapt

The risk is not irrelevance. SEs are not being replaced. The risk is commoditisation: being reduced to reactive demo resources who validate decisions that were effectively made without them. When that happens, commercial leverage disappears. Price becomes the only differentiator. Win rates fall against competitors who invested earlier in the buyer's selection phase. And SEs, who are typically among the most commercially effective members of the revenue organisation, are under-used.

Beyond the commercial risk, there is an execution risk. SEs who do not know what buyers believe before arriving at the first call cannot surface assumptions, cannot correct AI-derived misperceptions, and cannot deploy proof that targets the right friction. Discovery built on the assumption of an open, uninformed buyer will miss the actual evaluation context.

### What Mature SE Organisations Will Do Differently

The mature SE organisation in 2026 and beyond will not look like the 2020 version with better AI tools bolted on. It will be structurally different in three ways:

First, it will contribute to public proof before deals begin. SEs will be active contributors to the technical content, documentation, review site strategies, and community presence that shape buyer perception in the dark funnel.

Second, it will use assumption-led discovery. SE discovery frameworks will be designed to surface pre-formed buyer views, identify their provenance, and address them with evidence rather than generic repositioning.

Third, it will operate as part of a cross-functional GTM system. SE, product marketing, customer success, RevOps, and content will share a feedback loop. Field intelligence about AI-derived objections will flow into content strategy. Win/loss data will include dark funnel signals. Proof assets will be tagged, indexed, and accessible to buyers before the first meeting.

### Indicators to Monitor Over the Next 12 to 24 months

The organisations that begin monitoring these signals now will have a 12-to-18-month head start on those that wait until late-stage win rate decline forces the conversation.

	INDICATOR	WHAT TO MEASURE	ACTION IF TRENDING WRONG
1	<b>AI</b> <b>AI chatbot representation</b> Quarterly audit. Prompt major AI tools as a buyer would and track what they say.	Accuracy of product description, competitor framing, and capability claims across ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude, and Gemini. Audit quarterly.	Brief SE team on current AI narratives. Escalate inaccuracies to PMM. Prioritise public documentation and review site investment.
2	<b>MARKETING</b> <b>Review platform trend</b> Monitor G2, TrustRadius, and Gartner Peer Insights monthly.	Star ratings, review volume, and sentiment trend on G2, TrustRadius, and Gartner Peer Insights. These are now AI trust signals, not just satisfaction scores.	Activate customer evidence programme. Align CS with review collection timing. Respond publicly to negative reviews.
3	<b>REVOPS</b> <b>Point of First Contact</b> Track the stage at which buyers initiate contact. Trend is the signal.	Percentage of journey complete at first inbound contact. Directional shift toward later contact indicates growing buyer autonomy.	Accelerate dark funnel investment. Shift budget from outbound to pre-engagement content and community presence.
4	<b>REVOPS</b> <b>First-contact win rate</b> What proportion of deals are won by the first vendor the buyer contacts?	Proportion of deals won by the first vendor the buyer contacts. If that vendor is rarely yours, you have a shortlist presence problem, not a late-stage execution problem.	Review win/loss data for dark-funnel signals. Increase brand presence in AI search and peer communities before buying cycles begin.

	<b>INDICATOR</b>	<b>WHAT TO MEASURE</b>	<b>ACTION IF TRENDING WRONG</b>
5	<b>SE FIELD</b> <b>AI-derived objection frequency</b> Track how often SEs report objections traced to AI outputs, reviews, or community posts.	How often SEs report objections traced to AI chatbot outputs, review site content, or community posts. A rising count is a proxy for how much AI is shaping buyer assumptions before your team engages.	Build an AI objection library. Feed patterns into PMM content strategy. Update SE enablement with AI-specific objection responses.
6	<b>SE FIELD</b> <b>Discovery depth score</b> In Stage 1 artefact reviews, are discovery summaries testing assumptions or just recording buyer-stated requirements?	Percentage of Stage 1 discovery summaries that include evidence of assumption surfacing, not just buyer-stated requirements. Flat or falling score signals shallow discovery.	Introduce assumption-testing questions to SE playbooks. Add assumption surfacing as a Stage 1 artefact requirement.
7	<b>AI</b> <b>Proof asset discoverability</b> Are your technical documents, case studies, and benchmarks indexed and cited by AI tools?	Whether your technical documents, case studies, and benchmarks are indexed and cited by AI tools. Test directly: prompt AI tools with buyer-style queries and check whether your assets surface.	Audit public technical asset coverage. Prioritise AI-indexable formats. Ensure documentation is ungated, structured, and linkable.

#### THE SHORTLIST IS ALREADY FORMING

The buyer has already formed a view. The question is whether it was shaped by you or by someone else. Every week without a dark-funnel strategy is a week a competitor fills that space.

The shift is already underway. Buyer shortlists are forming in channels your SE team cannot see, shaped by AI outputs your organisation has not audited, on review platforms your CS team has not prioritised. The vendors who treat this as a future problem will discover it is a present one, the hard way, in a pipeline review.

## SOURCES AND CITATIONS

This report was produced by Apex Edge Sales Engineering. It draws on primary and credible secondary research. Interpretations and forecasts are clearly labelled as such and should not be treated as precise predictions. All statistics are attributed to their source. Where data could not be independently verified, the report uses cautious language and identifies the claim as sourced or inferred.

Source	Publication	Date	Key Finding Cited
Gartner	"Gartner Sales Survey Finds 61% of B2B Buyers Prefer a Rep-Free Buying Experience"	June 2025 (data: Aug–Sep 2024)	61% of B2B buyers prefer rep-free experience; 73% avoid irrelevant outreach; 69% note website-seller inconsistencies; 48% enter with a preferred vendor
Gartner	"Gartner Sales Survey Finds 67% of B2B Buyers Prefer a Rep-Free Experience"	March 2026 (data: Aug–Sep 2025)	67% prefer rep-free; 45% used AI in a recent purchase
Gartner	"The B2B Buying Journey"	Gartner.com (updated 2024)	Buyers 1.8x more likely to complete high-quality deal with human + digital; self-service leads to purchase regret; 75% prefer rep-free in certain tech contexts
G2	"2025 Buyer Behavior Report: AI Now Means Always Included"	April 2025	GenAI chatbots #1 shortlist influence (17.1%); review sites #2 (15.1%); salespeople ranked 8.8%; two-thirds prefer to engage sales only in later stages
G2	"The Answer Economy: How AI Search Is Rewiring B2B Software Buying"	April 2026	51% begin research in AI chatbots; 71% rely on AI chatbots; 69% chose a different vendor based on AI guidance; 33% purchased from a vendor they had never heard of; AI chatbots now #1 shortlist influence

Source	Publication	Date	Key Finding Cited
6sense	"2024 B2B Buyer Experience Report"	October 2024	Buyers engage sellers at ~70% of journey; 81% have a preferred vendor at first contact; 85% have set requirements; 84% of deals won by first vendor contacted
6sense	"2025 B2B Buyer Experience Report"	November 2025	Point of First Contact shifted to ~61%; 94% ranked vendors before first contact; 95% purchased from Day One shortlist; buying cycles shortened from 11 to 10 months
TrustRadius	Buyer Experience Report 2025	2025	Gen Z buyers show 2x AI adoption rates; 64% of B2B decision-makers are Millennials or Gen Z; buyers consumed average 13 content pieces, 5 from third parties
G2 (longitudinal)	G2 Annual Buyer Research	2021–2024	Public review site usage rose from 13% (2021) to 31% (2024) as primary buyer source
Forrester	Predictions 2025: Younger Business Buyers and GenAI	October 2024	89% of B2B buyers have adopted generative AI; one of the top sources of self-guided information
6sense / Search Engine Land	Zero-click search analysis	June 2025	58.5% of Google searches end without a click

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