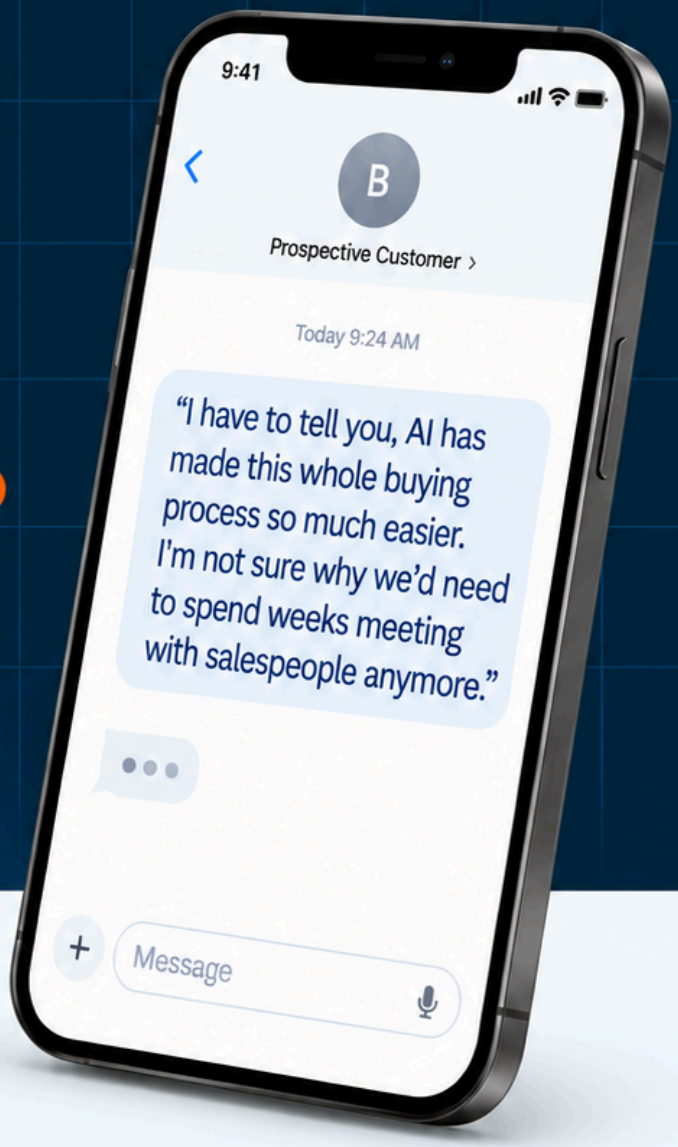
EXECUTIVE RESEARCH BRIEFING / 2027

Bold Value Partners

YOUR BUYERS HAVE AI.

WHY DO THEY STILL NEED YOU?

How to Win More Business Before AI Reduces Your Value to Price and Specs.



- The AI Informed Buyer
- The AI Speed Trap
- What to Do About It
- Turning Insight Into Action

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THE RESEARCH PAPER / OCTOBER 2026

By Walt Melcher | CEO, Bold Value Partners | Author of the forthcoming book Bold Value Selling

Imagine you or one of your team members finally getting a meeting with a prospective customer you've been pursuing for weeks. After a little rapport building, it begins with a discovery conversation.

"Before we get into our solution, help me better understand your business and current situation. What's new with your business and driving your interest to learn about other options?"

The buyer smiles and turns their laptop around.

"Actually, we've done quite a bit of homework already and think I save us both a lot of time. We've been using AI to research our options, identify potential suppliers, and compare their capabilities."

The buyer proudly displays an AI-generated comparison.

"We looked at five companies, narrowed it down to three, and developed a scorecard comparing specs, timelines, and estimated costs."

Then comes the surprise.

"Your company made the shortlist. Congratulations! But honestly, your solutions look pretty similar to others. We'd like to see a demo or talk with a sales engineer and get your best pricing."

And finally:

"I have to tell you, AI has made this whole buying process so much easier. I'm not sure why we'd need to spend weeks meeting with salespeople anymore."

Sounds like a promising opportunity. The buyer is interested, qualified, and ready to move forward.

But what if they've already established the evaluation criteria without considering the things that make your solution more valuable than your competitors'?

What if your competitive advantage comes from superior service, technical expertise, flexibility, total cost of ownership, and customer relationships, but the buyer's AI comparison emphasizes price and specs?

> **Your customers may be using AI to make your solution look similar to others before your salespeople have the opportunity to demonstrate why it isn't.**

This article is written for CEOs, Presidents, VPs of Sales, and sales managers at small to mid-sized businesses because the consequences can extend far beyond a single lost opportunity. They can include revenue never won, unnecessary discounting, and fewer resources available to fund strategic growth initiatives.

The central issue

AI is changing both sides of the sale. Salespeople are becoming more productive while buyers are becoming more capable of independently evaluating suppliers. The competitive advantage is shifting toward companies whose salespeople help buyers ask better questions, recognize differentiated business value, and make decisions they can confidently champion to the other stakeholders.

As businesses prepare for 2027, AI is raising the stakes in three familiar challenges: earning buyers' attention, building agreement among stakeholders, and demonstrating enough strategic value to win at full price.

THREE BUYER REALITIES / HIGHER STAKES IN 2027

01
THE ATTENTION CRISIS

Business relevance must survive faster AI-assisted inbox review.

02
MULTI-STAKEHOLDER FRICTION

Faster analysis can expose different stakeholder assumptions.

03
DEMAND FOR STRATEGIC VALUE

Price and specifications can crowd out business impact.

Why do buyers still need salespeople when they have AI?

Buyers increasingly want to conduct their own research, but they still value salespeople who help them validate information and make confident decisions.

Consider three findings from Gartner's 2026 buyer research:

45% of surveyed B2B buyers used generative AI during a recent purchase.

67% prefer a buying experience without salesperson involvement.

Yet 69% prefer validating AI-generated insights with salespeople. These findings measure different behaviors and preferences, rather than mutually exclusive groups.

GARTNER BUYER RESEARCH / 2026

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prefer validating AI-generated insights with salespeople.

Distinct survey findings; these are not mutually exclusive populations.

There's an important message here.

Buyers appreciate the speed, independence, and information AI provides. But information alone doesn't necessarily create confidence in a consequential business decision. That means they still prefer to buy from who they know and trust but it’s becoming more challenging for salespeople to get time with buyers to deepen those relationships and earn their trust.

Your customers may be experts at running manufacturing companies, financial services firms, technology businesses, or professional services firms. Many have substantial purchasing experience. But they aren't necessarily experts at evaluating your particular solution.

They understand the problem they want to solve. What they may not fully understand is how different solutions compare on total cost of ownership, service economics, implementation risk, stakeholder needs, and long-term business impact.

AI can help investigate these considerations. But someone must recognize which questions to ask, evaluate the evidence, and determine what matters most.

> **Buyers don't need salespeople to give them the same information provided online. They need salespeople to help them ask better questions, compare the right things, and make better decisions.**

That's a considerably higher standard for the value a salesperson must create to stand out in a competitive market.

Could AI be making your solution look like a commodity similar to others?

For smaller and midsized companies, this creates a potentially serious competitive vulnerability.

Many have built their reputations around advantages that aren't easily captured in a traditional supplier comparison.

Consider a manufacturer known for exceptional service, deep technical, engineering expertise, and the flexibility to accommodate changing customer requirements.

Its larger competitors may have comparable equipment, similar specifications, and lower prices that look more attractive.

Now imagine a customer using AI to compare those suppliers. AI may produce a well-organized analysis of capabilities, specifications, implementation timelines, and acquisition costs.

But what if the comparison doesn't capture the financial impact of competitive differences relevant to their unique use case?

What if the more expensive supplier can respond to unexpected problems twice as quickly, prevent costly production interruptions, or adapt to a customer's changing requirements?

What if its technical expertise reduces implementation risk and improves the customer's ability to expand?

Those differences can be economically significant.

AI can evaluate them when the necessary questions and reliable information are available. But if the evaluation criteria overlook them, the customer may never understand their importance.

As research published in Harvard Business Review established, suppliers often struggle to demonstrate why their advantages matter economically to customers. The problem isn't always a lack of differentiated value. It's the failure to substantiate why that value matters. At Bold Value Partners, we've observed that many small to mid-sized businesses already struggle to do this, and the growing use of AI in the buying process will only magnify the consequences of this deficiency.

AI is also raising the stakes for demonstrating Strategic Value. When buyers can compare specifications, capabilities, and prices almost instantly, salespeople must establish what those differences actually mean to the customer's business. Superior service, technical expertise, and flexibility become compelling when buyers understand how they improve profitability, reduce risk, or advance strategic goals.

> **Your competitive advantage isn't just what makes your company different. It's the added value those differences create for your customers' business.**

And if customers don't recognize that value, price can become the easiest basis for comparison.

Are buyers making decisions before your salespeople get involved?

Buyers increasingly research and rank suppliers before their first sales conversation.

The 2025 6sense Buyer Experience Report on 4,000 B2B buyers across industries found that 94% of surveyed buyers had ranked their shortlisted suppliers before engaging salespeople. In 95% of purchases, the eventual winner was already on the buyer's initial shortlist.

That means the opportunity to establish differentiated value may begin well before the first meeting.

Even getting that meeting presents a new challenge.

AI tools built into email platforms can now help users summarize and prioritize incoming messages. Microsoft's Copilot in Outlook, for example, can assign priority levels and generate brief message summaries. These features are not used universally, but they introduce another way executives can decide what deserves their attention.

AI is intensifying the Attention Crisis. As buyers use AI to summarize and prioritize incoming communications, generic sales messages risk becoming even easier to overlook. Earning attention increasingly requires demonstrating meaningful business value before requesting a conversation.

Imagine your prospecting email condensed into a single sentence:

"Supplier introduces capabilities and requests a meeting."

Now compare that with:

"Supplier raises a question about whether planned capacity expansion will support profitable growth with ideas on how to solve it."

Which message offers a more compelling business reason to engage?

A catchy subject line isn't enough. The value inside your message must give the buyer a reason to care.

That changes the standard for prospecting. Salespeople must demonstrate relevant business understanding before expecting customers to invest time in a conversation.

Are your salespeople using AI to become more productive or more valuable?

AI is giving sales organizations an incredible opportunity to increase productivity. But efficiency gains don't automatically translate into stronger customer relationships, higher win rates, or greater profitability.

Gartner's May 2026 research found that AI saves salespeople nearly 5 hours weekly.

Yet 72% of surveyed sales organizations reported low reinvestment of those savings into higher-value selling activities. Organizations that achieved meaningful AI time savings and reinvested them into high-impact, more productive activities were 2.2 times more likely to exceed customer growth goals than those reinvesting less.

That raises an important question for CEOs, VPs of Sales, and Sales Managers:

Where are those five hours going, and what additional value are your customers receiving?

Consider two salespeople preparing for the same meeting.

The first uses AI to research the prospect, prepare a presentation, and draft a great looking proposal.

The second uses those same capabilities, but goes further. They investigate the customer's competitive environment, explore potential strategic priorities their solution can help them achieve, anticipate what the buyer may have learned from AI, and prepare questions that the customer may not have explored.

Both become more productive.

But only one is prepared to create greater value: helping the customer discover what they may not have considered and recognize the additional value their AI-assisted buying process may have overlooked.

> **AI productivity is what your salespeople gain. Customer value is what your business gets rewarded for.**

What is the AI Speed Trap, and why can it threaten your profitable growth?

The AI Speed Trap occurs when AI-assisted research accelerates buyers toward demos, proposals, and pricing before they've evaluated the full economic and business impact of their decision. Salespeople who simply follow that accelerated process risk turning differentiated solutions into transactional price comparisons.

Even worse, your lower cost competitors may benefit most if you fall into the AI Speed Trap.

Let’s return to our opening sales meeting.

The buyer has already researched competing suppliers. They're requesting a demo and pricing.

A salesperson eager to advance the opportunity complies. They explain their capabilities, demonstrate their solution, and prepare a proposal or quote.

They’re excited to advance the opportunity in the CRM. While most sales manager would be thrilled to report this kind of deal velocity at their next leadership team meeting.

But has the buyer's understanding of the business case for your solution actually advanced?

Has the salesperson earned enough trust to demonstrate how their solution could become a valuable business partner, rather than simply fulfill a transaction?

That's the hidden danger.

> **The AI Speed Trap doesn't just put your price at risk. It can reduce a potential strategic partnership to a single transaction.**

Now imagine a different response.

The salesperson acknowledges the buyer's preparation:

"You've accomplished quite a bit with AI. That's impressive. I'd be interested in understanding how you developed your comparison criteria."

After learning what the buyer evaluated, the salesperson continues:

"Those are important considerations. We’ve seen customers like you expand their evaluation to include additional factors unique to their business. Would it be helpful if we spent a few minutes examining the total business impact, implementation risks, and what different stakeholders need from this investment?"

The salesperson isn't disputing the buyer's research.

They're building on it and creating social proof for going beyond what they learned from AI.

They might even offer three AI prompts to help the buyer evaluate overlooked factors, such as total cost of ownership, stakeholder concerns, and the strongest business case for addressing the key issues their solution can solve.

Those prompts should be neutral, not to appear biased and favoring the salesperson's company.

The objective isn't to take control away from the buyer. It's to become so valuable to the buying process that the buyer welcomes your leadership.

Why do promising sales opportunities still stall?

AI can make information more accessible to everyone involved in a purchase. But easier access to information doesn't automatically create agreement across the stakeholders involved in the purchasing decision.

Gartner found that 74% of surveyed B2B buying teams experienced unhealthy conflict during the purchasing process.

Your primary contact may love the proposed solution or what AI is recommending.

But their finance team questions the price against the budget. Operations worries about implementation. Technical experts and users identify potential risks and ongoing support. Executive leadership evaluates competing priorities.

Each stakeholder brings different business needs and personal concerns.

What happens if the investment fails? Will supporting it enhance their credibility or expose them to criticism?

Even when stakeholders use AI to investigate the same investment, their analyses may reflect different assumptions and priorities.

AI is adding another dimension to Multi-Stakeholder Friction. Finance, operations, technical teams, and executive leadership may each use AI to evaluate the same investment through different priorities and assumptions. Better access to information doesn't automatically produce greater agreement. Salespeople must help stakeholders develop a business case they can collectively understand, trust, and champion.

AI can help each stakeholder analyze the decision. But who will help the buying group align on why the investment matters, how it affects each stakeholder, and whether they can collectively support it?

That's an opportunity for a valuable salesperson to facilitate a more confident decision.

What happens in the Decision Room when your salesperson isn't there?

The Decision Room is where and when a customer's stakeholders evaluate an investment, challenge its assumptions, weigh competing priorities, and decide whether to proceed. These are the hallway conversations, phone calls, Teams messaging chats, and meetings the salesperson may never attend. Their influence depends heavily on whether they've equipped the buyer to explain and champion the business case for their solution.

Imagine the buyer from our opening story presenting the recommendation to leadership.

The CFO asks: "Your supplier costs 12% more. Why should we pay the premium?"

Operations asks: "What happens if implementation disrupts production?"

Then the CEO asks: "How does this investment help us achieve our expansion goals?"

Suddenly, the original AI-generated supplier comparison falls short, and the buying group may default to deciding on price and specs.

This is why I distinguish between two important parts of a complex sale.

The Discovery Room is where the salesperson works with customers to understand their business, explore opportunities, evaluate risks, shape their decision-making process, build trust, and develop the business case.

The Decision Room is where the customer's stakeholders decide whether that business case deserves their support.

THE TWO ROOMS THAT SHAPE THE DECISION

DISCOVERY ROOM

Build and validate the business case with the buyer.

TEST THE ASSUMPTIONS

→

DECISION ROOM

The champion must explain and defend the investment.

CHAMPION THE VALUE

Research from LinkedIn's B2B Institute and Bain & Company reinforces why this matters. Their Buyability research identified the ability to defend a purchasing decision if something went wrong as the leading driver of extreme decision confidence, at 34% in the studied buying population.

Your customer isn't simply recommending a product. They're putting their professional credibility behind a business decision.

> **The deal isn't won only in the room you're in.**

How does the Full Value Gap™ strengthen differentiation and protect price when buyers use AI?

The Full Value Gap™ raises your solution's perceived value by connecting the buyer's Current State to measurable Immediate Results and the Strategic Goals those results help achieve. As buyers use AI to compare solutions and accelerate decisions, developing this business case together reveals value beyond price and specifications and gives stakeholders a strategic investment they can confidently champion.

THE FULL VALUE GAP™ / A COMPLETE BUSINESS CASE

A CURRENT STATE	B IMMEDIATE RESULTS	C STRATEGIC GOALS
The problem and its measurable consequences.	The improvement the solution can credibly deliver.	The outcomes leadership is accountable for achieving.

IMMEDIATE VALUE + STRATEGIC VALUE = BOLD VALUE THAT WINS

Research reinforces why developing a complete business case matters. Gartner found that value-framing interactions, which help buyers understand how a solution improves business performance, were associated with a 20% lift in the likelihood of a high-quality deal.

Value-affirming interactions, which help buyers validate their investment decisions and feel confident moving forward, were associated with a 30% lift. These modeled associations support the importance of establishing measurable value and building buying confidence. They are not measured improvements in sales win rates, and Gartner did not evaluate the Full Value Gap™ specifically.

Consider a manufacturing example that shows how the Full Value Gap framework can help a buyer uncover your solution's differentiated value when using AI to compare alternatives. The salesperson has improved their discovery process to ask more strategic questions to establish each of the three points of the Full Value Gap.

A: Current State

A manufacturer experiences four significant production interruptions monthly. Outsourcing, overtime, inspection, and rework cost the business $350,000 quarterly.

That's $1.4 million annually.

B: Immediate Results

Suppose new equipment could eliminate those losses.

The potential gross avoided cost would be $1.4 million annually, or $4.2 million over three years, before accounting for purchase costs, implementation, and the time required to achieve results.

The actual improvement must be grounded in assumptions and evidence the customer provides and can champion. The salesperson then uses emotional intelligence and thoughtful questions to uncover personal impacts that may be difficult to quantify but still influence employee culture, loyalty, and productivity.

C: Strategic Goals

Now the salesperson asks what recovering that capacity could help leadership accomplish.

The customer explains that the company is pursuing $20 million in additional revenue over three years to support expansion, but existing capacity is constraining growth.

Suddenly, the conversation moves beyond equipment reliability.

It's about recovering capacity, protecting profitability, and supporting a strategic expansion.

The equipment hasn't changed. The customer's understanding of why it matters has.

Importantly, the $20 million target is the customer's strategic goal. By showing how its solution supports that goal, the supplier positions it not merely as an immediate fix, but as a necessary investment in the customer's long-term business plans.

Now return to the Decision Room.

The CFO wants to understand the economics, including why one supplier deserves a price premium.

The business case must demonstrate the value of solving the problem and what additional value the recommended solution delivers compared with alternatives.

The CEO wants to understand the investment's strategic importance.

Connecting the Immediate Results to the Strategic Goals helps answer that question.

> **One question tests the economics. The other tests the strategic importance. Your Value Story must answer both.**

As buyers increasingly use AI to accelerate supplier comparisons, the Full Value Gap™ becomes even more important to sales success in 2027. It helps salespeople establish why their solution is worth choosing by connecting measurable business improvements to the strategic goals customers are accountable for achieving.

> **Immediate Value → Strategic Significance → Your Bold Value That Wins.**

A good business case explains why the customer should buy. A differentiated business case explains why they should invest in you.

How Can Sales Managers Prepare Their Teams for AI-Informed Buyers?

Sales managers are in the strongest position to help their team be more successful in this environment, because they shape how salespeople prepare, what they practice, and how deals are reviewed. Gartner found that sales organizations that reinvest their AI time savings are 2.2 times more likely to exceed customer growth goals.[6] Managers can lead that reinvestment by coaching salespeople to turn the time AI saves into more valuable customer conversations at every stage:

- **Outreach:** Equip salespeople to use AI to test their prospecting messages before sending them, asking it to summarize each message in one sentence the way a buyer's inbox might, to confirm it offers a more compelling reason to engage.
- **Discovery:** Prevent salespeople from falling into the AI Speed Trap by updating your team's bank of discovery questions to ask how buyers have used AI to research, compare, and evaluate suppliers, and which AI tools they rely on. Prepare them with a response for when a buyer says they've done their AI research and won't need to meet for several weeks.
- **Delivery:** Prepare salespeople to equip their champion for the Decision Room by anticipating how stakeholders may use AI to challenge the price, assumptions, and strategic fit of the business case.

- **AI prompts:** Give your team a shared set of AI prompts to research a buyer's strategic goals, anticipate what the buyer's AI comparison is likely to show, and pressure-test the business case before it reaches stakeholders.

Download our tool: "How to Prepare Your Team for AI-Informed Buyers" that gives sales managers a stage-by-stage coaching checklist and sample AI prompts their salespeople can put to work right away.

Three questions every CEO and VP of Sales should ask

Before investing in another AI tool or accelerating another sales activity, choose an important opportunity in your pipeline.

It might be a large opportunity forecast to close this quarter, one that's stalled, or one facing significant price pressure.

Apply this Decision Room Test:

1. Do we understand how this customer has used AI to research their problem, compare alternatives, and establish buying criteria? Have our salespeople actually asked?
2. Have we helped the customer connect the measurable value of solving their problem to the strategic goals leadership is accountable for achieving? Have we established what makes our solution worth choosing?
3. Could our customer confidently explain and champion why our solution deserves the investment, at full price, in a leadership meeting without our salesperson present?

If those answers aren't clear, you've identified an opportunity to improve how your organization wins business.

AI is transforming both buying and selling.

The greatest competitive advantage isn't simply using AI to sell faster. It's using AI to make the value of your business more visible, meaningful, and compelling to customers.

And that brings us back to our opening question.

Your buyers have AI. Why do they still need you?

AI answers the questions buyers know to ask. The salespeople who win help them answer the ones they don't, and give them a decision they can champion.

Before your next meeting, ask AI what the buyer's leadership is trying to achieve, so you walk in thinking about their goals before your features. Here's a prompt to start with:

COPY-READY AI PROMPT

Act as a research analyst. Here is a company I'm about to sell into: [paste the company's website here]. Based on this and any information available, tell me the three to five strategic goals their leadership is most likely accountable for achieving over the next three to five years, and for each one, explain why it matters to them right now. Then suggest how a solution like mine might help equip them to achieve each goal.

Bring This Conversation to Your Leadership Team

How is AI changing the way your customers evaluate suppliers, and where might your sales organization be leaving revenue, margin, and strategic value on the table?

Invite Walt Melcher to your next leadership meeting for a thought-provoking discussion about the AI-informed buyer and what it takes to win more business at full value.

Walt Melcher is CEO of Bold Value Partners, creator of the Bold Value Method™, and author of the forthcoming book Bold Value Selling. His perspective draws on 35 years of experience, more than 3,000 customer meetings, and over 40,000 sales calls.

Research Sources & Notes

The cited studies involve different buyer and sales-leadership populations. Illustrative financial examples are not observed customer results.

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