



Win more deals with peer-to-peer sales references

A fast, pragmatic way to get more high-quality B2B customer references



Contents

3 | Introduction

4 | How sales references win deals

5 | Aim for quality and diversity

6 | How sellers *really* get references

8 | It's time to get targeted sales references

9 | What to look for in a sales reference app

11 | References on-demand is a power play

12 | Check out Altify Sales Reference Manager

Introduction

Peer-to-peer sales references establish trust with prospective customers, helping sellers speed up sales cycles and win more deals faster.

Prospective customers are in control of more of the B2B sales cycle than ever before. Contacting an enterprise sales rep is no longer a prospect's first stop on the long road to making an important business purchase.

In fact, **Forrester reports that an average buyer completes about 70% of a B2B purchasing decision before ever contacting sales.** Instead of meetings and back-and-forth calls with sales reps, buyers talk with peers in their personal networks and conduct their own research online.

When prospects finally raise their hands to talk with sales, they're often close to making up their minds and looking for additional validation before sealing the deal. At this point, they might ask to chat with two or three happy customers. If sales reps can't put their prospects in touch with relevant sales references, it introduces uncertainty, throwing promising deals into jeopardy.

In a prospect's mind, if a company doesn't have a single happy customer willing to speak on their behalf, then they could be hiding a serious customer satisfaction problem. Of course, B2B sellers know it's not that simple.

A host of obstacles stand in the way of sharing sales references. Corporate policies often prevent customers from endorsing vendors. And even when a sales rep identifies a customer account that can talk "on the record," it's difficult to get in touch with a relevant contact on short notice. Everyone is busy. Just finding twenty minutes when a prospect and a customer are both free to jump on a call together is far more challenging than most would ever expect.

But the fact is, excuses don't close deals. When prospects ask to hear from customers, it's up to sellers to do whatever it takes to provide timely, relevant references. So, it's in everyone's best interests to make growing sales reference pools and connecting sellers with satisfied reference contacts faster and more straightforward.

What's a sales reference?

A customer contact who is open to joining a live peer-to-peer reference call to share insight about a company, product, or service.

How sales references win deals



85 %

References have an 80-85% likelihood of influencing a B2B purchasing decision. (Gartner)

Only 18% of prospects trust the salespeople they work with during sales processes, while 92% trust what they hear from a customer.

The Harvard Business Review and Demand Metric

It's not personal, but prospects don't trust sales reps. They would rather talk with happy customers that they see as unbiased peers.

Prospects may be happy to watch sellers' slideshows and sit in on demos, but when it comes down to it, they prefer to talk directly with actual customers than salespeople. The research proves it: only 18% of prospects trust the salespeople they work with during purchasing processes, while 92% of prospects trust what they hear from a customer (The Harvard Business Review, Demand Metric).

It just makes sense. When prospects are on the cusp of completing a major purchasing decision that could impact their career, family, and future, they'd rather get

validation from a trusted peer who has no reason to lead them astray than chat with a salesperson who works on commission.

A recent Gartner study found that references have an 80-85% likelihood of influencing a B2B purchasing decision. Sure, sellers can win deals without references, but why would they choose to decrease the odds of closing deals when the solution is so clear? B2B deals are already complex enough.

Putting relatable, happy reference customers in touch with prospects helps speed up sales cycles and win more opportunities. On the other hand, making excuses for why relevant references aren't available puts deals at risk. It's truly that simple.

Aim for quality and diversity



75 %

of companies are concerned about overusing a small group of customer references. (Corporate Ink)

When a prospect asks to talk with a sales reference, it shouldn't set off a mad dash to track someone down. A large, diverse reference pool is the answer.

The most successful sellers honor their prospects' deadlines. When a prospect says they want to talk with three references by the end of the week, if Friday rolls around and there's no one for them to speak with, that's a major red flag.

But timelines aren't the only factor: relevance matters too. If a CRO at a tech company asks to chat with a reference and a sales rep puts them in touch with a Content Manager at a manufacturing firm, that's not likely to move the needle.

A mismatched reference can sometimes be worse than no reference at all because it implies the sales rep was desperate to accept a reference from anyone. In a prospect's mind, a healthy company should have ecstatic customers lining up to share their stories.

Using the same contacts too frequently is also a recipe for damaging customer relationships. Yet, a recent study found that 75% of companies are sincerely concerned about overusing a small group of customer references (Corporate Ink). The best way for organizations to get ahead of this concern is to constantly expand their pool of sales reference accounts and contacts.

Building a bench of satisfied customers across various roles and industries helps sellers prepare to fulfill a wide variety of reference requests quickly and easily. Not only can sellers better match prospects with customers they are likely to relate to, but reps can also protect their customers from overuse. For example, a C-level employee might be open to providing a reference once a quarter, while a manager trying to build her personal brand may be happy to join a sales reference call every month.

How sellers *really* get references

Struggling to get quality references is an all-too-common problem for B2B sellers. The first step to a better sales reference future is acknowledging that the old way is broken.

Getting relevant sales references on tight deadlines isn't easy. Many organizations don't have formal Customer Reference or Advocacy Programs at all. And for companies that do, the programs often can't move fast enough or scale quickly enough to fulfill every sales reference request before prospects' deadlines.

This means it's frequently up to sellers to do whatever it takes to get references to move their deals forward. Most B2B sellers get sales references by using one or more of these four approaches:

1. Collect Back Pocket References

What is it?

Sellers accumulate a small list of references over time and always go back to their trusted contacts.

What's the risk?

Sellers frequently overuse their favorite references, damaging customer relationships by mistake. Also, because the pool of back pocket references doesn't grow fast enough, it's tough to find well-matching reference contacts for every opportunity.

2. Trade References

What is it?

Sellers collect and trade their back pocket references with each other. A classic "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" situation.

What's the risk?

While sellers get slightly more reference diversity by trading, their combined sales reference pool is still relatively small, and usually, it's not growing any larger. Going back to the same ten references over and over is better than overusing the same five contacts, but only barely.





3. Call Who They Know

What is it?

Sellers repeatedly ask the same internal Customer Success and Subject Matter Expert (SME) contacts for help sourcing sales references.

What's the risk?

No matter how close sellers are with their colleagues, they have other responsibilities and can't always prioritize helping them find reference contacts. Rather than dropping everything to find references for sellers, it may take them days to help. And who knows how applicable the contacts they provide will be to the opportunity at hand?

4. Hail Mary

What is it?

Sellers send desperate internal emails to an entire department, business unit, or company for last-minute reference help.

What's the risk?

This last-ditch effort might surface a reference or two, but it leaves sellers with whatever they can get, rather than strategic, targeted sales references. Also, there are only so many times a sales rep can declare "all hands on deck" before their colleagues start ignoring their pleas.

Clearly, the common, go-to ways that many B2B sales reps use to source sales references aren't sustainable and come with considerable risk. But all hope isn't lost. With the problem acknowledged and out in the open, it's far easier to find a solution to break the cycle of poor sales reference gathering practices.

It's time to get targeted sales references

Even when organizations acknowledge their sales reference processes could use a boost, figuring out how to move forward can be daunting. It doesn't have to be.

A well-oiled traditional customer reference or advocacy program can be an organization's strongest asset. But launching, revamping, or expanding a traditional program isn't right for every organization.

Traditional advocacy programs require C-suite buy-in, cross-functional support, expanded headcount, and an earmarked budget. Typically, these programs are powered by a robust software solution designed to meet all stakeholders' reference needs—from Marketing and Customer Success to frontline sellers and everyone in between. Additionally, traditional advocacy programs require at least one dedicated Advocacy Manager to keep everything running smoothly.

At the start of a new advocacy program, sellers also have to learn common workflows, such as the process for requesting sales references and suggesting new reference accounts. A recent Forbes survey found that sales reps already spend less than 36% of their workdays actively selling. Without support from leadership, it's tricky for sellers to sacrifice even more potential selling time to get up to speed on new reference software and processes. This makes resorting to unofficial sales reference channels all the more tempting.

For organizations prepared to put in the time and resources, customer advocacy programs can pay dividends and become one of their strongest differentiators. But many organizations don't yet have the cross-functional alignment, executive support, or resources to launch a traditional program—or simply aren't interested. Someday, a formal advocacy program might be right for these companies, but sales reference requests are pouring in today.

Organizations with a pressing sales reference demand now need a straightforward, pragmatic solution as soon as possible. A simple, intuitive reference app designed to prioritize the needs of B2B sellers can add the structure these companies need to source and manage sales references and is often the quickest path to realizing value.



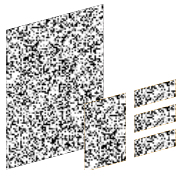
What to look for in a sales reference app



Companies primarily focused on delivering targeted sales references during sales cycles should consider a lightweight reference app that's explicitly built for B2B sellers.

Despite how widespread the problem of finding sales references is, there are shockingly few solutions built specifically to meet the reference needs of B2B sellers. What sellers really want is a simple, easy-to-learn app that focuses on putting targeted sales references at their fingertips when they need them.

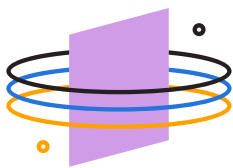
When evaluating reference apps designed to streamline the sales reference request and fulfillment process, organizations should consider five core attributes:



1. Salesforce-native

Most sellers spend nearly every day working from their trusted CRM. In organizations that use Salesforce, a Salesforce-native reference app will be the quickest and easiest for sellers to get started with.

Salesforce-native apps offer a familiar Salesforce interface and controls, slashing the learning curve for regular Salesforce users. Salesforce-native apps also deliver the reliability, security, and scalability enterprises expect from all Salesforce applications.



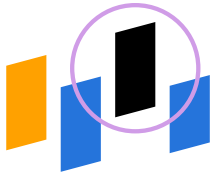
2. Automated reference recommendations

When sellers need a sales reference, they shouldn't have to waste time evaluating which customers could potentially help out. Instead, a quality sales reference app should provide recommendations automatically by matching reference contacts with opportunities based on key characteristics, such as industry and employee count.

What if we don't use Salesforce?

In organization's that use a different CRM than Salesforce, such as Dynamics or HubSpot, a sales reference app with available CRM integrations is the next best choice.

Whether organizations opt to integrate their sales reference app with a CRM immediately or down the line, having integrations available keeps options open as business needs evolve.



3. Rapid sales reference request approvals

Leaving the approval and fulfillment of sales reference requests to a single Advocacy Manager is not sustainable or scalable. And many companies don't even have an Advocacy Manager, which is completely fine. A reference app built for sellers should allow relationship owners to approve reference requests directly, accelerating the sales reference approval process. The relationship owners who know their accounts best should also be able to decide which reference contacts are most applicable to opportunities.



4. Naturally expands sales reference pool

If sellers always go back to the same trusted sales references, they risk burning them out. A solution that automatically highlights well-fitting customer accounts even if they're not currently referenceable is vital. This way, sellers can nominate new accounts as a natural step in their everyday workflows, expanding their sales reference pool quickly and efficiently.



5. Proven record of success

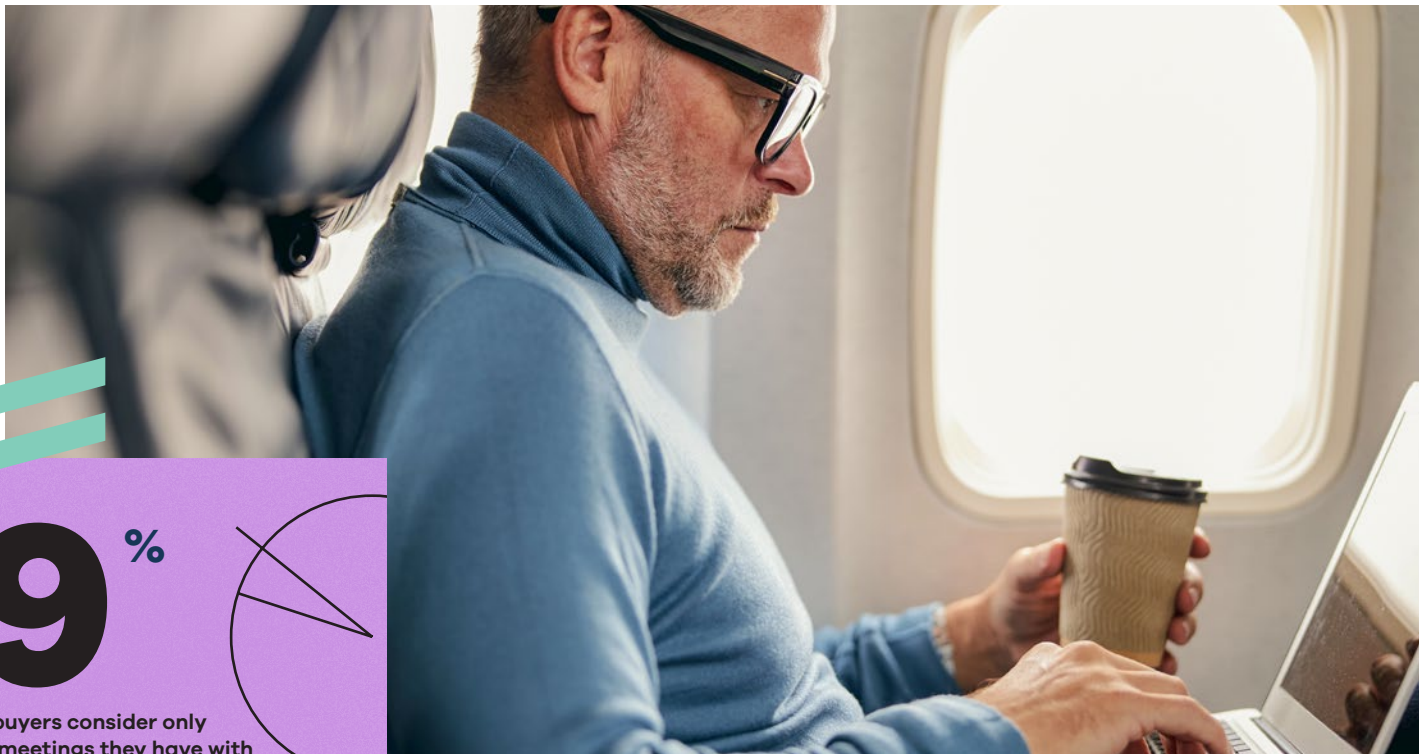
B2B sellers face unique challenges. Not all software providers understand what sellers are up against and have a record of success with both traditional advocacy programs and helping B2B sellers win the deals that matter. You can't fake experience. Selecting a company with a proven track record helps remove risk from the equation.

Bonus: A role for an Advocacy Manager

Not all organizations are lucky enough to have Advocacy Managers or Customer Reference Managers. If a company has existing managers, they may still want to be involved in sales reference management. Quality reference apps provide managers with the option to maintain oversight of sales references if they want to and the flexibility to leave sales references to sellers altogether if they prefer.

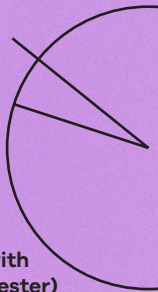
Even for companies without traditional reference programs, choosing a sales reference app that can operate both independently and alongside a traditional program is a smart move. This helps to future-proof the app and keeps options open as customer reference and advocacy needs evolve.

References on-demand is a power play



19%

Executive buyers consider only 19% of the meetings they have with salespeople to be valuable. (Forrester)

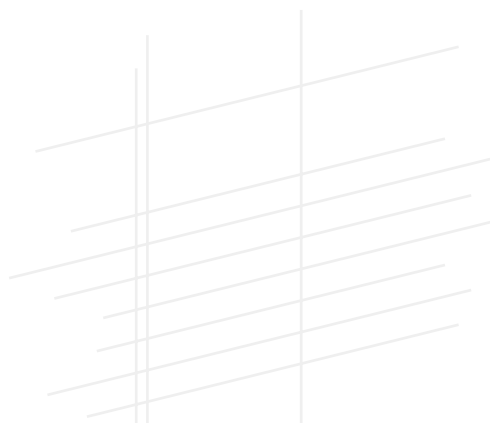


Nearly all B2B prospects will eventually want to talk with a reference. When sellers proactively introduce references to move deals forward, they're in control.

A large, high-quality reference pool gives sellers the confidence to proactively offer references at strategic points in sales cycles. When sellers approach their deals from positions of strength, they can rapidly increase prospects' confidence by conveying reference customers are lining up to sing their company's praises.

Having references available on-demand also keeps sellers in control of the timeline. They can be sure to bring in sales references at the best times to move deals along—never too early or too late.

According to Forrester, executive buyers only consider 19% of the meetings they have with salespeople to be valuable. A healthy sales reference pool provides the diversity sellers need to have matching contacts available to win over all the personas they work with throughout deals, from frontline managers to C-suite budget approvers. When the value of prospect meetings increases, sales cycles shorten and win rates go up.



Check out Altify Sales Reference Manager

Altify Sales Reference Manager is a simple, Salesforce-native reference app built by sales experts specifically for B2B sellers.

Upland Software has years of experience helping enterprises run traditional customer advocacy programs with RO Innovation and helping B2B sellers win the deals that matter with Altify. After talking with our customers and listening to their challenges, we decided to apply our expertise to reimagine a reference process that puts B2B sellers' needs first.

That's what led us to build Altify Sales Reference Manager: a Salesforce-native app that provides an easy, intuitive way for sellers to nominate, request, and manage sales references directly from their Salesforce opportunities.

How does Sales Reference Manager work?

Sales Reference Manager adds targeted reference account suggestions to Salesforce Opportunity records and routes new reference requests to the relationship owners who know their accounts best for approval. With the software's familiar Salesforce interface, practically overnight, sellers can go from overusing back pocket references to diving into an organization-wide pool of relevant reference accounts to close deals faster and increase win rates.

Sellers coordinate sales reference fulfillment directly with relationship owners using Sales Reference Manager. The app can either operate independently or alongside an existing advocacy program. While not required, if an organization has an Advocacy Manager or Customer Reference Manager, they have the option to maintain oversight by approving which customers can be used as sales references and assigning relationship owners to new accounts.

How does Sales Reference Manager help B2B sellers?

Sellers can stop...

- Wasting time hunting for references,
- Overusing their best references,
- Sharing irrelevant, poorly matched references.

And start...

- Speeding up sales cycles,
- Growing sales reference pools,
- Winning more opportunities with targeted references.



We are Upland.

We deliver software to the doers, the deliverers, and the day-to-day heroes of real-life business.

Ready to start winning more deals with targeted sales references on-demand?



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