Understanding Your Customers' Journeys:

The Foundation of Commercial Excellence

DUCKER CARLISLE

Many companies pursuing commercial excellence follow the same playbook: new organizational structures, redesigned processes, upgraded technology, additional headcount. And yet, revenue growth still falls short. In our experience, the root cause is rarely execution, it's a fundamental gap in customer and market understanding.

In the post-COVID environment, buying patterns have shifted and customers engage differently. The journey customers take to discover, evaluate, and purchase has become more complex and more digital. If your commercial transformation has underdelivered, the question worth asking is whether your organization, processes, and tools were actually built around the customers you're trying to win.

What is Commercial Excellence?

Commercial excellence encompasses how your organization creates, captures, and manages demand; spanning market intelligence, value proposition, sales and marketing execution, enabling infrastructure, and ongoing measurement. Most companies understand this in principle. What they underestimate is how much each element depends on a deep, current understanding of the customer.

Building best-in-class commercial excellence requires:

- Robust market intelligence and customer insights to inform commercial strategy and execution
- A strong value case and commercial strategy designed to create and capture demand
- Outstanding execution capabilities across sales, marketing, customer service, channel partnerships, branding, pricing, and product management
- The people, processes, tools, and technology to enable those execution capabilities
- Consistent measurement and monitoring to track success and inform refinements

Commercial excellence is an ongoing cycle, strategy designed, executed, and revised. Figure 1 illustrates this cycle.

Commercial excellence is an ongoing cycle whereby commercial strategy is designed, executed, and revised

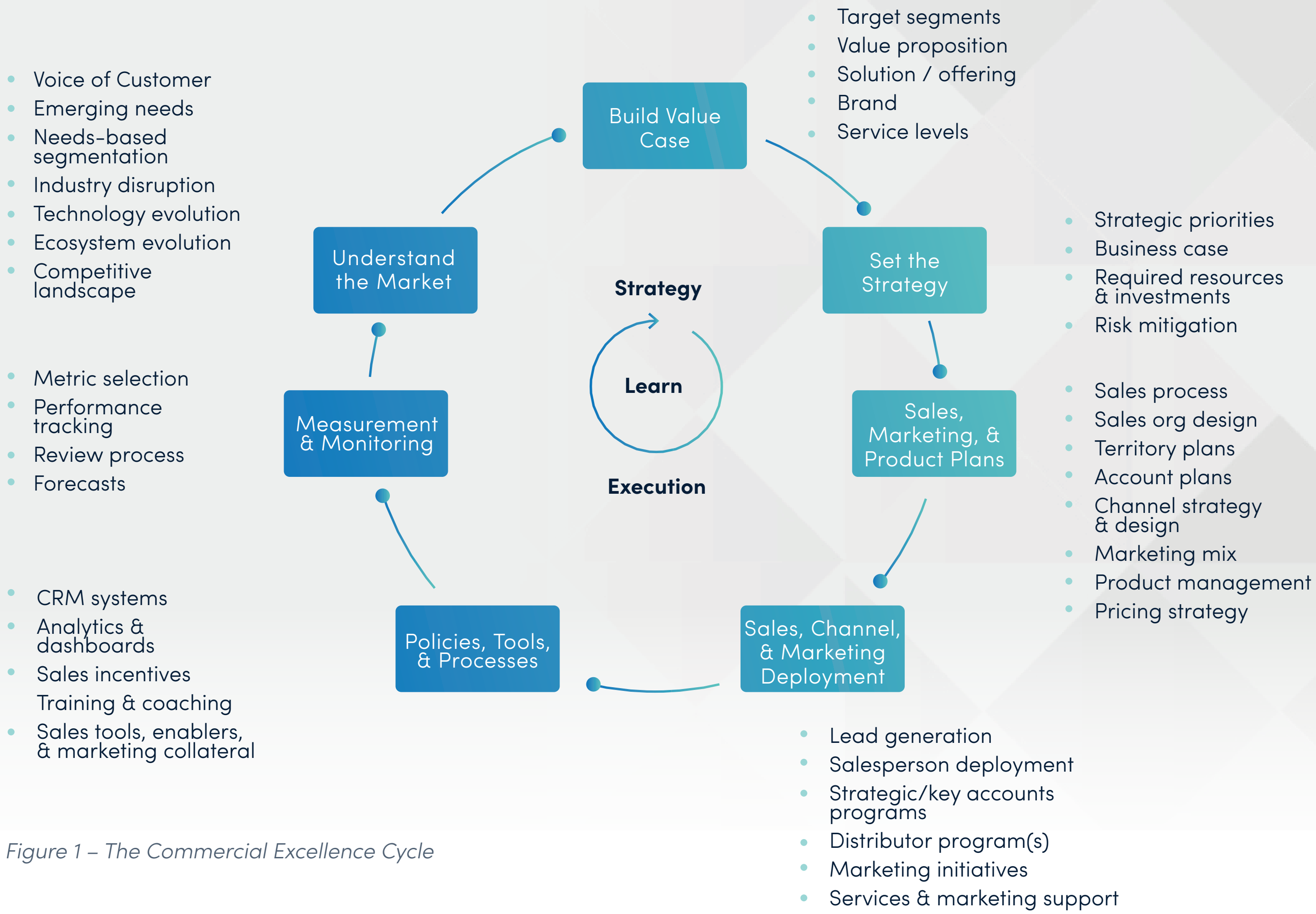


Figure 1 – The Commercial Excellence Cycle

Understanding the Market is the First Step

The first step in building commercial excellence is developing a strong understanding of the market and in particular, of the customer. Without this foundation, the value case will miss the mark with target customers, commercial strategy won't win against competitors, and the capabilities built to execute will be ineffective.

One senior executive, after an 18-month commercial transformation program, put it plainly:

> "I feel like we just spent $1.4MM to get a bunch of job descriptions and organizational charts for our commercial organization. But we still don't understand the market and really know why we win and how we can win and take share. We need more market insights, we don't understand our customers, and the assumptions we've received from the sales team appear to be incorrect."

For this client, the outcome was not revenue and share growth but the opposite. As business declined, they were unable to fund hiring for the new roles they had just designed. Their investment in commercial transformation, absent a foundation of market understanding, produced org charts that couldn't be filled.

Understanding the Customer Journey

The customer journey is foundational to commercial excellence not as a marketing artifact, but as the blueprint for the entire commercial operating model. This means understanding the journey customers take to learn about, select, buy, and use your offering. Mapping it reveals two things:

1. The varying decision criteria and processes that reveal unique needs-based market segments

2. How your organization can position itself advantageously at each step of the journey to maximize results and win in each segment

The customer journey is not a new concept. Most sophisticated companies map and track their customers' journeys. The problem is that this knowledge often sits siloed in the marketing function and is used primarily to drive awareness and reach. It rarely informs the full commercial operating model.

Additionally, as buying patterns have shifted, accelerated by the COVID pandemic toward more digital, virtual engagement, what your organization previously understood about the customer journey may no longer hold. It requires fresh examination.

At each point along the customer journey, opportunities are revealed to position your company and offering to win against competitors. Capturing those opportunities requires a coordinated effort across functions within the commercial organization and with channel intermediaries, distributors, dealers, integrators, and installers, outside it.

Ducker Carlisle approach to building commercial excellence begins with deep understanding of the customer journey

Generic B2B Customer Journey*

Discovery	Where and how do individuals or businesses find out about the product/solution?
Evaluation	How do individuals or businesses evaluate what to buy; what information do they need to make decision?
Transaction	How do individuals or businesses actually purchase the product/solution; with whom and where do they exchange money for the product/solution?
Receipt	How do individuals or businesses desire to receive the product/solution; how does the product/solution come to them?
Support	What do individuals or businesses seek in terms of interaction or support after they have taken ownership of the product/solution?

**Generalized process – each B2B market & customer situation can present a unique buying process & approach*

A detailed mapping of a B2B customer journey is much more complex and nuanced than the generic example above. We evaluate the customer journey at three levels:

3 Actions – what the customer does at each step

4 Experience – their satisfaction and friction points throughout

5 Thoughts – what they're weighing, questioning, or deciding at each stage

This rubric enables a full unpacking of the customer journey beyond simply what the customer does. Understanding experience and thoughts at each step reveals both commercial engagement opportunities and product or offering innovations that will create genuine value.

Using the Customer Journey as the Foundation for Commercial Excellence

Starting with a well-defined customer journey, you can determine how to influence, engage, and win with customers at each step and then design the operating model needed to do it. This is a three-step process:

6 Map the customer journey (or journeys, for different needs-based customer segments)

7 Determine how best to engage and influence customer decisions at each step

8 Design the commercial operating model needed to execute

1. Map the Customer Journey

Mapping the customer journey requires in-depth voice-of-customer analysis. This goes well beyond a standard survey. It requires substantive business conversations with customer leaders to unpack their decision-making criteria and purchasing process. It often requires visits to production facilities or job sites to fully understand needs, decision criteria, and the steps taken to select a supplier and commit to a purchase.

This analysis unlocks the key leverage points along the journey: where and how customers form their consideration set, how they narrow it down, and what ultimately drives their decision.

Customer journey mapping will also, likely, reveal distinct customer segments, groups whose buying behavior and needs differ meaningfully. Understanding this variation reveals different engagement approaches for each segment and can inform which segments are most worth targeting based on size, growth, and potential profitability.

2. Determine How to Engage and Influence

Given what you know about the customer at each step, what does it take to win their attention and position your offering effectively? This isn't only about having the right product or the right message. It requires sales and marketing activities that engage customers where they actually are in the process, in the manner they want to be engaged.

If customers begin their journey with online research, you need a strong web presence and SEO capability so you appear in their consideration set. If they evaluate detailed specification sheets when comparing options, your specifications need to be easily found and easily digestible. If they seek in-person technical guidance, your salespeople need genuine technical depth, backed by strong sales enablement tools.

3. Build the Commercial Operating Model

The operating model follows from the engagement model. Do you need highly technical salespeople to hold detailed conversations with technical buyers? What marketing capabilities are required to generate leads, produce content, build digital engagement, and design sales tools? What processes and infrastructure are needed to capture the sale ahead of competitors? What delivery and support capabilities are needed to strengthen the customer relationship and expand wallet share over time?

These aren't abstract organizational questions. They are answered directly by the customer journey.

A customer journey has three layers. What the customer does is visible. What they experience and what they are thinking at each step is not, and that is where the real commercial opportunity sits. The map below captures all three for a mid-market building products segment.

	DISCOVERY	EVALUATION
ACTIONS	• Determine style • Match windows/doors (e.g., cost, style, size, material type, color) • Match style of neighborhood/area • Doors: door glass desires in doorlite, sidelite, and/or transom • Calculate and review initial cost estimates **Homeowner** • Review previous example photos • Discuss how home will be used, preference in styles/ looks, & price • Will come with ideas from own online research **Architect/ Designer** (Not always involved, usually for homes over 3,500 sq.ft.) • Will put their approval on drawings, not involved in selection of window brand or type	• Utilize products installed on previous projects • Building codes specific to the area for glass and insulation needs • Up-and-coming technologies in glass and door glass • Understand material type (species for wood door), glass, and insulation needs for window & door specific to area (e.g. Glass: standard, impact, vs. hurricane, Door & Frames: material weather-ability and durability) • Narrowing down vendors **Homeowner** • Present available options • Send to distributor showroom • Discuss cost/ budget **Supplier** • Call to see which products are available • Search website for ideas • Visit showroom & seek recommendations on product specs • Prefer to work with a supplier that they can send client to see samples
EXPERIENCE	• Confidence/ Optimism – due to experience and product knowledge *"I have to be smarter and more knowledgeable than the door suppliers because they are often not detail-oriented enough."* • Frustrated - Dealing with indecisive homeowners that take too long to decide; this can delay entire project *Extremely Satisfied* *Not at all Satisfied*	• Frustrated – possible trouble finding exact products available that meet homeowner requests and match with rest of home • There are not a lot of suppliers in the area that provide premium products • Client can choose to save here and spend more elsewhere • Can take about 3-4 weeks
THOUGHTS	• Can I achieve the "look" that the homeowner requests with the products available? • Will I be able to get the premium quality with this aesthetic? • Will I be painting or staining entry door (wood stains better than fiberglass)	• What is the best price-to-value I can achieve? • Can I find the breadth of product offering for both windows and doors from manufacturer or distributor? • Can I come in under budget for this portion of the build?

CASE EXAMPLE

Unpacking the Customer Journey to Advance an Omni-Channel Engagement Model

A building products client realized more than 20% annual revenue growth, not by building new internal digital capabilities, but by redirecting investment to where their customers were already searching and buying. The insight came from the customer journey.

The client had perceived that purchasing behavior was shifting online and recognized that a significant share of their sales transactions were now happening digitally. They had not planned for this shift and needed to understand how customer behaviors were changing before committing to a commercial investment strategy.

Through extensive voice-of-customer analysis, including dozens of in-depth interviews and approximately 500 survey respondents, we mapped the customer journey across different segments of the business. Figure 5 summarizes the omni-channel journey for one segment.

Discovery

Small pros, end users and installers all exhibit similar research behaviors; they research online but also use traditional methods for discovery

Homedepot.com, Amazon.com and Lowes.com are the most frequent sources of information for small pros with Homedepot.com being most popular among off-line purchasers

Channel partners are aware of the rise of online research among their customers and end users

Adoption of online discovery is present and increasing among customer chain participants

Evaluation

Installers, small pros and end users rank price as one of the top 2 items researched, but differ on other items

Installers focus on product availability and delivery times while small pros and end users focus on consumerized content such as product images/specifications and reviews

While price is top of mind for installers and facility managers, they have not found an online source for premium high grade commercial products

Effective content is very important to creating a strong customer experience online and best-in-class content makes customer purchase decisions easier

Transaction

On-line sales are becoming more prevalent

Price transparency online is creating price pressure for channel partners

Small pros are buying from many channels for their projects, though buy primarily from dealers, wholesalers, and big box

Small pros, installers and facility managers purchasing online buy mostly from Big Box retailer and Dealer and Wholesaler websites, but also purchase a significant amount from online retailers

Price and product availability are the primary reasons small pros and installers purchase from selected channels

Not being able to touch/feel product limits small pros from purchasing online, as well as shipping issues (speed, ability to ship to jobsite)

Delivery

Same day and next day delivery are table stakes and expected across the customer chain

Support

Quick/immediate product replacement is most important to small pros for after-sales support

On-line installation instructions are very important for small pros who purchase online

Installerss and channel partners also report the importance of quick returns and product replacement

Key insights from the analysis contradicted what the client expected:

- Customers typically searched for products on third-party websites and channel partner sites, especially big-box home improvement retailers not the manufacturer's own site
- Customers often completed purchases through dealer and wholesaler websites after gathering information from big-box sites or Amazon

The client had been planning to invest in their own e-commerce capabilities. The customer journey data demonstrated it was far more valuable to build a compelling presence on third-party and channel partner sites. That realization redirected their commercial investment toward:

- Developing detailed, standardized product content for placement across third-party and partner channels, ensuring brand and product consistency everywhere customers were actually looking
- Creating a content management function to oversee consistency and effectiveness across those channels
- Working closely with and in some cases co-investing with less digitally sophisticated wholesalers to advance their online capabilities
- Using their own website to direct customers toward preferred channel partner sites for evaluation and purchase

The result: more than 20% annual revenue growth, driven primarily by capturing demand in the right place across digital channels.

CASE EXAMPLE

Customer Journey Informs Sales Team Engagement Model and Structure

A client in the agricultural infrastructure and equipment space nearly doubled revenue over three years. The turning point wasn't a new product or market expansion, it was rebuilding the commercial model around a detailed map of how contractors actually make purchasing decisions.

The client had one sales role in place: territory managers who were strong relationship sellers and effective at account retention, but not built to prospect or develop new business. They knew they needed to grow share. What they didn't yet know was exactly where in the customer journey they were losing ground.

We engaged in a commercial excellence diagnostic, identified gaps in sales effectiveness, and then evaluated and mapped the customer journey for contractors installing infrastructure on farms. Figure 6 details that journey.

The customer journey revealed that the key leverage points, early-stage prospecting and technical solution design, were precisely where the client's commercial team was absent. We used the journey to design a new sales process that connected commercial activity directly to those leverage points, as shown in Figure 7.

Contractor Journey

1. Farmer & contractor planning

- Farmer discusses needs
- Contractor surveys the land and creates solution design
- Contractor determines the products needed

2. Contractor contacts solution supplier(s)

- Discusses needs, delivery timelines
- Solutions supplier consults and provides advice to contractor
- Contractor may contact multiple solutions manufacturers

3. Supplier provides quote for proposed solution

- Supplier(s) present pricing
- Contractor may negotiate pricing based on competitive offers or other constraints
- Delivery date determined

4. Contractor places order

- Contractor places order with supplier – either with customer service or through sales rep

5. Contractor receives order

- Order is delivered to jobsite

6. Contractor installs solution

- Contractor installs the solution
- Supplier provides advice and additional support

Farmer Buying Process Variations

Some farmers hire contractors to design and install drainage, but purchase the solution direct from a drainage supplier

Distributor Buying Process Variations

The buying process for distributors is more condensed, needing less interaction drainage supplier

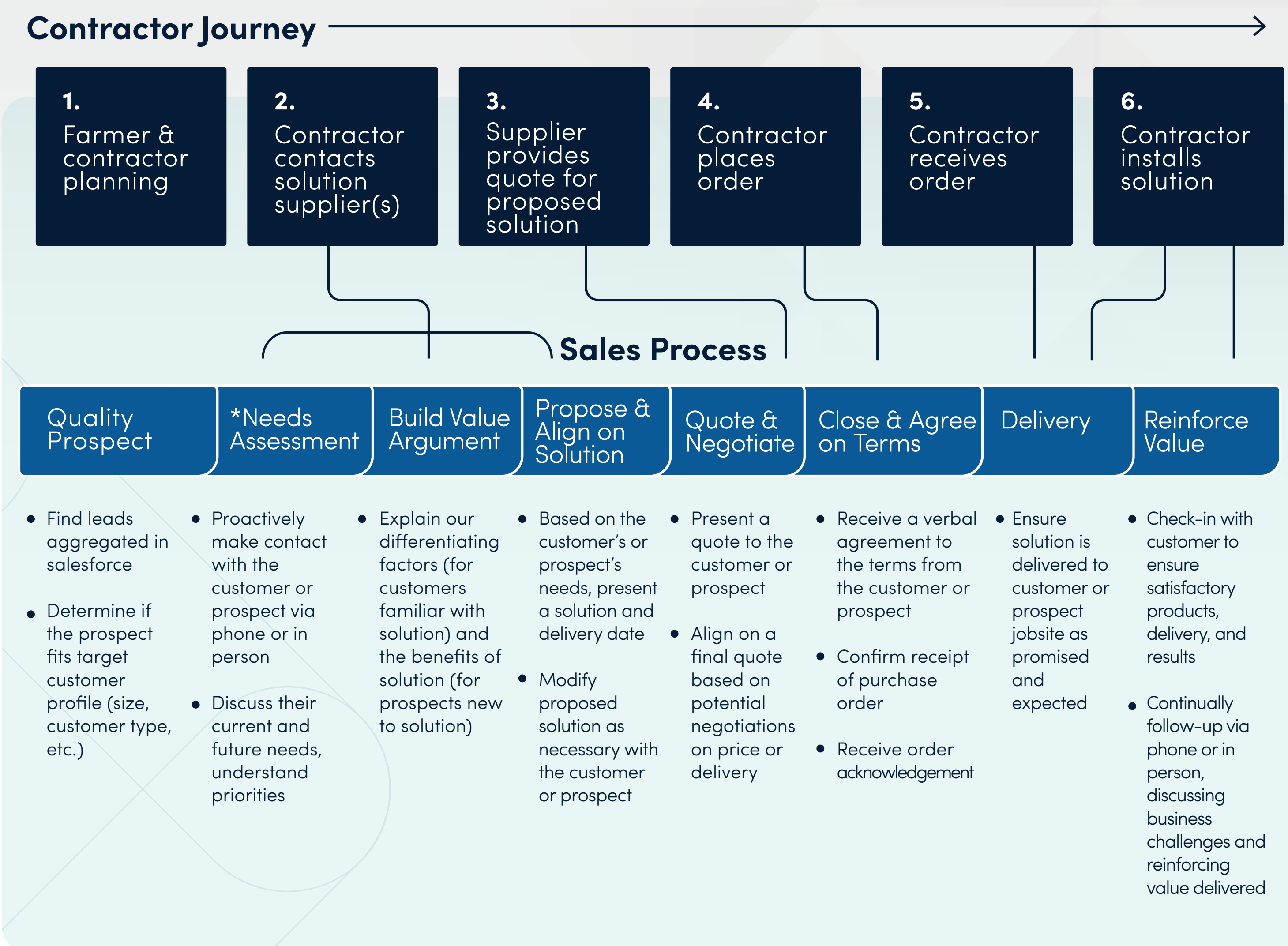
Farmers and small contractors will contact distributors to purchase drainage products and distributors will purchase from supplier as needed to maintain a stocked yard

Distributors often do not engage the supplier sales rep for their drainage needs – they will purchase directly from supplier through customer service or ordering portal

Typically, they do not discuss needs, require consultancy, or negotiate pricing and delivery dates with a contractor

The new sales process was integrated directly into CRM workflows. Rules were established so a customer could not advance in the pipeline unless specific tasks had been completed, enforcing adherence to the process rather than leaving adoption to individual discretion. Training and change management brought the sales team through the transition, with sales leadership actively involved in building and communicating the case for change.

From there, we determined the sales roles required to execute the process. The client reallocated resources from territory managers to business development representatives and technical specialists, roles the customer journey had shown were essential to engaging at the right points. Figure 8 illustrates the framework used to align sales roles to the sales process.



In summary, this client followed the three steps:

- Documented the customer journey in detail
- Determined how to best engage the customer along that journey
- Designed a sales process and refined sales roles to execute the engagement model

The outcome: nearly doubled revenue over three years, driven by significant share gains and market expansion.

Is Your Commercial Model Aligned to Your Customers' Journey?

Too often, companies do not pay enough attention to the customer journey or if they do, they don't apply that knowledge to inform capability building and organizational design. The result is investment in commercial transformation that produces org charts and job descriptions but not revenue growth.

How might you know if your organization's understanding of its customers' journeys is insufficient? Consider the following:

Signs your commercial model may not be aligned to your customers' journey

- You are reacting to RFPs and RFQs rather than driving the sales process and shaping the brief
- Your commercial team is mostly engaged in competitive bids rather than engaging customers at the high-leverage points earlier in the journey
- Your team is stuck negotiating price with procurement rather than demonstrating value to the full buying team
- Customers tell you that interactions with your commercial team aren't adding enough value
- You are failing to grow wallet share with your best accounts
- Cross-selling and upselling remain elusive despite a broad offering
- New customer acquisition has stalled

Conclusion

The customer journey is foundational. It informs how to win with customers, how to engage them to drive demand, and what the commercial operating model must include to execute effectively. It is not a marketing deliverable. It is the basis for decisions about sales roles, channel strategy, marketing capabilities, CRM design, and organizational structure.

For companies ready to take a harder look at how their commercial model is aligned to the customer journey, the starting point is usually more straightforward than it appears: a clear-eyed mapping of how your best customers actually discover, evaluate, and buy and an honest assessment of where your commercial capabilities meet or miss that journey.

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About Ducker Carlisle

Named one of America's Top Management Consulting Firms 2026 by Business Insider, Ducker Carlisle is a global market research, strategy consulting and M&A advisory firm that helps the world's largest companies and private equity firms optimize business performance and accelerate growth. Founded in 1961 with offices across the US, Germany, France, UK, India and China, the firm leverages proprietary data, deep industry knowledge and proven methodologies to deliver tailored, industry-specific insights and recommendations across the automotive, heavy truck & equipment, general industrial, building and construction, and private equity sectors.

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