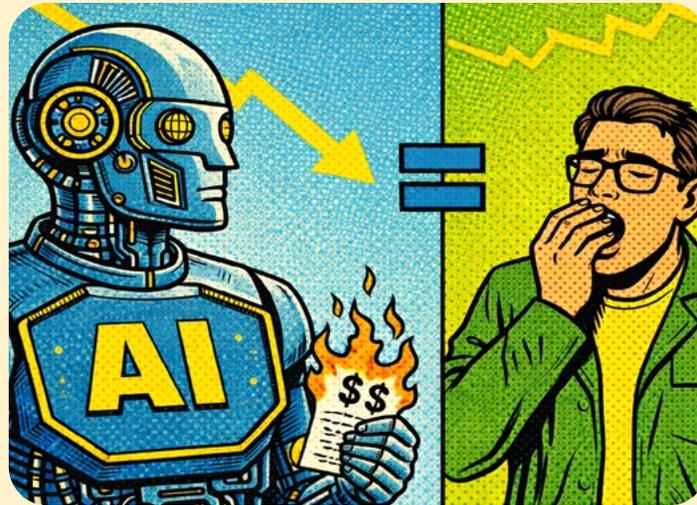
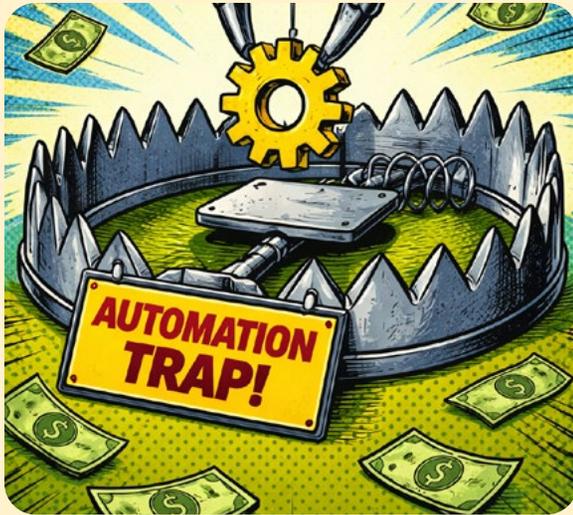


The 2026 B2B GenAI Investment Report

Why 79% of Companies are Adopting AI SDRs
But Only 5% Find Them Highly Effective



This report explores the growing disconnect between marketing automation and buyer expectations, offering a new playbook for growth in the AI era.

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Executive Summary

In 2026, B2B marketing and sales leaders are facing a stark contradiction. Despite significant investments in AI-powered tools designed to accelerate sales, buyer engagement is declining, and acquisition costs are soaring. This report, based on a survey of over 200 B2B leaders, uncovers a new paradox. As companies automate more of the sales process, they are inadvertently pushing buyers away.

We found that while 79% of B2B organizations are using or planning to use AI Sales Development Representatives (SDRs), a staggering 90% describe them as limited, poorly integrated or aggressive, and only 5% find them highly effective.

Meanwhile, buyers are retreating. Over 69% report significant friction in the research process, and 68% are responding less to vendor outreach. They are abandoning traditional vendor websites in favor of AI-powered research platforms like ChatGPT and Gemini, which now represent the primary starting point for 41% of B2B buyers.

This report unpacks the data behind this growing disconnect and provides a strategic framework for B2B leaders to navigate the new landscape. We explore the root causes of rising costs, the failures of current AI implementations, and the clear, actionable path to aligning with the modern buyer journey.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

92%

of B2B marketers report increased lead acquisition costs in the last 24 months.

69%

of B2B buyers say it's difficult to get the information they need from vendors.

79%

of organizations have adopted or plan to adopt AI SDRs.

41%

of B2B buyers now start their research on AI platforms, not Google.

5%

of marketers believe their AI SDRs are "highly effective."

64%

of buyers want a unified, centralized hub for vendor information.

PART 1:

The Squeeze: Are B2B Marketing Jobs at Risk as Lead Costs Rise?

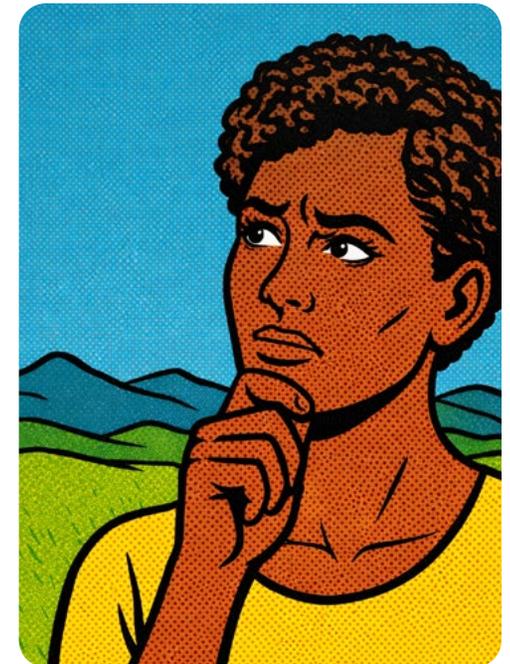
The financial and professional pressure on B2B marketing and sales leaders has never been higher. An overwhelming **92% of our survey respondents reported that lead acquisition costs have increased** over the past two years. This is not a minor uptick. For over a third of companies, costs have risen by more than 26%.

This cost crisis is having a direct impact on job security. Only **2% of marketing and sales professionals feel “completely secure”** in their roles, while 98% acknowledge feeling pressure to adapt to the changing landscape.

92% of B2B marketers report increased lead acquisition costs.*

50.5% increased 1-25%
33.7% increased 26-50%
7.9% increased 51-75%
7.9% no increase (0%)

Our research identified two primary drivers behind this trend: increased competition and rising media costs. **76% of marketers cited a “noisier, more competitive market”** as their top challenge, while **61% pointed to escalating costs on paid media platforms** like Google and LinkedIn. This intense competition and the declining effectiveness of old channels have put B2B growth leaders under immense pressure.



* Survey of 103 B2B marketing professionals, September-October 2025

PART 2:

The Automation Trap: Are AI SDRs Delivering Value?

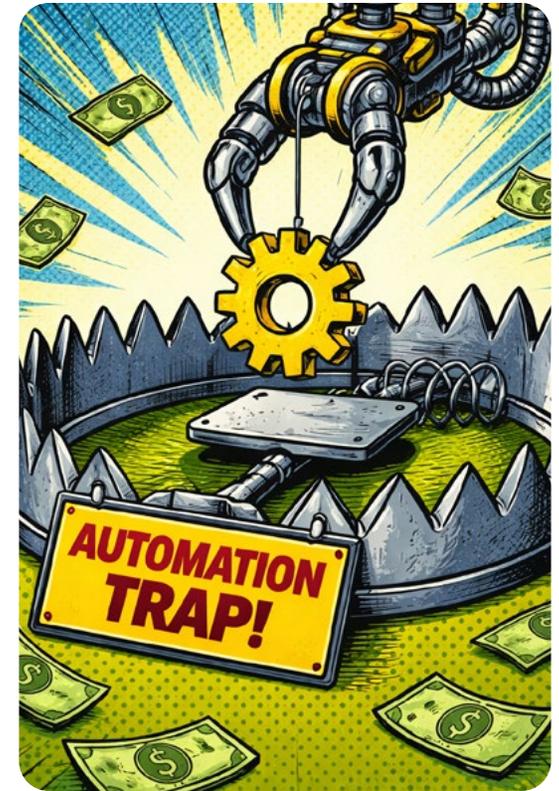
In response to rising costs and market pressure, B2B organizations have turned to AI sales tools, specifically AI-powered Sales Development Representatives (SDRs). The adoption rate is soaring, with **79% of companies either using or planning to implement AI SDRs**. The promise is clear: scale outreach, qualify leads, and reduce overhead.

The reality, however, falls short of the promise. Our research uncovered a massive gap between adoption and satisfaction.

The AI SDR Adoption-Perception Paradox:

While 79% of companies are investing in AI SDRs, only 5% of marketing leaders perceive them as “highly effective.”

So, where is the disconnect? The data shows these AI sales tools are used in two limited ways. Most are either simple chatbots for customer service (41% of cases) or blunt outbound prospecting tools (46% of cases). Only 13% of companies have managed to blend these functions into a cohesive, intelligent experience.



The Librarian vs. the Digital Concierge

Buyers are not opposed to AI. In fact, 70% have already interacted with an AI SDR. But their expectations have shifted:

They no longer want a “librarian” that only surfaces documents. They want a digital concierge—a capable research partner that:

- Understands their context and use case
- Synthesizes content into tailored recommendations
- Performs actual work (ROI calculations, solution comparisons, implementation plans)
- Smoothly hands off to the right human at the right time

When AI SDRs behave like slightly smarter chatbots, they feel misaligned with the broader evolution of the web, where AI systems are already helping users plan trips, negotiate purchases, and execute complex workflows.

The paradox: **marketing teams are adding more AI at the edge of their funnel (outbound, chat), while the core experiences buyers actually use—search, evaluation, internal alignment—are shifting to AI platforms and autonomous agents that most vendors barely consider.**

What Would Make AI SDRs More Valuable to Buyers?

Desired Improvement	% of Buyers
Answer complex, technical questions	61%
Perform tasks (e.g., ROI analysis, RFP support)	49%
Provide an easier handoff to a human representative	42%
Offer more personalization	41%

PART 3:

The Buyer Revolt: How Has B2B Buying Behavior Changed in 2026?

While marketers are busy implementing automation, buyers are fundamentally changing their behavior. Frustrated by fragmented information and irrelevant outreach, they are taking control of their own discovery process.

Our survey reveals a dramatic decline in traditional engagement tactics. **68% of buyers are responding less to vendor outreach, 46% are filling out fewer forms, and 32% are spending less time on vendor websites.**

The most significant shift is where they begin their research. For the first time, **AI platforms like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Gemini have surpassed Google as the primary starting point for B2B vendor research.** These platforms are now cited by 41% of buyers.

The shift to AI platforms also reflects what buyers now expect from their search experience. In the traditional web era, buyers were willing to manually search, click through multiple pages, and piece together answers themselves. Today, they expect AI to do that work for them. They're no longer asking "Where can I find information about this vendor?" but rather "Help me find a solution to my problem." This is the difference between search and synthesis, and it's why scattered PDFs and fragmented websites are no longer sufficient.

The Discovery Crisis:

69% of B2B buyers report that information from vendors is scattered and difficult to access, making it hard to find the answers they need.

Driven by this expectation for speed, synthesis, and personalization, buyers are no longer willing to hunt through scattered PDFs and inconsistent web pages. They want a central, intelligent source of truth. A remarkable **64% of buyers stated that a "unified experience" or "centralized workspace"** would most improve their vendor evaluation process.

PART 4:

The New Playbook: How Should B2B Companies Use AI in Sales?

The findings of this report are not an indictment of AI, but a call for a more intelligent application of it. The path forward requires a fundamental shift in mindset: from optimizing for lead capture, clicks and form fills to designing for AI-assisted buying journeys.

Based on our research, SlateCX recommends that marketers take several key actions:

1. Replace Scattered PDFs with Structured, Searchable Hubs:

Buyers are clear that the old model of downloading siloed PDFs is broken. The demand for a “unified experience” (cited by 64% of buyers) requires a move toward centralized knowledge hubs where all content is structured, searchable, and interconnected.

What Should B2B Marketers Do Differently in 2026?

In practice, this means consolidating case studies, product specs, pricing guides, and implementation documentation into a single, persistent digital workspace where buyers can search across all materials, bookmark key findings, and share insights with their team. This structure also makes your information easy for AI to cite when answering buyer questions, turning your content into a competitive advantage in AI-driven discovery.



2. Replace Outbound Spam with Agentic AI Experiences:

While 79% of companies are adopting AI SDRs, the current focus on low-value tasks and aggressive prospecting is alienating buyers. The opportunity lies in creating “agentic” AI experiences that serve the buyer by answering complex questions, performing tasks, and synthesizing information on demand.

How Can AI Serve Buyers Instead of Annoying Them?

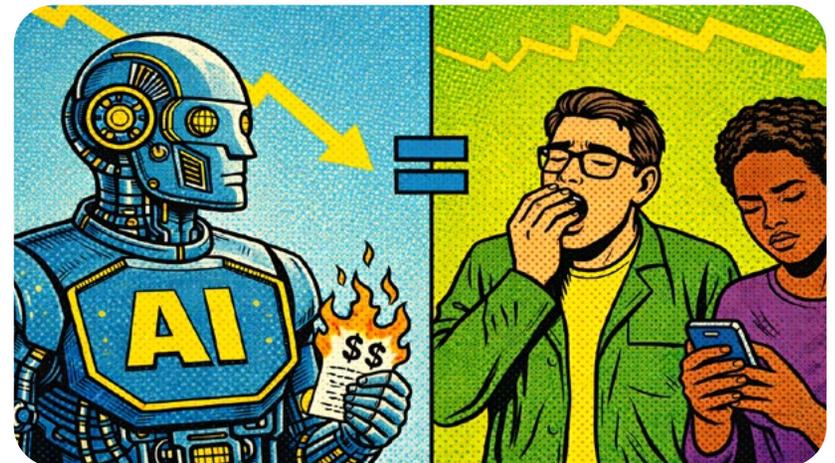
Deploy AI assistants that can perform real work: generating ROI calculations based on the buyer’s specific metrics, comparing your solution to competitors using the buyer’s evaluation criteria, or drafting customized implementation plans. Promote your AI SDR to a “digital concierge” that reduces the buyer’s workload rather than adding to it.

3. Replace Single-Session Bots with Persistent Research Assistants:

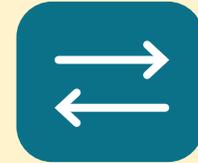
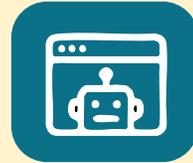
The modern B2B purchase journey is long and involves multiple stakeholders. Single-session chatbots that forget the conversation context are a dead end. Buyers now expect your platform to remember their context, understand their evolving needs, and help them build a complete picture over multiple sessions. The future belongs to persistent, collaborative digital spaces where buyers can conduct research over time, share findings with their team, and engage with an advanced AI assistant.

What Makes an AI SDR Experience Effective?

This means building experiences where a buyer can start a conversation on Monday, return on Wednesday to pick up where they left off, invite colleagues to review the AI’s analysis, and collaboratively refine their requirements—all within the same workspace. The AI should remember not just what was asked, but what the buyer cares about, what objections they’ve raised, and what stage of evaluation they’re in.



THE FOUR ERAS OF WEB ENGAGEMENT



Human-Driven Discovery (The Manual Era)

Manual: Users actively search, click, and analyze information themselves. The web is a library.

AI-Augmented Exploration (The Conversational Era)

AI-Augmented: Users converse with AI to get synthesized answers. The AI is a co-pilot.

Agent-Based Surfing (The Autonomous Browser)

Agentic: AI autonomously navigates the web to complete multi-step tasks. The browser is an active participant.

Autonomous Web Interaction (The Agentic Web)

AWI (Future): User agents interact directly with service agents, bypassing traditional interfaces. The web is a network of services.

4. Prepare for a new era of web engagement

Web engagement itself is undergoing a structural reset. Marketers are already seeing declines in organic web traffic as consumers use AI Co-Pilots like ChatGPT and Perplexity to do their research. And a new wave of AI browsers like Comet and ChatGPT Atlas are extending those capabilities by allowing AI Agents to visit sites and engage on consumers' behalf. And standards are now emerging for an Agentic Web where consumers' personal AI Agents can communicate directly to site-based AI Agents.

As shown in the figure above, this will change the role of the consumer and demand that marketers embrace new strategies as they are forced to design web properties for consumption by both humans and AI Agents.

THE EVOLUTION OF WEB ENGAGEMENT AT A GLANCE

	MANUAL ERA	AI-AUGMENTED ERA	AGENTIC ERA	AWI ERA
User Role	Active Discoverer	Co-pilot	Delegator	Goal Setter
Primary Interface	Search Results Page (SERP)	Chat Window	Autonomous Browser	Personal AI Assistant
Key Technology	PageRank / Crawling	LLMS / RAG	AI Orchestration / DOM Manipulation	AWI Protocols / Multi-Agent Systems
Business Goal	Achieve high rank (SEO)	Be cited by AI (GEO)	Be Agent-Friendly	Be the Agent's Preferred Service
Interaction Model	Human-to-Website	Human-to-AI	Human-to-Agent	Agent-to-Agent

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As shown in the figure above, this will change the role of the consumer and demand that marketers embrace new strategies as they are forced to design web properties for consumption by both humans and AI Agents.

Appendix: Complete Survey Questions & Results

This report is based on a survey of 205 B2B professionals conducted by Emporia Research in September and October of 2025. The respondent pool consisted of 103 marketing and sales professionals and 102 professionals with purchasing responsibilities.

SELLER SURVEY (N=103)

1. In the past 2 years, the cost to acquire new leads at your organization has:

Response	Percentage
Increased 1%–25%	50.5%
Increased 26%–50%	33.7%
0% (no increase)	7.9%
Increased 51%–75%	7.9%

2. In the past 2 years, how have the following changed at your organization?

Please reference the following definitions:

Engagement Rate = (Total Engagements / Reach or Impressions) x 100

Engagements: Sum of all interactions with a piece of content.

Reach or Impressions: The total number of unique users who have seen the content, or the total number of times the content was displayed

Lead Conversions: Percentage of visitors to a landing page who fill out a form

Response	Percentage
Increased	67.3%
Decreased	23.8%
Stayed the Same	8.9%

3. What factors are making it most challenging for marketers to compete in the AI era? (Select all that apply.)

Response	Percentage
Noisier market / increased competition	75.7%
Rising paid media costs	61.2%
Changing buyer preferences	43.7%

4. How worried are you that your ability to deliver results could put your job at risk in the next 1–2 years?

Response	Percentage
Somewhat worried. I feel pressure, but not immediate risk	34.7%
Not very worried. I think I'll adapt and be fine	30.7%
Neutral. I'm not worried, but I'm also not confident	28.7%
Extremely worried. I feel my job is at significant risk	4.0%
Not worried at all. My role feels secure regardless of results	2.0%

5. How has the rise of AI platforms (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity) impacted your organization's organic web traffic?

Response	Percentage
No impact	40.6%
Decreasing traffic	31.7%
Increasing traffic	27.7%

6. What adjustments have you made to your organic website traffic strategy? (Select all that apply.)

Response	Percentage
Shifted focus to brand, referrals, and community-driven traffic	60.8%
Creating content to be cited in AI platform answers	56.7%
Increased spend on paid media	55.7%
Improving self-service on my website to better serve those who visit	44.3%

Appendix: Complete Survey Questions & Results

7. Do you currently use an AI SDR solution (automated outbound, inbound chatbot, or both), or plan to in the next 12–18 months?

Response	Percentage
Not yet, but we plan to invest in the next 12–18 months	37.6%
Yes, but only in a limited/pilot capacity	30.7%
Not yet, and no plans to invest	19.8%
Yes, we are already using one widely	10.9%
Unsure	1.0%

8. What is/will be the primary use of your AI SDR solution?

Response	Percentage
Answering questions / FAQ support	37.5%
Outbound prospecting / lead generation	28.7%
Lead qualification / screening	17.5%
Blended prospecting + chatbot functions	12.5%
Website greeter / meeting scheduling	3.8%

9. Do you believe AI SDRs today are being used in the right way in B2B sales?

Response	Percentage
Somewhat, but limited to low-value tasks	45.5%
Somewhat but not well integrated with the rest of my content	35.6%
No, misused for overly aggressive prospecting	8.9%
Not sure	5.0%
Yes, highly effective	5.0%

10. What features or capabilities do you wish AI SDRs offered that they currently lack? (Select all that apply.)

Response	Percentage
Easier handoff to a human representative	58.3%
More personalization	56.3%
Better analytics and reporting	47.6%
Integration with CRM and marketing tools	42.7%
Other	1.9%

11. Where have you reallocated budget because of AI? (Select all that apply.)

Response	Percentage
Content marketing and SEO	63.1%
AI tools and automation	54.4%
Investing in brand and referral programs	35.9%

12. Which of the following improvements would create the most value for your team today?

Response	Percentage
Organic traffic from references in AI answers/search	27.7%
Conversion rates from paid advertising campaigns	22.8%
Higher return rates, more time on site and deeper product evaluation	17.8%
Getting sales reps involved more quickly when the prospect is evaluating	16.8%
Engagement rates with ABM targets/prospects	14.9%

Appendix: Complete Survey Questions & Results

13. At your organization, what is your level of involvement in evaluating and selecting vendors for enterprise solutions (e.g., software, hardware, or services)?

Response	Percentage
Increased 1%–25%	50.5%
Increased 26%–50%	33.7%
0% (no increase)	7.9%
Increased 51%–75%	7.9%

BUYER SURVEY (N=102)

14. Compared to a year ago, which of the following actions are you doing less frequently when engaging with vendors? (Select all that apply)

Response	Percentage
Responding to vendor outreach	67.6%
Filling out lead forms	46.1%
Looking on vendor websites	32.4%
None of the above	9.8%

15. What is the main reason you are less likely to engage with vendor marketing today?

Response	Percentage
Prefer to do my own research with tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, Perplexity, etc.	40.2%
Overwhelmed by vendor outreach	38.2%
Lack of differentiation in vendor offers (they all sound the same)	15.7%
Information on vendor sites is not easily accessible or helpful	5.9%

16. Compared to a year ago, where do you most often start vendor research?

Response	Percentage
AI platforms (ChatGPT, Perplexity, Gemini, etc.)	41.2%
Google	34.3%
Social / peer networks	18.6%
Directly on vendor websites	5.9%

17. What is the top reason you prefer using AI research assistants when evaluating vendors?

Response	Percentage
Faster access to answers and solutions	40.5%
More personalized recommendations based on my inputs	28.6%
Ability to have a conversational interaction and ask follow-up questions	19.0%
Less biased than vendor marketing materials	11.9%

18. When evaluating vendors, how much control do you prefer over the process?

Response	Percentage
I prefer a mix: independent research + vendor input when I request it	77.5%
I prefer self-service tools that let me research and compare on my own	19.6%
I prefer vendors to lead me through the evaluation process	2.9%

Appendix: Complete Survey Questions & Results

19. What frustrates you most about vendor research and outreach?

Response	Percentage
Information scattered across PDFs/ emails instead of one place	38.2%
Inability to get personalized or detailed answers to my questions	30.4%
Vendors don't provide enough detailed information	19.6%
Hard to involve my buying team in the process	6.9%
Other: none	1.0%
Other: When researching various products or services, in tight-budget times I often want to get a qu...	1.0%
Other: Most of the time vendors require a zoom or training demo and I prefer to evaluate on my own a...	1.0%
Other: I get a somewhat biased or altered truth of the real situation as vendors are more incentiviz...	1.0%
Other: Vendors expect a response when they cold email and are rude when they don't get one.	1.0%

20. Have you ever engaged with an AI SDR or chatbot during a vendor evaluation?

Response	Percentage
Yes, occasionally	49.0%
No	21.6%
Yes, frequently	20.6%
Not sure	8.8%

21. Which AI SDR experiences have you found most valuable?

Response	Percentage
Website chatbot for simple FAQs	40.8%
AI agent for research/analysis	31.0%
Scheduling calls with a human rep	21.1%
None – I don't find AI SDRs valuable	7.0%

22. What would make AI SDRs more valuable to you? (Select your top 2)

Response	Percentage
Ability to answer complex/technical questions	61%
Ability for agent to perform tasks (e.g., RFP, ROI analysis)	49%
Easier handoff to a human rep, Ability for agent to perform tasks (e.g., RFP, ROI analysis)	42%
More personalization, Ability for agent to perform tasks (e.g., RFP, ROI analysis)	41%

23. Which of the following would improve your vendor evaluation experience most?

Response	Percentage
A more unified experience from initial research through purchase and onboarding	34.3%
A centralized workspace that combines documents, demos, and discussions	29.4%
Fewer repetitive sales calls / less vendor outreach	25.5%
An easier way to store and share vendor research with my team	10.8%

Methodology

This report is based on a survey of 205 B2B professionals conducted by Emporia Research in September and October of 2025. The findings and recommendations are projected for 2026. The respondent pool consisted of 103 marketing and sales professionals and 102 professionals with purchasing responsibilities.

Citing This Research

SlateCX. (2026). The 2026 B2B Marketing Paradox: Why More AI Investment is Yielding Less Buyer Engagement. Retrieved from slatecx.com/2026-b2b-genai-report

About SlateCX: The Future of B2B Buyer Engagement

SlateCX enables B2B go-to-market teams to escape the 2026 marketing paradox. We replace spammy automation and fragmented experiences with a modern, AI-native way to engage, educate, and convert complex buying teams.

Our platform brings everything into persistent, AI-powered “slates” where buyers, their AI agents, and your revenue team can work together over time.

“Instead of forcing buyers to hunt through scattered PDFs and one-off demos, we give them a unified workspace to get the answers they need, when they need them.”

With SlateCX, marketing and sales leaders can:

Capability	What It Means for You
Turn content into a unified buyer workspace	Consolidate decks, videos, and ROI tools into a single structured hub for each account, eliminating information fragmentation.
Deploy a true digital concierge	Give buyers an agentic AI that can answer complex questions, synthesize content, compare options, and even help build business cases.
Experiment with removing forms	Use the AI Agent to collect prospect information at the ideal point in the conversation, not as a gate to content.
Get human sales reps into the conversation	The Slate Agent can invite a sales rep into the workspace after the prospect is qualified and will benefit from human engagement.
Support human + agent journeys	Make information easy for both humans and AI assistants to discover, interpret, and reuse through structured data and machine-readable surfaces.
Connect directly to your GTM stack	Integrate with platforms like HubSpot and other CRM/marketing systems to track engagement across buyers and their teams.

By combining persistent buyer workspaces, agentic AI, and deep go-to-market instrumentation, SlateCX helps B2B organizations escape the 2026 marketing paradox—replacing spammy automation and fragmented experiences with a modern, AI-native way to engage, educate, and convert complex buying teams. **For more information visit SlateCX.com**

