

The B2B Sales Process Handbook



Content

- 04 /** Introducing the B2B sales process
- 05 /** Why should you follow a B2B sales process?
- 06 /** The 8 stages of the B2B sales process
- 07 /** 1 – Research
- 08 /** 2 – Discovery
- 13 /** 3 – Qualification
- 15 /** 4 – Demonstration
- 20 /** 5 – Objection handling

25 / 6 - Closing

26 / 7 - Follow up

27 / 8 - Feedback

29 / Contact Cognism today



Introducing the B2B sales process

It's Monday morning.

That superstar SDR has booked a new meeting in your calendar.

"Ah, good," you say to yourself. "Time to sit back and relax."

...said no account exec, ever!

The best AEs know that if they want that meeting to succeed, then they have to get to work, straight away. They have to improve their knowledge. They have to get to know their prospect better.

They have to follow a process.

But what **is** that process?

We asked our business development team for their insights. How do they manage the hard job of **B2B sales**, from researching prospects to conducting demos and closing business?

They gave us their answers...and then we put them all together in this eBook.

We know that time is money in B2B sales, so we'll stop wasting yours.

Prepare yourself for the best biz dev guide you'll read this year.

Strap yourselves in, we're ready to launch!

Why should you follow a B2B sales process?

Most salespeople enjoy the freedom that comes with their role. The ability to bring their personality to every demo and adapt to changing conversations.

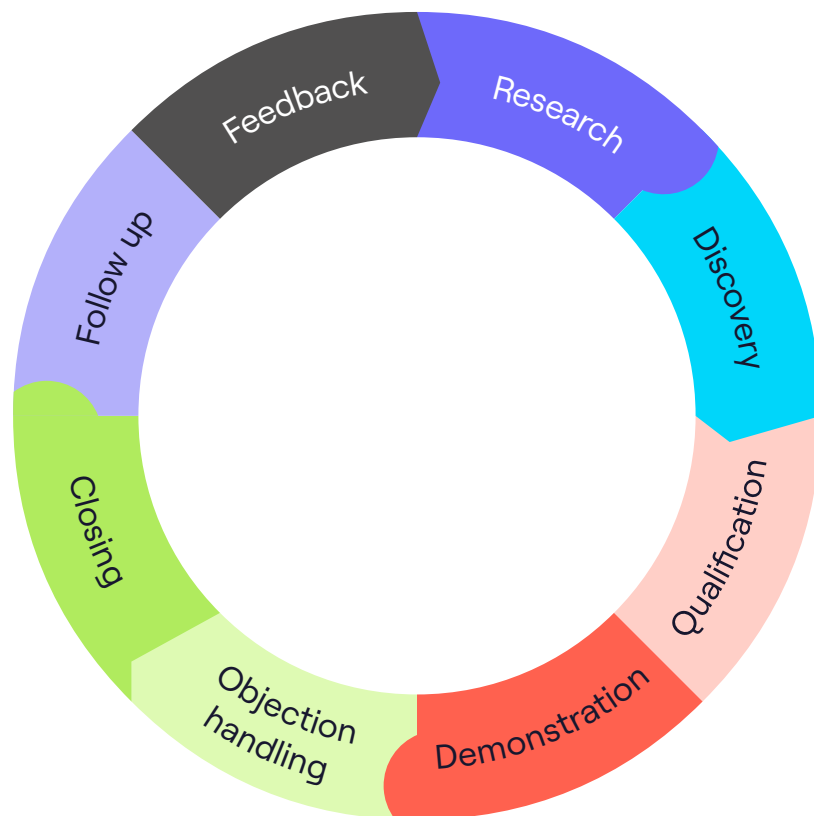
However, the best salespeople aren't artists - they're scientists. They use **B2B data** to form insights and optimise their work.

A B2B sales process provides a framework upon which a salesperson can improvise, while providing 4 additional benefits:



The 8 stages of the B2B sales process

What does the B2B sales process look like for Cognism's AEs? These are the 8 stages they follow:



Now it's time for the good stuff - let's explore each of the 8 stages in detail.

1 – Research

Here's a frightening statistic:

86% of B2B buyers say they see “no real difference between suppliers.”

With so much choice available to customers, it's more important than ever for AEs/BDMs to make a genuine connection with prospects and clearly display how their product can help change their lives.

Thorough research, before you run a demo, is your route to achieving this. This research phase can help you determine whether or not your product is a good fit for the buyer.

Follow these 3 steps:

STEP	Connect with the prospect on LinkedIn	Visit the company website	Read up on the latest industry news
ACTIVITIES	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Click onto their LinkedIn profile.• Check for articles/posts that they have commented on or shared.• Look over their career history and any personal milestones, e.g.: awards, event appearances.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Look for any news updates or recent press releases.• Scroll through the company's blog (if they have one).• Create a list of the technology that the company uses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Subscribe to industry news websites or LinkedIn groups.• Pay attention to industry trends, especially with emerging products/technology.

OUTCOME	Make a note of anything useful that will help you build rapport on your demo.	Make a note of recent company events/milestones and the language/terms the company uses.	With this knowledge, you will sound like an expert in their field - helping you to build trust with the prospect.
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“Research is a critical phase in the B2B sales process. You don’t want to waste time or appear unprepared by asking questions when the answers are readily available online. Also, if you can show the prospect that you’ve taken the time to research their business thoroughly, that will go a long way to establishing trust.”

Jonathan Ilett,
Sales Director, Cognism

2 – Discovery

2 more stats for you, courtesy of [Sales Benchmark Index](#):

- Demos conducted without discovery are 73% less successful than demos conducted with.
- Salespeople who tie their demos to specific pain points are 35% more likely to win a deal.

So, now you know how important discovery is. But what is it?

The purpose of discovery is to uncover your prospect’s existing processes and any pain points they may have. The idea is to start a conversation with

them and identify exactly how your product can fit into their current workflow and improve it.

The discovery phase can be conducted either over an exploratory “discovery call” before the demo is scheduled, or in the early stage of the demo itself.


If possible, we recommend having a discovery call with the prospect, separate from the demo. Our business development team shared the following steps.

Step 1 – Identify goals

When your discovery call starts, the first thing you need to do is identify goals. These are:

- The company’s short-term and long-term sales strategy goals.
- The prospect’s individual goals.

Ask the prospect questions that reveal this information. Their answers will be your basis for further discovery. Keep them in your mind as the call progresses. How will your product help the prospect and their company achieve these goals?



“It’s important to be precise. Focus on metrics and get percentages if possible. Establish quantity. For example, you can ask a question like: how much are you looking to increase your net new bookings? Then you can tie the prospect’s answers to the results that your product can deliver.”

Saif Khan
Senior Business Development Manager, Cognism

Step 2 – Identify pain points


The prospect has investigated your company because they have business challenges they want to overcome. For some, the pain they're feeling may be hard to define.

Guess what? It's the salesperson's role during the discovery call to explain their pain!

The best way of doing this is to ask open-ended questions about the prospect and their business. Get the prospect talking more and they'll soon realise what their own pain points are.

Open-ended questions are questions that don't require a simple "yes or "no" answer. Here are some examples, straight from the Cognism sales playbook:

- What was the reason for you joining me on this call today?
What prompted you to explore our solution?
- How big is your team?
- What are your core KPIs?
- Have you used a data provider before? If so, was it successful and why?
- What are the goals that your company is working towards?
- What's the biggest challenge your company is facing right now?
- What's prevented you from relieving this pain?
- What does success look like for your business?
- What technologies does your team currently use?
- What CRM do you use?
- What's the average sales cycle at your company?
- What's the relationship like between sales and marketing?
- Are you the decision-maker on a project like this?



“Identify 2-3 pain points that the prospect is experiencing. Check with them afterwards if you’ve understood correctly. Focus on the prospect’s tech stack – chances are, there’s a gap there that your product can fill.”


Nancy Newman
Associate Sales Director, Cognism

Step 3 – Tie everything together

This is the fun part!

Take the 2-3 pain points you’ve unearthed and connect them to a specific feature of your product. Now you’ve got a shortlist of features that you can explain to the prospect.

Show them how the features will produce benefits – linking the benefits to the goals you identified in Step 1. Tying everything together in this way will help you build up a strong business case.




“Don’t go through every one of your product’s features. The prospect is only interested in the parts that are relevant to them and their business.”

William Gay
Business Development Manager, Cognism

Step 4 – Recap and reaffirm

At the end of each stage of your discovery call, repeat what you've learned back to the prospect. Ask them if what you've discovered is correct.


Trust us, it's far from a pointless exercise – doing this means that they might divulge even more information that will help you!



“When your discovery call comes to an end, recommend the next step but let the prospect decide. It could be a follow-up email or going straight into booking a product demo. Always set exact timings for whatever the next step will be.”

Brahm Jagpal
Business Development Manager, Cognism

Bonus tip



“If you're conducting the call online (which is likely considering recent global events!) – always make sure the video is on! Being able to see each other will help you build rapport much quicker.”

Jonathan Ilett
Sales Director, Cognism

3 – Qualification

After discovering more about the prospect, it's time to qualify them. Are they ready to buy from you – yes or no?

Similar to discovery, this stage can be conducted on a separate sales call, or as part of the demo proper.

What is qualification?

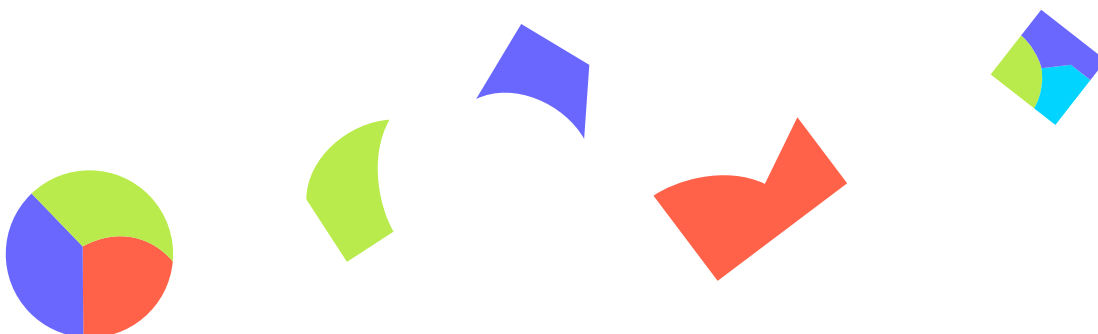
It's the process of evaluating whether a prospect is a good fit for your product or service. At the end of this stage, you should be in a position to judge if the prospect is ready to progress to a demo or pitch.

Why is qualification important?

You know as well as we do – all salespeople are fighting against the clock.

You've got targets to hit and a finite amount of time in which to hit them. You don't want to be wasting your time on a prospect that isn't a serious contender for making a purchase.

This is why qualification is important – it saves you time and means that you can quickly see if the prospect is a good candidate to be progressed to the demo stage.



How can you qualify correctly?

At Cognism, we teach our biz dev team to qualify new leads according to the BANT criteria:



All of the questions our BDMs ask during qualification are based around these 4 areas.

Use open-ended questions to get the prospect talking. These are questions that don't elicit a 'yes' or 'no' response. They help to get a conversation going. The more information you get from the prospect, the easier it is to qualify them.

Sample questions include:

- What does your current sales strategy look like?
- How does your sales team generate new leads?
- Who would normally be involved in buying decisions for new tech?
- What tools are you currently using?
- What regions are you looking to prospect into?
- What competitors have you investigated in the past?
- What did you like about them? What did you dislike?
- What are your current business growth goals?
- Are you in a position to take on new clients right now?



4 – Demonstration

You’ve discovered more about the prospect and their pain. You’ve qualified them as a good fit for your product. The next step is all about presenting your product in a way that satisfies and alleviates their pain.

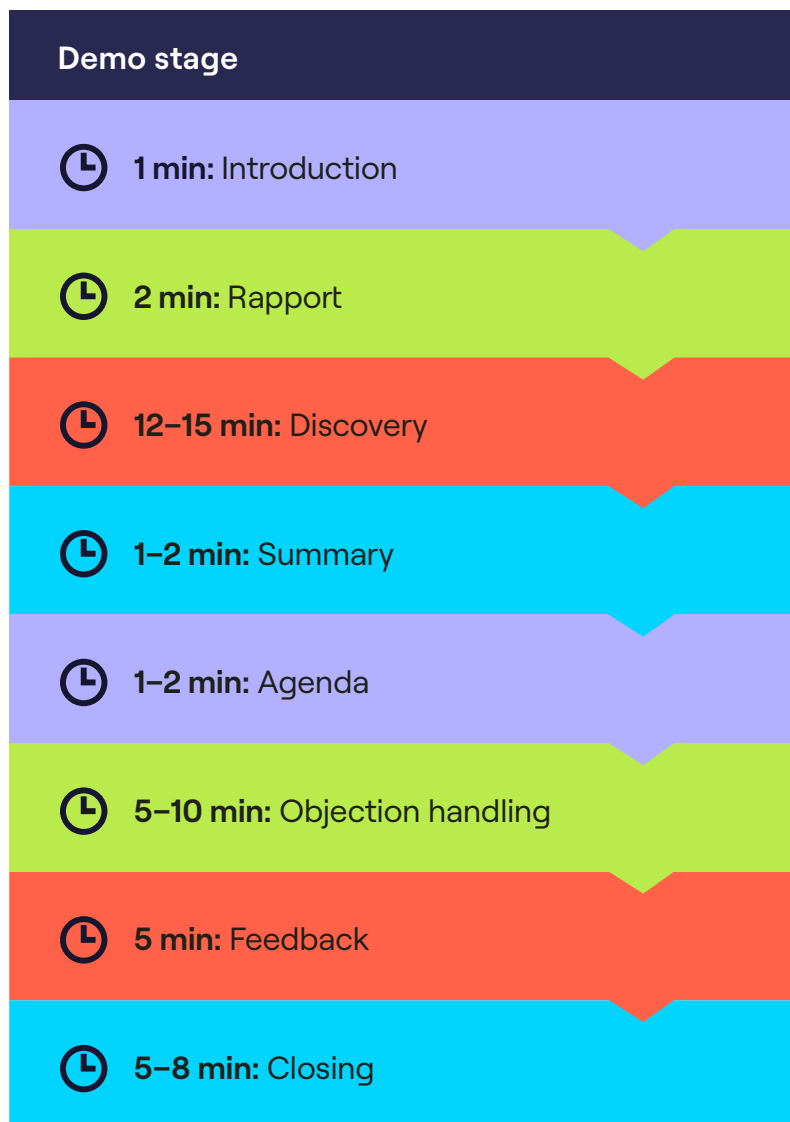
This is the demonstration stage.

Demo structure

We've found that most demos last between 30 and 45 minutes. Having a good structure in place means you can keep your eye on the clock. You don't want to run out of time before you get to the most essential parts.

This is how we structure our demos at Cognism. Our BDMs weave each section together, creating a single narrative.

The narrative is that your product can solve the prospect's pain.



Demo notes

Our advice is to take notes during your demo. If you don't, you will forget key points!

Cognism's BDMs use this template for their demo note-taking. Adapt it for your own company's needs/USP.

Company overview	Brief description of the prospect's company, its industry and size.
Ideal customer profile	The industries and job titles that the prospect's company targets.
Current process	How the prospect's company generates new business.
Tech stack	The main tools used by the prospect's team.
Key hook	What are they looking to get out of using the product?
Rapport	Personalised notes/information that could be useful in follow-ups.

Introduction and rapport

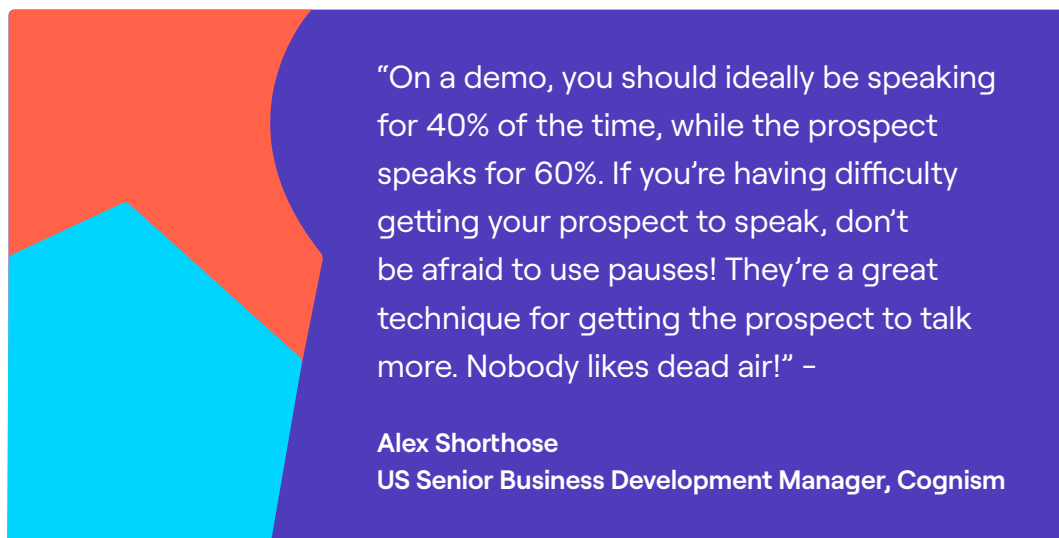
While the introduction and rapport sections should be short and sweet, they are still important. While you want to focus on getting to the next stage quickly, you need to build your narrative straight from the kick-off. It's not about making a sale; it's about selling a future state.

Think back to the 3 steps from the Research stage. What did you find out about your prospect? Have they recently won an award, for example, or been featured in an industry publication? Use the intel you have on them to build rapport.

Mirroring is a great technique for rapport-building. It's often taught to cold callers but can be just as effective for AEs. Here's how it works:

- Listen carefully to how the prospect speaks and the words they use.
 - Then, imitate the way they talk, using the same words or phrases.
- Mirroring is a great technique for rapport-building. It's often taught to cold callers but can be just as effective for AEs. Here's how it works:

This tactic has been proven to increase the odds of being "accepted" by the person you're talking to. It relaxes the prospect and makes them feel more comfortable talking to you.




"On a demo, you should ideally be speaking for 40% of the time, while the prospect speaks for 60%. If you're having difficulty getting your prospect to speak, don't be afraid to use pauses! They're a great technique for getting the prospect to talk more. Nobody likes dead air!" –

Alex Shorthose
US Senior Business Development Manager, Cognism

Discovery

If you haven't arranged a separate discovery call, then this is the stage of your demo where you should conduct discovery.

Go back to Stage 2 for our advice on how to handle this. The one thing we will say is: **discovery is where deals are won or lost**. Take special care in mastering this phase of the B2B sales process.



“Focus on 3 or 4 problems your prospect may be facing. Too few and your prospect won’t believe that you care; too many and you’ll lose focus on your priorities.”

Richard Murphy
US Senior Business Development Manager, Cognism

Summary

Use this section to demonstrate that you were listening to the prospect’s concerns. You have to show that you understand their pain points. Repeat the prospect’s pain points back to them and ask them if you have it right.

Doing this is a great method for building credibility and trust with the prospect.

Agenda

With this section, set a flow or expectation of what you intend to discuss next. Tell the prospect the features that you would like to show them - but allow them the chance to add to the agenda, if they wish.



5 – Objection handling

At this stage of the B2B sales process, you'll start demonstrating some product features. Naturally, the prospect will have some objections.

As we mentioned earlier, Cognism uses the BANT methodology to qualify leads. Most objections you'll encounter will also conform to the 4 pillars of BANT.

This is how you handle them.

Budget – “I don't have the money to buy.”

First, find out more about the reasons behind the objection.

Is it genuinely that the price is too high, or is it that the prospect doesn't see the value of your product for the price they'll have to pay?

If it's that the price is too high, emphasise the value of your product or what makes you different from the competition.

If they don't see the value, explain how your product will change their life for the better! This could be anything from saving them time or money, or helping them to **generate leads** and revenue. You have to give the prospect a compelling reason to buy from you.

A compelling reason needn't necessarily be based around pricing or cost. It could be anything from certain product features, the level of customer service that your company provides, or customer reviews.

Don't discount

After all that, if the prospect still has an objection... try to avoid the temptation of going straight to discounting. Doing this can all too quickly devalue your product. If the prospect has a pricing objection, there are other things you can suggest instead of taking money off.

Perhaps consider bespoke payment terms that help spread the cost of investment, without reducing the overall price.

Use case studies and testimonials

Another strategy for resolving a pricing issue is to bring up some of your company's success stories. Prove that other organisations are achieving results with your platform and that the expenditure is worth it.

Mention some satisfied customers who work in the same industry as your prospect (this is a **very** important point - whichever customers you mention, they must be relevant to the prospect).

Always have some suitable case studies and testimonials to hand during your demos.

Authority – “I’ll have to speak to my boss about this before deciding.”

To handle this objection, start by confirming what the prospect's concerns are. Maybe you can provide some information that will stop them from referring their query upwards.

If you play this right, you can turn the prospect into a champion for your product. They can help you get the buy-in you'll need from the ultimate decision maker.

If that doesn't work, and a third party has to be involved, stay calm. Simply arrange a time to speak with them and book it in your diary.

Need – “We really don't need your product right now.”

With this objection, you need to get to the root of the problem. What's stopping them from buying?

It may be that the prospect loves certain product features, but not others. It may be that they just can't see (yet!) how your product will help them.

Two things will assist you here: data and content.

Data

Provide the prospect with some data that displays the difference your product can make. We recommend pulling 2-3 stats or facts to use on your demo.

Before using them, check that the stats you've chosen are relevant to the prospect's industry or business. There's no value in sharing sales statistics with a marketer, for instance, or giving revenue growth data from your enterprise clients to a startup.

Content

Make use of the materials produced by your marketing team (if you have one!).

Come prepared to the demo with a couple of appropriate customer case studies. If the prospect has a couple of very specific questions, maybe you can direct them to a blog or two on your company website.

Keep up to date with the content your business is publishing and utilise it in your objection handling. If you're encountering objections that your company's content can't solve, then suggest scheduling in a regular meeting between sales and marketing. Share your ideas with the marketing team, so that they're producing content that moves the needle.

Timing – “It’s not the right time for us to buy.”

How you handle this objection all boils down to the prospect's reason for delaying. But whatever their reason is, the most important thing to do is to create a sense of urgency.

Remind the prospect of the costs of not buying your product now.

This is where all the research and information you've gained during the early stages of the process will come in handy.

Use what you've learned to turn the objection on its head.

Here are a few common scenarios from Cognism's business development playbook:

Scenario	Action
The prospect's company is launching a new product or initiative.	Your product can help them achieve their goals.
The prospect's company has recently acquired funding.	Your product is a wise investment and can take their business to the next level.

The prospect has only recently joined the company.	Your product can help them to achieve great results and make a big impression early on.
The prospect's company had a bad quarter.	Your product will help them to turn their fortunes around.
The prospect has to wait for an incoming hire with ultimate decision-making power.	Your product will enable the decision-maker to become even better at their job once they arrive.

Key takeaway

The trick is to turn each disadvantage into an advantage.

The bottom line is - investigate each objection, ask searching questions, uncover the reason behind each one - and then use the information to handle them effectively.

“My number one objection handling tip? Answer the prospect’s most urgent objection first.”

“The reason for this is, once you’ve resolved that, it makes answering all the other, less troublesome objections much easier. You’ve shown that you can be trusted and it will make the prospect feel much more certain that you have the solutions they’re looking for.”

Jonathan Ilett
Sales Director, Cognism

6 – Closing


This stage of the B2B sales process should be the most exciting part for the prospect.

You've demonstrated the value of your product, handled all of their objections, and convinced the prospect that your solution is an investment which can't be passed up on.

Discuss prices and negotiate if necessary. Offering some free added value to the deal can help get it over the line.

Also, be sure to discuss all of the remaining steps before the demo ends. Confirm if there are any other stakeholders who need to sign-off on the deal. This will ensure that there are no surprising bumps along the way.

Now the signed contract will be in sight!



“If there are other stakeholders involved in the decision, and other hoops (legal, IT or procurement etc.), talk about them at this point.”

“But above all, get the prospect excited. Make them look forward to using your product.

After all, you've just shown them how it will make their problems disappear!”

Catherine Gardner
Business Development Manager, Cognism

7 – Follow up

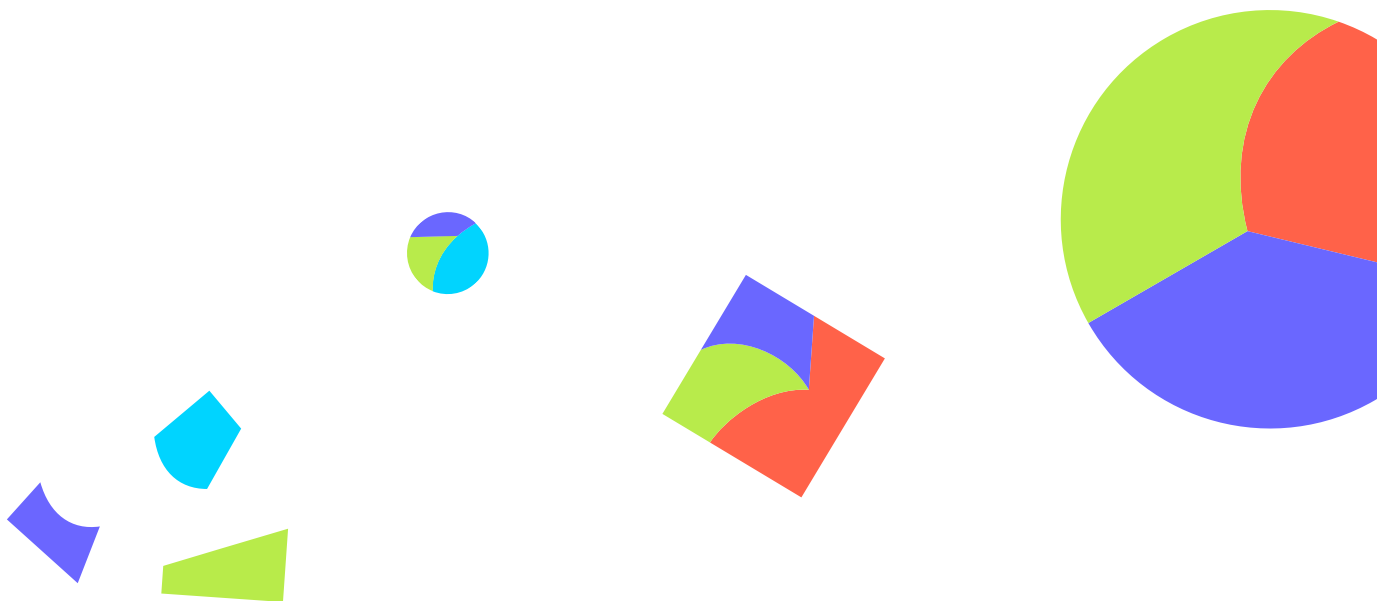
Congratulations! You've just signed a new customer. But wait – the B2B sales process isn't over quite yet...

As soon as the call ends, start formatting your demo notes. Include all the key points you discussed and the agreed next steps. Arrange your notes in a way that works for you and makes it easy to scan for the important information.

Then, your next task is to compose a follow-up email.

The message should document everything you and the prospect discussed. Here's what a good follow-up email should contain:

- How much you enjoyed showing them your product – keep building that rapport, even at this stage!
- The key points of what you talked about (if possible, include a recording of your demo).
- Clear and concise next steps and timelines for completion.
- Include any extra information at the end of the email.





“Write your follow-up as if it’s going to be read by multiple people. Chances are, it will – on average, there are **7 people involved** in any B2B buying decision!”

“Make it clear, detailed, well-thought-out and professionally written (no grammar errors, no typos).”

Alex Shorthose
US Senior Business Development Manager, Cognism

8 – Feedback

This is the final step in the B2B sales process, and it happens after the prospect becomes a customer.

Give your new customer some time to get to grips with your product and see the value of it. Then, check in with them and ask them for their feedback.


This is the post-sales questionnaire that our BDMs send to new clients:

- Which words would you use to describe our product?
- How well does our product meet your needs?
- Which 3 features are the most valuable to you?
- What are the 3 most important features we’re missing?
- If you could change just one thing about our product, what would it be?
- How would you rate the value for money of our product?

- How did using our product compare to your expectations?
- Compared to our competitors, is our product better, worse, or about the same?
- Why did you choose our product rather than a competitor's?
- On a scale from 0 to 10, how likely are you to recommend our company to others?
- What would you say to someone who asked about us?

The insights you gain from customer feedback can be invaluable. It impacts 4 key areas of the business:

- **Improving the sales process** – it demonstrates which features are highly prized by customers.
- **Sharpening marketing messaging** – it gives the marketing team fresh insights into how the product is perceived.
- **Proposes product upgrades** – it highlights which features need to be enhanced or revamped.
- **Establishes industry positioning** – it gives you a much better idea of where your business sits in the market.



“If the customer’s feedback says that they’ve been enjoying the product, ask them for a case study or referral. This might give you a great new lead to restart the B2B sales process with!”

Jonathan Ilett
Sales Director, Cognism

Contact Cognism today

So there you have it - the 8 stages of the B2B sales process, explained!

Did you get value from our handbook? If your answer's yes, connect with us on our social media. We'd love to hear your feedback.



Cognism is the world's best **B2B prospecting solution**. Our data and tools can help your sales team to:

- Save time.
- Find new customers quickly.
- Enable faster, more accurate outreach.
- Simplify workflows.

...And do all this while being 100% compliant.

Want to book a demo with us? Simply click the button below. We're looking forward to starting the B2B sales process with you!

[Request your demo today](#)

