



AI won't close your deal

Enterprise sales in the AI era will still be won by trust, insight, and the human ability to solve real problems

A perspective from 26 years of selling technology to Indian enterprises

There's a conversation happening in every boardroom right now. It goes something like this: AI is transforming everything, including how we sell. SDRs will be replaced. Pipelines will be automated. The enterprise sales cycle will collapse from 18 months to 18 days.

I've spent 26 years in enterprise sales across Nokia, HPE, Oracle, Ericsson, and others — and I want to push back on this narrative. Not because AI isn't powerful. It is. But because the conversation fundamentally misunderstands what enterprise selling actually is, especially in India.

The misconception

The prevailing wisdom — coming mostly from Silicon Valley and its echo chambers — is that AI will dis-intermediate the enterprise salesperson. That generative AI will write the emails, qualify the leads, score the opportunities, and eventually negotiate the terms. The human becomes optional.

This might work in markets where enterprise buying is transactional. Where a CIO reads a whitepaper, books a demo, runs a POC, and signs a contract in 90 days.

India doesn't work that way. It has never worked that way. And I'd argue it shouldn't.

What India's enterprise ecosystem actually looks like

When I was leading business development across APJ and MEA, the deals that mattered — the ones worth crores, the ones that defined market position — never followed a linear funnel. They followed a web of relationships, timing, institutional politics, and trust built over quarters, not calls and most important unearthing the unbearable pain which drives customers to buy.

Consider what a typical enterprise deal in India actually involves:

A buying committee of 5 to 15 stakeholders, many of whom have competing priorities. A procurement process that intersects with government policy, compliance requirements, and sometimes political cycles. Channel partners and system integrators who control 60 to 80 percent of the revenue flow. And a timeline measured not in weeks but in years.

No AI agent is navigating that. Not today, not in five years, and likely not in ten.

What AI can do — and this matters — is handle the work that was never the hard part to begin with.

Where AI genuinely changes the game

I've watched enterprise sales evolve through several technology waves — CRM in the early 2000s, marketing automation, sales enablement platforms, intent data tools. Each one promised to transform selling. Each one improved efficiency at the margins. None of them changed the fundamental nature of how large deals get done.

AI is different in degree but not in kind. Here's where I see it making a real impact in Indian enterprise sales:

Research at scale. The hardest part of entering a new sector isn't the pitch — it's understanding the ecosystem. Who are the decision-makers at a government PSU? What's the procurement rhythm? Which system integrators have the incumbent relationship? AI can compress weeks of ecosystem mapping into hours. That's genuinely valuable.

Document preparation. Proposals, RFP responses, compliance documentation — these are time sinks that pull senior salespeople away from relationship work. AI handles first drafts exceptionally well. A proposal that took three days now takes three hours, with the salesperson focusing on customisation and strategic positioning rather than formatting.

Pattern recognition in pipeline. Across a large enough deal portfolio, AI can identify which opportunities are stalling, which stakeholders haven't been engaged, and which competitive signals suggest a shift in direction. This is useful operational intelligence — not a replacement for judgment, but a supplement to it.

Meeting intelligence. Transcription, action item extraction, and relationship mapping from conversation data. When you're juggling 15 stakeholders across a two-year pursuit, having an AI that remembers who said what in the meeting eight months ago is a genuine advantage.

But notice what all of these have in common: they make the human salesperson more effective. They don't replace the human. They give them leverage.

What AI cannot do in India

Here's where I get direct, because this is the part most people skip.

AI cannot build the trust that makes a CXO take your call. Trust in India's enterprise ecosystem is personal, accumulated, and deeply contextual. It's built over dinners, industry events, years of delivering on smaller commitments, and a reputation that travels through networks you can't map in a CRM.

AI cannot navigate committee politics. Knowing that the CFO and CIO disagree on vendor selection — and understanding why, and knowing which relationship to activate to bridge that gap — is judgment work. It requires reading rooms, sensing hesitation, and knowing when to push and when to wait.

AI cannot sequence a deal over 18 months. The art of enterprise selling in India is pacing. Knowing when to present, when to go silent, when to bring in the channel partner, when to escalate to CXO level. This choreography is learned through decades of pattern recognition that isn't available in any training dataset.

And AI certainly cannot provide the guarantee of personal accountability that Indian enterprise buyers demand. When a BFSI CXO signs a multi-crore deal, they're not betting on a product. They're betting on the person across the table. Will this person be here when implementation gets difficult? Will they pick up the phone at midnight when production goes down? That's a human covenant.

The real transformation: AI-augmented enterprise selling

The firms that will win India's enterprise market in the next decade aren't the ones replacing their sales teams with AI. They're the ones giving their best salespeople AI leverage.

Here's what this looks like in practice:

A senior enterprise salesperson who previously managed 8 to 10 active pursuits can now manage 15 to 20, because AI handles the research, document prep, and pipeline monitoring that used to consume 40 percent of their time.

A partner ecosystem that was mapped manually — through spreadsheets, memory, and relationship tracking across dozens of people — is now mapped dynamically, with AI surfacing which partners are active in which deals and where there are gaps.

A deal review that used to rely on the salesperson's narrative ("the deal is going well") is now supplemented by data: stakeholder engagement frequency, competitive mention analysis, and procurement stage tracking. The judgment is still the salesperson's. The information is richer.

This is the model I believe in. Not AI-led sales. AI-augmented sales. The human leads. The machine serves.

A note to international companies entering India

If you're a global technology company looking at India's enterprise market, here's the honest truth: AI won't solve your India problem.

Your India problem is not an efficiency problem. It's a relationship, trust, and institutional knowledge problem. AI tools are useful — deploy them. But before you invest in sales automation, invest in the person. Find someone who has the relationships, understands the committee dynamics, knows the procurement rhythms, and has the patience for an 18-month cycle.

Then give that person AI tools and watch them operate at a level that wasn't possible five years ago.

That combination — human depth plus AI leverage — is the future of enterprise sales in India. Not the replacement of one with the other.

What I'm watching

India's enterprise AI landscape is moving fast. Nearly half of Indian enterprises now have multiple AI use cases in production. The shift from pilots to scaled deployment is real. And the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi earlier this year, with 251,000 visitors and commitments to expand GPU capacity to 58,000 units, signalled that India is serious about building sovereign AI infrastructure.

For enterprise sellers, this means your buyers are becoming more sophisticated. They understand AI. They're deploying it internally. They expect their vendors to be at least as advanced. Walking into a CXO meeting without AI-augmented preparation will soon feel like walking in without a slide deck.

But here's what won't change: the CXO still wants to look you in the eye. They still want to know you'll be in the room when it matters. They still want to trust the person before they trust the product.

India has always understood this. The rest of the world is only now catching up.

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