



Elevating the buyer experience in industrial B2B

How to create a buyer experience that matters



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Industrials' "buyer experience (BX) dilemma"

A striking 88% of the more than 3,400 C-suite leaders who participated in our [Pulse of Change Index](#) told us they anticipated that the rate of change in 2024 would exceed that of 2023. They were right; it did. **The problem is that more than half (52%) also told us they were not fully prepared to respond to such rapid change, and that assessment is also proving true.**

As we move through the calendar year, competition in the B2B industrial landscape has intensified and growth is proving elusive. Changing customer needs have further unbalanced this equation, leading to a growing demand for reinvention of traditional sales channels and tools.

Against this backdrop, positive buyer experiences (BXs) can make a critical difference. Meeting and exceeding customer expectations at scale can increase win rates, boost retention and enhance customer value and sales efficiency, ultimately driving business growth.

To deliver those experiences, however, many (if not most) industrials have a lot of ground to cover. For example, legacy technology systems and tight budgets are keeping most from taking full advantage of today's technologies. Adopting generative AI (gen AI)-powered tools at scale and using them effectively in complex processes is still a blip of an idea on the horizon.

Even efforts to replicate practices that have worked well for B2C-focused industries, such as digital self-service tools, have not reaped significant dividends in the B2B world. They help mitigate some challenges, such as staff shortages, but they fall well short of delivering a fulfilling BX.

Critically, as one of our respondents told us, the problems are often quite basic: *"Oftentimes specific products are not available or not offered in the (online) configurator options. Also, the configurators do not always have the most accurate data listed there. So, oftentimes they are not useful for us."*

Industrial companies have been here before. A decade ago, in fact an [Accenture survey](#) made a startling discovery: 76% of industrial B2B companies were wasting half of their investments on ineffective buyer experience (BX) initiatives. Many companies made notable progress in the years that followed. But now, the game has changed.

And the bottom line is this: today's solutions are delivering on yesterday's expectations. **And that means the industrial B2B buying journey is ripe for reinvention.**

An enormous opportunity

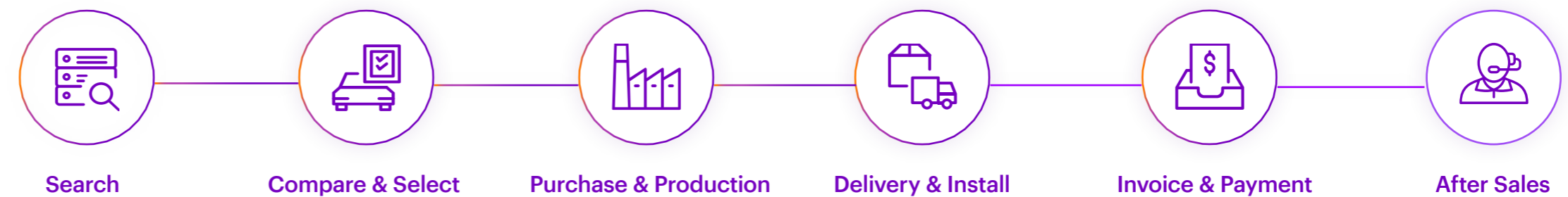
In fact, an enormous opportunity for B2B industrial companies is there for the taking. Reinventing the BX today will be key to leading tomorrow. Our research has revealed over 1,600 customer pain points along the B2B buying process. (See the sidebar, “How we studied the buyer journey,” for more details on our method.) So executives need to consider their customers’ experiences afresh, and start from there. The stakes are high, but the good news is that industrial leaders understand the urgent need to develop better B2B buying experiences and are willing to do what it takes to deliver.

How we studied the buyer journey

To better understand what needs to change (and how to make those changes), we studied the complexities of the B2B buyer experience afresh, first articulating the six distinct steps that make up a buyer’s journey. (See Figure 1.) As B2B executives know well, their customers’ buying journeys are generally far lengthier and more complex than those of a B2C business. They often require continuous interaction with multiple services and sales touchpoints.

Figure 1

The essential B2B buying journey



Source: Accenture 2024



Moreover, the services and products themselves are technical, highly customized and often bundled to meet specific customer needs. So for additional clarity, we articulated two distinct buying journeys: 1) purchasing standardized industrial components, and 2) purchasing an industrial machine bundled with a service contract (which we call “purchasing a solution”). (See box.)

We also considered the varying roles of each buyer involved, identifying four specific buyer roles for each buying journey. (See Figure 2.) In total, we interviewed 72 industrial buyers across Germany, the US and China, representing all roles across both types of journeys. Our goal was to gather as much information as possible about the buyer experience across the entire buying journey. We identified over 600 issue statements that yielded 1,600 pain points. We mapped these pain points to drivers of exceptional BX.

Two distinct B2B buying journeys

The “product-buying journey” focuses on standardized industrial components sold as individual units. These products are integrated into machines or systems and require precise specifications to achieve specific outcomes within the system. Think of valves, actuators or electric motors.

The “solution-buying journey” centers around purchasing bundles of capital equipment and related services such as maintenance and repair, overhaul, spare parts, upgrades, training and performance monitoring. Or, simply purchasing the services. Think of a metal press with an extended warranty bundle or a laser cutter which is offered in an as-a-service model.

Figure 2

Two buying journeys, four roles (three in common and one unique to each journey)

Common Roles in the Product- and Solution-Buying Journeys

1. Procurement



Roles such as procurement managers or senior buyers, who manage product purchases, evaluate suppliers based on quality and cost and oversee contracts and delivery to optimize procurement outcomes, evaluates suppliers based on quality and cost, and oversees contracts and delivery to optimize procurement outcomes

2. Functional



Roles such as production or engineering managers, who add technical expertise to the procurement process, ensuring products meet production requirements and quality standards through close collaboration with suppliers

3. Quality



Roles such as quality managers, who oversee quality control processes, ensuring products meet regulatory and company standards through rigorous testing and risk management

Journey-Specific Roles

4.1 Technical Engineer (Product Journey)



Roles such as maintenance or technical managers, who ensure production efficiency through product maintenance and upgrades

4.2 Project Manager (Solution Journey)



Roles such as production system managers who oversee the lifecycle of industrial equipment and services, focusing on meeting project goals and technical requirements

Source: Accenture 2024

What drives or derails the deal?

Our expert interviews confirmed **six main drivers** that make for an exceptional BX. These drivers (see box) aren't and shouldn't be surprising. Similarly, it's no surprise that the relative importance of each driver may vary by the buyer's role. For example, convenience is crucial for Procurement, since individuals in this role frequently interact with suppliers to gather extensive information to address their colleagues' product-related questions. On the other hand, it is quite clear that quality is paramount for buyers in the Quality role.

And when we analyzed the 1,600 pain points we identified that could compromise these key drivers, we found that 85% were **"behavioral."** That is, they relate to the buyer's interactions with a company's people and tools and are usually linked to drivers such as reliability, convenience, transparency, responsiveness and proactivity.

The rest were **"non-behavioral"**, which were related to concerns over product or solution quality. Accordingly, these largely affected the quality driver.

Both are critical to the buyer experience. As one respondent told us, *"Initially, services and solutions were secondary considerations, but over time, they have become a crucial strategic pillar for the company. Ultimately, it's the service that sells the second machine."*

A closer look at each type of pain point reveals specific opportunities for improvement and, critically, differentiation. Let's consider both types in the context of the two buyer journeys, beginning with the less complicated product-buying journey.

The six main drivers of exceptional BX

Reliability: The consistency and dependability of a supplier, indicating that they can be trusted to deliver as promised.

Quality: The standard or grade of a product or service, where high quality is often associated with durability, performance and satisfaction.

Convenience: The ease and simplicity with which a customer can interact with the supplier, navigate processes or use offerings.

Transparency: The openness and honesty of a supplier about product features, service scope, pricing and risks to foster trust and confidence.

Responsiveness: The speed and effectiveness of a supplier in responding to customer inquiries or issues.

Proactivity: The extent to which a supplier correctly identifies customer needs and then reaches out with solutions before the customer asks for any.

Opportunities for improving the product-buying journey

This buying journey, while more straightforward than the solution-buying journey, accounted for nearly two-thirds of BX-related pain points. That may sound daunting, but as our research showed, it also makes for bigger targets for improvement.

For example, one of the most direct ways to improve the product-buying journey is to focus efforts on buyers in functional roles. These professionals had encountered most (45%) of the pain points reported, which, when you think about it, makes sense. They oversee entire production lines. They're responsible for maximizing productivity and operational equipment efficiency, while minimizing costs. So any work done to improve the experience of buyers should have significant, positive ripple effects.

Another broad focus area: behavioral pain points. Across buyer roles, the highest

number of pain points arose from problems with reliability (35%) and convenience (30%).

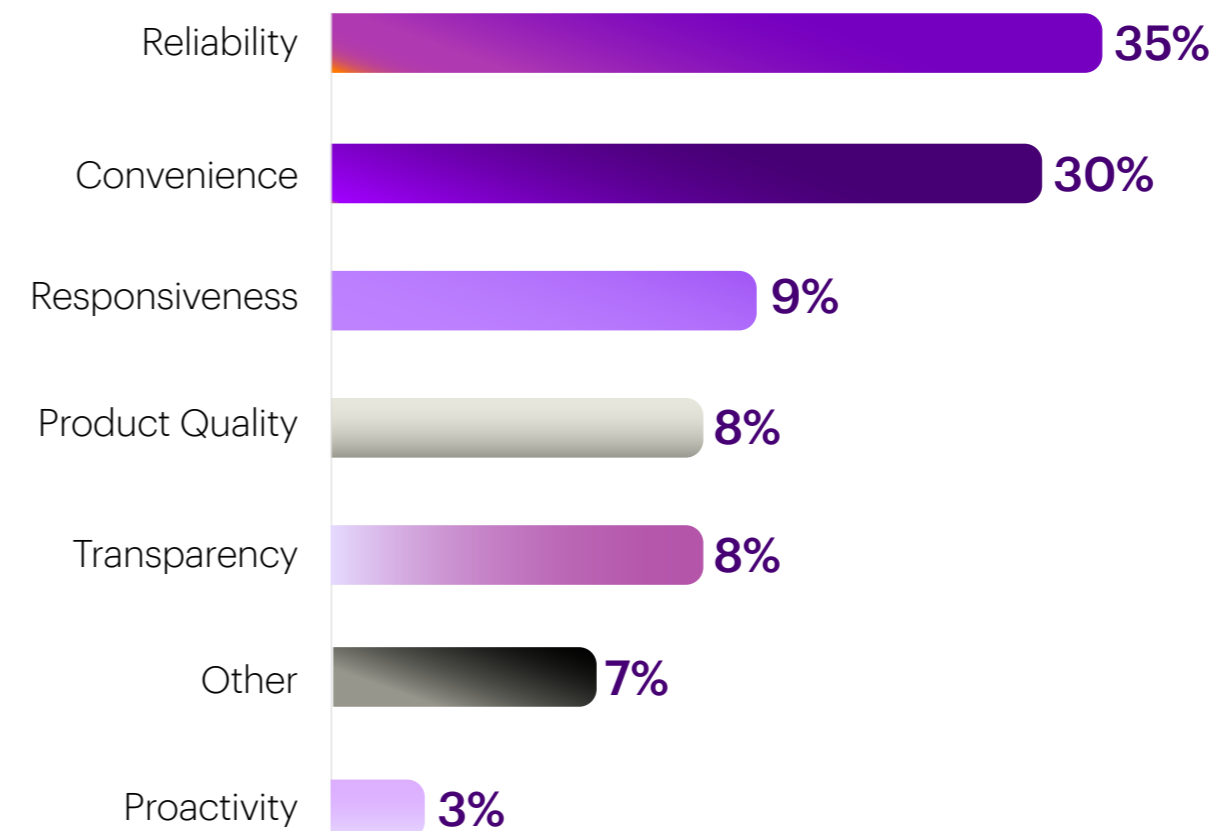
On this topic, one of our interviewees shared a personal experience as an example of the importance of meeting or exceeding customer expectations, even on inconsequential things: *"[I] pulled data sheets from the website of a major global supplier and then I found out that the data was two revisions old. So, I had to reach out them directly to get the correct information."*

A simple data sheet snafu turned the opportunity for a convenient, seamless experience into one of manual follow-up, delay and frustration.

Our analysis of the other drivers revealed significantly fewer problems, as [Figure 3](#) shows. Nonetheless, even minor areas of friction reveal opportunities for improvement.

Figure 3

Product-buying journey—pain points by BX driver



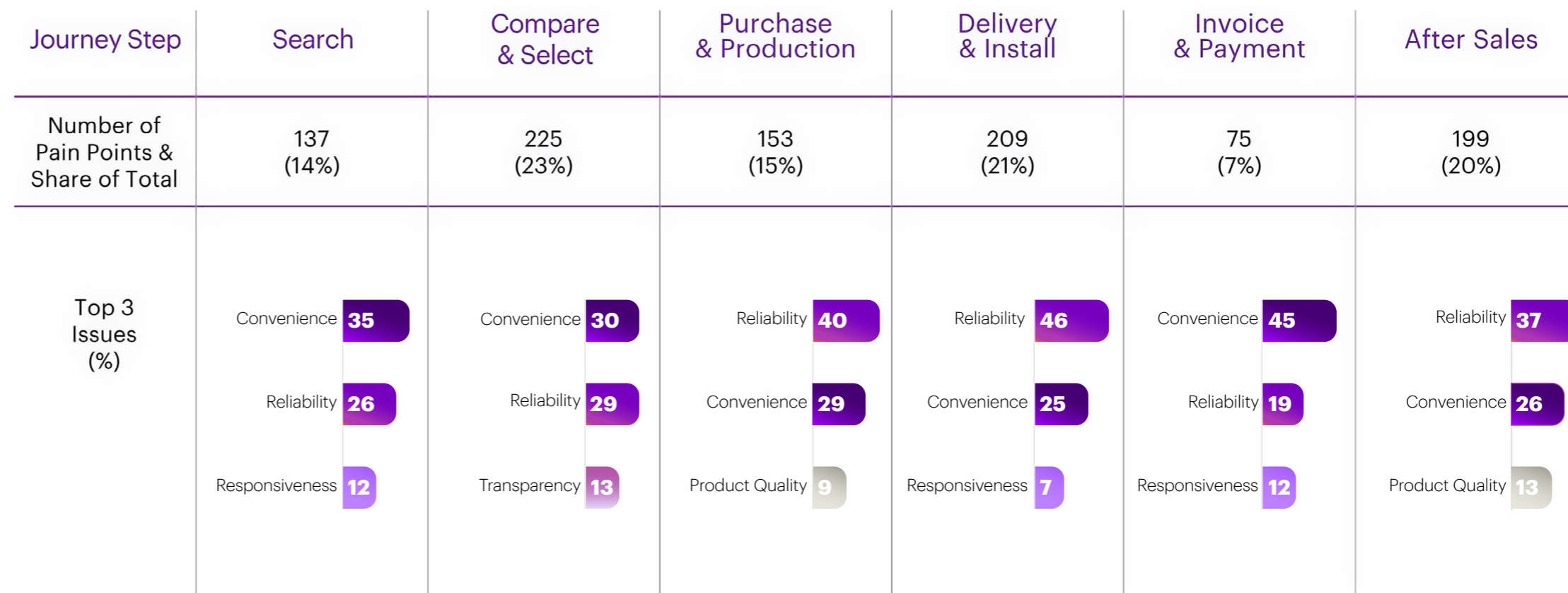
Source: Accenture 2024

Another way to do this would be to analyze the steps where much of the dissatisfaction originates. All our buyers expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with the first three steps of the buying journey: searching for information, comparing and selecting products and services and then completing the purchase order. All three of these steps have digital tools that companies and customers expect would improve BX. In practice, however, buyers report that they often find them difficult to use, expensive to integrate and/or fraught with technical problems. These three steps together account for almost two-thirds (64%) of all pain points in the product-buying journey. (See Figure 4.)

As one buyer noted: *"Depending on where you are in the food chain, the very large companies can easily expect us to work on their portals. Unfortunately, these portals are complex, and it is difficult to integrate them into our own systems. Therefore, we often have to forego this integration, as the additional costs are not in relation to the purchasing relevance."*

Figure 4

Product-buying journey—pain points by BX driver and journey step



Source: Accenture 2024

Opportunities for improving the solution-buying journey

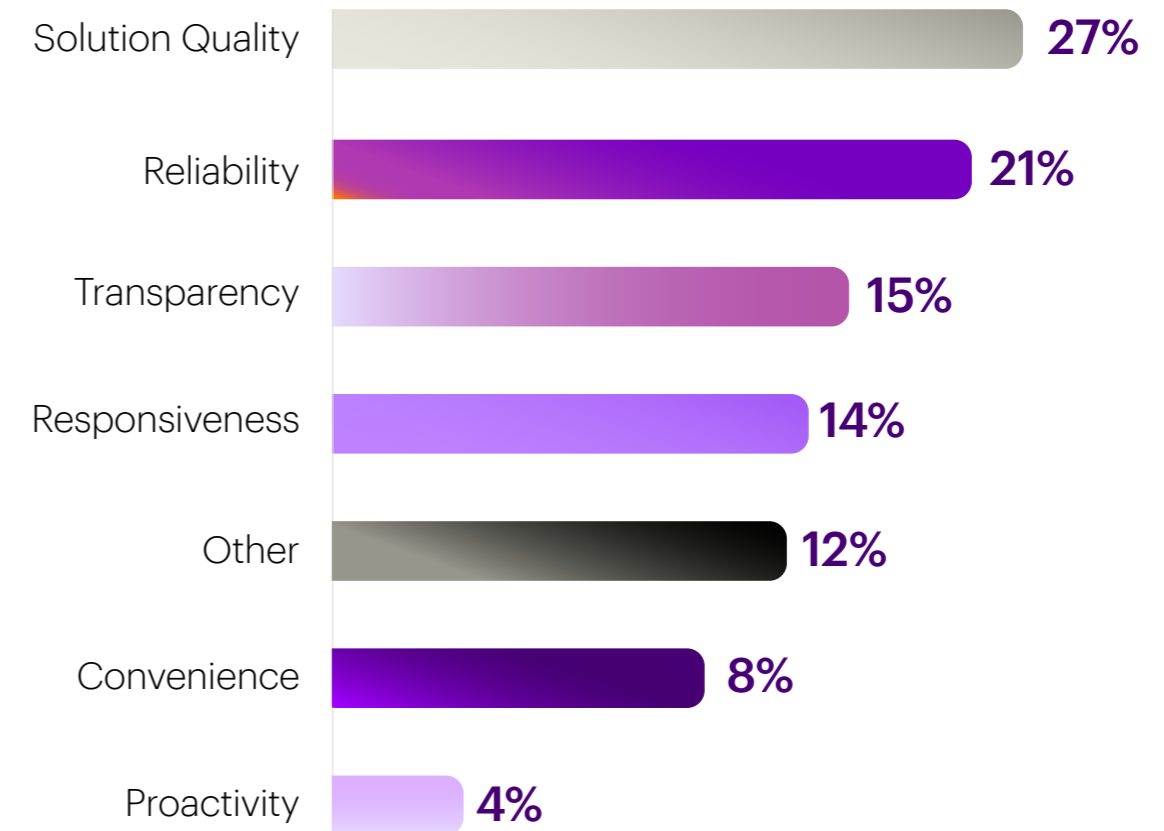
As with the product-buying journey, functional and quality managers—those with broad remits—were the most affected categories, reporting 72% of the pain points we identified in this journey. So again, they provide a significant target for improvement efforts.

But overall, the participants in our study encountered only about half the number of pain points than they did for the product-buying journey. In part, we believe this may be because they enter the process with lower expectations. As our interviews revealed, buyers anticipate that they will encounter issues when buying complex machinery and service solutions far more so than when they're buying a standard component or product.

The most prominent non-behavioral issue they encountered was quality, which accounted for 27% of all pain points and caused significant frustration, particularly when it came to service delivery and fulfillment. Among behavioral drivers, reliability (21%) and transparency (15%) stood out as significant contributors to a poor BX. (See Figure 5.)

Figure 5

Solution-buying journey—pain points by BX driver



Source: Accenture 2024

Notably, across all buying steps, “Aftersales” (continuous support, maintenance and assistance) emerged as a distinct problem area.

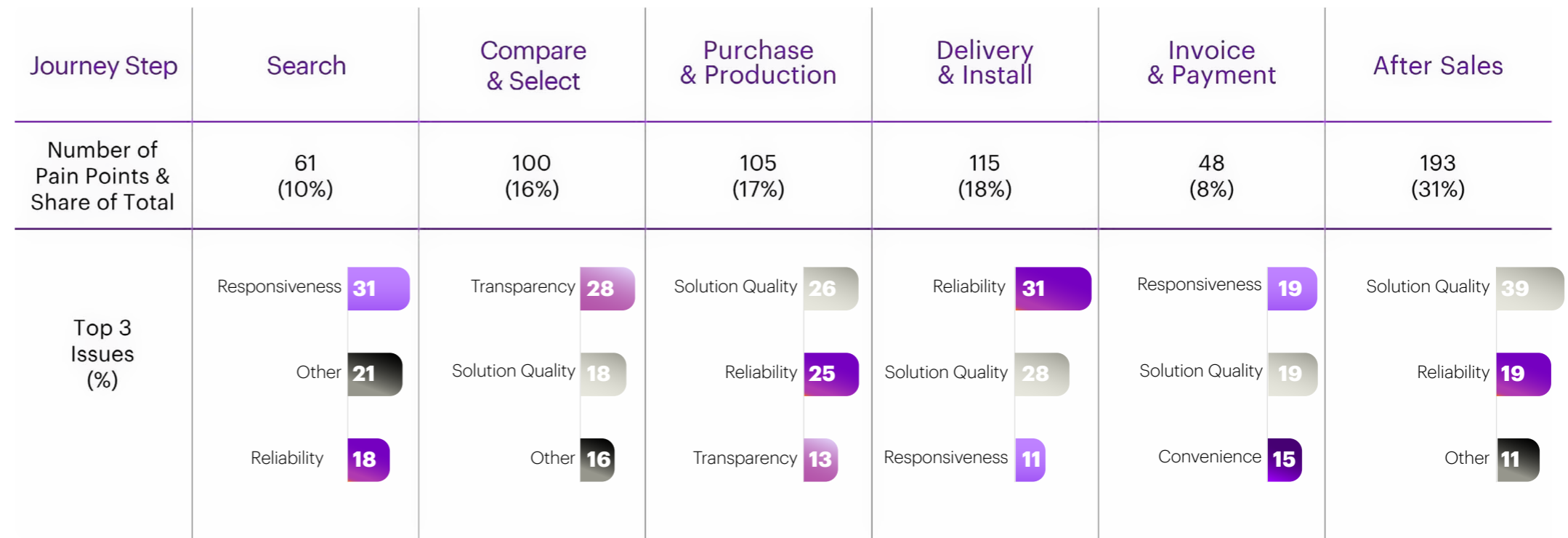
As one interviewee explained: *“The limited integration of different systems into everyday workflows is a major issue, specifically in relation to the suppliers’ abilities to offer a more comprehensive service portfolio. Suppliers need to have the ability and knowledge to interact with various types of Manufacturing Execution Systems (MES) and provide support for integration without relying on third-party integrators. The main issue is the lack of seamless integration and the need for better support in this area from machine tool companies.”*

Another, a quality manager, said it seems particularly challenging for buyers to find the information they seek: *“It’s very difficult for me to reach the correct person. They don’t let me speak directly with the responsible person, and I almost always get the information through other people. Sometimes the information is incorrect, and other times it’s not the answer that I’m expecting, but it’s already too late for changes.”*

Figure 6 shows pain points across the steps of the solution-buying journey.

Figure 6

Solution-buying journey—pain points by BX driver and journey step



Source: Accenture 2024

Enhancing BX—the enduring reinvention imperative

Our research and experience suggest adopting a sequential approach to BX enhancement to make progress amid the financial constraints that many industrials are facing. The key, however, is that each step must fit into an overall plan that supports continuous reinvention. Industrial companies need to be able to enhance their BX as buyers' expectations evolve, based on innovation supported by advanced technologies.

To reach and sustain peak performance, sellers should first focus on foundational issues, but do so in a way that sets further progress.

Ultimately, this means building a strong digital core—the critical technology capability that can create and empower reinvention. As Accenture's [first report](#) on reinventing with a digital core says: "Many large companies utilize technologies like cloud services, data management, AI, security or SAP S/4 HANA Cloud, so they have the 'building blocks' of a digital core. But without proper integration and activation of these components for reinvention, they do not have a digital core."

Today, for example, gen AI tools are leading the charge in transforming business landscapes. [A recent Accenture study](#) revealed that across industries, companies that apply gen AI to customer-related initiatives can expect to achieve 25% higher revenue after five years compared to those focusing solely on productivity. Yet most of the buyers we interviewed had not encountered AI tools such as chatbots

during the search phase of their buying journeys. That speaks to a massive opportunity for industrials to scale solutions such as the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT), data analytics, integrated CRM systems and AI/gen AI to address issues related to reliability, transparency and convenience. And **that** underscores the critical need to adopt and deploy individual tools in the context of a larger strategy that envisions holistic support for the sales team covering detailed product and service information and a customer history.

Executives also need to set aside their **sell** mindset and develop a buyer-centric outlook when evaluating technology investments. Remember the significantly high pain points in the product-buying journey at the 'Compare & Select' stage? They exist despite a plethora of digital tools that have been deployed without truly understanding whether they deliver value to buyers. To reach the peak of BX excellence, tech investments need to align with buyer needs and not with what's convenient for the industrials. For example, the end-to-end digital twin from [DMG MORI on Siemens Xcelerator Marketplace](#) enhances the buyer experience by allowing for extensive virtual testing. This optimizes processes before physical implementation, making the purchase and integration of components and machine tools more efficient and effective for manufacturers.

Two ways that advanced technologies can reduce buyer concerns directly:

Reducing the complexity of buying tools: Several interviewees were frustrated by the cumbersome registration procedures and deployment of too many supplier-specific solutions on suppliers' online portals and web services.

Our suggestion: Evaluate whether the specific experience you're trying to create justifies forcing yet another login for buyers; if not, opt for a more customer-friendly alternative.

Harnessing AI/gen AI to improve convenience: All interviewees were unhappy with the finding, sharing and inquiring mechanisms deployed by industrial firms, explaining how these affected almost all phases of the buying process.

Our suggestion: Deploy gen AI solutions such as recommendation engines, chatbots and note-taking assistants on websites, customer portals and even conferencing software; use gen AI to augment your salespeople by generating buyer insights from touchpoints and arm sales teams with this data to set them up for better conversion rates while ensuring a memorable buyer experience.

First, however, industrial leaders need to assess their starting points and be sure they're covering the basics. The reality is that many sellers would benefit from ramping up their efforts to understand their customers' key BX issues.

We learned a tremendous amount during our interviews; industrials can do the same, interviewing or surveying their own customers to gain a granular understanding of what bothers them and why, and what they want most in their BX. Some leading industrial companies are already taking action to better understand their customers. The senior vice president of digital customer relationship at [Schneider Electric](#) told us: *"We regularly conduct customer surveys to obtain their feedback through Net Satisfaction Score and other channels such as sentiment analysis. Understanding trends is crucial for driving future changes."*

Next, industrials would do well to unpack what an ideal BX means for their own employees. A big piece of helping employees build and sustain the relationships that buyers value so greatly is empowering them with clear expectations, process knowledge, training and easy ways to access the data and information they need when they need it. Keeping this in mind, review and update basic communication training programs, then move on to upgrading specialized training in the art of understanding and solving customer needs.

Redefine basic KPIs to include buyer satisfaction, incident discovery and resolution. If your company doesn't have them, create Standard Operation Procedures (SOPs), checklists and scripts for different channels and interactions.

Elevate employee training programs to help offset talent shortages. Focus on advanced competencies, such as handling complex customer issues and providing consultative advice. Develop BX playbooks for customer engagement and retention. Consider setting up a Product Information Management (PIM) system with reliable and detailed product and service information to help sales team members advise their clients.





Additionally, realign and integrate customer-facing teams and processes such as sales, engineering and after-sales to foster unified customer engagement and reduce misunderstandings and re-work. [Bridgestone, for example](#), has built a scalable platform that ensures trusted data is available for the organization to access and interact with. The central data platform (CDP) is at the heart of Bridgestone's data-driven journey to improve customer experience and optimize operations, ultimately generating an estimated \$300–450 million of future annualized value.

Thereafter, establish formal and inclusive feedback loops. Ask employees what they're seeing in the field that may not sync with survey findings. Ask about the pain points they encounter most when they are trying to serve customers at each step in the buyer journey. Consider their counsel and apply their suggestions to the extent possible. [Legrand](#), a global leader in electrical and digital building infrastructure, has launched an innovative [Voice of the Customer](#) approach, with an eye to enhancing the company's understanding of its customer needs, pain points and

preferences. As one Legrand executive said: *"Our approach is based on the concept of 'Customer Lifetime Value', and it's helping us identify trends, potential irritants and the most effective actions to improve their experience. Data analysis enables us to assess the impact of our initiatives, such as customer training, commercial visits, digital support and the impact of our customer relationship centers. We can now measure the return on investment of these actions. Additionally, AI tools, including gen AI, are helping us analyze our data more deeply and on a larger scale. We are eager to continue using this information to enhance our customer listening and empathy, and to offer increasingly high-value experiences."*

By taking these actions, companies will enable employees to focus on what matters most to buyers, while fostering a culture of innovation and agility that empowers teams to anticipate and drive change, rather than merely react to it.

Time for bold action

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

Greek philosopher Heraclitus

If Heraclitus thought that the only permanent thing in the world was change back in 500 BCE or so, imagine what his perspective on change would be today?

Today's solutions are delivering on yesterday's expectations. It's time for B2B sellers to engage with a new approach to BX and prepare to change continually to sustain success in the future.

By attaining a far more granular understanding of their customers' unique demands, industrial companies can set a course for transforming their BX from a persistent challenge into a strategic advantage.

By embracing digital solutions such as Internet of Things, digital twins, AI/gen AI and advanced Customer Relationship Management (CRM) integrations, they can enrich their data and further enhance customer interactions.

By giving employees the training and tools they need to succeed, and a forum to contribute to the evolution of their jobs, they can foster

engagement, vitality and enthusiasm for improvement.

And by making investments in technology with the goal of developing a strong digital core, they will build the tech stack they need to conquer the challenges that lie ahead.

On the way to getting started? Here is what you should do next:

- **What to do Today:**
 - **Cross-check results** from the BX study with findings from internal research and market trends.
 - **Identify system bottlenecks** in the customer journey that may lead to issues such as unreliable quotes or delays.
- **What to do Next:**
 - **Pressure-test** all customer-related IT initiatives against the expectations outlined in the BX study. Ensure each initiative has a clear, measurable goal (for instance, faster quote delivery, enabling self-service, improving

reliability).

- **Analyze and streamline** the IT landscape to address identified system bottlenecks and ensure smooth customer interactions.

- **What to tackle Later:**
 - **Rethink data flows** to optimize and improve customer experiences across all touchpoints.
 - **Integrate AI solutions** to enhance responsiveness, convenience and overall quality of first customer interactions.

The future belongs to companies that seamlessly blend technology with empathy, creating personalized experiences that over-deliver on buyers' expectations. Not only will these organizations gain a sustainable competitive edge, but they will also redefine industry standards. The path to an extraordinary buyer experience is clear—what's needed now is bold action.

About our research methodology

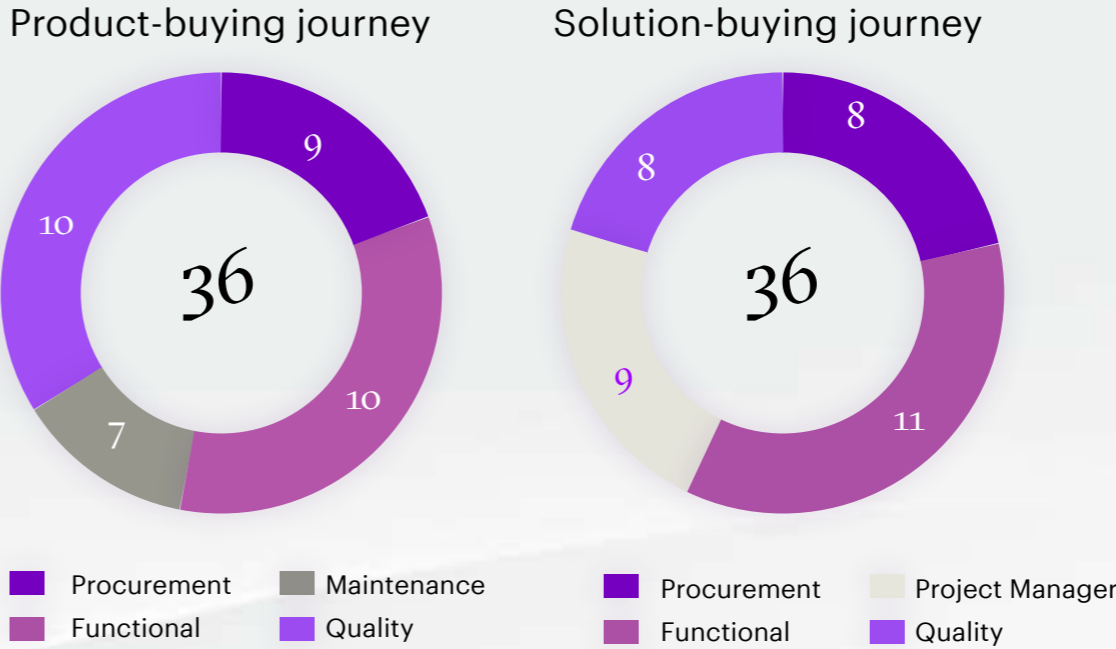
This report is based on our extensive practical experience from numerous buyer experience (BX) projects supporting the world's leading industrial companies and an in-depth study involving 72 senior B2B buyer executives across China, Germany and the US. All interviews were conducted in the fall of 2023; interviewees represented a mix of company sizes, procurement priorities and buyer roles. All interviews were compiled, coded and analyzed by Accenture Research's Industrial group.

During the coding process, we identified 635 issue statements that were mentioned during the one-hour expert interviews. Analyzing those issues and mapping them against the six buying journey steps and the six main drivers of buying experience satisfaction, we arrived at 1600 pain points that need to be addressed.

Figure 7
Interview ratios by buyer journey personas and by region



Buyer Personas per Buying Journey



Source: Accenture 2024

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