



Why Most Pipeline Starts Too Late

An executive position paper on timing, visibility, and the hidden tax on B2B revenue

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LUCRUM PARTNERS MARKET PERSPECTIVES

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Executive Summary

Most B2B leadership teams are optimizing a system that starts working after the outcome has already been shaped. That isn't a metaphor — it is measurable, and it is costing companies their largest, most defensible deals without ever showing up as a loss on anyone's dashboard.

In a Q4 2025 survey of 118 CEOs, SBI Growth found that 71% rate account expansion as critical to hitting growth targets — but only 49% are confident their team can execute it. That 22-point confidence gap is the widest of any growth lever surveyed, wider than go-to-market efficiency, far wider than retention. It shows up on nearly every leadership team's scorecard, and almost nobody can fully explain it, because the obvious explanations don't hold. These are companies with account managers, QBRs, customer success teams, and intent data platforms already in place. The confidence gap persists anyway.

The reason is not effort. It is timing.

4x More Opportunities 4,270 vs. 1,007 pipeline	71% vs 20% Conversion Rate signal-driven vs. traditional	7.4x Larger Deal Size \$2.6M vs. \$350K average	128 Days Faster to Close 144 days vs. 272 days
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Source: SBI Growth & Polaris I/O, "Pipeline in Plain Sight" (2026). N = 58,825 business evolution signals across 46 enterprise accounts, 12-month study period.

This paper makes the case that pipeline visibility and market visibility are not the same thing — that most GTM operating systems still confuse the two — and that the fix is not more sales activity aimed at the same window. It is a different point of entry, and a different way for leadership to govern revenue timing rather than just revenue activity.

1. The Question Your Pipeline Can't Answer

Every revenue leader can answer "how much pipeline do we have." Almost none can answer a more consequential question: how much of that pipeline was already decided before we knew it existed?

Bain & Company's research on B2B "Day 1 List" dynamics found that most deals executives believe were lost in negotiation were never actually winnable — the vendor simply was never on the buyer's initial shortlist. Separate research from 6sense's 2025 Buyer Experience Report, surveying nearly 4,000 B2B buyers, found that 94% of buying groups have already ranked a preferred vendor before making first contact with any vendor at all — and that pre-contact favorite goes on to win the deal 77% of the time.

For the large majority of B2B deals, the outcome is substantially determined before your CRM shows an opportunity.

It's worth sitting with what that means in practice, not just in the abstract. While this paper is being read, it is reasonable to assume that inside at least one account your team considers strategic, a buying group is already in motion — and a competitor may already be answering the question “what should we prioritize?” inside that account, simply because they noticed the trigger event first. Your team will not see that competitor in the CRM. It will show up later, if at all, as a deal that inexplicably went to an incumbent, or as a shortlist your team was invited onto too late to matter.

Pipeline, in that sense, behaves as a lagging indicator: a record of decisions already made, not a leading view of decisions still forming.

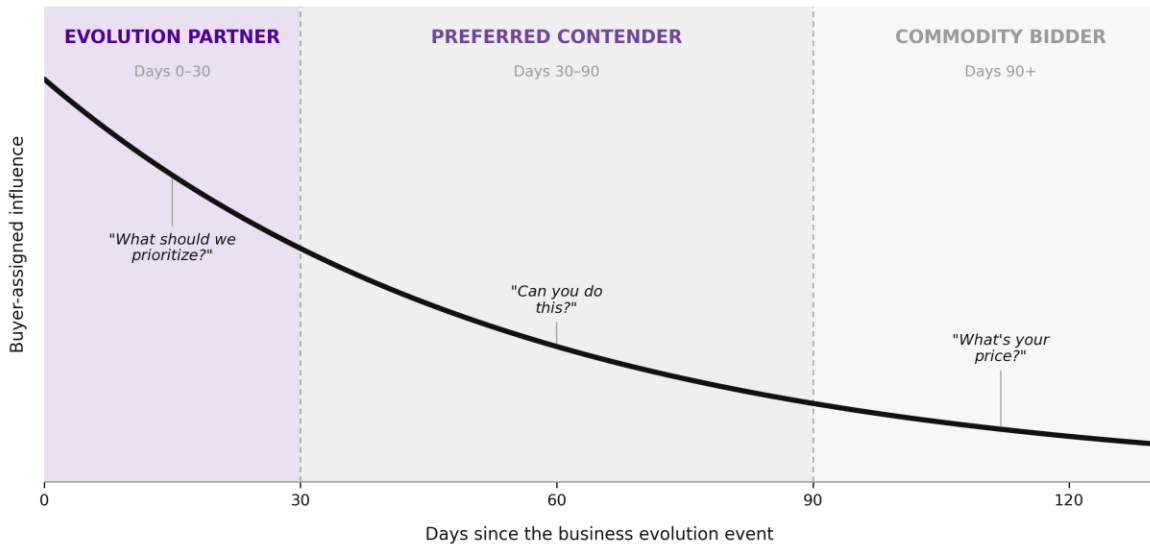
A second shift compounds the problem — the buying group your team needs to reach has grown and become harder to track in real time. Forrester's State of Business Buying, 2026 found the average B2B purchase decision now involves 13 internal stakeholders and 9 external influencers, and that number roughly doubles for purchases that involve evaluating AI capability. A go-to-market system built to detect a single buyer's intent is structurally unable to see thirteen people quietly forming consensus before that intent ever registers anywhere.

None of this means a sales team is executing poorly. It means the operating system is aimed at the wrong moment.

2. The Three Windows

SBI Growth and Polaris I/O's study gives this problem a name and a clock. Once a business evolution event occurs inside a customer's organization — a leadership change, a restructuring, a strategic transformation — the buyer's questions change on a predictable schedule, and so does the role assigned to whichever vendor happens to be in the room.

Influence Doesn't Erode Gradually — It Collapses in Windows



Buyer-assigned role by response time to a business evolution event. Source: SBI Growth & Polaris I/O (2026).

Days 0–30 — Evolution Partner

No fixed requirements exist yet. The buyer is still asking “what should we prioritize?” — and the vendor present for that conversation gets invited to help shape the answer, including the budget, the evaluation criteria, and the shortlist itself.

Days 30–90 — Preferred Contender

Requirements now exist. The conversation has shifted from “what should we do” to “can you do this.” The vendor is one of two or three under active comparison — still able to shape how the evaluation runs, but no longer able to shape whether it happens.

Days 90+ — Commodity Bidder

Requirements are locked and the RFP is out. The only remaining question is “what’s your price.” The vendor is one of many, competing on criteria someone else wrote, defending a position rather than building one.

Across the 46 accounts studied, this timing variable alone explains a striking gap in outcomes. Opportunities surfaced inside the 30-day window converted at 71%, versus 20% for opportunities surfaced through traditional account management — QBRs, inbound requests, relationship-driven discovery. The signal-driven deals were also 7.4 times larger on average and closed 128 days faster.¹

¹This finding is drawn from a study of account expansion — growth inside 46 enterprise accounts a vendor already serves — not net-new logo acquisition. The mechanism is the same one the Bain, 6sense, and Forrester research describes for the broader B2B buying journey: whoever is present while the buyer is still forming the question wins a structurally different negotiation

Before You Read Further

Pick one deal your team closed — or lost — last quarter. Do you know, specifically, which day someone on your team first learned the opportunity existed, relative to the day the buyer's internal conversation actually started? For most leaders, the honest answer is no. That gap — between when the need formed and when your team found out — is the entire argument of this paper, applied to one real deal instead of 46 study accounts.

3. Why Your Dashboard Can't See This

This is the part that makes the finding uncomfortable rather than merely interesting: none of it shows up in the metrics most leadership teams already trust.

Win rate, pipeline coverage, and forecast accuracy can all look reasonable even while a company is structurally excluded from its best, largest, and highest-margin opportunities — because those opportunities never entered the pipeline in a state where they were winnable. A deal a team never had a real chance at doesn't register as a loss. It simply doesn't register.

That reframes the problem from a sales-execution question into a governance question. The organization is fully resourced — SDRs are calling, AEs are running QBRs, marketing is running campaigns — and still structurally late, because the operating system was built to detect and manage visible opportunities, not the conditions that create them. That is not a productivity gap a team can close by working harder. It is a design gap in what the organization is built to see.

Two consequences follow, and both belong on a leadership agenda rather than a sales-operations one.

- Forecast confidence erodes for reasons the forecast itself can't diagnose. A pipeline built entirely from late-stage, already-visible opportunities cannot account for the deals that never became visible at all — a structural reason, not just a discipline reason, that even well-run RevOps functions report chronic under-confidence in their own numbers.
- Capital allocation inherits the same blind spot. Budget, headcount, and executive time get allocated against the pipeline leadership can see. If a meaningful share of addressable revenue never becomes visible under the current operating model, the company isn't just under-investing in growth — it may be systematically misallocating the investment it's already making.

than whoever arrives once the question is already answered. The account-expansion data is the clearest available quantification of that mechanism; the net-new buying research confirms the same pattern holds at the level of the overall market.

The Marketing-Qualified Blind Spot

A specific version of this problem sits inside the marketing-to-sales handoff itself. Most GTM operating models still treat the Marketing Qualified Lead (MQL) as the trigger for sales engagement — an individual crossing a scoring threshold by filling out a form, downloading content, or attending a webinar. Kerry Cunningham, 6sense’s Head of Research and Thought Leadership and a former Forrester and SiriusDecisions analyst, has argued that this model breaks against the same buying-group reality described above: B2B buying decisions are made by double-digit groups of stakeholders, and the large majority of them never take an identifiable action a scoring model can see. By 6sense’s own research, typically only around a quarter of website form-fills become a qualified lead at all — and that is before accounting for the buying-group members who never filled out a form in the first place.

The deeper issue for a leadership team isn’t the conversion math. It’s the timing the MQL model structurally guarantees. An identifiable individual action — a form fill, a demo request — is almost by definition a late-stage signal: it happens after a buyer has decided the topic is worth researching, which the data above shows typically happens well after internal consensus has already started forming. A GTM system that waits for an MQL before engaging isn’t simply missing part of the buying group. By design, it is waiting for the Preferred Contender or Commodity Bidder window to begin sales engagement — while marketing measures its own success by how many of those late-stage signals it generates. Sales and marketing can both hit their numbers this way and still be running a system aimed at the wrong moment.

Sizing Your Own Exposure (Illustrative, Not a Forecast)

Take your team’s total expansion pipeline from the past year. Assume, conservatively, that even a third of it is currently moving through a 90-plus-day, Commodity Bidder engagement window instead of a 0–30-day one. Apply the differentials SBI and Polaris measured — a shift from roughly 20% to 71% conversion, and from an average \$350K deal to \$2.6M — to just that third, and the implied gap is not a marginal efficiency improvement. It is a multiple of the expansion revenue currently being booked. This is not a projection for any specific business — only a working session against your own numbers can produce that. It is a way to see, in your own order of magnitude, why this belongs on a leadership agenda rather than a sales-operations one.

4. What Changes

The fix is not more pipeline activity aimed at the same window. It is moving the point of entry earlier, and building the organizational muscle to act inside a 30-day window instead of a 90-day one.

Lucrum Partners calls this operating model Signal-Led GTM™ — built around four capabilities.

Signal Detection

Identify business evolution events — leadership changes, restructurings, strategic transformations — before they surface as visible demand. The SBI/Polaris research found that three categories alone (strategic transformation, growth and restructuring, and environmental disruption) accounted for 82% of closed expansion deals, which means the detection problem is narrower and more tractable than “monitor everything” implies.

Signal Interpretation

Route the right signal to the right person with enough context to act on — not a raw alert, but an account view that connects the signal to what it likely means for that specific buyer.

Signal Activation

Engage inside the 30-day window with a plan built for that specific conversation: what the buyer is trying to work out, who else in the organization the event affects, and who on the account team is best positioned to be first in the door.

Signal Governance

Replace part of the backward-looking pipeline review with a forward-looking review of what’s forming — a change to the existing operating cadence, not an additional meeting bolted onto it.

Organizations that struggle with this shift tend to fail at the same step: they deploy a monitoring tool, flood the team with signals, and provide no filter or workflow for acting on them. That is the most common failure mode the SBI/Polaris research documents — monitoring everything and acting on nothing. The fix starts with a signal investment thesis specific to the business — which categories predict revenue here, not in general — before any platform decision gets made.

5. Where to Start

None of this requires replacing the GTM stack already in place. It requires a layer of visibility the current stack doesn’t have, and a small number of concrete changes to how account teams engage and how leadership reviews pipeline.

Every quarter this pattern goes unaddressed is a quarter of expansion pipeline compounding in the wrong window — and not a static gap. Buying groups continue to compress how quickly they reach internal consensus, and more of that consensus is forming with no seller in the room at all. The organizations already building this capability are not waiting for certainty. They are building a signal investment thesis this quarter and refining it as they go.

The real question for this leadership team isn't whether this pattern is worth examining. It's whether you examine it before or after a competitor becomes the Evolution Partner in your next major renewal conversation.

We'd suggest starting with one exercise, answerable in a single leadership conversation:

Of the expansion deals your team closed in the last four quarters, how many did they find because they saw a need forming — and how many arrived as an inbound request or an RFP already in motion?

If most arrived, the pipeline was there. The team simply didn't have a system built to see it early enough to shape it.

Lucrum Partners' Signal Blindness Index™ is built for exactly this conversation. It doesn't measure how well your revenue engine is performing. It measures how much of the market your executive team cannot currently see — evaluating an organization's ability to detect, interpret, and act on the earliest commercial signals that shape buying decisions months before opportunities become visible, across five domains: revenue signal governance, account and buying-group signals, customer health and retention signals, decision velocity and governance, and capital and investment signals.

The output isn't a score for its own sake. It's a maturity benchmark — Signal Blind, Signal Aware, Signal Enabled, or Signal Governed — paired with a clear Proceed, Pause, or Refocus recommendation and a 90-day executive action plan, so a leadership team knows where to invest before spending further on sales technology, training, or AI.

Start with the Signal Blindness Index™. A 30–45 minute executive diagnostic that reveals where your commercial organization is flying blind, quantifies the associated revenue risk, and provides a practical roadmap to build a Signal-Led GTM™ operating model.

To begin, contact me at brian@lucrumpartners.co.

About Lucrum Partners

Lucrum Partners is a research-backed commercial growth advisory that helps B2B executive teams build more predictable revenue through Signal-Led GTM™. By integrating buyer intelligence, market signals, and executive operating models, Lucrum enables organizations to identify opportunity earlier, align commercial execution, and compete before demand becomes visible to the market.

Lucrum Partners was founded by Brian Shea, who explores this shift in B2B buying in his TEDxBocaRaton talk on Signal-Led Go-To-Market™.

Every Lucrum engagement begins the same way: with the Signal Blindness Index™, our signature executive diagnostic. To run it for your organization, contact me at brian@lucrumpartners.co.

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