



WHITEPAPER

The Moneyball Moment

Sales, Analytics, and Success in a
Data-Driven World



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The 2011 Brad Pitt movie *Moneyball* is one of those rare baseball films that even people who don't know a thing about the game somehow end up loving. As of this writing, *Moneyball* has a 94% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes – quite high for a sports-themed film. And I've got a theory about why so many people who don't love baseball love this picture.

At the end of the day, *Moneyball* really isn't about baseball. Technically, yes, it's a story that *involves* a baseball team. **But what this movie is truly about is Brad Pitt shaking up the status quo** ... when people really, really don't want to see it get shaken up. And that, I believe, is something that all leaders -- in fact, all of us -- can relate to.

Haven't seen *Moneyball*? No problem. Here's a quick summary that will explain what I mean. (If you've seen the film, feel free to skip the next paragraph.)



Against all odds, having lost his four best players to far wealthier teams, cash-strapped Oakland A's general manager Billy Beane (Brad Pitt) adopts a daring new method for turning around a losing team: analytics. At first, his data-driven approach isn't popular with the scouts, the fans, the radio talk show hosts, or the A's manager Art Howe (Philip Seymour Hoffman). In fact, Howe, along with just about everyone else who reports to Beane, tells him he's crazy. But guess what? The new approach works. Long story short: Beane and his Ivy-League numbers guy successfully chart and track a whole bunch of new metrics; they use those metrics to identify undervalued, overlooked players; and they sign those players for next to nothing, because nobody else in major-league baseball is doing what they're doing. Over the course of a season, the players deliver. Beane leads the A's into the 2002 playoffs, which was supposed to be an impossible outcome. Only it *wasn't* impossible. It was the next phase of big-league baseball's evolution.

Beane's maverick emphasis on analytics has become the way business is now conducted in major-league baseball. In fact, it's become the way business is conducted in *all* big-time sports. The leaders on and off the field have all moved from intuition to data. And leaders in other industries are starting to follow their example.



Move from intuition to data.

THE CHALLENGE OF THE “OLD-SCHOOL GUY”

Back in 2002, what Billy Beane was advocating was flat-out heresy to baseball “purists”—which is another term for people who like the status quo just the way it is, because that’s what they’ve gotten used to.

One of those people was Art Howe, the A’s manager, a classic “old-school guy.” Beane outlined the changes that had to happen. Tactfully and professionally. Multiple times. But nothing changed. In the early phase of the season, Howe simply refused to put the people Beane had signed into the lineup. Howe was stuck in an old-school paradigm. Know anyone like that? (Most sales leaders do.)

I call Billy Beane’s dilemma with his old-school field manager – and our very similar organizational dilemma as sales leaders in the AI era -- the Moneyball Moment.



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Perhaps you’re wondering *how* Beane eventually persuaded his manager to play (for instance) the new, undervalued first baseman he’d just signed. Answer: Beane *traded away* all the other players who could play first base. Guess who started at first base that night? Right: Beane’s guy.

That’s one creative, highly effective way of addressing a Moneyball Moment.

By the way, the scene where Beane tells his manager about these trades is one of the truly great roleplays on **the art of launching and sustaining a difficult conversation**. This is how sales leaders (and other leaders) inevitably end up resolving a Moneyball Moment: by starting and completing difficult conversations. It’s how leaders survive, and ultimately, it’s how their *teams* survive. After that discussion, Howe had no more comebacks, no more excuses, no more delaying tactics. The game had officially changed. Whether those stuck in the past *wanted* it to change was irrelevant.

SOME THOUGHTS ON SHAKING UP THE ORGANIZATIONAL STATUS QUO

Not all the conversations survivors like Billy Beane face are difficult, though. Very near the end of the film, Beane has a job interview at Fenway Park with John Henry, the owner of the Boston Red Sox.

During that interview, Henry says to Beane:

"For \$41 million, you built a playoff team. You lost Damon, Giambi, Isringhausen, and Pena, and you won more games without them than you did with them.

You won the exact same number of games as the Yankees, but the Yankees paid \$1.4 million per win, and you paid \$260,000.

I know you're taking it in the teeth out there, but the first guy through the wall – he always gets bloody. Always. This is threatening not just a way of doing business, but in their minds, it's threatening the game. Really, what it's threatening is their livelihoods. It's threatening their jobs. It's threatening the way that they do things.

And every time that happens, whether it's a government or a way of doing business or whatever it is, the people who are holding the reins, who have their hands on the switch, they go crazy. I mean, anybody who's not tearing their team down right now and rebuilding it using your model ... they're dinosaurs."

HOW NOT TO BE A DINOSAUR

At this point, I hope you've gathered that this is not in any way, shape, or form an article about baseball. What this is, is an article about **how not to be a dinosaur sales leader enabling a dinosaur sales team**. In the AI era – the era when we all became responsible, whether we liked it or not, for data-driven decisions, meaning decisions based on advanced analytics – we have an ethical obligation to launch difficult conversations with the "old-school guys" (of whatever gender) on our team.

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There are a number of areas where the people who work for us are likely to feel threatened by a new paradigm – and create a Moneyball Moment for us as leaders. Let me be clear: the responsibilities of salespeople and *sales leadership* now need to be looked at in a whole different way – just as Billy Beane and the A's, and eventually all of organized baseball, had to start looking at the job of field manager *and* general manager very differently than they were used to. At the end of the 2002 season, baseball's GMs, managers, and scouts all lived in a new world. The lucky ones realized that. The unlucky ones clung to the status quo.

Today, it's our turn. Just like Billy Beane, we need to be prepared to have some difficult discussions with the people who report to us ... if we expect to survive and thrive in the AI era.

Sales leaders now have a personal and professional responsibility to act more like Billy Beane in 2002 and less like his naysayers. Beane wasn't crazy. He was on the cutting edge. There's a difference. What follows is meant to help you show everyone in the organization exactly where the borderline between crazy and cutting edge really lies.

THREE MONEYBALL MOMENTS

The ever-deepening complexity of the buyer journey means organizational success now requires a whole new breed of salespeople.

That doesn't mean your salespeople are in trouble. It just means that they're going to need to learn to do some things differently. It means some new deliverables are now non-negotiable parts of the job, whether those deliverables are familiar or not. And the sooner those deliverables are established with crystal clarity for salespeople, the better off everyone is going to be.



Salespeople will need to learn to do some things differently.

Very often, when we share with teams what I'm about to share with you, some of the people on the team push back. They talk about what is and isn't in their formal written job description. They resist changes to that formal job description. They talk about autonomy, about doing their job in the way that works best for them, and about how long they've been doing things their way with no problem. So, here's my question for leaders (and everyone else, for that matter): Didn't Art Howe, the old-school manager in *Moneyball*, put forward each of those reasons in defense of *his* status quo?

Howe's job description had changed, regardless of whether he realized it. Cue the difficult conversation.

Defending an outdated status quo may feel easy and safe at first ... but it gets more expensive on both the personal and the organizational level with every passing day. At the beginning of the 2002 baseball season, *zero* major league managers had to look closely at player analytics if they wanted to do their job well and keep that job. Today, *all* of them *must* do that to stay competitive.

What baseball has learned, we need to learn. Getting a better playbook, following it as a team, and executing it in a disciplined way, as a team, are all markers of professionalism in any discipline and any industry. *No* successful team uses the last decade's playbook. *No* good playbook ignores what the competition is likely to be throwing at us right now. And *no* effective leader gathers the team together before the big game and says, "Okay, on the count of three, get out there and do whatever you feel like doing."

Bottom line: Even if people push back at first, we have a professional obligation to update the playbook, and a professional obligation to lead the difficult conversations that ensure that playbook is executed. Each of the following items, then, represents a playbook-related Moneyball Moment for us as leaders to navigate. Each of these three changes will shake up some preconceptions in your organization about what salespeople do for a living. And that's a good thing.

There are three critical areas where cutting-edge sales leaders are going to run into Moneyball Moments: Sales Intelligence, Mapping the Opportunity, and ROI.



Sales Intelligence

Our salespeople will want to be ready to do **more research work up-front about a given contact, a given target company, and/or a given industry** than they did even a year or two ago. Why? Because buyers and influencers have access to more relevant data than ever before, and that access to data has changed the dynamic. As sellers, we need to assume they've done a lot of research on us; if we're going to have a positive impact on them (much less align with where they are in the buyer journey), we have to gather and integrate a lot more data on them than we once did. Fortunately, our people can use tools like ChatGPT to uncover the specific challenges and pain points likely to affect decision makers and influencers we target, and to identify the most important questions and symptoms likely to arise at various touch points. They can use tools like [Humantic AI](#) to personalize their messaging to play to a contact's behavioral style long before they even talk to that contact. In years past, salespeople weren't expected to do any of this. Now they are.



Mapping the Opportunity

Our team members will also want to get better at [understanding the entire cast of characters on the buying side](#), better at clarifying what value looks like to each of those individual players, and better at matching the right internal team member on our side with the right external influencer on the buyer side. In years past, when there were fewer people involved in a purchase decision, this kind of internal collaborative planning was often considered optional. Unless they were dealing with a huge account, salespeople typically looked for ways to steer around team selling. It's now much, much harder to do that and remain competitive. One of my clients told me of a recent close that required no less than thirteen different people to sign the contract. That's the direction we're all headed. The salespeople who succeed will be those who adapt to this new reality.



ROI

Last but certainly not least, our team members will also want to improve their ability to **demonstrate conclusively where we have improved, and can be expected to improve, return on investment**. If salespeople are in any way uncomfortable with this conversation, or if they imagine that charisma and personality are somehow going to serve as a replacement for it, they're no longer going to be competitive in this marketplace. It's that simple. At Sandler, we used to call this skill "dollarization," but in a globally connected arena it probably makes more sense to call it "financial quantification." Whatever we call it, in the AI era, it's not optional. It's table stakes.

These are, as I see it, the three critical areas where cutting-edge sales leaders are going to run into Moneyball Moments with their direct reports. They are well advised to be prepared to initiate, and continue, difficult conversations with front-line sales contributors about these deliverables. Members of our selling team may imagine that last year's rules still apply, and that the deliverables I've mentioned are optional or negotiable. They're not.

The old-school rules don't apply anymore. The game has changed, and whether we wanted it to change is irrelevant. Salespeople who can't get their heads around these three new realities need to be coached until they can ... or, if our analytics tell us that that outcome is unlikely or cost-ineffective, taken out of the lineup (to use a *Moneyball* metaphor).



The game has changed. Whether we wanted it to change is irrelevant.

The potentially *challenging* news for sales leaders is that, like Billy Beane, we may need to have more than one difficult conversation with a contributor we'd really prefer to hold on to. That means we need to be consistent and stay rooted in reality, whether other people accept reality or not. If we don't do that, the market will make the hard choices for us, and we may not like where that leaves our organization. **The changes will happen regardless of how ready we are for them!** Which kind of company would you rather own stock in: one deeply invested in cable broadcasting, or one deeply invested in streaming entertainment? I rest my case.

The *good* news for sales leaders is that, in Billy Beane's world, Art Howe eventually came around. There's no good reason to assume your team won't do the same.

By the way, the AI-driven, analytics-heavy era we're all living in provides plenty of challenges in terms of Moneyball Moments we encounter with peers and superiors. I'll be covering those in a future white paper.

In the meantime, feel free to [reach out for help](#) in identifying and managing your next Moneyball Moment with your team.





About Sandler

Sandler is the worldwide leader in sales, management, and customer service training. We partner with organizations of all sizes, across all industries, to help them improve their revenue performance. Sandler not only provides the initial and advanced strategies and tactics needed to excel, but we also empower your team to develop the attitudes and implement the behavior necessary to reach the highest levels of success.

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