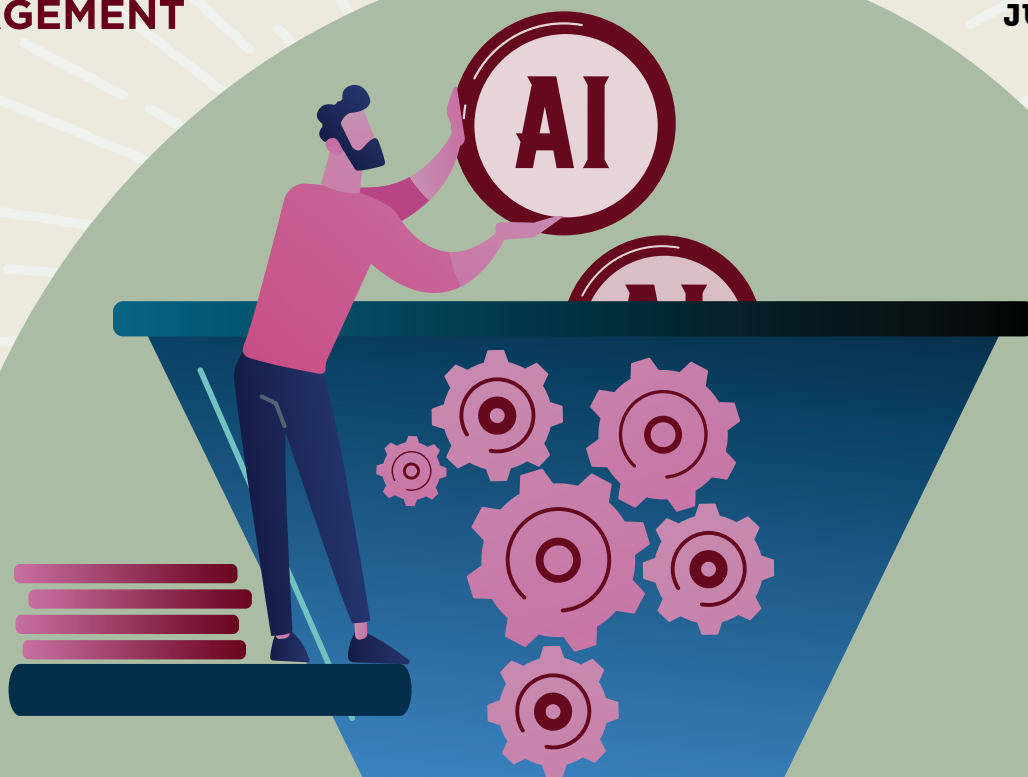




Gartner CSO and Sales Leader Conference 2026

**Leading Strategically
In the Age of AI**



AI, Human Intelligence, and Your Sales Strategy

Designing sales incentive programs that drive outcomes

BY SUSAN ADAMS, NEXT LEVEL PERFORMANCE

Sales incentives are a core lever for driving revenue performance, but the landscape is changing. Sales cycles are longer, buying groups are larger, and channel ecosystems are more complex. The most effective incentive programs lean into technology and emerging research in motivation to reinforce focus, shape behavior and sustain momentum. AI is providing unique, new opportunities to understand what's working and what's not.

High-performing organizations consistently turn incentives into a durable performance advantage across both direct sales teams and channel partners.

Selling Isn't Just 24/7/365. It's 360°

The most effective incentive programs are a daily part of sales operations. Rather than acting as short-term contests or end-of-quarter accelerators, they reinforce priorities that matter throughout the selling cycle. This means rewarding progress – not just outcomes – so the entire audience understands what it takes to achieve their goals.

By targeting behaviors such as pipeline creation, training and customer retention, organizations create clarity for sales teams and channel partners alike. The result is less guesswork, more consistency and better alignment between strategy and execution. Inspiring with recognition and rewards across the whole audience earns commitment. Platforms like Next Level's Amplify provide greater visibility into seller actions and adoption from learning engagement to campaign participation.

Keep It Simple Or Be Forgotten

Sales teams today face an overwhelming number of tools, messages and shifting priorities. The recent Incentive Research Foundation (IRF) "Using Incentives to Drive Pipeline" study showed that channel partners may be in up to 50 incentive programs and actively participate in half. Even direct sales teams experience challenges with competing priorities and demands. Incentive programs that are overly complex add to that burden.

High-performing programs simplify decision-making by making expectations explicit and progress visible. As the IRF study states, "If a partner can't understand 'what's in it for me' in 60 seconds, the program likely loses attention."

If Data Is the Driver, AI Is the Accelerator

What is your goal and how can you measure your return on objectives? That question is where effective use of data starts – but it's also where many programs stall.

Data tells you what is happening. It shows activity, results and patterns over time. But on its own, it does not change behavior. This is where AI plays its role in a sales incentive strategy. AI accelerates the value of your data by helping you move faster from insight to action. It identifies patterns sooner, highlights what matters, and surfaces where to focus next.

That is AI's true purpose – not replacing strategy, but making data more usable, decisions more timely, and execution more precise. A strategic incentive partner can layer insight and experience over algorithms to super-charge your results. Without that clarity, AI moves faster, but not necessarily in the right direction.

Be Human

Sales incentives inspire people to perform. Inspiration is not only an emotion, it's what connects emotion to action. And that is entirely human.

While data and AI can provide incredible insight into program structure and performance, human intelligence delivers the emotional acumen to connect people to their goals. In his recent book, "The Next Renaissance: AI and the Expansion of Human Potential," Zack Kass (former OpenAI head of go-to-market) writes, "Courage, compassion, hope, curiosity, humor, wisdom, morality and empathy are measures of human achievement. And soon these 'soft skills' may in fact become our primary means of differentiation. So my advice to you is: be human."

By leaning into communication, aspiration and the human drives for recognition and belonging, you can differentiate your program from others and inspire the people whose emotional investment is essential for your targeted outcomes.

Incentives don't drive performance on their own. Clarity, visibility, consistency and human nature do.

Susan Adams is the vice president of Client strategy and Engagement at [Next Level Performance](#). Next Level is proud to celebrate its 50th anniversary this year as it continues to lead the way in the design and implementation of sales incentives, channel and customer loyalty, employee recognition, meetings, and event solutions.



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nxlperformance.com
connect@nxlperformance.com
(732) 745-0600

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