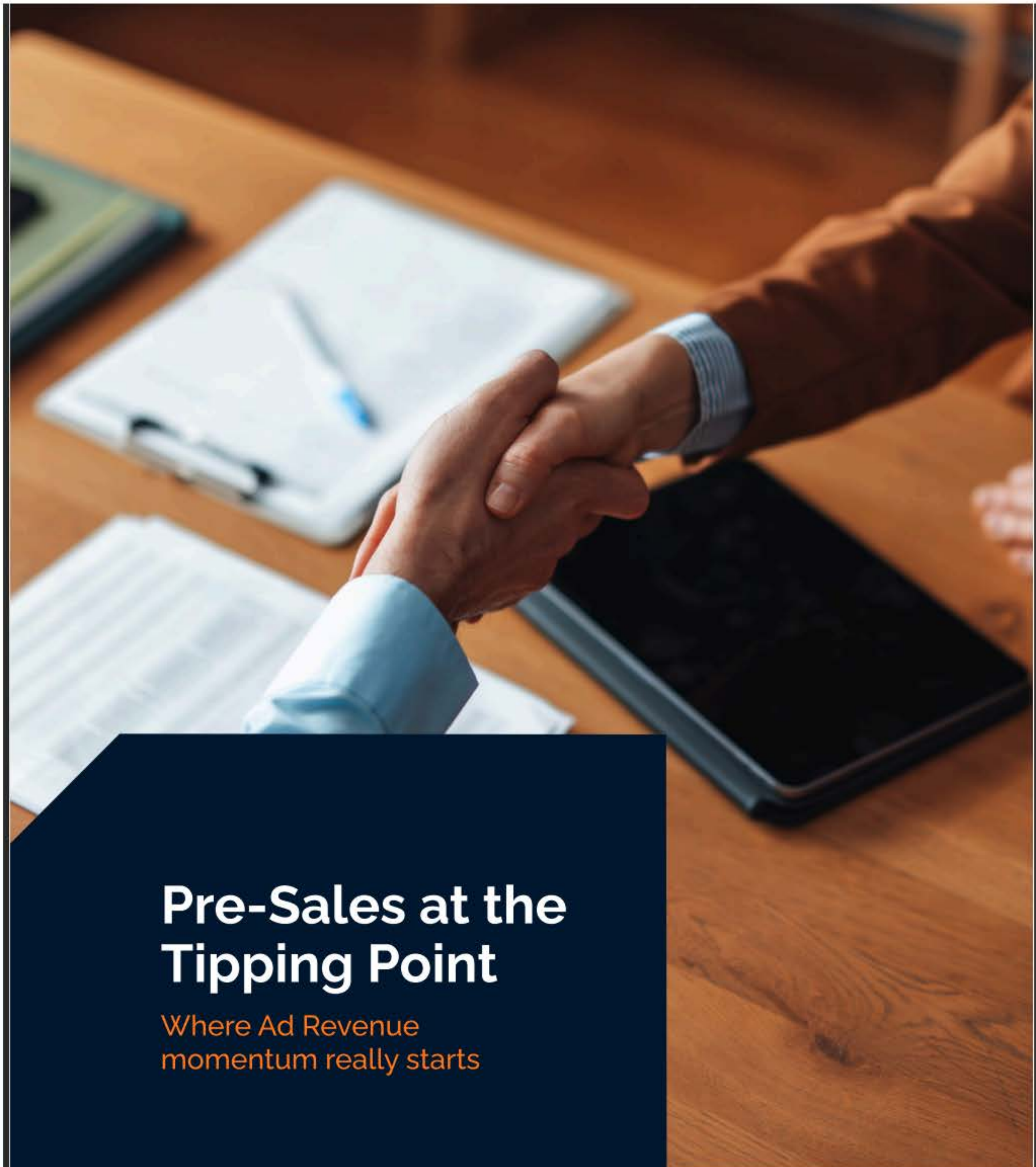


Pre-Sales at the Tipping Point

Where Ad Revenue momentum really starts

theorem

Introduction:

Pre-sales is where Ad Revenue momentum either begins – or quietly leaks away. As the first stage of the order-to-cash process, pre-sales shapes how opportunities are priced, packaged, approved, and ultimately fulfilled. Yet in many media organizations, this critical stage still relies on manual work, fragmented systems, and informal handoffs that slow execution long before a deal ever reaches the order management system.

The scale of this challenge is often underestimated. Research shows that **90% of advertising professionals spend more than five hours per week on manual or administrative pre-sales tasks, with 44% spending more than ten hours** on activities like pricing validation, proposal revisions, and internal coordination. This is not marginal inefficiency. It is a recurring, embedded drain on sales capacity.

What makes this more complex is a growing perception gap. **86% of organizations that have adopted pre-sales automation report increased deal closures, yet one-third believe that a lack of such automation is actively holding back revenue growth.**

As deal complexity increases and organizations are asked to scale without adding headcount, this normalization is no longer sustainable. For organizations looking to protect revenue velocity and scale with confidence, it's critical to understand how pre-sales actually operates today – where time is spent, where decisions stall, and where execution slows.

> **Pre-sales inefficiency is an invisible drain.
> Its cost compounds over time.**

Research Methodology

To understand how pre-sales operates across modern media organizations, this report combines both quantitative and qualitative research conducted across the North American media landscape.

The quantitative portion of the study surveyed 500 professionals involved in the pre-sales and ad operations lifecycle, including leaders and practitioners from publishers, streaming platforms, and media and entertainment organizations. Respondents represented a cross-section of roles spanning ad sales, revenue operations, pre-sales strategy, and operational support functions responsible for proposal construction, pricing validation, and deal coordination.

The survey examined how pre-sales work is performed today, where teams encounter the most friction, and how those operational constraints affect deal velocity, accuracy, and scalability.

To complement these findings, the research also included in-depth qualitative interviews with senior pre-sales and revenue leaders across media owners, including publishers, streaming platforms, and media and entertainment organizations. These one-to-one discussions explored the operational realities behind the survey data, providing detailed insight into how teams navigate fragmented systems, approval dependencies, inventory coordination, and proposal construction in day-to-day workflows.

Together, these perspectives offer both statistical validation and operational context.

The quantitative data identifies where pressure concentrates across the pre-sales process, while the qualitative interviews reveal how teams adapt to these challenges in practice.

The Scale of the Problem

Manual pre-sales as a structural tax on revenue

Manual pre-sales work does not surface as a single bottleneck. It shows up in small, repeated moments across the pre-sales process – each one manageable on its own, but costly in aggregate.

Media inventory and deal construction are rarely static. Rates vary by placement, format, availability, and client tier. Priority advertisers may receive negotiated pricing or reserved access, while other clients are quoted standard rates. Inventory may also be tentatively allocated across overlapping deals, requiring coordination to prevent conflicts. As a result, pricing validation often involves manual reconciliation across rate cards, availability calendars, prior agreements, and internal approvals.

While media inventory pricing illustrates a core challenge, it is only one dimension of the broader orchestration problem. The same manual reconciliation, dependency chains, and revision cycles appear in proposal construction, internal approvals, and contract handoffs. Proposals then move through multiple rounds of revision as inputs shift or approvals lag. Information is re-entered, reformatted, or reconciled as work passes between teams. None of these steps feel extraordinary. Together, they define how pre-sales operates day to day.

The result is a pre-sales function that scales linearly with effort rather than volume.

As opportunity flow increases, so does the amount of coordination required to assemble, revise, and approve each deal. Teams respond by working harder, building personal workarounds, and relying on informal processes to keep things moving.

Over time, this becomes a structural tax on revenue. Pre-sales capacity is consumed by assembly and coordination work instead of analysis, recommendations, and client engagement. Deal cycles lengthen not because of demand constraints, they increase because coordination effort compounds as volume increases.

The Scale of the Problem

Individually, these inefficiencies are often accepted as simply "how pre-sales works." They are treated as routine headaches — inconvenient, but unavoidable. In aggregate, however, they place a hard limit on how pre-sales can scale.

As deal volume grows, coordination effort outpaces capacity, and breakdowns in pricing, proposals, approvals, and handoffs begin to compound. Pre-sales becomes a constraint not because demand is lacking, but because the operating model cannot absorb complexity without adding effort.

Cumulative coordinated ineffective effort

The Friction Audit

'Invisible' Tax on scale

Why Friction Persists

Normalization and the perception gap

Given the scale and recurrence of manual pre-sales work, a natural question follows: why hasn't this been fixed already?

A large part of the answer lies in normalization. Over time, teams adapt to friction rather than redesign around it. Manual steps become routine. Workarounds are documented, shared, and eventually accepted as part of the process. As long as deals continue to move forward, inefficiency is absorbed into daily operations instead of treated as a signal that the system itself needs to change.

What teams see	What the system is doing
Deals still close	Manual dependencies increase
Workarounds keep things moving	Effort is hidden across roles
Tools feel sufficient	Inefficiency compounds

Perception reinforces this behavior. Many organizations view their current tools and workflows as "good enough" because outcomes are eventually achieved. As one ad sales leader put it, "Email is my CRM." Success is measured by whether deals close, not by how much effort and time it takes to assemble, revise, and approve them. The cumulative cost of that effort remains largely invisible, especially when it is spread across sellers, operations, and support teams.

Qualitative insights from interviews with senior leaders across media owners reinforce this pattern.

Why Friction Persists

Leaders consistently described fragmented data environments, where information and historical campaign assets reside across CRM systems, SharePoint, marketing drives, and personal folders. CRM resistance also surfaced repeatedly. Sellers avoid additional system entry when it feels like administrative "busywork," particularly when the personal value is unclear. Teams rely on email threads, spreadsheets, and offline processes to coordinate deal construction.

As a result, inefficiency persists without clear ownership. No single team sees the full end-to-end impact, and no single breakdown feels significant enough to trigger change.

Instead, inefficiency compounds quietly as deal volume and complexity increase. What began as a manageable workaround becomes embedded into how pre-sales operates, masking the true cost until scale makes it impossible to ignore.

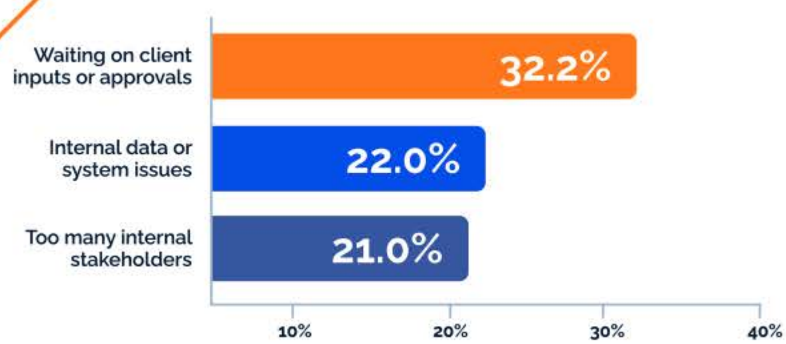
When friction is normalized and absorbed through workarounds, pre-sales inefficiency can coexist with strong revenue performance, at least for a time. The cost only becomes visible when growing deal volume exposes how much coordination and rework pre-sales is carrying behind the scenes.

Deal Delays Are a Systems Failure

Why stalled deals reflect operating design, not sales execution

Normalization does more than mask inefficiency. It also shapes how delays are understood and addressed inside the organization. When deals slow down during pre-sales, the root causes are overwhelmingly operational.

Most pre-sales delays are caused by systems and coordination, not seller execution.



Deal Delays Are a Systems Failure

Our research found that the most frequently cited source of delay is waiting on client inputs or approvals, which accounts for **32.2%** of reported slowdowns. Another **22.0%** stem from internal data or system issues, while **21.0%** are tied to coordinating across too many internal stakeholders. Together, these factors represent the majority of pre-sales delays, and none of them are driven by seller intent or effort.

That distinction matters. These delays are not the result of poor execution in the field, but of workflows that depend on sequencing, reconciliation, and manual coordination across disconnected systems and teams. As deal terms evolve, progress stalls while inputs are gathered, validated, and approved, often outside the systems meant to support the process.

This also explains why incremental fixes rarely hold. Pushing teams to follow up faster or tighten timelines does not remove the underlying dependencies that cause delays to recur. As long as deal construction relies on fragmented workflows and informal handoffs, the same friction points will continue to surface.

These delays are not random. They surface most consistently in a small number of recurring pre-sales activities, where data, coordination, and decision-making converge.

Top Pre-Sales Pressure Points

Market-validated pressure points

The operational burden of pre-sales is not evenly distributed. Quantitative research shows that it concentrates in a small number of core activities that sit at the center of deal construction and coordination.

Top pre-sales friction points identified by the market:

- **Pricing and inventory verification (48.6%)**

  Validating availability, rates, and packaging across systems introduces repeated manual checks and revisions, especially as deals change.

- **Incorporating client feedback and edits (45.6%)**

  Each round of feedback triggers downstream updates to pricing, proposals, and approvals, often managed outside core systems.

- **Proposal building and revision (44.8%)**

  Proposals require continuous rework as inputs shift, approvals lag, or deal terms evolve, increasing cycle time and coordination effort.

- **Internal approvals and sign-off (45.4%)**

  Approvals span multiple stakeholders and tools, creating delays when information is incomplete or misaligned.

- **Contract and IO handoffs (33.8%)**

  Transitioning deals from pre-sales into execution introduces risk when details are re-entered, reformatted, or reconciled manually.

- Across these activities, the risk is not theoretical.

44% of respondents report that manual errors such as pricing mistakes or missed deadlines **"always"** or **"frequently"** derail work.

These pressure points share a common characteristic:

- **Dependency.**

  Each relies on timely inputs from multiple teams and systems. When any input changes, work must be reassembled manually, amplifying effort and delay.

- **Qualitative insights from interviews with senior leaders across media owners reinforce this pattern.**

  Teams consistently describe pre-sales effort clustering around coordination, reconciliation, and revision – not because of edge cases, but because this is how deals are built today.

- **These pressure points matter because they are repeatable and predictable.**

  Pre-sales friction does not stem from isolated breakdowns, but from a small set of activities where coordination, data, and approvals consistently converge. How these points are handled determines whether pre-sales inhibit growth or become a lever for scale.

What the Market Wants Automated

Where teams prioritize impact in pre-sales

Teams want relief where coordination consumes the most time – and where improvement unlocks measurable upside. When asked what faster, more capable tools would enable, respondents pointed out potential gains:

60.6% say it would free more time for strategy, 46.8% say it would accelerate deal closures, and 45.5% say it would reduce errors.

Research shows a clear pattern in how teams prioritize automation. The highest priority is **approval and workflow management**, cited by **30.0%** of respondents. This reflects the operational drag created when signoffs depend on manual routing, incomplete context, or informal escalation across teams.

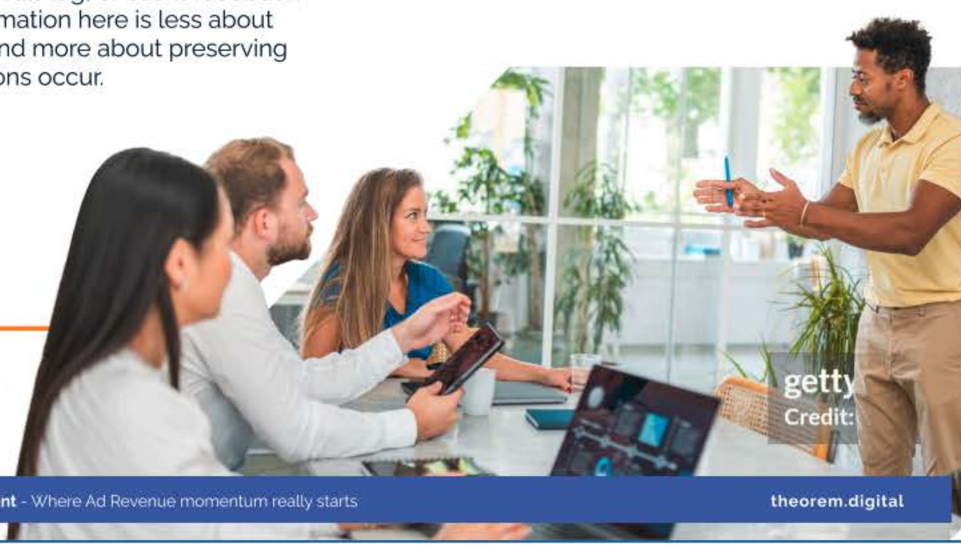
The next priority is **data ingestion and pricing accuracy**, identified by **21.4%** of respondents. As pricing, inventory, and packaging inputs shift during pre-sales, teams are forced to reconcile information across systems. Automating these inputs reduces rework and helps ensure that changes remain aligned as deals evolve.

Proposal and media plan generation follows closely, prioritized by **20.6%** of respondents. This underscores how much effort is consumed by building and reconciling data across systems as inputs change, approvals lag, or client feedback is incorporated. Automation here is less about document creation and more about preserving consistency as revisions occur.

Taken together, these priorities reinforce a consistent message. Teams are not asking for automation everywhere. They are asking for relief where coordination, dependency, and repetition consume the most time and introduce the most risk. The focus is on workflows that span systems and stakeholders, not isolated tasks.

The pattern reflects a broader shift in how pre-sales work is understood. As manual coordination declines, time reallocates toward strategy, client alignment, and revenue growth. The move is not from one tool to another, but from administrative overhead to strategic engagement.

That shift sets the stage for rethinking the operating model itself.



The Downstream Impact of Pre-Sales Inefficiency

How early-stage inefficiencies ripple through execution and revenue

When variability is introduced at the front of the order-to-cash process, its effects ripple across execution, delivery, and revenue recognition. They carry forward into execution, introducing risk and rework long after a deal is signed.

Inconsistent or manually reconciled inputs from pre-sales often surface during order setup and ad operations execution. Small discrepancies in pricing, inventory, or packaging require last-minute clarification, adjustments, or make-goods, pulling operational teams into reactive work that could have been avoided upstream. What appears manageable during pre-sales becomes more costly once deadlines and delivery commitments are in play.

These issues also place added strain on finance and revenue operations. Orders that require correction or clarification slow billing cycles and complicate reconciliation, reducing confidence in forecasts and revenue reporting. As variability moves downstream, teams spend more time validating and correcting work than improving efficiency or performance.

For leadership, the impact shows up as unpredictability. Cycle times stretch unevenly. Execution risk increases as volume grows. Scaling becomes harder not because demand is lacking, but because the organization is compensating for variability introduced earlier in the process.

This is why pre-sales inefficiencies cannot be treated as isolated sales issues. When variability enters the system at stage one, it propagates through every step that follows. Addressing it upstream is critical to reducing downstream risk, improving reliability, and sustaining growth as deal complexity increases.

Manual vs Purpose-Built Automation

Why operating model matters more than individual tools

At this point, the question is no longer what manual pre-sales costs the organization, but whether the operating model itself is fit for scale. The challenges facing pre-sales are not the result of isolated gaps or underperforming tools. They are the outcome of an operating model that was never designed to support the volume, complexity, and coordination demands of modern media sales.

In a manual pre-sales model, work is distributed across disconnected systems and informal processes. Information is gathered, reconciled, and passed along through a combination of emails, spreadsheets, decks, and point tools. Progress depends heavily on individual knowledge and effort. When inputs change, work is reassembled. When approvals stall, teams improvise. Scale is achieved by adding effort, not by increasing efficiency.

Purpose-built automation approaches the work differently. Instead of treating pre-sales as a collection of tasks, it treats it as a coordinated flow. Pricing, inventory, proposals, approvals, and revisions are connected through governed workflows that make dependencies visible and manageable. Changes are absorbed systematically rather than manually, and ownership is clear at each step.

The difference is not speed alone. It is predictability and control. In a purpose-built model, pre-sales effort scales with demand because work moves through defined paths, not personal workarounds. Errors are reduced because inputs are validated once and reused. Approvals are faster because context travels with the work.

The difference between manual and purpose-built automation is not effort. It is the transformation of presales into a high-performance intelligence system.

Manual vs Purpose-Built Automation

This shift matters because it reframes what improvement looks like. The goal is not to make teams work harder or faster. It is to design pre-sales so that execution is consistent, visible, and resilient as volume grows.

Manual Pre-Sales	Purpose-Built Automation
Deal Intake Opportunity details pulled from multiple sources; information re-entered or reformatted.	**Purpose-Built** Opportunity data flows directly into pre-sales workflows with shared context.
Pricing and Inventory Pricing and availability via disconnected spreadsheets / calendars, emails, manual overbooking risks.	**Purpose-Built Automation** Pricing and inventory validated through connected systems with governed rules (replacing silos with real-time sync).
Proposal Assembly Proposals rebuilt or heavily revised as inputs change.	**Purpose-Built** Proposals assembled from connected components that update as inputs change.
Revisions and Feedback Client feedback triggers manual rework and coordination across teams.	**Purpose-Built** Revisions propagate across pricing, proposals, and approvals without restarting work.
Approvals Approvals routed informally with limited visibility and context.	**Purpose-Built** Approvals routed through structured workflows with clear ownership and context.
Handoff to Execution Deal details re-entered / reconciled, bundles mismatch ops line items causing resell.	**Purpose-Built Zero-Error Handoff:** Validated details flow OMS-ready, no rekeying, or downstream defects.

Upward by Theorem: Purpose-Built Automation for Pre-Sales

The operational patterns described in this research point to a consistent conclusion: reducing pre-sales friction requires automation designed specifically for how media deals are constructed, revised, and approved before execution begins.

General-purpose workflow tools can address isolated tasks, but they rarely resolve the underlying coordination problem that spans pricing validation, proposal construction, stakeholder approvals, and execution handoffs. When these steps remain disconnected, teams continue to rely on manual reconciliation across systems and stakeholders.

Upward by Theorem was developed to address this structural gap. The platform applies **purpose-built automation to the pre-sales stage of the order-to-cash lifecycle**, connecting the activities that define deal construction into governed workflows.

Rather than replacing existing infrastructure, the system is designed to operate alongside established tools such as CRM platforms, inventory systems, and operational applications. This approach allows organizations to introduce automation within existing environments while reducing the manual coordination that typically occurs across disconnected systems.

Within this model, several capabilities become critical to stabilizing pre-sales execution:

- **Connected pricing and inventory validation,** ensuring that rates, packaging, and availability remain aligned as deals evolve.
- **Structured proposal construction,** where proposals are assembled from validated inputs rather than rebuilt during each revision cycle.
- **Governed approval workflows,** providing visibility into ownership, decision points, and deal status
- **Managed revision cycles,** allowing feedback and updates to propagate across deal components without restarting work
- **Clean execution handoffs,** where finalized deal structures transfer into downstream systems without manual re-entry or reconciliation.

When these functions operate within a connected environment, the nature of pre-sales work changes. Teams spend less time coordinating information across systems and stakeholders, and more time evaluating opportunities, shaping proposals, and aligning with client objectives.

In this way, purpose-built automation shifts pre-sales from a coordination-heavy process to a structured intelligence layer within the revenue lifecycle.

What It Takes to Automate Pre-Sales at Scale

From fragmented manual coordination to a high-performance intelligence system

Automating pre-sales workflows at scale determines whether revenue execution is stable or fragile under growth.

In manual environments, variability is managed through coordination. Pricing changes, revisions, and approvals trigger reconstruction across disconnected systems. As deal volume increases, so does exposure to delay, inconsistency, and margin risk.

Purpose-built automation replaces reconstruction with governed continuity.

Achieving that continuity requires five capabilities:

Connected pricing and inventory intelligence

Pre-sales must establish shared validation logic so availability, rates, and packaging remain synchronized as deals evolve.

Explicit approval governance

Approval routing, ownership, and visibility

Structured proposal workflows

Proposals built from connected components rather than rebuilt with each revision, and updates that cascade predictably as deal terms evolve, protecting accuracy and compressing cycle time.

Clean execution handoff

Finalized deals must flow into operational systems through structured, validated data alignment.

Managed feedback and revision cycles

Client feedback integrated into aligned workflows without resetting downstream approvals or pricing logic.

At scale, these capabilities transform pre-sales into a high-performance intelligence layer within the revenue model. Deal construction becomes governed, transparent, and resilient under change. Pricing integrity, approval governance, and inventory constraints are enforced as deals are built, not corrected after execution. Revenue confidence increases because margin exposure is addressed before a deal moves forward.

What Changes When the Pre-Sales Workflow Is Purpose-Built

From activity management to revenue confidence

When the workflow is purpose-built and embedded, variability no longer destabilizes deal progression. Pricing changes, revisions, and approvals move through defined pathways rather than triggering reconstruction.

Deal velocity becomes more predictable under growth. Complexity increases without multiplying coordination effort.

The character of work shifts as well. Time previously spent reconciling inputs and repairing inconsistencies reallocates toward shaping recommendations and strengthening client alignment. Teams prioritize high-performing client chemistry rather than repetitive administrative correction.

Risk posture changes. Margin exposure is identified before execution.

Approval thresholds are enforced before commitments are made. Inventory constraints are surfaced before they become delivery problems. Financial integrity moves upstream.

Leadership visibility expands. Bottlenecks, workload imbalances, and deal risk surface while opportunities are forming, not after downstream friction appears. That upstream visibility strengthens bottom-line integrity and reinforces revenue confidence.

Pre-sales evolves into a High-Performance Intelligence System within the revenue engine – not as an added layer, but as a governing layer that stabilizes growth and supports strategic operational excellence.

What This Means for Revenue and Operations Leaders

Implications for CROs, COOs, RevOps, and Ad Sales leadership

Pre-sales is often treated as a black box – a web of emails, spreadsheets, and informal coordination that sits upstream of execution. For revenue and operations leaders, the mandate is broader than refining individual sales steps. It is establishing governed control over how deals are constructed, validated, and transferred into execution from the earliest stage of order to cash.

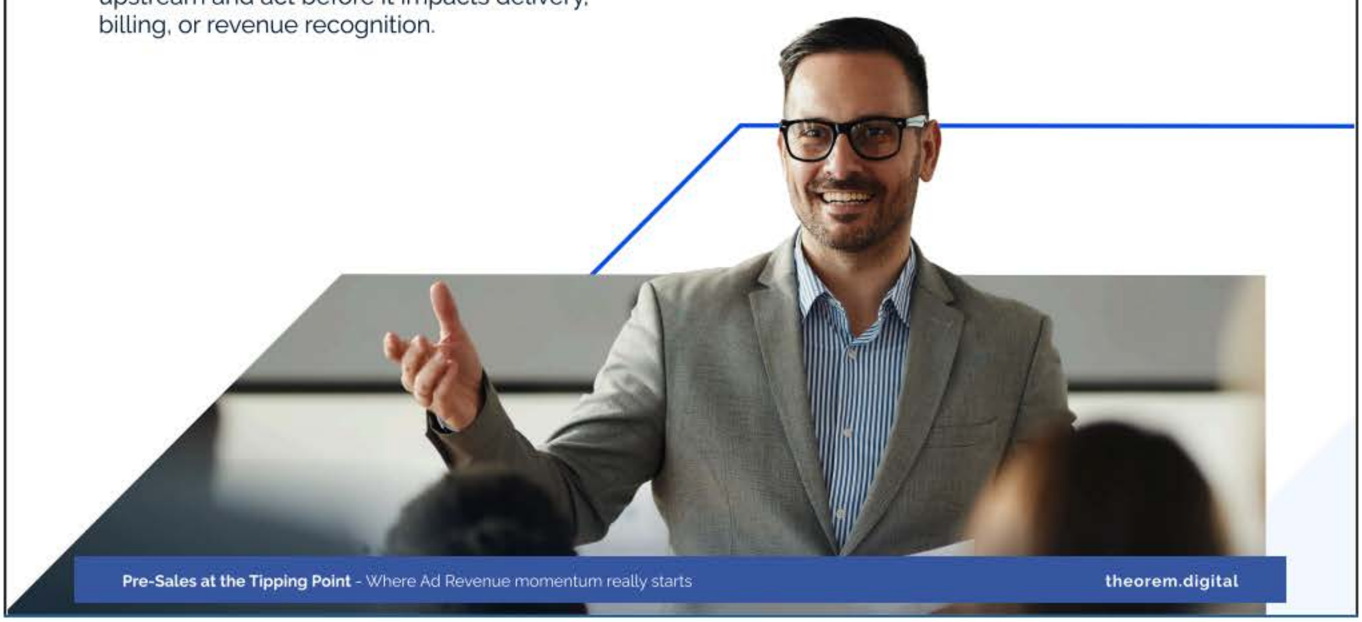
When pre-sales is manually coordinated, leaders are forced to manage by exception. Forecast confidence depends on heroics. Capacity planning is reactive. Scale introduces risk rather than leverage. Decisions are made with incomplete visibility into where time, effort, and risk are accumulating.

Purpose-built automation changes that dynamic. Leaders gain earlier and more reliable insight into deal progress, bottlenecks, and capacity constraints. Instead of discovering issues downstream, they can see pressure building upstream and act before it impacts delivery, billing, or revenue recognition.

This shift also changes how growth is pursued. Scaling revenue no longer requires a proportional increase in headcount or manual oversight. Pre-sales capacity grows through structure and consistency, allowing teams to take on more complex opportunities without sacrificing execution quality or governance.

For CROs and ad sales leaders, this means sellers spend more time engaging clients and shaping proposals, and less time navigating internal friction. For COOs and Rev Ops leaders, it means fewer handoff failures, cleaner execution, and stronger alignment between sales commitments and operational reality.

Ultimately, orchestrating pre-sales reframes leadership focus. Instead of managing around variability, leaders can design for it. That shift creates the foundation for sustainable growth, predictable execution, and greater confidence across the entire revenue lifecycle.



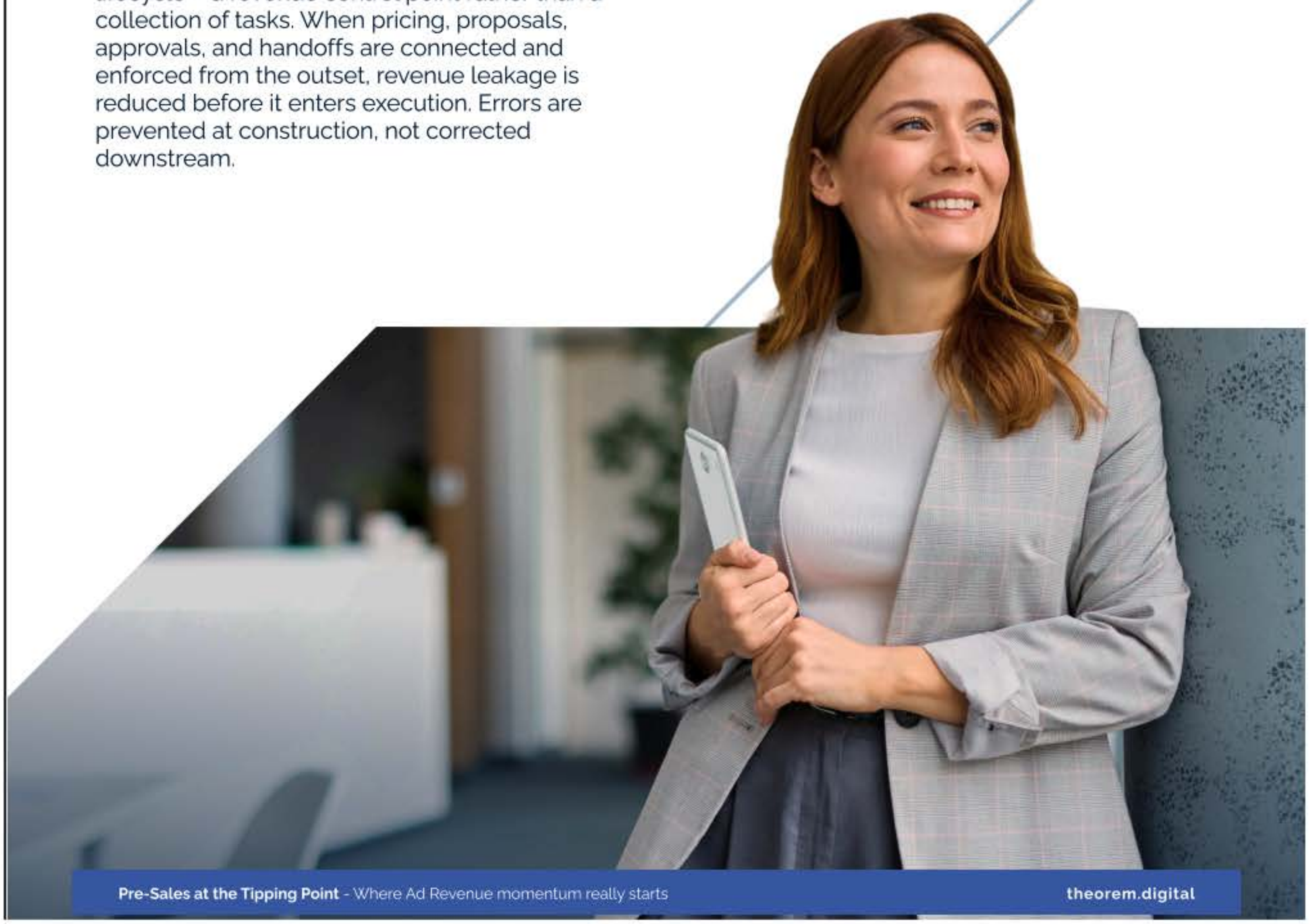
What This Means for Revenue and Operations Leaders

A Clear Path Forward for Pre-Sales

The challenges facing pre-sales are not new. What has changed is the tolerance for inconsistency. **77%** of respondents surveyed in our research reported manual errors in pricing or deadlines, and **92%** described themselves as satisfied with their current tools. Organizations have learned to live with friction. Meanwhile, those that adopted automation reported **56%** higher win rates. The performance gap is measurable.

The opportunity lies in treating pre-sales as a governed Stage 1 layer of the order-to-cash lifecycle – a revenue control point rather than a collection of tasks. When pricing, proposals, approvals, and handoffs are connected and enforced from the outset, revenue leakage is reduced before it enters execution. Errors are prevented at construction, not corrected downstream.

This is not workflow repair. It is deliberate engineering of the first stage of revenue production. By designing pre-sales as a governed system, organizations establish financial integrity at the moment commitments are made. Risk is surfaced upstream. Margin exposure is contained before it scales.



What This Means for Revenue and Operations Leaders

Pre-sales shifts from constraint to stabilizing force. Upward delivers the intelligent glue between RFP and OMS – connecting systems without requiring rip-and-replace disruption. Revenue is not secured at signature; it is locked in during pre-sales, where pricing, approvals, and commitments are constructed.

Upward is built specifically for this control point. As the first stage of the order-to-cash lifecycle, pre-sales determines execution quality, financial integrity, and delivery performance. By connecting systems, structuring workflows, and governing decision points, complexity is managed within the system rather than absorbed through manual effort.

The result is a visible, reliable revenue layer. Margin exposure is addressed before execution. Leadership gains earlier insight into deal health and capacity strain. Alignment between sales intent and operational reality strengthens at the point of commitment.

By reinforcing pre-sales at the origin of revenue momentum, organizations scale with confidence, protect financial integrity, and deliver on client commitments with precision.

As deal complexity increases and organizations are asked to scale without proportional headcount, the reliability of Stage 1 in order-to-cash becomes a defining factor in revenue performance.

Pre-sales can remain a coordination layer held together by effort. Or it can evolve into a governed intelligence system that protects margin, strengthens revenue confidence, and stabilizes growth.

The organizations that treat pre-sales as infrastructure, not administration – will be the ones positioned to scale deliberately rather than reactively.

The tipping point is no longer about whether to improve pre-sales. It is about whether the revenue engine is designed to sustain the growth it is expected to deliver.

The Inflection Point

Pre-sales has reached an inflection point. For years, manual coordination and informal workarounds were tolerable. Growth absorbed the friction. Teams compensated. Deals still closed.

That margin for inefficiency is narrowing.

Thanks for reading

About UPWARD

Purpose-built for Media and Entertainment, Retail Media, and streaming brands, UPWARD helps organizations streamline business processes, and enhance scalability by automating every stage of the OTC process. UPWARD automates the most complex workflows, enabling unparalleled growth and operational excellence across the Ad Rev Ops ecosystem.

Build a Stronger Foundation for Revenue Execution

Pre-sales directly shapes how efficiently revenue moves from opportunity to execution. When pricing, proposals, approvals, and handoffs stay connected, teams can reduce rework, improve visibility, and scale with greater confidence.

Talk with our team to learn how Upward supports the first stage of order-to-cash, or sign up for the beta to get an early look at a more connected way to manage pre-sales.

Contact us today to learn more about how UPWARD is automating excellence.

To Learn More Visit

Sign Up for the Beta

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