

Atlas

Generative Research: Risks & Opportunities in Customer Expansion



My role: UX Research Lead

Stakeholders: Head of Product, Design & Go-to-Market, CTO

Timeline: 6 weeks | August - September, 2024

Project Overview

Product	• Atlas, a B2B SaaS product • Built to offset cold outreach through warm introductions to accelerate business operations.
Users	• Professionals in Venture Capital & Private Equity
Problem	• The current user base is too niche - the total addressable market (TAM) isn't large enough to sustain the business's growth plans.
Objective	• Understand risks and opportunities with expanding go-to-market efforts to a new customer segment: <u>sales professionals</u>.
Approach	• Generative research: Competitive & market research to build domain knowledge, apply domain knowledge to in-depth user interviews.
Outcome	• Increased confidence in path forward to pursue segment, resulting in a new suite of signed “sales” customers. • Library of competitive research artifacts to equip cross-functional partners in Sales, Customer Success and Product Management.

1. Product Overview

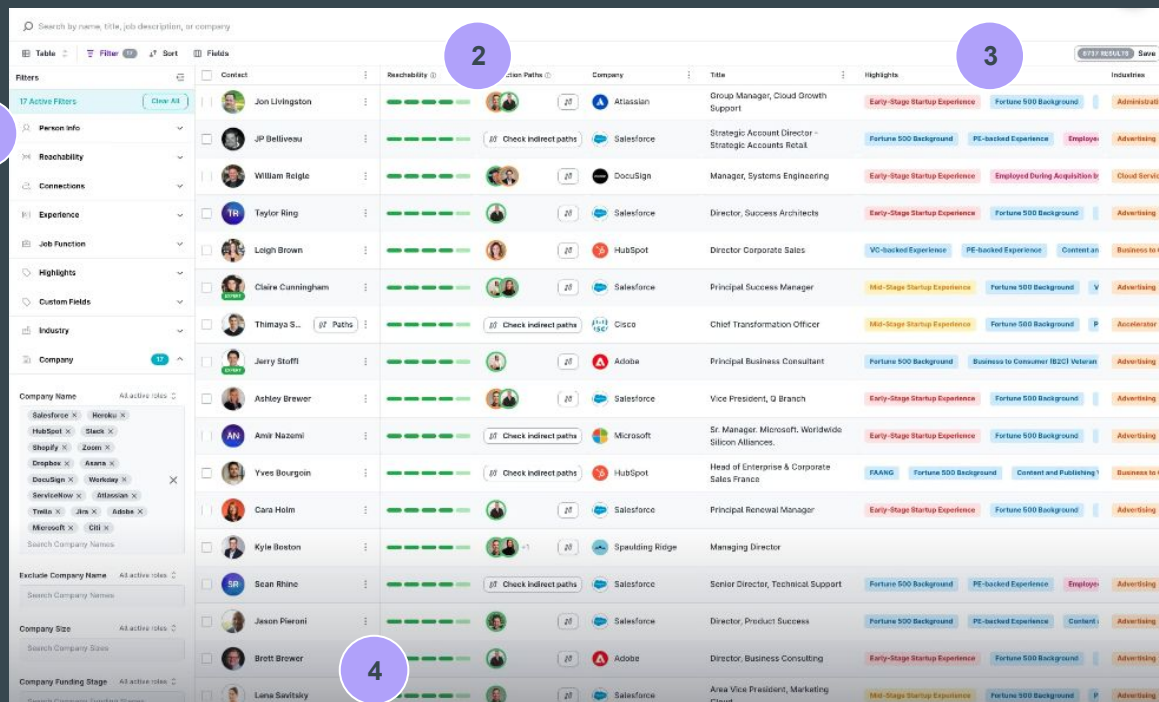
1. Product Overview

What is Atlas?

- B2B SaaS tool
- Built to accelerate business operations through *warm introductions*.

Key features

1. Robust “people search” functionality
2. Connects to email and calendars to inform “relationship strength”
3. Indexes a *collective* organization’s professional network
4. Seamless contact upload process

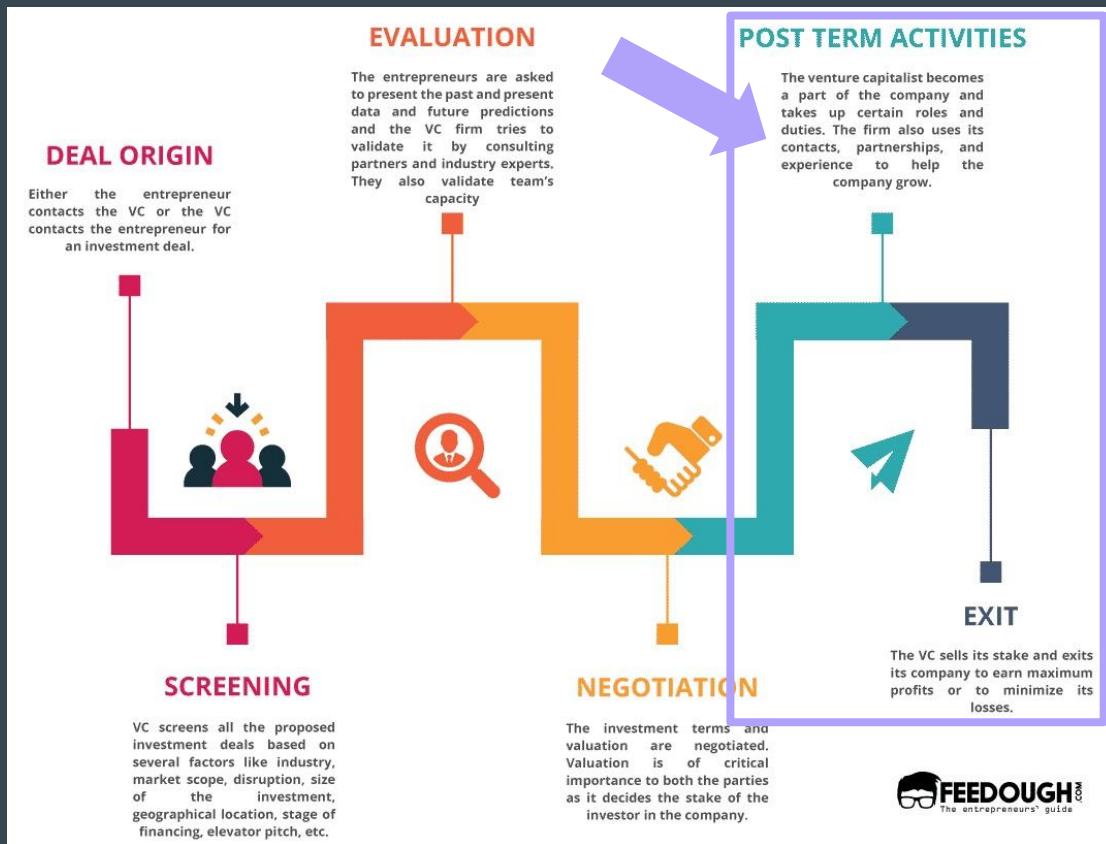


2. User Overview

2. User Overview

Who are Atlas users?

- Professionals in **Venture Capital & Private Equity**
- Provides post-investment support, or **“value creation”**
 - *Ex: Head of Talent, Platform or Community*
- No buying power, but has influence
- Accelerate their objectives through warm introductions
 - *What are their objectives?...*



Typical Venture Capital Process

2. User Overview

What are their objectives?

- Support portfolio companies in preparing for IPOs, acquisitions, or follow-on investments.
- They do this through:
 - Talent strategy & operations
 - Business guidance and advice
 - Access to subject matter experts
 - Organizing and executing community events
- Their impact has a more indirect impact on their firm's bottom line.

Value Creator Vicki



Titles

Head of Platform, Head of Community, Platform Partner, Director of Talent

Seniority

Senior, Director, VP

Industry

VC, PE

Funnel Stage

primarily post-deal

Stakeholders

Portfolio founders, Firm partners and investor

Job responsibilities

Talent projects, customer intros, event planning, network management

Tools

- Email
- Spreadsheets
- Text/whatsapp
- LinkedIn
- Salesforce, HubSpot, Affinity
- Getro, Consider
- Professional communities - VC Platform

"There's no playbook for my job. I have to figure it out on my own."

Motivators



Value Creation

I succeed when our portfolio companies succeed.



Being indispensable

Finding ways to articulate my impact earns me trust and influence at my firm.



Organization

Organizing details about people helps me feel more in control and effective when multiple projects are in the air.



Efficiency

Saving time making introductions means that I can make more introductions.

Pains



Status Quos

There's isn't a tool for people in my role & I don't see the same value that my teammates see in our techstack



Switching costs

My team can be hesitant to adopt new tools. They don't want to duplicate efforts or further silo our data.



No job "playbook"

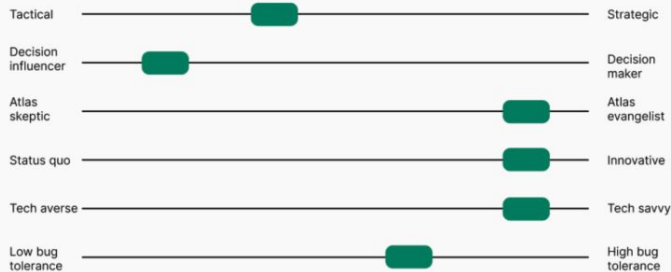
Platform is a relatively new function, I'm often learning as I go & performing functions I know little about (talent)



Unscalable processes

Relying on my team to keep spreadsheets & other static documents updated is unrealistic.

Behavior & Influence



3. Problem Statement

3. Problem Statement

We saw signs of product-market fit with our current customers...

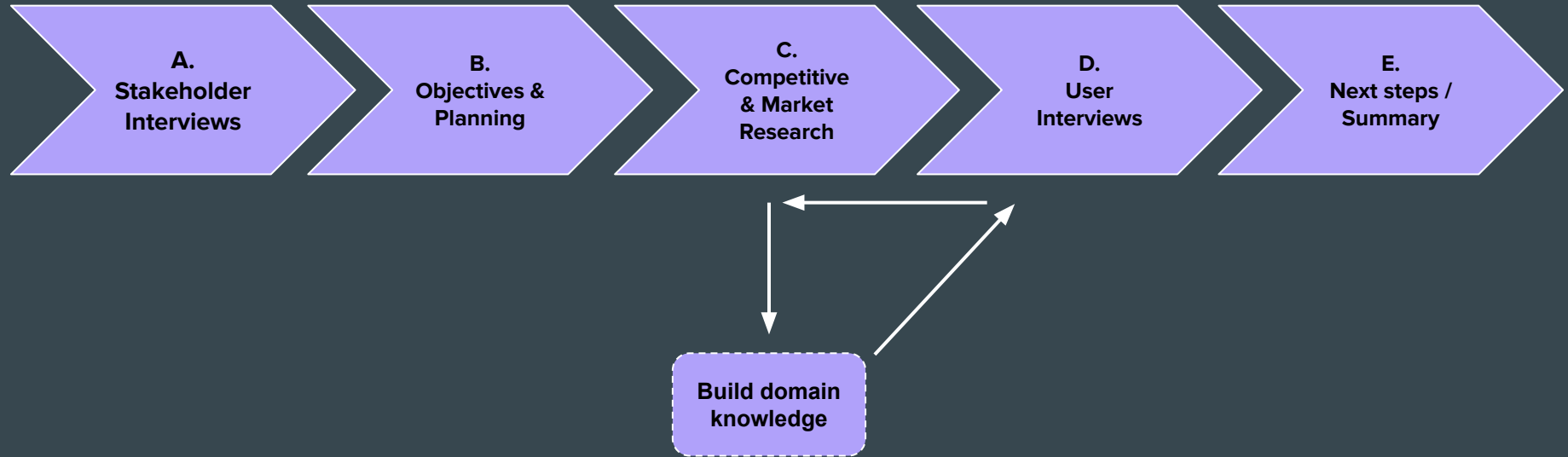
...But their *limited buying power, small total addressable market, and the product's lack of value for their top-of-funnel colleagues* signaled the need to expand our go-to-market efforts to sales teams at private companies.

The challenge? We didn't know if we could win them yet.

4. Approach

4. Approach

Understand the trends, tools and the unsolved problems of people in sales roles.



4a. Stakeholder Interviews

4a. Stakeholder Interviews

Why I did this

1. Understand *business objectives*
2. Align on how this *supports product strategy*
3. Define knowns, unknowns & *assumptions*
4. Determine *approach* and timeline

Who I talked to

1. Head of Product
2. Head of Design
3. SVP of Sales
4. VP of Go-to-Market
5. CTO

4a. Stakeholder Interviews: What I learned

Business objectives

Assumed increase in ARR with a “sales” customer profile.

- More purchasing power
- Gaps in the market for sales prospecting software

Product objectives

Assumed overlap in use cases with the current customer profile

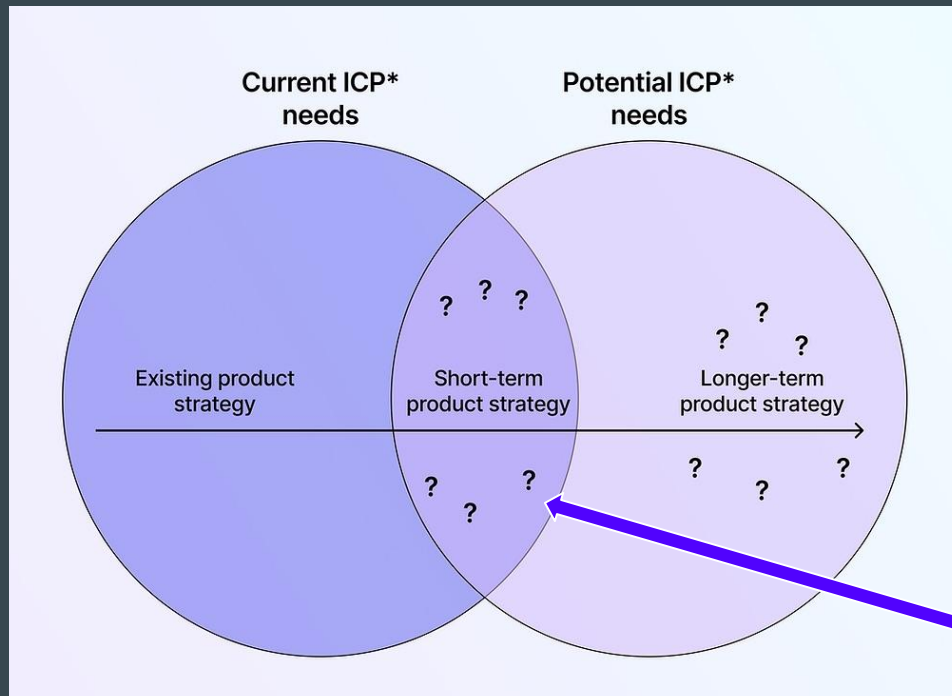
Unknowns

1. Holistic **understanding of the sales tech stack** and what it unlocks
2. What **specific player** in the sales ecosystem would benefit the most from Atlas
3. How **macro challenges** impact day-to-day operations for this segment

4b. Define Research Objectives

4b. Defining Research Objectives

Dig into unknowns and assumptions.



*ICP = Ideal Customer Profile

1. Understand the **market**
 - **Unknown:** How macro challenges impact day-to-day operations for this segment
2. Understand **competitors**
 - **Unknown:** Holistic understanding of the sales techstack and what it unlocks
3. Understand the **“user”**
 - **Assumption:** Assumed increase in buying power + unmet needs.
4. Define **similarities & differences** between current & new customers.
 - **Assumption:** Assumed overlap in use cases with the current customer profile

4c. Planning

4c. Planning

Apply domain knowledge

Build domain knowledge

1. Research market trends

Understand macro-level trends and insights within the Sales function

- Trends
- Disruptions
- Role structures and responsibilities

2. Competitive Analysis

- Who are the biggest players in the space?
- How are they marketed?
- What do they unlock for their users?
- How do their capabilities compare to Atlas?

3. User Interviews

Understand the typical sales professional.

- What's their process?
- What's their techstack?
- How do market trends affect their day-to-day?
- Which of their problems have yet to be solved?

Why that approach?

I needed to **build domain knowledge** so that I could run effective user interviews.

I would speak with subject matter experts in Sales and reviewed market trends with sales software via sales forums and communities.

This would establish a baseline of domain knowledge that was built upon with user interviews and additional rounds of competitive audits as I learned of new technologies and problems through user interviews.

4d. Build Domain Knowledge

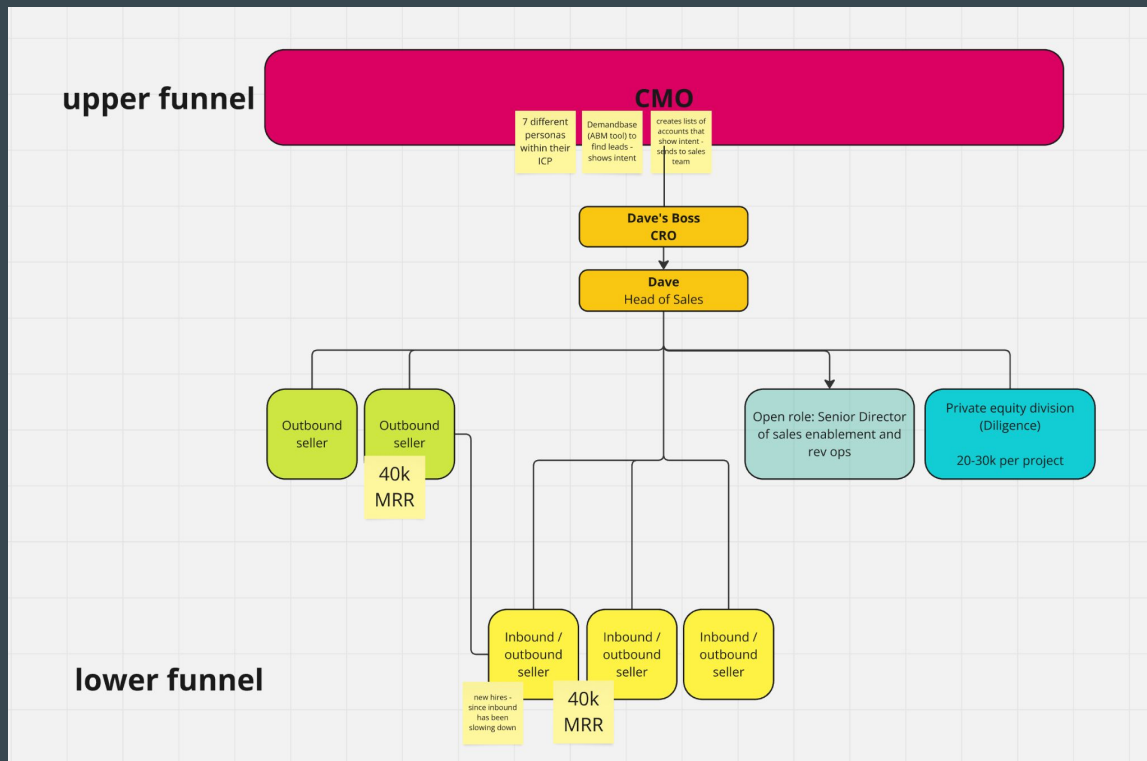
4d. Building Domain Knowledge: Approach

2 interviews with subject matter experts in Sales

- Understand roles and responsibilities
- Trends they've observed
- Common sales tech stacks
- Deeper dive into prospecting: roles, responsibilities, challenges

Competitor & market research

- Review how competitors position themselves
- Review their capabilities
- Sales forums and articles



4d. Building Domain Knowledge: High Level Insights

Day-to-day Implications for Sales Teams

Macro Challenge	Day-to-day Implication	Opportunities
Economic downturn	Mid-Sr. Sales players are absorbing more manual, time consuming tasks due to team restructuring	- Easily centralize all known relationships I have access to - Qualify and rank all relationships to help me understand strength of relationship - Stronger relationships = strategic advantages to cut through noise - Weaker relationships = future inroads if I can nurture / grow them - Thought leadership and evangelize internal referral structures
AI & Oversaturation	Increasing battle for attention	
Reduced morale & team culture challenges	Lack of incentives = siloed relationship insights	

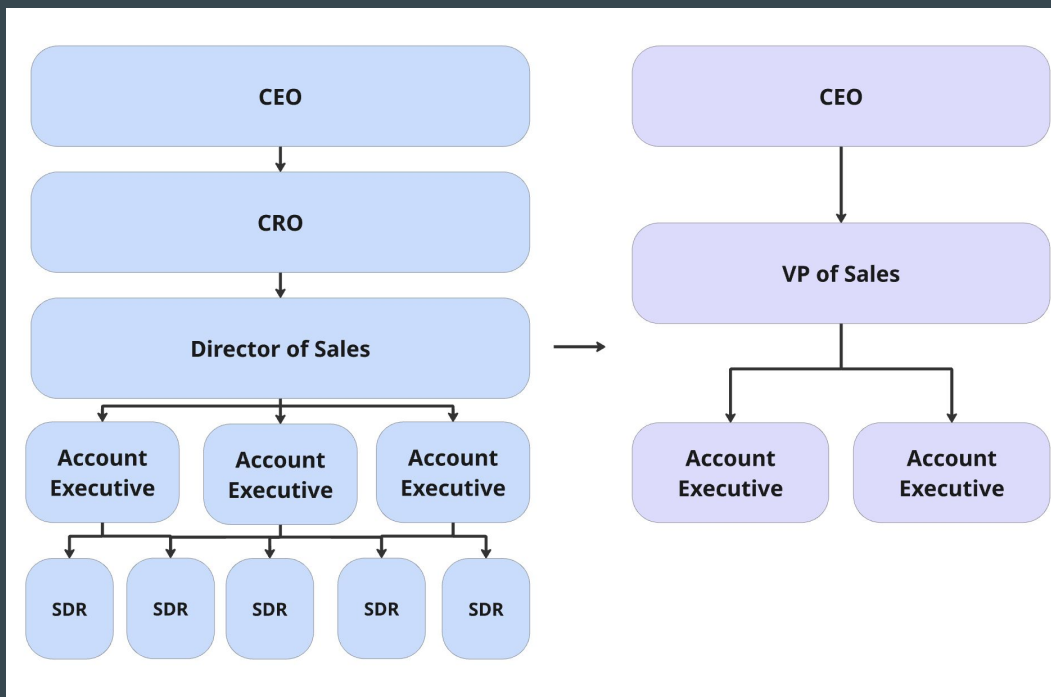
4d. Building Domain Knowledge: Insight

💡 Roles & responsibilities are consolidating due to economic downturn.

To cut costs and boost efficiency, companies are shifting their sales teams toward “full-stack” account executives.

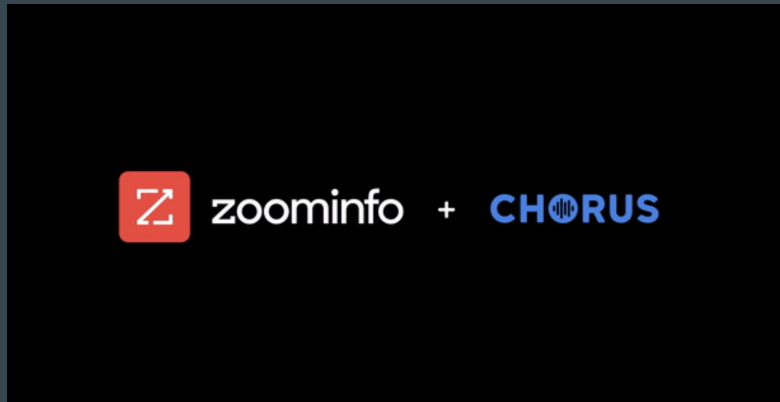
This trend extends to leadership, with more Director+ roles taking on individual contributor work.

👉 This insight **challenged** our initial assumption that this segment has larger budgets to spend on software.

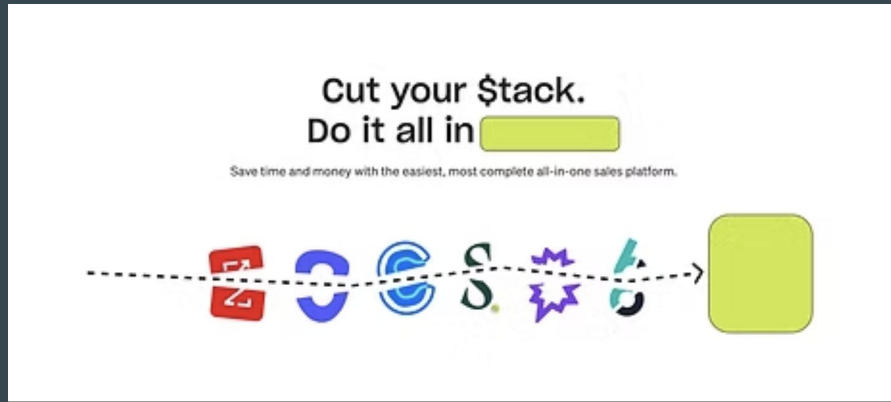


4d. Building Domain Knowledge: Insight

💡 Competitors have adapted to decreased budgets and the rise of “full-stack” roles by marketing themselves as “full-stack” solutions.



Larger companies acquire smaller products with more specific solutions to add to the longitudinal value of their own platform.



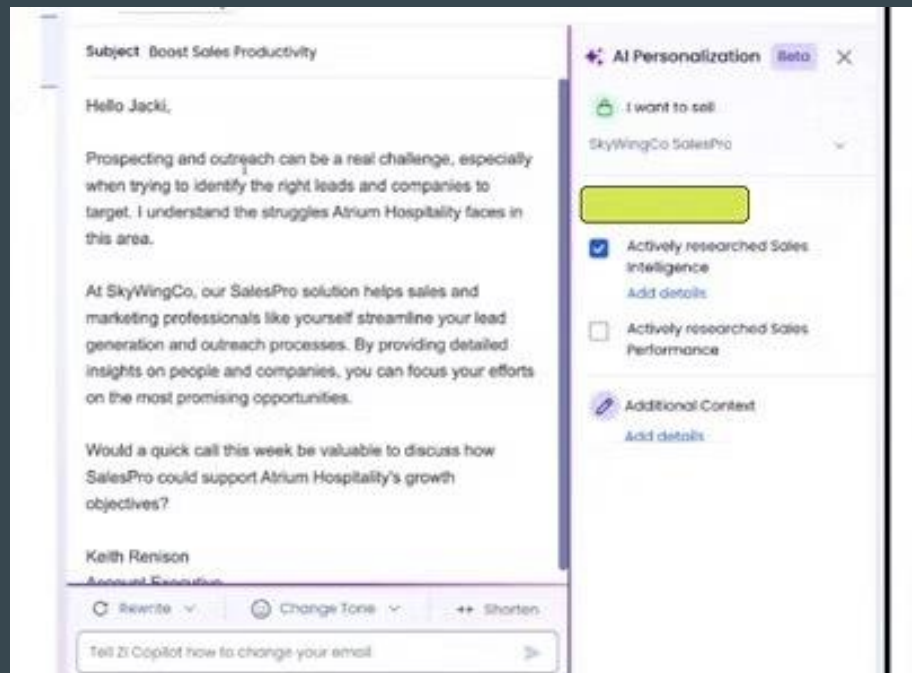
Apollo.io markets itself as an all-in-one platform with the value prop of reducing operational costs for sales teams.

4d. Building Domain Knowledge: Insight

💡 The rise of AI enables cold outreach at scale, making the attention market more saturated and difficult to win.

*“Prospecting **just takes time** if you're going to do it effectively.”*

👉 This insight **supported** our initial assumption that there's opportunity space within this segment.



Prospect's inboxes are more crowded than ever with low quality cold outreach powered by sales engagement tools.

4d. Building Domain Knowledge: Competitor Research

The competitive review helped me understand, from a capability and category perspective, how different sales software compares to Atlas and what problems they solve for their users.

Outcome: This ended up being used as collateral for our sales and customer success team better answer the question “What makes you different than [xyz]?”

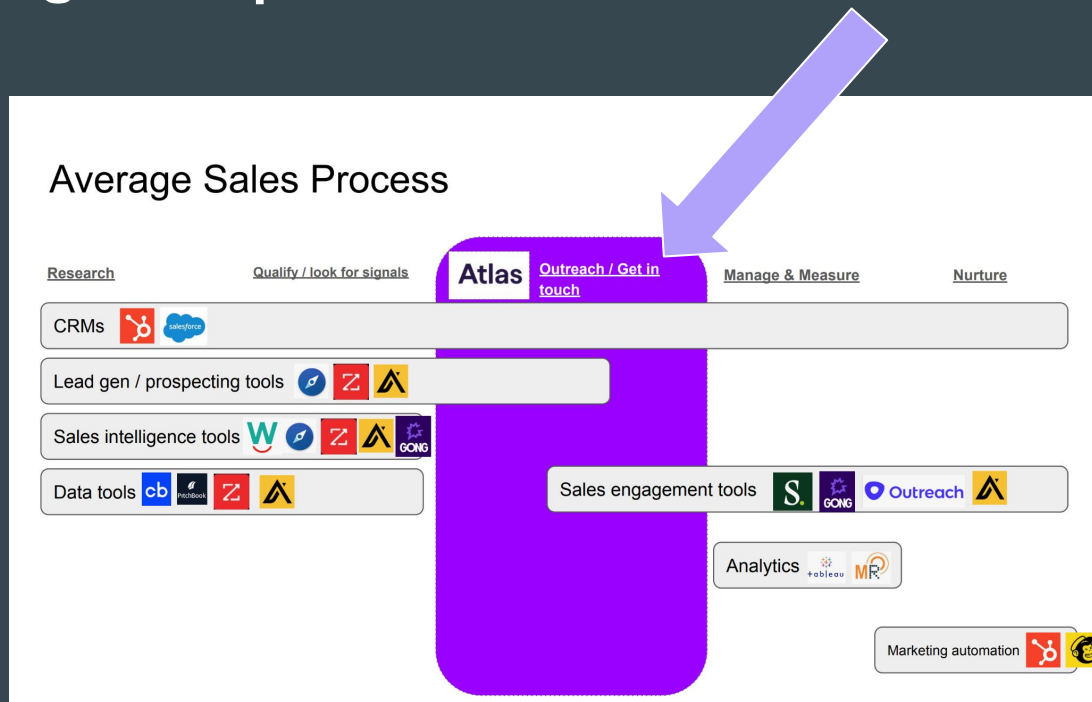
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4d. Building Domain Knowledge: Competitor Review

I categorized each tool into different categories, focusing on which part of the sales process they supported and which problems they solved.

Key learnings

- Heavy crossover per category per tool
- Sales intelligence is a highly competitive market
- Notable opportunity to add value to the outreach step



Recap: Domain Knowledge

Research Objectives	Insight	How this informed next steps: User Research
1. Understand the market	💡 Roles & responsibilities are consolidating due to economic downturn.	Informed recruitment criteria • Account Executives, SDR/BDR, Director of Sales. • Small / medium-sized private companies. • Heavily involved prospecting process.
2. Understand Competitors	💡 Competitors have adapted to decreased customer budgets and the rise of “full-stack” roles by marketing themselves as “full-stack” solutions	• Understand how “full stack” tools fit into their end-to-end sales process. • What problems DON'T those tools solve?
3. Understand the “user”		
4. Define similarities and differences between current and new users	💡 The rise of AI enables cold outreach at scale, making the attention market more saturated for prospects.	• Understand their current tactics and blockers for “breaking through the noise” during the outreach phase of prospecting. • Understand if and how warm introductions play a role in their process and how they approach it.

4e. User Interviews

4e. User Interviews

Methodology

- 30-45 minute in-depth interviews, conducted remotely
- Spoke with 15 participants in total

Recruitment

- Screener survey circulated on LinkedIn
- “Dogfood” Atlas for intros to targets
- Focus on “full stack” AE profile at small / medium sized private companies

Constraints

- No budget to compensate research participants meant shorter interviews

Research questions

1. What are some tools that you cannot do your job without?
2. What do those tools unlock for you?
3. What do you wish those tools did better?
4. What's the procurement process like?
5. Walk me through your prospecting process, what takes the most time?

"I would say, definitely name dropping. I'm like, oh, I saw you know x y z person. Like, I know her from college or something like that. So definitely just, like, name dropping if we have somebody that we both know and common."

“But if I see that the person I’m reaching out to knows somebody that I know or, like, is a mutual connection in some way. Being able to be, like, hey. Like, look, we both know this person or, like, getting that in is massive”



4e. User Interviews: Insight



Their colleagues outside of the core sales team have impactful relationships or inroads to prospects, but often go overlooked.

"Like, we always get kind of annoyed when we're like, you know that person?! Like, why didn't you tell us?"

"It's honestly more so just frustrating when I stumble upon things, stuff like, oh my gosh you know this person really well. How have we never had a meeting with them at this point?"

But, like, I wish there was a better way that we could see, like, a bird's eye view of, like, who everybody's connected with

Participant 1



Quick Facts

- Senior manager of Partnerships
- Sports industry
- Company size: 35
 - Sales team: 4
- 50 customers, limited TAM
- Sales target: 1M/y
- 3 month sales cycle

"Like, we always get kind of annoyed when we're like, you know that person?! Like, why didn't you tell us?"

Pains

- Since her industry is so tight knit and small, TAM is finite and word gets around
 - *"It can feel like high school"*
- **Unknown / unrealized network potential** because her adjacent teammates's networks aren't visible to her
- **Growing pains** (professional development) May feel like she has too much autonomy at times
- **Team culture challenges** - doesn't feel like everyone on her team feels safe enough to speak up about problems or ideas
- When finding a connection pathway she's often skeptical that it's a guaranteed way in.

Contradictions

- *"I'm not gonna go ask our head of engineering who probably only knows other engineers [for help]"*

Insights

- Sports is a tight knit industry - **everyone knows everyone**
 - *may have learned this the hard way?*
- Wants to balance the give / get dynamic
 - *"I'm also offering myself up 'if I can ever help you..."*
- Advanced filtering and targeting experiences help her find more people
- As a top performer, she has a lot of influence when it comes to their tech stack
- **Teammates are unlikely to speak up unless they're incentivized to do so**
- **Beta curious** - Mentions that her friends are in product and took extra time to ask about Atlas

4e. User Interviews: Tooling Insights

Beta curious, likes software that makes them “look smart”

“I love tools that I can use that make me look really smart. That make us look really smart and really advanced.”

“Yeah I love learning about new tools, can you tell me about the product you’re working on?”

Has notable influence when it comes to new tooling.

*“...your pool of who you can reach out to is a lot smaller, which means you have to be more strategic in that sense. **And that’s where I definitely would use any tool.** Like, you’re grasping at straws a lot of the time to continue growth.”*

“Yeah I’m one of the top performers, if I approach my boss with a tool that I think could help me be more productive he would be supportive.”

- Ended up signing up for a trial

4e. User Interviews: Tooling Insights

Relatively happy with how their techstack uncovers leads, but getting in touch with leads efficiently is still a problem to be solved.



4e. User Research: Jobs to be Done

1. *When I'm trying to get in touch with prospects, I need a way to stand out in their inbox because their attention is in high demand by other people like me.*
2. *I need a "bird's eye view" of all the relationships that I might be able to leverage to accelerate my workflow. I often wonder how many opportunities I have left on the table because I didn't have a warm introduction.*
3. *I need to optimize the time I spend on cold outreach by being confident that it is the best path to get in touch with someone.*
4. *I need to future-proof my career by building new relationships and nurturing existing relationships.*

4e. User Research: Snapshot Persona

Goals / Motivators

- **Showing results** - my role directly impacts the bottom line
- **Lasting impressions** - I'm very social and love making lasting in-person connections
- **Growing** what I've built (network, skills and reputation)
- **Maximizing ROI**

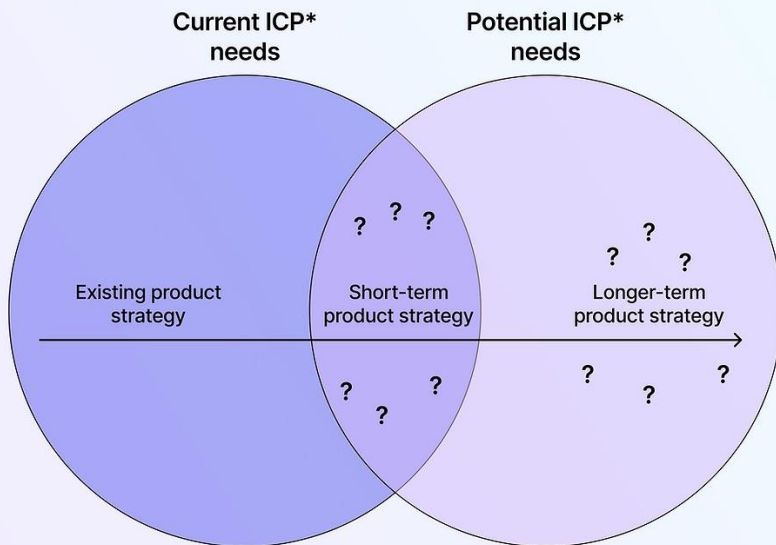
Pains

- Feeling micromanaged by metrics-driven outcomes
- Differentiating myself in saturated markets
- Not having enough support as I take on more responsibilities
- Asking for intros over and over again starts to feel uncomfortable and transactional
- Unaware of certain intro paths that help me get in touch with prospects more quickly

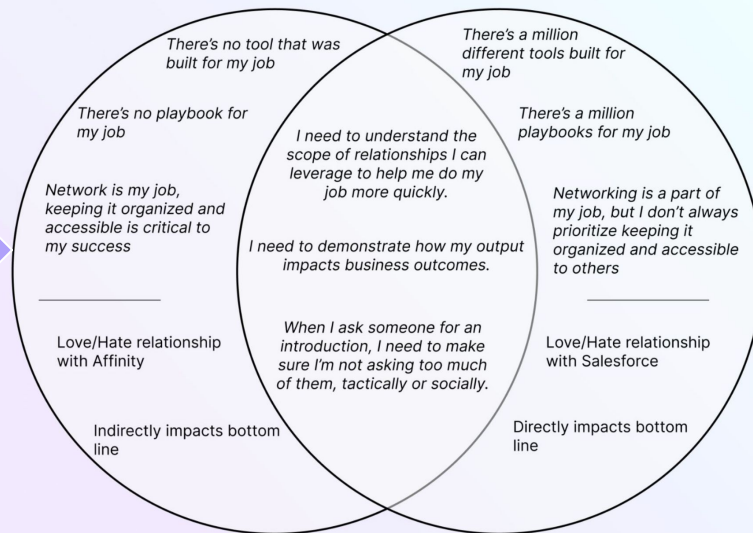
Opportunities

- Be more proactive in warm intros
 - Engage teammates who aren't incentivized to / aware of prospecting efforts
- Better prepare for events
- Modern UI / UX - classic sales tools are notoriously ugly
- Increase confidence in outreach strategy
- Integrate and consolidate data and insights

4e. User Research



VC / BD Venn Diagram



Atlas

Recap: User Interviews

Research Objectives	Insight	Key recommendations
1. Understand the market 2. Understand competitors 3. Understand the “user” 4. Define similarities and differences between current and new users	It is incredibly challenging to stand out in the saturated email inboxes of prospects and leads.	1. It's risky to continue to invest in functionality that aligns with “Sales intelligence” software. Rather than competing against them, we should consider how to integrate with those tools. 👉 Path forward: Open API (Implemented) 2. It's critical that we make it as easy as possible for colleagues to import their networks to Atlas. 👉 Path forward: Continue to iterate on improving the “passive” user experience. 👉 Path forward: We need to clearly define and articulate the value prop of Atlas to equip users to “sell” the ask. 3. We should focus on and prioritize the areas of overlap between the current and new ICPs before committing to more niche functionality 👉 Path forward: Complete MVP “path to connect” feature and invest in optimizing and expanding our relationship data sources.
	Their colleagues outside of the core sales team have impactful relationships or inroads to prospects, but these often go overlooked.	
	They're relatively happy with sales intelligence software but feels that it leaves them at a dead end.	

Outcomes

- Increased confidence in the path forward on how to approach this new customer segment
 - Value proposition position**
 - Feature developments**
 - Open API for integrations and richer data
 - Improved relationship visualization
- Onboarded 5 new “sales” customers while maintaining existing customer base.
 - Revenue ~\$36k
- Delivered materials to enable sales & customer success teams to articulate differences between Atlas and similar products in the market.
 - Competitive research
 - List of sales communities and upcoming events where they could demo Atlas
- Dogfooded the product and flagged multiple usability issues and bugs

MARKET SCALE

The platform for warm commerce

Our global network is powered by one of the largest and most advanced data infrastructures in the market. Every day, we process

The screenshot displays a user profile for Jeff Dwyer with a 'HIGH' status indicator and the text 'your team can likely reach Jeff Dwyer'. Below this is a section titled 'Paths To Connect' with a count of 201. It features two tabs: 'Direct' and 'Indirect'. The 'Indirect' tab is selected, showing a list of connection paths. Each path includes a sequence of user avatars, a description of the connection (e.g., 'via Joe Lind and James Kebinger'), and a progress bar of green bars. A mouse cursor is hovering over the path 'via Winfield Peterson and James Kebinger'. On the right side, a partial view of another user profile for Joe Lind is visible, showing his title 'VP of Engineering' and affiliation 'Hunt Club'.

Reflection - What I'd Do Differently

- Usability testing with Sales ICP
 - Stress test if what they say aligns with what they do
 - Understand gaps in the current state of Atlas
 - Prompt: Identify an introduction to your ICP
- Refine screener survey after first few interviews
 - Initially I spoke with people in more niche roles and industries
 - Media
 - Non traditional sales roles (auto industry, brick and mortar services)
- Potential diary study
 - Pending budget / time - lots of operational overhead