MarketStar

Growth Decoded

Episode 2 Transcript

SMB Vs. Enterprise Sales — The Playbook For Scaling Up With Paul Williams

Introduction

[1:01] Paul Grant: Welcome to Growth Decoded by MarketStar. I'm Paul Grant, and I'm thrilled to be here with Paul Williams.

Paul, it's great to have you with us today. Atlassian's enterprise pivot has been fascinating to watch. To kick things off, could you tell us a little about your role and your experience leading enterprise sales teams throughout your career?

[1:26] Paul Williams: Thanks for having me, Paul. I definitely appreciate it, and hello to everyone watching.

I've been in enterprise sales for quite some time and joined Atlassian about three and a half years ago. My role today focuses on Enterprise Strategy Planning, which connects strategy to the work that actually gets done across organizations.

Specifically, I work with portfolio leaders and others responsible for deciding where to invest their time and resources, while helping them track the outcomes of the work being delivered.

Section 1: The Enterprise Pivot: Building for Larger Customers

[2:05] Paul Grant: In your experience, how have these dynamics shifted your team's go-to-market priorities over the last two or three years?

[2:17] Paul Williams: Like many companies, Atlassian started as a product-led organization. Over the last three and a half years, we've expanded our enterprise solutions to better serve the enterprise market.

The biggest shift has been in how we engage customers, but it also required significant internal changes. We now have dedicated teams supporting strategic accounts, enterprise accounts, mid-market, and SMB, while our overlay team supports all of those segments.

The enterprise motion is very different. There are more decision-makers, longer sales cycles, and additional considerations when forecasting opportunities, quoting products, and delivering demos. It's a fundamental shift that required us to set new expectations internally.

Now, three and a half years later, the company is executing well against that model. We've intentionally aligned people to focus on specific market segments because the SMB and enterprise motions are very different.

What really drove that evolution was our customers. We naturally started moving upmarket, and that forced us to adapt. We had to establish new expectations—not only for how we engage with customers, but also for how we operate as an organization.

[4:01] Paul Grant: If you compare enterprise expectations today with your time at Microsoft or IBM—both large-scale enterprise sales organizations—what feels fundamentally different about what you're driving today at Atlassian?

[4:19] Paul Williams: Companies like IBM moved into the enterprise much earlier. If you look at how IBM is structured from a sales perspective, it's very similar to Microsoft, SAP, and many other large enterprise organizations. There's a reason those models exist—they generally work well.

At Atlassian, though, we weren't necessarily beholden to those structures because we're a software-native company. We're more nimble, which has allowed us to create processes that work for us.

Those larger organizations have well-established processes, which is valuable, but they also come with a level of rigidity. We don't necessarily have that at Atlassian, and that's been liberating because it gives us the flexibility to move quickly and build processes that fit our business.

[5:11] Paul Grant: That's a great advantage. Being able to chart your own course is especially valuable as market dynamics continue to change.

You and I have seen enterprise sales evolve dramatically. Many of the legacy playbooks and rigid processes that organizations relied on for years have been disrupted. Today's sales motions have to align with how customers buy, and that buying behavior has changed significantly.

[5:45] Paul Williams: I think AI is driving much of that change. It's transforming sales models, changing how customers interact with vendors, and raising expectations on both sides.

We've already seen AI become a major force disrupting traditional sales models, and I think it's going to continue changing how companies engage with each other over the next several years. It's going to be a fascinating evolution to watch.

[6:14] Paul Grant: We were looking at some recent data, and one statistic really stood out.

Around 40% of buyers today are self-serving using AI tools, compared to somewhere in the mid-20% range just two years ago. That's an incredibly rapid shift.

When you think about what lies ahead—how purchasing habits will continue to evolve and how enterprise buying criteria may change—it's fascinating to imagine what the future could look like.

[6:48] Paul Williams: That's the interesting part—none of us really knows.

We all have ideas, but I don't think anyone would have predicted two years ago just how quickly things would change.

The expectation now is that this pace of change will continue, if not accelerate.

The real question becomes: How do you build an organization that's nimble enough to adapt? How do you take advantage of these shifts to gain market share, serve customers better, and differentiate yourself from competitors?

[7:35] Paul Grant: That leads nicely into the next topic: the structural differences between SMB and enterprise sales motions.

From your experience, what have you seen? The same playbook doesn't necessarily apply across both markets, does it?

[7:59] Paul Williams: It really doesn't.

When you look at SMBs, they're smaller organizations, typically much more price-sensitive, and there are fewer buyers involved. The way you align with customers and engage them is simply different.

They expect you to move quickly—as quickly as they do. Even though they're trying to solve many of the same business challenges, it's really a matter of scale.

They're asking, "How do I do things faster, better, and cheaper? How do I gain an edge that helps me differentiate in my market?"

Those challenges are similar, but the environment they're operating in is very different.

Section 2: SMB vs. Enterprise: What Changes

[8:40] Paul Williams: They all have those challenges. The difference is that, in SMB, there are fewer decision-makers. From a sales perspective, that means we can get access to the people who can actually make decisions much more quickly. There are simply fewer steps.

With the enterprise, as you mentioned, there can be anywhere from 11 to 16 stakeholders, depending on the organization. Just when you think you've finished selling, another group becomes involved. There are always additional stakeholders, so you're really running multiple sales campaigns simultaneously with people at different levels.

The altitude of your messaging has to change depending on who you're speaking with, and you have to demonstrate value at every step.

When large organizations make a change, it typically involves a significant investment of both time and money. One thing I think salespeople often underestimate is the level of risk. Making a change is inherently risky because large companies can't pivot quickly. They can't simply decide they're going in a different direction after investing months in the process.

In many cases, they're making decisions nine, 12, 18, or even 24 months before they expect those changes to take effect. They have to think much further ahead because of the time required to implement change, adopt new technology, and bring the organization along.

Smaller companies can pivot much more quickly because there are fewer people involved. That's one of the biggest differences.

I've seen that challenge in every organization I've worked for, and Atlassian is no exception. We experienced that same transition as we moved from SMB into the enterprise.

[10:40] Paul Grant: It sounds like you've been at the helm of that transition and have charted a great course for Atlassian.

What were the signals that told you it was time to move upmarket? What made you decide it was the right time to make that shift?

[10:58] Paul Williams: It depends on what you're selling because different products require different motions. Some products still follow more of a product-led, flywheel motion, and they're successful that way.

The products I'm responsible for have always required more of an enterprise sales motion. That created an interesting dynamic because Atlassian has historically been a product-led company, but with the acquisition of this particular product line, we suddenly found ourselves selling at a much higher level within organizations.

That required everyone to adapt to a different sales motion.

In our case, the signals were already there. We knew the people facing the challenges we were solving were senior leaders, so we always knew we needed to move in that direction.

At the same time, many of our products were still being sold primarily to developers or technical users. What Atlassian has done is complete that picture.

Eventually, executives consume the work that developers produce. They're responsible for funding it, measuring it, or making strategic decisions around it. We realized we needed to connect those different layers.

That's where our "System of Work" comes in. It's our philosophy for how organizations operate today.

At the foundation are the people doing the work. Above them are the leaders determining what work gets prioritized, how success is measured, and whether the investments the organization is making are actually paying off.

Moving up that chain became a natural progression.

What's exciting is that we've spent years delivering value at the practitioner level. Now we're expanding that value to every level of the organization, all the way up to executive leadership.

To do that, we have to demonstrate business value. We need stronger ROI conversations and what we call a Business Value Assessment. We have to meet customers where they are and show how completing that picture creates additional value across the organization.

It's rarely a sudden pivot where you decide to sell to the enterprise overnight. It has to be an evolution.

You continue adding value until customers recognize that it makes sense to engage leaders higher up in the organization.

Otherwise, your product is simply another tool. Whether it's a red tool or a blue tool doesn't really matter.

The real question is: What business value does it create when it's connected to everything else the organization is trying to accomplish?

[14:18] Paul Grant: Thanks for sharing those insights.

Another major difference between SMB and enterprise sales is procurement. Enterprise sales almost always involve navigating a complex, multi-threaded procurement process.

What are some of the approaches you've developed with your team to navigate that buying cycle successfully?

Section 3: Repeatable Enterprise Sales Plays

[14:50] Paul Williams: That's everyone's favorite topic as a salesperson—working with procurement.

Their job is often to commoditize what you're selling, which is why value selling becomes so important.

It starts with working closely with your executive sponsor to understand the business outcomes the organization is trying to achieve. Once you understand those outcomes, you can build a value case. You can also better understand the company's risk profile and how they make purchasing decisions.

[15:32] We've implemented mutual action plans throughout the sales process. We ask questions like, "If we're successful here, who else needs to approve this? Who else needs to review it? Who needs to be involved before we can move forward?"

I remember working on a multi-year agreement where the approval process for a three-year contract was completely different from the one-year agreement we'd completed previously. We had to learn that process together with our sponsor.

It required constant communication.

[16:10] We also focused on demonstrating value throughout the process. We showed what business as usual looked like, compared it to the future state, and quantified the value of making the change.

One thing that may sound counterintuitive is that we engaged procurement early.

We introduced ourselves, asked them to explain their process, and understood exactly what they expected from us. They walked us through every step.

That open line of communication stayed in place throughout the engagement, which eliminated much of the uncertainty and guesswork.

[16:53] Instead of asking, "When do you think this will happen?" we knew exactly where we were in the process.

Ask specific questions. Pressure-test the process to make sure everyone understands it. Document every step, then build your timeline backward from your target execution date.

When you do that, you remove almost all of the uncertainty from the process.

[17:19] Paul Grant: That's brilliant advice, Paul. I love that.

[17:25] Paul Grant: At MarketStar, more often than not, we're navigating procurement cycles as well.

I'd echo the importance of building that relationship and establishing strong advocacy within procurement. More importantly, it's about understanding the outcomes they're trying to achieve. Over time, those relationships can significantly accelerate growth, rather than viewing procurement as simply a checkpoint you have to pass before reaching a decision-maker.

[17:56] Paul Williams: Another benefit is that it removes some of procurement's leverage at the very end of the process.

Instead of receiving a last-minute request for an additional discount—which can throw a wrench into the deal and affect the profitability model you've built with your CFO and the rest of the organization—you've already established the value.

They understand the business case and have aligned around that value from the beginning, which makes those final conversations much easier.

[18:19] Paul Grant: Thanks, Paul. I appreciate those insights.

Section 4: Building Enterprise Readiness

[18:25] Paul Grant: Let's shift gears a bit.

You've had a tremendous year at Atlassian. You shared some impressive results with me—around 40% year-over-year ARR growth and roughly 20% year-over-year top-line revenue growth.

Talk to us a little about the repeatable elements of your enterprise playbook that have enabled that level of success.

[18:55] Paul Williams: It starts with understanding the outcomes the customer is trying to achieve. From there, you work backward and quantify the value of getting there.

If a customer wants to implement a particular piece of software, the first question is why. What are they doing today, and what outcome are they trying to achieve?

If they're trying to solve something that isn't economically feasible or simply isn't the right problem to address, it's better to identify that early, recommend a different approach if necessary, and move on.

[19:40] From there, we use mutual action plans to keep everyone aligned.

At the enterprise level, you almost have to manage the sales process like a project. You need to determine when to align with your executive sponsor, when to involve procurement, whether the security team needs to participate, who the stakeholders are, and what each of them cares about.

You also need to understand how each stakeholder will evaluate the value of the solution. Only then can you build a business case that's truly meaningful.

We're building what I call a maturity model.

[20:15] The idea is to meet customers where they are by assessing their current level of readiness. We evaluate whether they're prepared to take on a solution like this, identify any gaps, and address those early so we don't discover major misalignments several months into the engagement.

[20:35] Paul Grant: You've mentioned something else that I found really interesting—a maturity model. Can you walk us through what that is and how it helps ensure you're engaging customers at the right stage?

[20:46] Paul Williams: Absolutely. We use what I call a maturity model to meet customers where they are. The idea is to assess whether an organization is actually ready to take on the change they're considering and identify any gaps before we invest months working together.

One thing I've learned is that successful transformations always come down to three things: people, process, and technology.

Ironically, process and technology are usually the easy parts. You can hire consultants to redesign a process, and you can always buy new technology.

Technology is the easy part—you can buy it. But you shouldn't buy tools to solve a people problem or a process problem.

[21:42] Organizations sometimes assume a new tool will fix adoption or alignment challenges, but if the people aren't ready, the project is almost guaranteed to struggle.

That's why we spend time understanding whether the organization can absorb the change, whether expectations are aligned across stakeholders, and whether everyone is actually prepared for what's ahead.

If there's misalignment, projects fail. If there's alignment, execution becomes much smoother because everyone has already bought into the vision before implementation even begins.

[22:33] Paul Grant: There's a lot in there that really resonates. More than just our first names, I think we're aligned on quite a few principles.

One thing you mentioned earlier that really stood out was how you've managed to significantly increase your average contract value as you've moved upmarket.

Most companies assume that moving upmarket automatically leads to larger deals, but we often see those transitions stall. What do you think allowed you to successfully increase ACV?

[23:02] Paul Williams: The first thing is recognizing that enterprise customers don't automatically buy more simply because they're enterprise customers.

If you don't establish value early, you'll often get pushed into a small pilot engagement. Sometimes that's perfectly fine if you have a strong land-and-expand strategy, but you need to build that expectation into your financial model because expansion may take six months or even a year.

Enterprise organizations move deliberately. They often want to test the waters first.

[23:50] I think you have to make sure your initial deployment is large enough to demonstrate meaningful business value. If the implementation is too small, the impact won't be significant enough to justify broader adoption.

That's why value creation has to be intentional from the very beginning.

[24:20] Paul Grant: One final question on this topic.

If you had to point to the single biggest accelerator in your enterprise growth journey, what would it be?

[24:32] Paul Williams: Interestingly, I don't think there is just one thing.

Enterprise success comes from consistently doing a number of fundamentals well.

If I had to prioritize one, though, it would be aligning everything around the customer's desired business outcomes. You need to understand their business deeply enough to speak intelligently about the challenges they're trying to solve and clearly demonstrate how your solution addresses those challenges.

[25:00] That sounds simple, but in enterprise selling it's much harder than it appears.

You also have to communicate that value differently depending on who you're speaking with. Every stakeholder has different priorities, different responsibilities, and different success metrics.

Your message has to remain consistent, but the way you frame that message needs to be tailored to each audience.

When you do that well, you not only win larger deals—you build long-term relationships that continue delivering value long after the initial sale.

Section 5: Enterprise Leadership & Execution

[25:11] Paul Grant: As companies make the transition from SMB to enterprise, what would you consider the non-negotiables of a successful enterprise sales playbook?

[25:24] Paul Williams: The biggest mindset shift is moving away from selling products and toward selling business outcomes.

You have to understand what your customer is trying to achieve and anchor every conversation around those desired outcomes—not around product features.

The second non-negotiable is continuously proving value.

[25:56] And that doesn't stop once the contract is signed. You need to demonstrate value before the sale, throughout the buying process, and long after implementation.

That's especially important in enterprise organizations because people move. The executive who championed your solution today may be in a different role six months from now. New stakeholders inherit existing initiatives all the time.

Your job is to leave behind a clear record of the business value your solution delivers, so whoever takes over understands why those decisions were made and why the investment continues to matter.

[26:42] Paul Grant: I completely agree. One of the biggest differences in enterprise sales is that value has to be reinforced throughout the entire customer journey—not just during the initial purchase.

We see organizational changes all the time. Champions become procurement contacts, business owners move into executive roles, and new stakeholders enter the process. When you've clearly established business value, those conversations become much easier to continue.

For CROs, CXOs, and go-to-market leaders preparing to make their first significant move into enterprise sales, what's the most important advice you'd offer?

[27:18] Paul Williams: First and foremost—listen.

Spend time with your customers.

I think many leaders become disconnected from what's actually happening in the field. Getting out and hearing directly from customers not only gives you better insights, it also demonstrates that you genuinely care about their success.

[27:52] I'd also encourage leaders to spend time with their own teams.

Your frontline sellers experience customer challenges every day, and those insights don't always make their way through the organization. The closer you stay to both customers and employees, the better equipped you'll be to make informed decisions.

Another critical responsibility is making sure everyone understands the engagement model.

Your teams need clarity around the mission, what's expected of them, and what's acceptable. They should feel comfortable asking questions and even making mistakes—as long as they're following a thoughtful process and learning from the experience.

[28:42] I always try to build what I call a "learn-it-all" culture instead of a "know-it-all" culture.

Business is evolving too quickly—especially with AI—for anyone to have all the answers. Curiosity and continuous learning have become far more valuable than pretending to know everything.

Finally, transparency matters.

Being open with both your employees and your customers builds trust. When people know you're genuinely listening, they're more willing to share what they're experiencing, and those conversations often surface the insights that lead to your next strategic pivot.

[29:36] If I could leave leaders with one recommendation, it would be this:

Stay close to your customers, stay close to your people, and be willing to evolve as the market changes.

[29:54] Paul Grant: That's excellent advice.

When you think about it, SMB sales are typically built for scale—high volume, fast execution, and relatively limited customer interaction.

Enterprise selling is fundamentally different.

It's about understanding each customer's unique business needs, meeting them where they are, and building relationships that begin with meaningful business impact and grow into long-term strategic partnerships.

And none of that happens without leaders being actively engaged—working alongside their teams, spending time with customers, and understanding how decisions are actually made inside enterprise organizations.

[30:50] Paul Williams: Exactly.

Section 6: The Future of Enterprise Sales with AI

[30:56] Paul Grant: Let's end on a forward-looking note. If you had a crystal ball, what do you think will matter most for enterprise sales over the next year or two?

[31:03] Paul Williams: Everyone expects the answer to be AI—and it is—but maybe not in the way people think.

The biggest change isn't simply that AI exists. There's really no excuse anymore for not understanding your customer's business.

Sales professionals now have the ability to understand a customer's business, industry trends, competitive landscape, and likely challenges in a matter of seconds. In the past, gathering that level of insight meant digging through annual reports, researching the market, and piecing everything together manually.

[31:42] Today, AI can do much of that heavy lifting almost instantly.

Because of that, customer expectations are changing.

Enterprise buyers won't be satisfied with a salesperson asking, "Tell me about your business." They'll expect sellers to arrive already informed and ready to have a strategic conversation.

I think that's where AI will have its biggest impact—not replacing salespeople, but raising the standard for how well prepared they need to be.

[32:18] Organizations that embrace AI to strengthen sales intelligence and customer understanding will have a real competitive advantage. They'll identify customer challenges faster, understand business priorities more deeply, and position their solutions much more effectively.

Ultimately, I think sales will become both faster and more effective. The velocity of the sales process will increase, but so will customer expectations.

[32:46] Paul Grant: That's a great perspective.

AI isn't just making sales teams more efficient—it's making buyers expect a much higher level of expertise from every interaction.

The companies that invest early in helping their sellers become better informed, more consultative, and more customer-centric will be the ones best positioned to succeed.

Paul, this has been a fantastic conversation. I really appreciate you joining us today. I think we could have kept talking for another hour.

[33:18] Paul Williams: Thanks for having me, Paul. I really enjoyed it.

[END]