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The Keys to Effective Strategic Account Planning

Key 10: Provide coaching and sponsorship to account teams as needed



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“The Keys to Effective Strategic Account Planning” is a best-practice model Performance Methods, Inc., has developed from our extensive client work in the strategic account management area as well as our affiliation with the Strategic Account Management Association. Chances are, if you’ve recently attended a SAMA event, you may have even been to a session bearing the same name. This model, based on 10 critical best-practice areas, establishes a SAM execution framework. In this article series, we “unpack” each key and provide insight into how global industry leaders achieve SAM excellence through effective implementation of best practices.

The keys to effective strategic account planning

1. Define “What is a strategic account?” and assess the ongoing fit.
2. Discover what the customer values most and validate it.
3. Assess and strengthen the account’s most strategic relationships.
4. Position and differentiate the supplier’s unique value with the customer.
5. Integrate and balance the account and opportunity planning processes.
6. Align the supplier’s objectives with the customer’s.
7. Develop and implement a proactive strategy to grow the account.
8. Engage the customer in the account-planning process.
9. Implement performance metrics to measure and track SAM execution.
- 10. Provide coaching and sponsorship to account teams as needed.**

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I once heard a strategic customer lament, “All of our suppliers get the big things right, but it’s the ones that also get the little things right that become our partners.” Contemporary strategic account management is about getting the big things *and* the little things right for the customer, and this has never been more vital than in today’s high-speed, high-pressure and complex business environment.

Examples of this abound in many aspects of life for practically all of us, whether we’re talking about our relationships, health, education or work. But think about sports for a moment – whether it’s the sports you play, the sports your kids play or the sports you watch on TV. Isn’t it true that it’s the little things that separate the great from the good, and the stars from the roster filler? Legendary American baseball executive Branch Rickey, considered by many the greatest innovator in the history of the sport, coined the phrase “Baseball is a game of inches.”

Couldn't the same be said of American football, soccer (real football!) or track and field?

But in no other sport is the difference between great and good calculated in margins as minute as in golf. If baseball is a game of inches, then golf is a game of millimeters. And when the difference between victory and defeat can be measured in millimeters, the value of *coaching* can separate glory from ignominy.

TaylorMadeGolf (a division of Adidas Group) understands the importance of coaching; in fact, they have built a business around it. Headquartered in Carlsbad, Cal., TaylorMade Golf is the industry leader in golf equipment innovations and is an organization with a deep understanding of the importance of coaching in the pursuit of performance excellence. Brian Coffman, TaylorMade's vice president of sales, offers this perspective: "Here at TaylorMade, effective coaching is at the essence of our business. In a sport where the difference in winning

and losing is frequently determined by the slightest of margins, coaching and preparation are critical. We believe that this is also true in the deployment of account management best practices with our customers, and we believe that effective coaching can be a driver of effective SAM performance as well."

In this article, the final installment in the "Keys to Effective Account Planning" series, we will discuss why effective coaching and sponsorship can be game-changers in strategic account management. We will examine who needs SAM coaching and unpack the areas where we have seen coaching have the greatest impact ("inflection points"). In many ways, modern SAMs are like today's star athletes: They must do many things right to be successful, and they must do them correctly almost every time. But just like in sports, it's the "little things" that distinguish the great from the good, and it's the impact of effective coaching (or lack thereof) that frequently determines whether the 25-foot putt drops into the hole or sadly rims the cup.

Why do today's account teams need coaching? (And who needs it?)

The demands on the contemporary account team are significant. They find themselves having to do difficult things for complex customers, and they must do many things simultaneously – no small task! To make matters worse, and even more complicated, they are typically operating in tandem with other team members, and, just as in synchronized swimming, keeping everyone in harmony and motion without bumping into one another can be quite a daunting challenge.

Consider your own account team and overall organization. If your account team is like most, then there are probably those who are considered by your customer to be *always needed* (to whom we will refer as core team members) as well as those who are *sometimes needed*. We'll call them extended team members. Both types are important, and both may be equally strategic to the relationship. But they are different, and their customer-facing roles reflect this.

The value that each team member, core or extended, creates and co-creates with the customer will be determined, in the end, by the customer. And when things start moving and everything seems to be in motion from an account-team perspective, that's when proactive coaching can be the most effective way to bring out the best in all of the "athletes" on your team. Most readers should be able to relate to the chart to the left (Fig. 1), as it must surely contain at least a few of the operational areas of your organization represented on your account team.

It's clear that when all of these moving parts are harmonized and

Figure 1



balanced, the likelihood of value creation and co-creation is significantly enhanced. Conversely, when this does not happen, and the customer hears conflicting messages from different people on the team, there is invariably a sense of confusion that can devolve into feelings of angst. Unfortunately, this can lead to the customer feeling as though he is being put at risk by the very people that should be there to mitigate his stress: his strategic account team.

The job of the strategic account team is to reduce the customer's sense of risk and exposure while delivering solutions, best practices, expertise and value to them. The role of the SAM coach is to facilitate this through proactive interventions that evolve data and information into insight and actionable awareness, with the intention that this be put to use immediately by the account team on behalf of the customer. We see the account manager, under any title, as the pivot point of coaching because, in highly successful implementations of SAM, these are the people who tend to be the great providers (and receivers) of coaching. This includes coaching to and from their managers as well as to and from their team members and peers. PMI managing partner Craig Jones has worked with the coaches and managers of many of our clients, and he puts it this way: "Some of the biggest challenges for SAMs include getting things done through others who don't report to them, as well as working effectively across the functional areas of their organizations. Coaching has proven to be a leadership skill that SAMs and their managers can leverage to facilitate internal alignment and ensure that the entire account team is on the same page."

When are account managers and their teams most in need of coaching?

The role of the SAM coach is to facilitate this through proactive interventions that evolve data and information into insight and actionable awareness, with the intent that this be put to use immediately by the account team on behalf of the customer.

SAM teams are in greatest need of coaching when they are approaching what might be referred to as the "critical success predictors" of account team alignment with the customer. It's what happens when account managers and their teams are confronted with these critical areas of SAM execution that typically determines their success throughout the lifecycle of the customer relationship. Effective account team coaching can serve to strengthen team-to-team alignment with the customer, and strong team-to-team alignment has been proven, again and again, to be one of the key catalysts for customer value creation and co-creation as well as the development and deployment of account growth strategies. (Note: The reader may want to refer to Article 7 in this series on developing and implementing effective account-growth strategies.)

We have examined the coaching dynamic at work in industry leaders from around the globe and have come to realize through these observations that there are fundamentally six critical predictors of success that tend to drive effective alignment, internally within the account team and then externally with the customer. We identify and describe these critical success predictors as follows:

1. Proactive Engagement with Customers
 - Not driven by service issues or sales opportunities
2. Optimal Resource Deployment with Customers
 - Helping customers gain access to key resources
3. Process Execution on Behalf of Customers
 - Utilizing key processes, tools, skills and teamwork
4. Growing Customer Sponsor and Supporter Relationships
 - Building increased levels of trust and credibility for you and your organization
5. Joint Collaboration and Planning with Customers
 - Collaborating with customers on achieving their business objectives and addressing their internal challenges
6. Value Creation and Co-Creation with Customers
 - Ensuring that your SAM efforts are focused on customer value creation and co-creation

Effective coaching can help account teams stay ahead of the curve and be more proactive with their customers, rather than falling behind in meeting expectations and becoming more reactive. This goes hand in hand with ensuring that the strategic customer has access to the resources that are most important to their success, an issue that comes up over and over in meetings that we have with client customers. Sometimes the account manager and team need a bit of help in determining who is most essential to

the customer, as well as how to make these resources available to the customer. The effective SAM coach can be instrumental in helping the account team understand how to make the case for gaining access to additional resources that the customer may need.

As we all know, strategic customers can be quite demanding, and they tend to expect their account teams to navigate their own organizations on the customer's behalf and to get things done promptly and properly on the first try. Strategic customers hate "slow no's," and the SAMs and account teams that can make navigation and access easier for the customer have the opportunity to build and grow strong supporters and sponsors. These sponsors and supporters have become such because of the credibility and trust that the SAM and team have developed by getting things done on behalf of the customer, all of which can be facilitated through effective coaching.

Finally, many customers expect to engage collaboratively with the suppliers that they consider most strategic to their business and are even willing to participate in mutual

planning activities with them – no small task on the part of the SAM and account team. Effective coaching at the right times and intervals around the collaborative planning process can be a game-changer, and when this coaching includes a focus on driving the activities that will ultimately result in value creation and co-creation for the customer, the impact can be dramatic.

Where should SAM coaches focus their efforts?

We've covered *why* coaching can make a significant difference in SAM execution, *who* stands to benefit most from the application of coaching best practices, and *when* account managers and their teams are most in need of it. This leads to the question of *where* the SAM coach can have the greatest impact on performance, and we will define these inflection points as the "four corners of SAM coaching."

Simply put, we have observed that there are four clear areas of intervention that tend to have the highest return on investment when effective coaching is proactively applied to the

SAM process, and these can be best defined as follows:

Corner one: account-growth strategy



Account teams can benefit from effective coaching when they are brainstorming approaches and strategies to grow their relationships with their strategic customers. Development and implementation of account-growth strategy can be the "launch ramp" for account planning, and when coaches intervene in this area the impact can be felt throughout the account-planning process.

Corner two: account action plan



Figure 2



Account teams can benefit from effective coaching when they are building the action plans from which they will deploy resources, infrastructure and expertise on behalf of their strategic customers. To avoid building account plans that aren't properly executed, coaches should consider intervening in the development and execution of account action plans to ensure that there is alignment around the actions, as well as commitment and accountability to get things done on time and on budget.

Corner three: sales opportunities

Developing and Winning Sales Opportunities

Account teams can benefit from effective coaching when they are developing and strategizing how to win competitive sales opportunities, because let's face it: If there aren't enough marks in the win column, the relationship will begin to deteriorate. This type of coaching requires the willingness and ability to jump into the competitive fray with the SAM and the account team to determine how best to "plan to win" new opportunities.

Corner four: value creation and co-creation

Creating and Co-Creating Measurable Value

Account teams can benefit from effective coaching when they are focused on delivering on the commitments that were made in pursuit of sales opportunities to ensure that customer value is being created and co-created. This "corner" of SAM coaching is critical and oftentimes overlooked by

traditional sales managers that are more comfortable in the first three corners than this one. The accrual of "past proven value" creation can be the source of tremendous momentum that can, in turn, drive corners one, two and three.

Regarding sponsorship for account teams and their strategic customers

Look inside some of the most effective SAM programs and you'll find a culture of sponsorship, executive and otherwise. Some might see this as a form of coaching, and, in simplest form, it surely is. But the difference is the level of ongoing commitment to the account and the SAM by the sponsor, which in many cases is driven by a sincere interest in the success of both the account team as well as the strategic customer. In most organizations that we have worked with, the more urgent need is for coaching first and for sponsorship second.

Where you see an organization that is proactively providing effective SAM coaching to account teams as a best practice, you're sure to find at least a hint of sponsorship in place as well. And while both can make a significant difference in the success of account teams and account management programs, executive sponsorship has proven to be a serious needle-mover in high-stakes accounts where "slow-no's," navigation issues and conflicting messages simply cannot be tolerated. While sponsorship may be a "nice-to-have" for the contemporary SAM program, effective coaching is not. It is a requirement, and if you don't believe it, try to find a successful SAM program that is void of coaching – be it manager-down, peer-to-peer or team member-to-team member. I can't think of one,

but if you can please let me know.

Conclusions and recommendations

In this article series, we have discussed SAM best practices that include defining strategic accounts and assessing fit, as well as discovering and validating customer value. We've examined how to assess and strengthen the most strategic customer relationships and the importance of positioning and differentiating unique value with strategic accounts. We've acknowledged the challenges of trying to balance and manage the short- and long-term priorities of account management, and we've delved into the high-impact topics of aligning objectives with the customer, developing and implementing account-growth strategies, and the vast upside of engaging the customer in the account-planning process. Finally, we have discussed the importance of measuring SAM performance with metrics that track execution and effectiveness.

Is it accidental that we would choose to explore coaching at the end of our journey into SAM best practices? Hardly! That's because keys one through nine represent the primary areas of upside and downside for account managers and their teams and, as such, give rise to many of the urgent needs for coaching and intervention into the strategic customer relationship. It's through the execution of these key areas of best practice that many realize, albeit reactively, that a little help is needed and that a bit of coaching might be in order. Our assertion that coaches should proactively focus on the SAM inflection points represented by the "four corners" model is to suggest that a little proactive coaching can go a long way in preventing the need for "fix-it"




coaching that is really more about damage control than value creation.

Because strategic account management, like golf, can be a game of millimeters, SAM coaching must be mindful of that last foot, that last inch and even that last millimeter. It's about understanding that the slimmest of margins can be the difference between winning and losing. Great athletes realize the significance of coaching, and many of them have their own *personal* coaches that go beyond what they receive from their teams. Why? Because they understand that to be a champion at any sport requires skills that must be applied *simultaneously*, a feat that's virtually impossible for most people without someone to provide them with that extra awareness that can translate into optimized performance.

Have you ever known a golfer who was great on the putting green but

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couldn't hit a straight drive if his life depended on it? I've met many SAMs who have felt this way as they pursue relationships with their largest accounts, only to find that there are some things the customer needs that are outside their areas of strength. Even the most successful athletes can struggle when they find themselves in situations that are outside their comfort zones or beyond their areas of peak performance. Effective

coaching can have an impact on ALL facets of the SAM's "game" like nothing else can. As baseball great Hank Aaron once said, "It took me 17 years to get 3,000 hits in baseball. I did it in one afternoon on the golf course." 

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About Performance Methods, Inc. Based in Atlanta, PMI provides consulting and training services to assist clients in the design, development and deployment of customer engagement best practices. PMI's unique approach provides clients with customized and integrated solutions consisting of sales processes, best practices and consultative selling skills. PMI has been selected by many of the world's leading corporations as their sales/account management best practices partner and has been widely recognized for the innovation, effectiveness and the strength of its contemporary suite of customized sales performance solutions. PMI is an active participant and sponsor in the Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA), the world's largest non-profit community of strategic account management and sales best practices, and will be featured in the ten-part article series ***The Keys to Effective Strategic Account Planning***. PMI has been cited by Effectiveness Solutions Research (ESR) for leadership in the areas of depth and breadth of the PMI sales best practices solution suite, strength of methodology, value-selling orientation, advanced selling skills, solutions effectiveness, ability to customize, change management, global implementation, sales performance and sales training measurement, return-on-training and innovation. PMI has been acknowledged by Training Industry as one of the top sales training and methodology providers for 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015 and was featured in ***The Best Practices of High Performing Sales Teams*** article series. Training Industry recently published PMI's ***Raising the Bar for Customer Engagement*** article and recognized it as one of its top ten articles of 2014. PMI creates worldwide client value and coverage through its global partnership with Mercuri International, the world's largest sales training and development consultancy.

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