



# THE FOUR PILLARS OF WORK A SAM MUST EXECUTE ON TO BE SUCCESSFUL

The world of strategic or key account management (SAM/KAM) is the growth area of sales, which makes sense given how technology is overtaking so much of the transactional sales space. With customers no longer in need of someone to educate them on products or services, they need salespeople who can step beyond the information available online by delivering **real insights** that help them solve **real problems**. Welcome to SAM.

SAM is new to many companies. In others, it is transforming from relationship management to becoming a true problem-solving resource. During this time of transformation there is no better resource than SAMA (Strategic Account Management Association). They have been at the center of the universe for all things related to SAM research, learning and networking for more than 50 years....before SAM was cool!

Over that time, SAMA has benchmarked hundreds of B2B companies to identify what the best SAMs do differently. Keep in mind: I'm not talking about all the critical SAM program elements like executive sponsorship, account selection, compensation and the like. I am talking about the actual nuts-and-bolts work that a SAM must do with his or her internal and customer teams to be successful.

Too often, I think SAMs and their managers can lose sight of the actual work that needs to take place in order to make a SAM successful. These are the "Tier One" work activities absolutely indispensable to doing the job right. Without mastering these, no SAM can successfully drive growth with and for their strategic customers.

## The Four Pillars of Work a SAM Must Execute To Be Successful

1. Developing account plans
2. Working with customers on account plan development
3. Implementing account plans
4. Creating value solutions for key customers

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Source: Current Trends & Practices in SAM

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Seems straightforward, right? It isn't! I have had the privilege of facilitating workshops for SAMA's SAMA Academy training curriculum as well as founding a company that builds software tools to enable SAM. Through this work, I've interacted with thousands of SAMs and reviewed more versions of account planning than I can remember. I've witnessed account planning tools that either don't work the way they're supposed to or don't adequately encompass the real-life work of a SAM.

So let's focus on each of the four pillars and what they actually mean.

### 1: Developing account plans

That there needs to be an account plan is something, I think, every SAM I've ever met understands. The danger here is that the account plan becomes far more geared towards management than for the SAM. With SAM, it's not about how many leads go into the top of the funnel and how many deals come out the bottom, but rather about how many customer challenges go into the top and how many solutions come out the bottom.

I think we could learn something from the general idea of a "sales process," insofar as the work of a SAM is an ongoing process — not a static plan. Someday the overwhelming catch-all vernacular of the "account plan" will morph into "account process," but not today.

### 2: Working with customers on account plan development

There is not a SAM out there who does not talk to his or her customer; they all do. But the talking IS the problem insofar as too many SAMs are talking when they should be listening and understanding. This listening mindset is hard to achieve.

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In the SAMA Academy workshop my company facilitates with Adrian Davis (of Whetstone), we talk about becoming a part of the customer's so-called tribe. The point here is that if you are not aligned with and helping with your customer's objectives and challenges, then you are not part of their tribe. And when the chips are down, the Tribe will band together and you'll be kicked aside. Needless to say, this is not where you want to be as a SAM. I think a test here is one of transparency. Do you openly share your plan with your customer, and does the plan reflect that you are part of their tribe?

### 3: Implementing account plans

This is where the wheels start to come off. Ideally, the SAM should be able to tell anyone who asks, "This year we tackled 10 significant customer challenges, completed six, two are underway, and the other two are still being considered or canceled." That is the mark of good activity tracking. The next level would include quantified customer results, such as, "These solved challenges yielded \$1 million of customer benefit. And after that, the efforts helped us to increase our share in Product X yielding Y revenue and Z profit." Come time for the next customer negotiation, the SAM would bring several years of this data to the table. And when that time comes when the SAM's CEO or BU president questions the need for an expensive sales resource, the answer is right there in the implementation data.

### 4: Creating value solutions for key customers

This point is somewhat like #2 except deeper, more active and game changing. In our SAMA course, we use "The Hero's Journey" to make this point. The Hero's Journey is a framework for the path that all good adventures follow, the same one that George Lucas uses to tell the Star Wars stories. In The Hero's Journey the customer is the hero. Point one is to get the SAM to realize that he or she is not the hero of the story. The customer is. In this scenario, the role of the SAM is to be the helper/mentor who brings the special weapon that allows the customer/hero to overcome great obstacles and move on to transformation and success. To extend the Star Wars example, the SAM isn't Luke Skywalker. The customer is. The SAM here stars as Obi Wan or Yoda. On this point the SAM or his coach needs to look at the customer plan and ask whether they are really working to bring the customer that secret weapon they need to become the hero.

## Primary questions a SAM needs to be able to answer

The primary questions a SAM needs to be able to answer, rendered in my shorthand are:

- Do I understand the customer's challenges? If I shared them with the customer right now, would they agree?
- Do I have ideas on how I might solve those challenges? Some of those ideas might be somewhat tactical, as that's getting me into the customer tribe. Hopefully some of my ideas approach the "special weapons" category. Is there rigor put into describing, quantifying and prioritizing these ideas?
- Am I clear with my customer and internally on which ideas we are executing? And, just as importantly, on those we are not? Is there commitment on both sides to execute?
- And finally, do I have an account plan that embodies these critical points? Does it help me stay on track with my work of understanding challenges, generating ideas and executing?

If your SAMs have the discipline, mindset and capability to use these four questions as a guide, then they will be successful in advancing the business for both you and your customer. Once again, this work is about putting customer challenges into the top of the funnel and getting solutions to come out the bottom.

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## A Couple Points of Common Confusion...

### 1. SAM is not the same as BIG DEAL manager

Unfortunately, there is a class of SAMs out there whose companies treat them as BIG DEAL managers. I'm not saying having someone manage big deals is not important. It is. But it is not the core work of a SAM. Big deals arise from the work of SAM outlined above, but the SAM role should not revolve around managing the big deal.

### 2. Account Plans That Don't Reflect a SAMs Job

There is also a contingent out there who believes that a SAMs job is significantly defined by their ability to produce: relationship maps, SWOT analysis, product penetration, customer profitability, competitive analysis, meeting dates, tasks, deals, contracts, crazy scores, etc. Sure all of these concepts are important and certainly are part of a plan. But they are also mostly internal and significantly secondary to the four work activities you want a SAM to tackle with their customers first thing in the morning.

So a word of advice: Be excellent on the four work activities that lead to success and be *good enough* on all of these other points that can choke a good SAM. On the other hand, don't be fooled by a SAM who is amazing at filling in 60 pages of boxes but struggles to work with a live customer to solve real business problems.



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