
Use of Technology in Strategic Account Management



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*Issues, Assessments, and Trends:
A Report by SalesGorilla, Inc.*

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Issues, Assessment, and Trends

Introduction

Between November 2001 and January 2002, the Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA) conducted a research study¹ to evaluate the use of technology in strategic account management. The research consisted of two phases. In phase one, approximately fifty SAMA constituents completed an electronic questionnaire to provide a high-level perspective on the major technology issues. In phase two, thirty-five one-on-one telephone interviews were conducted with SAMA constituents to explore the issues in greater detail. During the interviews, participants were asked: 1) how well existing technologies addressed their business needs, 2) the key requirements that such technologies must fulfill, and 3) what their experiences were with technology implementation.

This report is an independent analysis of the SAMA research results. It provides general observations about technology and implementation processes, and identifies four key areas that technologies must address to meet the needs of strategic account management teams:

- Simplicity
- Collaboration
- Knowledge management
- Cost effectiveness

General Observations, Processes, and Tools

During the interview process, participants talked about tool selection processes and implementation issues. All had similar experiences with existing technologies, and shared those experiences in three areas: general observations, processes, and tools.

General Observations

All participants remarked that one of their greatest challenges in implementing technologies was getting the staff to use the new tools and keep data updated. Ease of use and ease of

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updating were recurring themes in the interviews, and most participants agreed that these two areas were not well addressed by existing technologies.

Customer expectations always move forward, and companies often struggle to keep up with them to stay effective. Interviewees emphasized the need for real-time reporting from all technologies, a feature that was perceived to be lacking in all existing solutions.

The need for integration into Microsoft Office applications was also a key issue for most managers, because those tools are the ones most commonly used by all staff members. The underlying message seemed to be that technologies should conform more closely to the user interface model of Microsoft Office in order to reduce the costs of training and staff development.

It was also clear that most participants believed in the growing acceptance of remote access and wireless technologies by their sales organizations. Such technologies will be a must for the mobile workforce in the near future.

Processes

Participants emphasized that companies looking to adopt strategic account management technologies must look first to processes before deciding on a technology. Many believed that internal Information Technology organizations were an impediment to obtaining tools that were truly useful to strategic account teams.

Comments on processes fell into four distinct categories:

- **Requirements Definitions:** Goals and metrics must be defined before technologies are brought in. Companies must understand their customers and know where customer relationships are headed. It is a good idea to benchmark with like-minded organizations before beginning the selection process.
- **Simplicity and Effective Implementation:** Fully map out the implications of implementing technologies in the short and long term. Companies will achieve greater success by choosing and implementing simpler, proven technologies before choosing more complex ones. Effective implementation plans are the key to success.
- **Internal/External Collaboration and Management Support:** Multifunctional teams must be brought to bear when specifying, assessing, and choosing technologies. Strategic customers should be involved with the development of strategic plans. Early management support is crucial to successful technology selection and implementation.
- **Training:** Training plans must be created to ensure successful technology implementation and use. Users must be shown that the value of the new technology outweighs the time required to learn and use it. Implementers must be aware of the need for corporate culture changes to pave the way for effective technology use.

Tools

Business tools must integrate smoothly with one another if they are to be successfully implemented and used within a corporation. A single point of entry must be provided for users to ensure consistent use. Fewer, simpler, and more flexible technologies are the keys to acceptance in the corporate environment. Many participants emphasized the need for Web-

based applications. Real-time reporting is a critical need that is not perceived as being fulfilled by existing solutions. The lack of soft knowledge management inhibits full acceptance of existing technologies.

Four Key Technology Components

There are four key components that technologies must address in order to achieve widespread acceptance in the strategic account management market:

- Simplicity
- Collaboration
- Knowledge Management
- Cost Effectiveness

Simplicity

Nearly all of the participants emphasized the need for flexibility and ease of use. Technologies are difficult to manage, they said, and technology solutions are too often dictated by IT organizations. Processes must come first; find a technology that fits easily into your existing strategic account management processes. Simple, effective processes work best.

Technology solutions must be easy to implement and integrate with existing systems. Participants indicated frustration with existing solutions, remarking upon the great expense of getting these technologies to work with legacy data and existing internal processes. They also want to see technologies that are easy to extend – they want to be able to take advantage of new features without having to retrain their entire workforce.

It is clear that for technologies to achieve ready adoption by the corporate workforce, they must easily fit into daily work routines. Most participants indicated that users will ultimately fail to update a database at the end of the day, so solutions must somehow capture needed data in the process of normal work. Technologies must also make information easy to get to from a variety of sources, including Web browsers, e-mail, PDAs, and smart phones.

It is also clear that the ubiquity of Microsoft Office drives tool requirements. Many participants urged technology vendors to find ways that enable their tools to integrate with Microsoft Office because those tools are the most commonly used in the industry.

Collaboration

Almost all participants indicated that there is a need for true collaboration tools that appear to be quite different from database-intensive approaches. Users need a tool that makes it easy to share information globally.

Not only do sales teams need tools that enable them to collaborate, but there must also be collaboration within the company at the time that tool requirements are being specified. Several participants recommended the use of multifunctional teams and interviews with individual users to drive the tool requirements process.

Knowledge Management

One of the key issues expressed by participants was the need to retain critical account information in the face of changing personnel. There were two categories of information that participants identified as being critical to the success of strategic account management tools:

- Structured information: hard data, figures and facts, contacts, strategic planning information, forecasting data, documents
- Unstructured information: soft data, anecdotal information, intuitions and hunches

The ability to maintain the corporate memory, to record the collective intelligence of account teams, is key to strategic account team success. But capturing that information must happen simply and naturally as part of the routine work process. A knowledge management model that requires users to enter data at the end of the workday will fail.

Simple, searchable content and document management tools are needed that enable users to store, share, edit, and update key account data. Important data must be made available to account teams instantly.

There must likewise be tools that make it easy to accumulate and analyze key customer data. One national account manager put it this way:

There is no tool that pulls information from key sources together – press releases, account manager notes, annual reports. All of this information is what I use to find opportunities in strategic accounts.

Real-time reporting is likewise a ubiquitous requirement. There is too much manual work required by existing systems, and administrative support has vanished due to downsizing. Strategic account management must be able to automatically generate management reports from real-time data. It is critical to managers that they know the day-to-day status of accounts and opportunities, and that they can locate that information quickly.

Cost Effectiveness

All participants lamented the high cost of implementing existing technology solutions to their problems. There are too many hidden costs:

- Consultation and customization
- Ongoing maintenance and administration
- Training

Participants believe that automatic real-time reporting tools will help reduce costs considerably by enabling managers to make better decisions because they have more reliable data.

Integration with Microsoft Office tools like Outlook and Excel is critical in keeping costs down because these tools are already in use in the routine of daily work.

Conclusion

Successful technologies, such as SalesGorilla's Strategic Account Management System (SAMS), will better satisfy the needs of strategic account teams because they are easy to install and implement, and because they integrate transparently into the user's working habits. Use of Web browsers, e-mail, and inherent process-orientation are the key elements that such technologies bring to the corporate environment. Powerful, application-specific tools like SAMS will deliver high return on investment to strategic account managers and their teams.

For more information about SAMS, collaborative process management, and your strategic account management needs, contact SalesGorilla at +1 408 868 9700, or send an e-mail to info@salesgorilla.com