ClarityES1 Podcast Episode 3: Shifting the SAM effort curve to the left.

Welcome back to the ClarityES1 podcast series. I'm your host, Chris Deren and after a couple of decades of helping field teams develop into their full potential, I can say that we've learned a lot, especially about Strategic Account Management and how to get it right.

As it is with most SAM efforts, degrees of SAM success as well as common points of SAM failure, there's what you can see that's obvious and what's hidden beneath the surface of account strategies, scenarios, and stakeholder interactions.

One such observation that admittedly only came with the passage of time, is the need to shift the SAM effort ***from the right to the left***.

Let me explain what we mean by that.

Things would be a lot easier if the SAM effort could be accelerated in a way where you could just "jump to the good stuff." Build your plan, quickly establish decision-maker relationships, introduce, and sell in a new product or service contract and ramp up the customer support component to make sure the account stays in your camp for a long time.

Of course, that would indeed be skipping over a lot……

- Understanding the ecosystem of connected entities within which the account is operating and how it's influencing stakeholder decision making.
- Understanding the account itself and stakeholder pressures, issues, chal lenges, and opportunities at a deeper level.
- Not to mention competitor and swot analysis.

- Etc., etc., etc.

That's not to say that SAMs don't try to skip the line anyway. It happens every day of the week.

Even the most tenured SAMs occasionally suffer from the same habits that Junior Sales Reps have, and they look for the shortest path of least resistance to get their solutions sold in with the least number of obstacles to deal with. Let's just chalk that up to human nature.

And it used to be that the clearest downside of this habit was having to re-trace Account Strategy steps and making multiple repeat attempts to create a compelling reason for account stakeholders to engage.

But an even more consequential effect of rushing into promoting solutions too soon began to emerge over the years. And it's one that impacts SAM organizations and SAMs equally, although it is harder to see with the naked eye.

It has to do with the fact that the most successful Account Strategies involve the collection of additional, privileged information that leads to a competitive advantage in the form of better decision-maker access, better problem/solution intelligence or both.

The obtainment of this deeper level of account and stakeholder intelligence takes time. Sometimes, considerably more time. Hence the temptation to "skip the line" and rush into presenting solutions. SAMs and selling teams are mistaken however, in their belief that skipping the line saves time. It's quite the opposite. It adds many weeks, months or more to the process. The reason for this is that skipping over or rushing through the up-front due diligence process or stakeholder discovery conversation especially in the largest most strategic accounts, leads to making too many assumptions in absence of a stronger foundation of information to stand on. (the phrase…" throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping something sticks" comes to mind).

When this happens, there's a high level of account process experimentation. Mystery surrounds the unanswered emails, the proposals that receive no feedback, the surprise decision makers who seem to come out of nowhere.

Given enough time, the truth eventually comes out about why the customer did not move forward with a solution if they ever intended to at all. But the timeframe for collecting enough information to find out if it's a "go, or more likely no/go" decision is often so late in the process that resources spent in the effort, (the SAMs' and other cross-functional team members) have no return on investment.

By contrast, (and here's where the big insight was born), moving the effort curve from the right (rushing to push solutions) to the left, (up-front account and stakeholder due diligence), has the interesting effect of collecting this deeper level of intelligence ***in a shorter amount of time***, enabling SAMs and account teams to arrive at a "go, no/go" decision-point faster. The knock-on effect of faster "go, no/go" decisions?...... Pipelines that refresh more frequently with a larger number of well-qualified opportunities.

And what happens when SAMs have pipelines with more and better qualified opportunities? It makes it easier for them to re-prioritize those accounts where the alignment just isn't there yet and focus on the highest quality, intelligence-based opportunity paths.

The benefit of all this right-to-left effort shift to the SAM organization? That one is pretty straight-forward. More accurate forecasting and less pipeline risk from a larger number of better qualified opportunities; not to mention much more efficient use of core and extended account team resources.

The benefit to individual SAMs? That can be tricky at first as the initial reaction to suggesting that they need to slow down and obtain additional information may not be that popular. But our experience has been consistently since this observation came to light, that if you point to the more rapid “go, no/go” decision-points and larger pipelines of better qualified opportunities, they’ll get it. And those that successfully make the “right-to-left” shift will tell you that they’ll never go back to “skipping the line” again.

Thanks for listening to the ClarityES1 podcast series! Until next time…