VOLUME 28 ISSUE 1 2026

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STRATEGIC ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

WHAT CUSTOMERS VALUE

By Dave Irwin
Founder and CEO
Polaris I/O

*Editor's Note: This article is reprinted in full from Chapter 8 of the recently released book "*Go to Customer: A Guidebook to Selling What's Possible — for Enterprise Account Teams*" with permission from the author and publisher.*

In the chapters ahead, we will explore a critical shift in how organizations must align their capabilities, resources, and value with what customers truly need and expect. This is no longer a static exercise. It's a dynamic, ongoing process of adaptive alignment. As customer environments, priorities, and stakeholders evolve, so must our ability to stay in sync. In today's competitive landscape, the companies that modernize their systems, processes, and skill sets to operate at the speed of their customers will not only grow faster — they'll outpace and displace competitors who fail to keep up.

I learned this lesson the hard way. Another RFP landed on my desk with a tight deadline, little insight into the customer's real needs, and even less confidence in winning. Still, we responded, just like we always did. This one came from a major retailer investing in a new omnichannel marketing platform. We followed the standard playbook: polished technical documentation, detailed implementation plans, and a showcase of our team's capabilities. It was thorough. It was professional. It was exactly what everyone else was doing.

Then came the moment that changed everything. During one of the review meetings, the customer, clearly exasperated, said something I'll never forget: "All you guys are the same. We don't care about the technology — we can't even tell the difference. What we want is someone who can run the campaigns and get the results. Can you do that?"

It was a wake-up call. For years we had been leading with technology, not outcomes. We were selling the engine, not the results. That comment forced me to confront a painful truth: We weren't aligning with what the customer valued. And what they valued wasn't the technology. It was the outcomes driven by the technology. We had assumed they knew what to do with our solution, but they really didn't. They were retail experts, not campaign experts.

From that moment on, we flipped our approach. We led with campaign performance, not product specs. We showcased the processes, people, and analytics that would drive measurable results. We stopped talking about what our technology could do and started proving what we would deliver. We used our own tools to run real campaigns, analyze performance, and continuously improve results.

The transformation was fast and dramatic. We went from being seen as a reliable but minor player to a serious competitor. Our win rate jumped tenfold. We started beating larger firms still stuck in the old model. Analyst reviews improved. Customers noticed. And all because we stopped assuming what they wanted and started listening to what they actually needed.

This experience taught me that real differentiation doesn't come from what you build. It comes from how well you align with what your customers are trying to achieve. If you want to win in today's market, don't just sell what you have. Solve what they value.

Reframing the product mindset: A strategic imperative

In today's market, the tendency to overvalue our own products, what we call "productitis," is a common but costly misstep. It stems from a deeply ingrained mindset: the belief that our offerings are inherently exceptional and that customers will naturally recognize their value. The reality is far different.

Customers aren't buying products. They're seeking solutions. Regardless of how innovative or feature rich your product may be, most buyers can't distinguish it from the competition. They're unlikely to invest the time or energy to do so. The marketplace is saturated with similar offerings, and to the customer it often feels like choosing between twenty indistinguishable options on a grocery store shelf.

This sameness has made traditional product-centric selling obsolete. Buyers have evolved. They conduct their own research, form opinions independently, and increasingly avoid sales conversations that revolve around product features.

The shift: From product to purpose

To succeed in this environment, we must shift our focus from what we sell to why it matters. This means aligning with customer priorities, understanding their business challenges, and positioning our offerings as enablers of their success, not just as products, but as strategic solutions.

This isn't just a sales tactic — it's a mindset. It requires curiosity, empathy, and a commitment to delivering value beyond the product itself. When we lead with insight, not inventory, we earn trust. When we speak about outcomes, not options, we gain relevance.

A call to action

Let this be your call to break free from the product-first mentality. Challenge assumptions. Ask better questions. Seek to understand before you seek to sell. The future belongs to those who can connect with customers on a deeper level — not through features, but through foresight.

The opportunity is clear: Move from product obsession to customer obsession. That's how we differentiate. That's how we win.

Addressing customer misalignment: Recognizing the root causes

In the early days of industry, business was straightforward: Companies designed products, developed go-to-market strategies, and assigned quotas by territory. Customer needs were simpler, and product-centric approaches sufficed.

Today the landscape is unrecognizable by comparison. Customer challenges are multifaceted, organizations are sprawling across business units and geographies, and digital commerce has introduced unprecedented complexity. Yet many organizations persist with outdated go-to-market mindsets, failing to adapt to the realities of modern markets.

Only 28 percent of account management channels consistently achieve their cross-selling and growth goals.[1]

The result is a widening gap between what suppliers offer and what customers actually need — a gap that continues to grow in the absence of meaningful change.

The modern enterprise: Complexity and silos

Organizational silos are no longer confined to departments; they now span newly acquired business units, each with its own priorities and processes. Marketing and product teams often operate in isolation, focusing on mergers and acquisitions to drive revenue rather than fostering organic growth. Sales teams are left to "figure it out," tasked with cross-selling into "white space" without a unified view of customer needs. Too often only account sellers, those closest to the customer, have any real understanding of what buyers want, and even then, their insights rarely reach senior leadership.

The persistence of outdated approaches

Despite these challenges, management frequently clings to legacy strategies, reinforced by habit rather than insight. Customer feedback mechanisms remain product-centric, asking, “What do you think of our product?“ instead of the more critical, “What needs do you have that we can help address?“ Leadership may overlook the true source of underperformance, attributing missed targets to sales execution rather than systemic misalignment with customer needs. Account sellers become mere messengers, pitching what the company provides, not what the customer demands.

A call to action: Shifting mindsets and embracing opportunity

This is a pivotal moment. With the advent of AI and advanced analytics, leaders have a unique opportunity to realign solutions with customer needs and empower account sellers with new, effective workflows. However, realizing this potential requires a fundamental shift in mindset — one that prioritizes serving customers above meeting internal sales targets.

Leaders must begin with the customer and work backward, designing strategies that solve real problems rather than pushing products to meet financial forecasts. This approach demands courage, discipline, and a willingness to challenge established norms.

The cost of misalignment

Misalignment is not a minor issue; it is expansive and multidimensional. Recent research from Corporate Visions highlights that:

B2B buyers frequently stick with existing solutions or develop in-house alternatives when external vendors fail to demonstrate a clear path forward. Even when buyers express interest, deals often stall because proposed solutions do not fit evolving needs or because sellers cannot articulate tangible value. Too many sales reps focus on features rather than business fit and measurable outcomes, perpetuating the cycle of misalignment.[2]

Consider the lost opportunity cost: Imagine your win rates are only 30 percent of what they could be, along with your average deal size. What would that add up to? It would be astronomical — and this is corrected with alignment, not incremental investment.

The critical role of solution alignment

Success hinges on one decisive factor:

Aligning your solution precisely with the customer’s needs.

Its impact has only grown stronger, surpassing all other factors in determining outcomes.

When evaluating why deals are won or lost, the ability to fit your solution to the client’s requirements emerges as the most significant predictor. This decisive factor is a call to action. Organizations that consistently ensure their offerings address the true needs of their customers position themselves to outperform competitors and secure lasting relationships.

Key drivers of wins and losses

Many elements influence success, but Corporate Visions’ published research shows executive buyers rank these decision-making factors as most critical, in order of importance:

- Align solution to needs.
- Articulate meaningful value.
- Negotiate creatively.
- Deliver compelling communications.
- Demonstrate clear differentiation.
- Help justify decisions.
- Provide expert insights.
- Resolve concerns responsively.

The research clearly concluded that the single biggest predictor of sales success is solution alignment — aligning your solution to buyer needs. Based on buyer feedback from 120,000 win/loss reports over a two-year period, this one competency has:

- “Emerged as the top driver of deal outcomes across wins, losses, and no-decisions—becoming more influential than any other sales competency.
- Shown surprising independence from other skills. While most competencies work in concert, solution alignment increasingly drives decisions on its own.
- Demonstrated consistent growth in importance with new data from each quarter, confirming it’s not a temporary trend but rather a fundamental shift in buying behavior.”[3]

Getting the solution aligned is the cornerstone — without it, strengths elsewhere won’t make up the gap.

Aligning solutions with customer needs

Achieving alignment between solutions and customer needs is not only more effective but also less burdensome than maintaining misalignment. Removing organizational silos fosters efficiency and innovation, while collaboration across departments accelerates progress and unlocks new opportunities. Listening to customers requires less effort than avoiding their feedback, and it yields far greater rewards.

The integration of artificial intelligence enables organizations to combine diverse capabilities into tailored solutions that address specific customer outcomes. By leveraging both historical and real-time customer input, automation can streamline these processes, liberating employees from restrictive workflows and empowering them to serve customers with creativity and agility.

Empowering account sellers

When account sellers are consulted, their requests consistently center on eliminating obstacles that hinder their performance. They require the following:

- Support systems that simplify complexity.
- Automation that delivers relevant solutions precisely when needed.
- Tools that facilitate clear communication and rapid delivery of customer-centric solutions.

Providing these resources enhances productivity and ensures that solutions are delivered at scale and speed, directly aligned with customer expectations.

The path forward

This approach embodies the core principles of a robust Go to Customer strategy and the Selling What's Possible™ methodology. By prioritizing alignment, collaboration, and customer-centric innovation, organizations position themselves to achieve sustainable growth and lasting customer loyalty. The choice is clear: Empower teams to break free from outdated barriers and enable them to deliver what customers truly need.

Matching solutions to needs: Begin with a capabilities inventory

Understanding and aligning organizational capabilities with customer needs is essential for delivering value and building strong client relationships. While suppliers possess a deep knowledge of their own offerings, there is often a disconnect between what organizations value internally and what customers seek.

Overcoming internal bias

When asked to list company capabilities, organizations frequently generate a wide range of responses, many of which are overly detailed, biased by departmental perspectives, or focused on technical minutiae. This tendency, "productitis," can cloud judgment and obscure what truly matters to customers. It is important to recognize that one's position within the company shapes internal viewpoints, but these perspectives rarely mirror the priorities of decision-makers on the customer side.

Note:

- **Technically.** A capability is any form of intellectual property your company possesses. Since there are so many different forms of businesses, there are many different intellectual property laws and business models based on those patterns.
- **Simply.** A capability is an ingredient that can be combined with other ingredients to add more value based on a given customer's situation.

Adopting a customer-centric perspective

To bridge this gap, organizations must adopt a top-down approach. The focus should shift from internal features to the attributes customers genuinely value:

- **Trust and reputation:** Customers prioritize working with vendors who are recognized as trustworthy and competent in their field.
- **Proven track record:** Demonstrated success in delivering outcomes for similar clients is highly persuasive.
- **Comprehensive capabilities:** Skills, processes, experience, and methodologies must be evident and aligned with client objectives.
- **Innovative approach:** The ability to bring vision, new ideas, and robust solutions to the table sets partners apart.
- **Breadth and depth:** A strong portfolio of features, functions, strategic partnerships, and data-driven insights enhances credibility.

Unlock your team's know-how with AI-driven capability mapping

Building a dynamic, AI-accessible capability inventory is essential for organizations aiming to stay competitive and innovative. By thoughtfully organizing your products, services, and areas of expertise into a clear inventory, you

Customers Value Capabilities That Span Many Areas

- ☑ Functionality
- ☑ Knowledge
- ☑ Skills
- ☑ Processes
- ☑ Features
- ☑ Labor
- ☑ Approaches
- ☑ Case Studies
- ☑ Expertise
- ☑ Vision
- ☑ Research
- ☑ Data
- ☑ Ideas
- ☑ Access
- ☑ Customers

enable a seamless combination of offerings to suit evolving customer needs. Take a critical look at your current capability list — don't limit yourself to existing structures. Consider how new services or solutions can be bundled with your technologies, enhancing customer value by relieving them of complex management responsibilities.

Now is the time to identify untapped opportunities. Providing expertise as specialized on-demand resources or retainer-based solutions not only differentiates your business but also opens up new streams of revenue. For instance, adding campaign management services to support your campaign technology proved highly successful, yielding incremental fees and delighted clients.

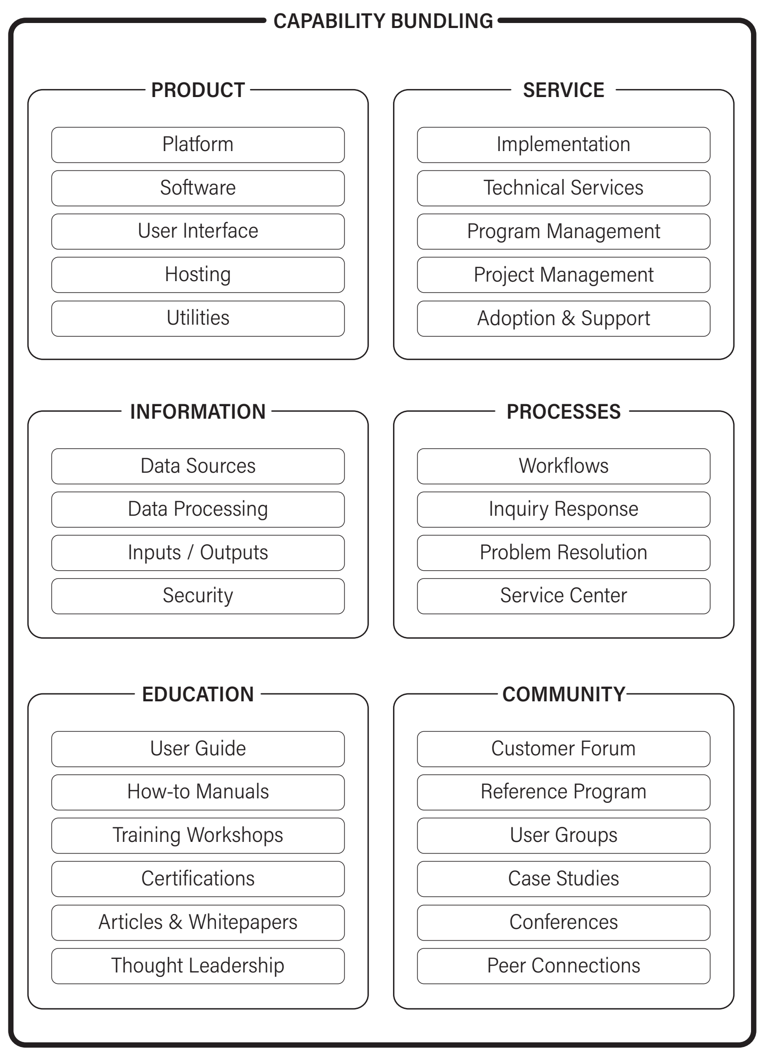
This work is not a one-time project; it's an ongoing strategic practice. Success requires close collaboration among marketing, finance, and product teams. Regularly gather customer feedback and analyze success stories to spark the creation of new, desirable capabilities with measurable outcomes. Make each thoughtfully developed capability readily accessible within your inventory to ensure your organization consistently delivers the unique value clients deserve. Start this process now — success hinges on agility, innovation, and relentless focus on customer impact.

Connect capabilities to outcomes

After establishing your list of capabilities — ideally organized within broad, intuitive categories to keep them accessible and actionable — the next essential step is to connect each capability to a clear, meaningful outcome. This alignment is not just a best practice; it's fundamental to delivering real value for your customers. By mapping outcomes to capabilities, you create a direct line between what you offer and what your customers genuinely need.

It's important to remember that you rarely understand a customer's true end goals right from the start. Preliminary signals only provide hints. Through intentional discovery, ongoing dialogue, and collaborative engagement, you uncover deeper insights into their challenges and ambitions. As these emerge, you're equipped to strategically combine the right capabilities in a way that not only addresses surface-level needs but

Capability Map



delivers on the outcomes that matter most to them.

Approaching solution design from this perspective ensures you remain flexible, responsive, and laser-focused on customer success. The work may seem demanding, but each thoughtful connection between a capability and a desired outcome brings you closer to building trust, strengthening relationships, and producing measurable impact. Ultimately, this rigorous, customer-centered thinking is what turns potential into performance.

Creating a simple inventory might look something like this.

PRODUCT		SERVICES		EXPERTISE	
Product	Outcome	Service	Outcome	Expertise	Outcome
Product A	Outcome A	Service A	Outcome A	Expertise A	Outcome A
Product B	Outcome B	Service B	Outcome B	Expertise B	Outcome B
Product C	Outcome C	Service C	Outcome C	Expertise C	Outcome C

What is an outcome?

An outcome, particularly from a customer's perspective, extends far beyond simple financial impacts. In practice, outcomes encompass a range of attributes, such as convenience, reliability, quality, and overall satisfaction, that executives carefully evaluate when determining the true value of a product or service. While this might initially sound theoretical, it's actually a fundamental part of our everyday decision-making process. We all instinctively assess value through multiple lenses, not just price.

Recognizing this, it becomes essential to consider the full spectrum of customer outcomes, because understanding and delivering on what truly matters to customers is what sets exceptional organizations apart. By broadening your perspective and appreciating the diverse factors that contribute to customer value, you unlock the potential to drive meaningful impact and lasting success.

There are three correlated areas:

- What is the future state and is the value of achieving the result of the future state worth the effort?
- How will this future state be achieved and when will we achieve it?
- Who is the executive owner and where are the impacted stakeholders in the company?

Critical considerations for delivering value aligned to customer outcomes

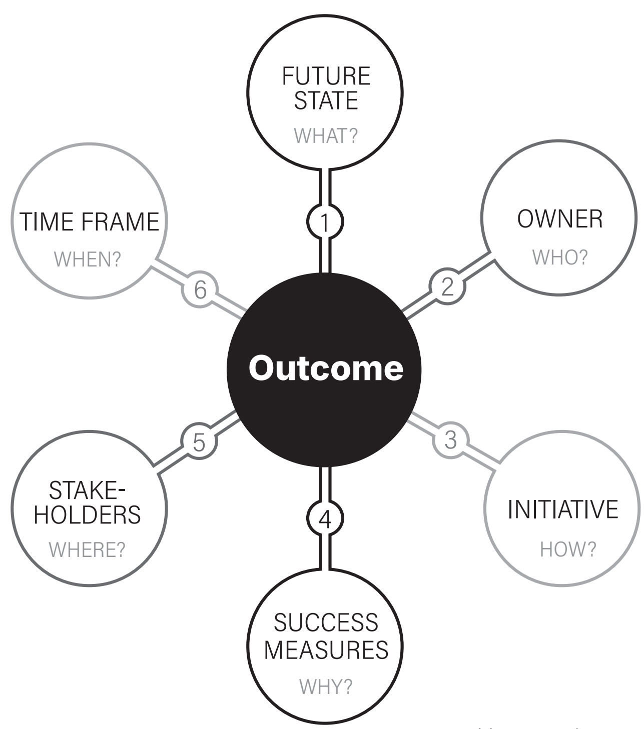
Highlighting return on investment (ROI) without anchoring it to a clear time frame or budget cycle can undermine executive confidence and decision-making. Executives require a comprehensive framework that not only quantifies value but also contextualizes how and when that value will be realized.

To promote clarity and informed decision-making, outcomes should be defined with explicit attributes — before associating them with specific products, services, or expertise.

Example: Structuring outcome attributes for a service

- **Service name:** Pipeline Opportunity Prioritization
- **Desired state:** Prioritized Opportunities Delivered as a Service
- **Accountable owner:** CRO
- **Strategic initiative:** Enhance Pipeline Quality
- **Success metric:** Achieve 80 Percent Close Rate
- **Key stakeholders**: Account Sellers

The Outcome Wheel



- **Time frame:** Three Months

Leveraging AI-driven bundling for customer outcomes

Building an inventory that links products, services, and expertise to clearly defined outcome attributes enables organizations to lead with customer outcomes and intelligently bundle capabilities, especially when integrating generative AI. This approach aligns solution-selling with what customers value most and positions offerings for maximum impact.

The power of prepackaged bundles

Account sellers often show strong enthusiasm for leveraging prepackaged solution bundles that have a proven track record of successful sales and delivery. These pre-bundles serve as an elevated tier of capabilities, much like choosing a ready-made dinner from the grocery store instead of selecting individual ingredients. This approach is critically important because these bundles are strategically engineered to align with common customer needs and desired outcomes, ensuring a more seamless and effective sales process.

However, a common challenge arises as many sellers remain focused on selling smaller, individual product components. This focus can inadvertently limit their engagement to lower organizational levels within the customer's hierarchy, often without their awareness. This phenomenon relates directly to the "gorilla" effect discussed in chapter 6: the tendency to miss or ignore opportunities at higher levels of urgency and strategic importance.

To maximize impact and revenue potential, it is essential to equip account sellers with pre-bundles that correspond to higher-altitude customer needs. When the customer's urgency and complexity escalate, providing a comprehensive pre-bundle — integrating products, services, and expertise that directly address these elevated outcomes — empowers sellers to align with the buyer's priorities and engage meaningfully at the appropriate organizational level. This strategic alignment not only drives stronger business outcomes but also advances the seller's positioning as a trusted adviser capable of delivering impactful solutions.

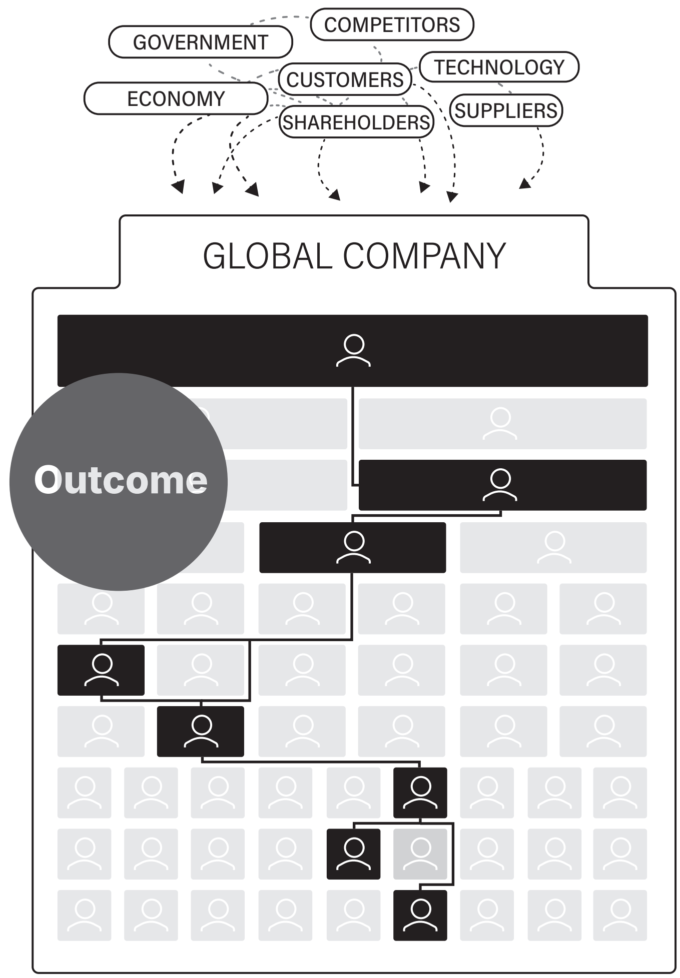
Establishing repeatable patterns through outcome mapping

A reverse-engineered approach, starting with the outcomes customers seek, enables organizations to identify and replicate winning solutions by answering key questions:

- Who are the key stakeholders seeking these outcomes?
- Which capabilities have consistently delivered such outcomes?
- What success rates, margins, pricing, costs, and time-to-results have comparable solutions achieved?
- Is there documented evidence of proven customer impact and successful delivery?

Proactively mapping buying centers, altitude levels, and outcome patterns creates a blueprint for scalable, repeatable success. It empowers account executives with tested recommendation sets, increasing both confidence and effectiveness in engaging executive stakeholders.

Mapping the Buying Center



Optimizing bundle performance: A strategic imperative for enterprise growth

To drive sustainable growth and competitive advantage, companies must rigorously track and analyze the performance of capability bundles proposed to customers. Win-loss analyses that focus on bundles (comprehensive sets of capabilities) offer a streamlined, insightful approach to understanding which combinations deliver the greatest business outcomes.

Why tracking bundles matters

Tracking how often specific bundles are proposed, purchased, and successfully delivered, alongside the outcomes realized, provides critical data that fuels AI-driven sales optimization. These datasets empower advanced algorithms to recommend precisely tailored bundles matching evolving customer needs, thereby maximizing the likelihood of closing deals. This approach represents the new frontier of insight-driven selling in large enterprise accounts, where complexity demands precision.

Key principles for leveraging bundles effectively

1. **Expertise over product:** Customers increasingly value the expertise guiding them through complex solutions as much as the products themselves. Position knowledge and advisory capabilities at the core of the sales journey to deliver meaningful impact.
2. **Innovation as a constant:** Innovation remains paramount. Gartner consistently highlights the rapid evolution of customer expectations fueled by technology — especially AI — and shifting behaviors. Continuously refine existing capabilities, create new bundles, and offer choices that align with these dynamic requirements to stay ahead.
3. **Data integrity fuels AI effectiveness:** Maintaining up-to-date, accurate data on capabilities and their delivered outcomes is essential. Clean datasets enable AI to make reliable, context-sensitive recommendations that resonate with client needs in real time.
4. **Bundling enhances margins:** As transactional sales face margin compression and automation, capability bundles become vital to preserving and enhancing profitability. Bundles that deliver superior customer outcomes justify premium pricing, thus driving higher margins and shareholder value.
5. **Accelerated time to value:** Buyers increasingly prioritize asset-based services — leveraging intellectual property and expert know-how — that deliver faster, measurable business results. Bundled solutions that solve complex problems efficiently position providers as indispensable partners.
6. **Leverage historical successes:** Using data from past wins to inform future engagements maximizes success rates. Aligning bundles to customer context and proven outcomes ensures relevance and boosts confidence in proposed solutions.

Role by role: Steps to shape the future

For account teams

Imagine a future where intelligent systems seamlessly match the ideal capabilities to your customers' precise needs. To thrive in this landscape, it is essential to be meticulous and deliberate in capturing customer requirements with accuracy and depth. Customers communicate their needs most effectively through the outcomes they aspire to achieve. Your role is to convincingly sell the gap, the difference between their current situation and their desired future state, while emphasizing the urgency and risks associated with leaving that gap unaddressed. Success depends on fully understanding all stakeholders involved and carefully assessing their unique objectives. By doing so, you dramatically increase your likelihood of winning and sustaining business over the long term.

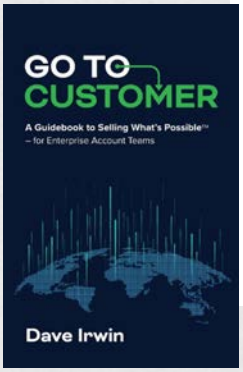
For marketing

Marketing must evolve beyond traditional approaches by partnering closely with product teams and finance leaders to design compelling capability bundles. The most valuable customer insights often come from your largest clients, who act as bellwethers for the broader industry. Use these insights as the foundation to innovate, crafting new combinations of products, services, and expertise that directly respond to market needs. Your challenge is to create packages and pricing models that clearly demonstrate the value linked to the outcomes delivered, making it easier for customers to understand and justify their investment.

For management

Breaking down internal silos is not merely advisable; it is mission critical. Obstacles that reinforce isolation between departments undermine collaboration, stifle innovation, and ultimately weaken performance. Companies that thrive unify their teams around a shared principle: working backward from the customer. This approach mandates

As we've seen, the intelligent use of data and AI to tailor capability bundles sets the stage for winning deals and driving growth, but there's an equally critical piece to the puzzle that often goes overlooked: the human element. Because no matter how sophisticated your analytics or how innovative your offerings, it's the people behind the capabilities who truly shape customer value and competitive differentiation. So, what happens when the very expertise your customers depend on is tangled in internal roadblocks or misaligned priorities? In the next chapter, we'll explore why "who" delivers your solutions matters as much as "what" you're selling and how organizations that get this right unlock not just sales, but lasting trust and strategic advantage.



cross-departmental cooperation, fostering engagement and collective ownership of corporate goals. To embed this culture, consider redefining objectives, goals, and incentive structures so they reinforce shared accountability. When teams succeed together, the business succeeds overwhelmingly.

For sales enablement

Sales enablement professionals are the champions for this transformative vision. Your role is to recommend robust frameworks, select the right tools, and identify strategic partners who can help design and implement new processes that align capabilities with customer needs. Crucially, the solutions you facilitate must be intuitive and actionable for account sellers in the field. Focus intently on how success will be measured, not just in outputs, but through tangible impact on sales performance and customer satisfaction. Your influence will determine how effectively this vision is executed and embraced.

For commercial insight strategists

As the architects of alignment, you bear the vital responsibility of ensuring every opportunity is tightly calibrated between customer needs and recommended solutions. This means rigorously identifying gaps in understanding and thoroughly validating customer outcomes. Are all stakeholder perspectives incorporated into the solution? Your insight leadership is indispensable to guiding account executives to consistently deliver actionable, precise solution recommendations from the outset. By anchoring the commercial process in deep insight, you empower the entire team to win bigger, faster, and more frequently. ■

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Dave Irwin is Founder and CEO of Polaris I/O. He has 30 years of experience in B2B as a President, GM, CMO, and CSO. Connect with him on LinkedIn at linkedin.com/in/irwindave.