



## CLARITYES1 PODCAST #7: 5 COMPELLING REASONS FOR IMPLEMENTING A CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

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.

If there's a "third rail" issue for heads of commercial, sales ops and learning and development leaders when it comes to implementing KAM initiatives, it's the topic of introducing a CEP or (Customer Engagement Process). More specifically, why one is needed in the first place and how to make it stick?

Let's tackle the "making it stick" question later since if there's reluctance for any reason to embrace a formalized, unified customer engagement process to begin with, we must start there.

First, some clarification that we're **not** talking about the rigid sales processes of the past that prescribed highly scripted steps to engage a buyer in. In B2B complex sales and account

management, they have no rightful place and in fact can come across as insulting to a decision maker's intelligence when used.

Instead, we're talking about flexible, professional, often internally tailored customer engagement processes designed to create strong alignment with how buyer's buy and build credibility and the personal currency of the salesperson or account manager in the buyer's eyes. This happens only when the upfront work is put in to understand customer needs and issues at a deeper level so the mapping of solution value to those needs becomes as obvious to the customer as it is to the KAM with help from the CEP.

Now I'm aware of the fact that there's a lot of salespeople and account managers over the years who have come to the conclusion that following a formalized process is not at the top of their list of fun things to do. I think a lot of this is due to the bad reputation of those tackier selling scripts or sales approaches of the past that act like big brother watching with a list of checklist steps to see what they've done or haven't done.

With that said, in my 30+ years of selling, and building, managing and coaching global account teams, I have firmly arrived at two conclusions:

1. The right customer engagement processes are those born out of the trenches of trial and error and are rooted in real-world best practices and feedback from customers

themselves; not some theoretical set of prescriptive steps that look good on an account planning checklist.

2. They are absolutely essential if commercial organizations are serious in their pursuit of both continuous improvement and presenting the most help and value to customer stakeholders.

In fact, I would go as far as saying that many of the top issues and frustrations commercial organizations experience in the way their teams engage with customers ...

- No real sense of buying urgency among decision makers
- Lack of a unified, consistent, and repeatable way to manage opportunities
- Difficulty identifying or accessing the right customer stakeholders
- Deal cycles that veer off course and too much experimentation

...can be directly tied to the absence of and a reluctance to embed a formalized customer engagement process.

So, for those commercial organizations who have already rationalized not having a CEP, good news..... You can stop listening now.

For all others who sense a CEP is necessary but need to build a more convincing case around it, here are the 5 most compelling reasons why implementing a formalized, repeatable, and consistent customer engagement process is so critical, especially today.

## 1. IT'S WHAT YOUR CUSTOMERS WANT

A few years ago, a member of the C-Suite of a large, west-coast based healthcare system called a meeting with their counterparts in a top 15 Pharmaceutical firm. They were not happy. Over the course of the previous 18 months, they counted 37 different individuals from the Pharma company's commercial, medical and field reimbursement teams who had been calling on various decision makers at multiple levels in the health system. The problem? Almost no coordination amongst the different Pharma account teams resulting in repetitive or unnecessary meetings and a general sense of misalignment between the long-term vision of the health system executives, and the short-term sales objectives of the Pharma company.

Old habits die hard.

Fortunately, the Pharma company got the message and implemented a more formalized process driven by an "account CEO" who ensured a unified, coordinated approach. One of the most compelling arguments for a CEP is how it will improve the working relationship between your company and its customers.

## 2. IT'S HOW YOU KNOW WHAT'S WORKING AND WHAT NEEDS IMPROVEMENT

One of the major benefits of win/loss analysis in selling is that, when done properly, you can pinpoint faster what areas need the most improvement and which you don't need to worry about. So, when those portions of the commercial force engaged in short-duration, tactical sales cycles follow a defined selling process *necessary* for this type of reporting but the strategic

account managers for the same company resist using a KAM-level CEP, the organization misses out on the opportunity to find out what's working and what's not at the KAM level in a shorter amount of time. The problem here is that unlike tactical selling activities, a KAM effort may be many months down the wrong path with a lot of cross-functional resources wasted before it comes to light what was not working in the account/opportunity cycle and why the deal was never likely to proceed in the first place. In contrast, when the KAM cycle is broken down into definable parts, isolating issues and making corrections can happen faster, saving both time and money, not to mention helping other KAM teams see how the repeatable success patterns can be of benefit to other, similar account pursuits.

### **3. IT'S HOW YOU REDUCE GUESS WORK AND SCALE YOUR PIPELINE OF OPPORTUNITIES FASTER**

Of the major benefits of implementing a KAM-level customer engagement process, you wouldn't expect speed to be at or near the top of the list. After all, when any sales team hears the word "process", they're likely to associate it with adding more work to their plates and slowing things down. But actually, the opposite is often true.

Allow me to explain....

Early on into our 20 years of experience helping commercial teams implement tailored customer engagement processes, one of our manufacturing clients pointed out a substantial side benefit we hadn't initially anticipated. When their KAM teams started to embrace a

common framework and vocabulary around account, opportunity and stakeholder cycles as part of the CEP, there was less guesswork as information gathering and sharing happened faster. This in turn led to a faster buildup of details that they could use for decision support. One of those decisions their KAMs started focusing more on was making the go/no go decision on the account or a specific opportunity within the account. And when faster information flow allowed them to make the go/no go decision much earlier, it in turn enabled their KAMs to refresh their pipelines more frequently resulting in pipelines that ***grew quicker*** with a larger number of well-qualified, simultaneous opportunities. It's a funny thing that happens when the right process reduces guess work and experimentation. Who knew you can use a CEP to actually pick up speed?

#### **4. IT'S HOW YOUR ORGANIZATIONS' GREATEST CAPABILITIES TO HELP CUSTOMERS GET PUT FORWARD**

When KAM organizations set out to become top of their game, they are faced with a rather daunting set of sub-initiatives to get right.....

- Developing the right skills and competencies
- Fostering tighter matrix team collaboration
- Navigating the growing complexity of customer account environments
- Knowing what to measure at the right time and many others....

But perhaps a more significant challenge is also the one that represents the best opportunity to increase the perception of value with key account stakeholders. And that is the ability of KAMs and KAM teams to marshal the resources of the organization on the customer's behalf.

Surveys over the years have shown that strategic account decision makers value a KAMs ability to organize their company's resources in support of a key objective or goal of theirs over industry knowledge, product knowledge or other attributes KAMs are expected to bring to the table. And what's the best way to enable a KAM team to marshal resources on the customer behalf? A common framework and approach with a consistent language for the KAM to communicate with core and extended teams so that everyone can get on the same page with the account strategy, the progress being made against shared objectives with account stakeholders and what everyone's' role is in what happens next.

## **5. HOW YOU MAKE A CEP STICK IS WHY YOU NEED ONE IN THE FIRST PLACE**

The issue of getting a customer engagement process to stick; to have that lasting impact in the way that KAM organizations routinely build and sustain value-driven relationships with their most strategic accounts comes up often. Unfortunately, there are some cases where even a moderate dose of resistance to a new CEP is enough to discourage leadership from taking on the initiative to implement one.

It's not an overnight transformation after all. It takes careful preparation, the willingness to "stick with the plan", communicating expectations and installing mechanisms to ensure it becomes part of the daily dialogue around selling to major accounts.

But let's take a look at what happens when you do.

The right CEP can act as a set of guideposts that provide direction and validation around account strategies and best practices externally and internally. Especially for those new to the KAM role, this can speed up the onboarding process and help close the gap in capabilities between them and their more senior colleagues.

Every organization and each individual KAM are better at some things than others. A KAM organization may be great at churning out marketing materials but weak at providing more timely marketplace and account intelligence. An individual KAM might count industry knowledge amongst their top strengths but has difficulty accessing senior decision makers or conducting discovery conversations without rushing to pitch products. A well-structured CEP can help here in two ways:

- The speed with which you can isolate and identify the areas that need improvement
- And the tools and resources to actually build the missing capability

And my personal favorite, the right customer engagement process offers consistent, repeatable way to talk about accounts, opportunities and the resources needed. A few years ago, we

worked with the VP of sales leading an organization of 330 specialty reps calling into major account environments. The CEP we tailored for his team had 4 parts (or “Zones”) as we call them, designed to create stronger alignment with account decision makers. Within just the first couple of weeks of implementing the CEP, it became known across his teams that you couldn’t engage leadership in any account or opportunity discussion without first being asked the question.....”What Zone are you in?” This had the effect of making account-based conversations with his reps and managers much more efficient since as soon as it was known “what Zone they were in”, they were able to cut to the chase with everyone understanding where they were in the opportunity cycle and the best way to help them.

It also sent the signal that the CEP had become part of the daily vocabulary and workflow around account selling. In other words, it had become “sticky.”

For the VP of Sales, it also increased his comfort level that he and his managers were able to “stay on top” of all the important accounts and opportunities; avoiding the issue of being asked to help “rescue a deal in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour” without a way to really validate where things stood.

Look.... I understand that you may have very tenured account managers who use their “been done that, been there” length of experience as a reason to resist attempts to inject a more formalized process into the environment. My experience has been however, that if you explain these compelling business case reasons and they see how they lead to better access, better

information or both in their opportunity pursuits, you should have a more willing and engaged audience to move a CEP forward.

At the end of the day, it's not just about the individual KAM and their willingness to follow a defined customer engagement process. These days, it's more about the strong benefits of a CEP, especially for your customers and the missed opportunities associated with not having for on the organization.

Thanks for listening to the Clarity Podcast Series – Until next time.