



WHITE PAPER

# Competencies of Strategic Account Managers

by Mike Schultz, Ago Cluytens, and Mike Jones

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# Executive Summary

Competencies of Strategic Account Managers  
*How Top Performers Differ from The Rest*

by  
Mike Schultz, Ago  
Cluytens, and Mike Jones

In RAIN Group's *Top-Performing Sales Organization Benchmark Report*, we polled 472 sales leaders about their top priorities for the upcoming year. The number one priority was to "increase business with existing accounts." Not a surprise, considering the organizations that excelled at this were significantly more likely to be Top Performers. At the same time, in looking at differences between Top Performers and The Rest, we found that the number one difference was "our sales organization is effective at maximizing sales to existing clients across capability areas."

If leaders are prioritizing strategic account management, and Top Performers—those with higher win rates, who set and achieve challenging goals, and are more likely to grow revenue—are markedly better at it, it warrants further investigation.

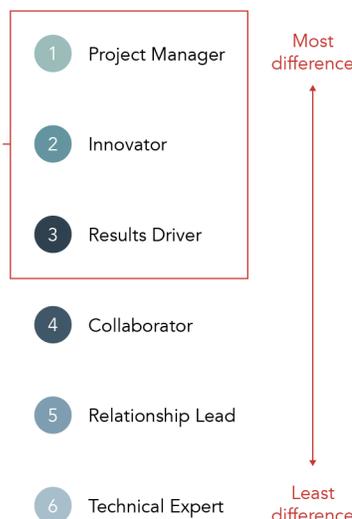
So we undertook our *Top Performance in Strategic Account Management* research initiative. In it, we studied 397 organizations with formal strategic account processes. These results confirmed our Strategic Account Management Competency Model. We know that Top Performers in Strategic Account Management:

1. **Drive Value:** The best strategic account managers grow accounts because they drive value for buyers—they don't wait for sales to fall on their desks from existing clients.
2. **Ask How, Who, and What:** They ask the questions that get to the heart of expanding and winning opportunities with existing accounts.
3. **Plan:** Top Performers are more than 2 times as likely to have an effective process for growing and protecting strategic accounts. It may be cliché, but "he who fails to plan, plans to fail" really does apply in strategic account management.
4. **Cover the 6 Strategic Account Management Roles:**
  - Results Driver
  - Project Manager
  - Technical Expert
  - Innovator
  - Collaborator
  - Relationship Lead

## Competencies Most Commonly Played Across All Organizations



## Competencies Most Separating Top Performers from The Rest



But our findings didn't stop there. The ultimate goal of our research was to find out what separates Top Performers from The Rest in strategic account management. Some of the most striking results are to the left.

Most companies have the roles of Technical Expert, Relationship Lead, and Collaborator covered. It's expected. But it's the top-performing companies that distinguish themselves by playing the roles of Project Manager, Innovator, and Results Driver well.

# The Ridiculous Upside of Strategic Account Management

**SAM:**  
Strategic Account  
Management

**SAMs:**  
Strategic Account  
Managers

*Ridiculous Upside* is the name of a well-known blog that covers up-and-coming basketball players that could make the NBA, but still need further development to reach their potential. Too bad that the basketball bloggers took the name, because ridiculous upside is a great way to describe the untapped potential hiding in most every company's existing account base.

In a recent RAIN Group research report, we polled 472 sales leaders about their top priorities.<sup>1</sup> The number one priority was to "increase business with existing accounts." Organizations that excelled at increasing business with existing accounts were significantly more likely to be Top Performers.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, the number one difference between Top Performers and The Rest was: "Our sales organization is effective at maximizing sales to existing clients across capability areas."

Many think that sales results have more to do with product or service superiority, or some strategic offering advantage Top Performers have.

Not true. The 72nd difference between Top Performers and The Rest out of 72 factors was: "The potential for revenue growth in our current offering set is exceptional." In fact, there was no statistical difference between the two groups regarding the growth potential of the current offering set.

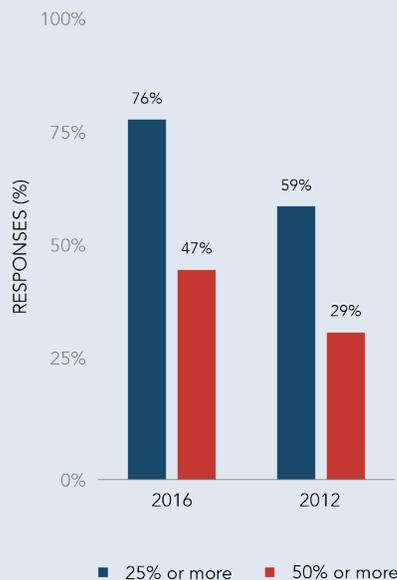
If it isn't the offerings, what, specifically, is it that makes some organizations so much better at growing their accounts? Given decades of experience working with leaders to design SAM strategies and structures, and strategic account management teams to build their skills, we had our models and ideas, but wanted to get data beyond our experience to see what truly separates the best from the rest.

This led us to a major study of 397 organizations that had formal strategic account management functions. Top Performers in this study, *Top Performance in Strategic Account Management Benchmark Report*, had stronger revenue growth, margin growth, and satisfaction growth in their named strategic accounts than The Rest.

We learned that strategic account managers—the people charged with growing accounts—in the Top Performer group had a very different set of competencies. By outlining our findings in this report, we hope that it helps you design strategic account management jobs at your organizations, hire and develop teams tasked with growing strategic accounts, and approach strategic account management overall such that you will enjoy your fair share of the ridiculous upside.

Figure 1. Revenue Growth Potential Greater than 25% and 50%

76% of all organizations in our study believe they should grow their strategic accounts by at least 25%, and 47% of respondents believe they should grow them by at least 50%. This is a marked increase in the growth potential since our study 4 years earlier.



1 Mike Schultz, John Doerr, and Mary Flaherty, *Top-Performing Sales Organization Benchmark Report* (RAIN Group, 2016).

2 Mike Schultz, "What Defines a Top-Performing Sales Organization?" RAIN Group, <http://www.rainsalestraining.com/blog/what-defines-a-top-performing-sales-organization>.

# Strategic Account Manager Competency Model Overview

There are several concepts embedded in the Strategic Account Manager Competency Model:

- Driving Value
- How | Who | What
- Plan
- 6 Strategic Account Manager Competencies

Briefly, covering the first three:

*Driving Value:* The SAMs that grow accounts do so because they drive value for buyers. Also, implied in the word “driving” is a connotation of proactivity. This is important because too many SAMs view their role as winning opportunities that, essentially, fall on their desks. However, the vast majority of the ridiculous upside lies in the value SAMs can drive that buyers wouldn’t be aware of unless sellers themselves raise the ideas proactively.

The data around driving value supports the importance of doing it. We found that when SAMs drive value, companies are much more likely to be in the Top Performer group. When we asked about the effectiveness of company processes to drive value (fig. 2), we found that Top Performers were 2.2 times more likely to do so. They were better at internally assessing the myriad ways they could drive additional value at strategic accounts, and working collaboratively with strategic accounts to drive value in new, innovative ways.

Figure 2. Effectiveness of Company Process to Drive Value



*How | Who | What:* If we’re going to drive value we need to answer three questions:

1. **How are we going to drive value for the account?** If you’re going to drive value, you need new and innovative ideas for how to do that, and you need practical support for making sure the ideas can become reality.

2. **Who is important in driving this value?** Both on your team and the account's, you need to know who the stakeholders are that need to be involved, and what their respective roles are, to drive value.
3. **What do we need to do to make additional value come to life?** If you're going to drive value proactively, a variety of people will need to do a variety of things. People on your team need to create action plans detailing what everyone needs to do, hold people accountable, and manage the whole strategic account growth process.

Connected to each of these concepts are two competencies of strategic account managers, totaling six competencies, which we'll cover shortly in detail. But first...

*Plan:* The hub that connects the How | Who | What concepts is a strategic account plan. You may think that this is a given, but only 21% of The Rest have an effective process for growing and protecting strategic accounts compared to 53% of Top Performers.

And when it comes to the 32 strategic account manager competencies we studied, the four worst across all respondents related to strategic account planning:

29. Ensure account plans are current
30. Vet account plans to ensure they're solid and defensible
31. Ensure account plans are thorough
32. Create compelling and effective written plans

Top Performers are markedly better, however.

Figure 3. Account Managers Lead the Account Planning Process Effectively

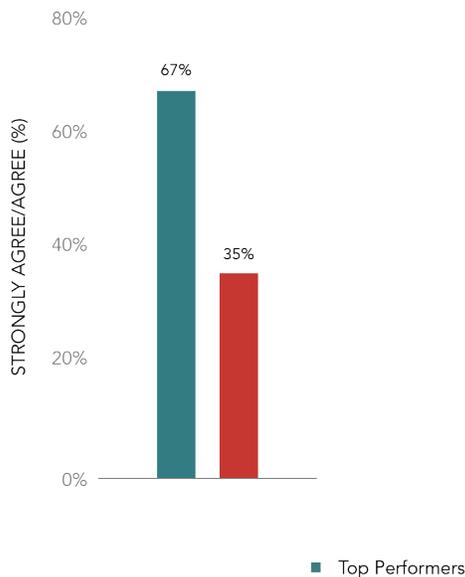
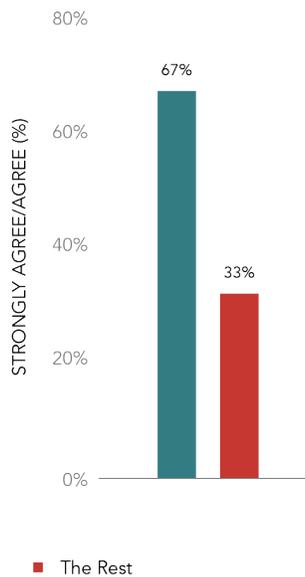


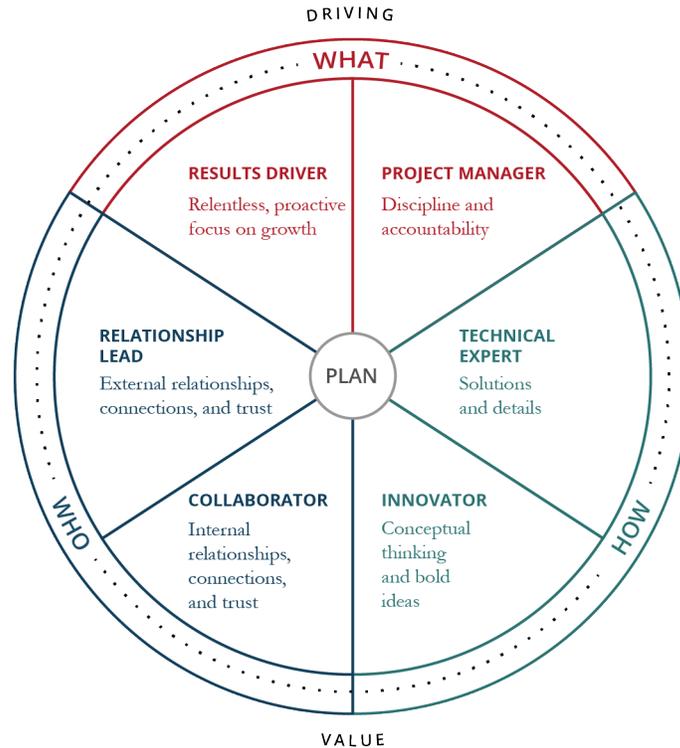
Figure 4. Account Managers Ensure the Execution of the Account Plan



There's no question that strong account plans and planning correlate significantly to Top Performance. So significantly, in fact, that the strategic account plan is the hub that connects the spokes of the Strategic Account Manager Competency Model.

## Six Strategic Account Manager Competencies

There are six strategic account manager competencies, or “hats” SAMs might wear on any given day. Some combination of these competencies are the key to success of most every strategic account manager. At RAIN Group, we have honed this model over many years of working with large and mid-size organizations to optimize their strategic account management success, and through our benchmark research report in both selling and strategic account management.



The 6 Strategic Account Management Roles are:

- Results Driver
- Project Manager
- Technical Expert
- Innovator
- Collaborator
- Relationship Lead

### What about Customer Service?

Shouldn't customer service, including responding to customer requests and solving day-to-day problems, be a part of the SAM Competency Model?

The major outputs of a strategic account manager are to grow revenue and margin at accounts. Certainly there's an element of customer service, what some people might even call "account management" in a *strategic* account manager's world. However, this report focuses on the role as it pertains to driving growth proactively. Your company may have day-to-day care and feeding of the account at the detail level as a part of the strategic account management role, but ideally they should be separated out, with customer-service oriented staff handling the lion's share of operational implementation and putting out fires should they arise.

# Competency #1: Results Driver

The Results Driver leads the charge for maximizing business inside of the “market” of the account. The Results Driver’s will is bent on growth. Is impatient to push things forward. You don’t have to light the fire in the belly of the Results Driver. If you, yourself, don’t bring up maximizing account growth, they will.

## INSIGHT

Many companies think their Relationship Leads can be molded into Results Drivers. One person can certainly play both of these roles, but too many companies try to force their Relationship Leads into the role of the Results Driver when it doesn’t fit. Trying to light the fire of growth in a Relationship Lead who is not wired that way doesn’t work.

### Results Drivers:

- Proactively lead the process to grow accounts
- Accept accountability for achieving business goals (e.g., account growth, profit, satisfaction, etc.)
- Lead the account-planning process effectively
- Create or find the resources needed to grow accounts
- Are effective at selling major opportunities inside accounts
- Drive internal change in their company, as needed, to maximize account growth
- Vet account plans to ensure they’re solid and defensible
- Negotiate effective agreements
- Possess the financial and business acumen to build compelling account-growth plans

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

About three-quarters of Top Performers have SAMs that proactively lead the process to grow accounts. Less than half of The Rest do.

# Competency #2: Project Manager

The Project Manager is the organizer of the process of capturing revenue from the account. They organize the plan, the people on the team, and, essentially, make sure everything gets done.

## INSIGHT

Project management and execution are among the competencies least talked about. Project management is not sexy, it's not enterprise-level discussion leading, it's not innovating. However, the competency most separating Top Performers from The Rest is that of the Project Manager (see page 15).

### Project Managers:

- Lead members of account teams effectively
- Ensure the execution of the account plan
- Display discipline in adhering to the process for growing strategic accounts
- Create compelling and effective written account plans
- Hold account team members accountable
- Ensure account plans are appropriately thorough
- Perform the research needed to plan for and drive account growth
- Maintain analysis and tracking against plan
- Ensure account plans are current

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

We studied 23 different SAM challenges organizations face, including whether implementing strategic account plans after they're built is a challenge. Only about 1 in 5 Top Performers cited this as challenging, but almost half of The Rest had trouble implementing strategic account plans after they were built.

This underscores the great importance of the Project Manager competency and the strategic account manager's ability to execute.

# Competency #3: Relationship Lead

The Relationship Lead is the embedded player (or players) in the account who creates and strengthens relationships. The Relationship Lead defends against competitor inroads. At larger companies, the Relationship Lead can be the manager of a sizeable internal team that leads individual relationships with stakeholders at accounts. Along with the Technical Expert, it's the Relationship Lead who tends to do a lot of what's viewed as "selling" at the account.

## INSIGHT

Most Relationship Leads are either good at creating relationships (i.e., prospecting) or strengthening and deepening relationships, but less often both. If you want to penetrate more deeply into strategic accounts, you need both.

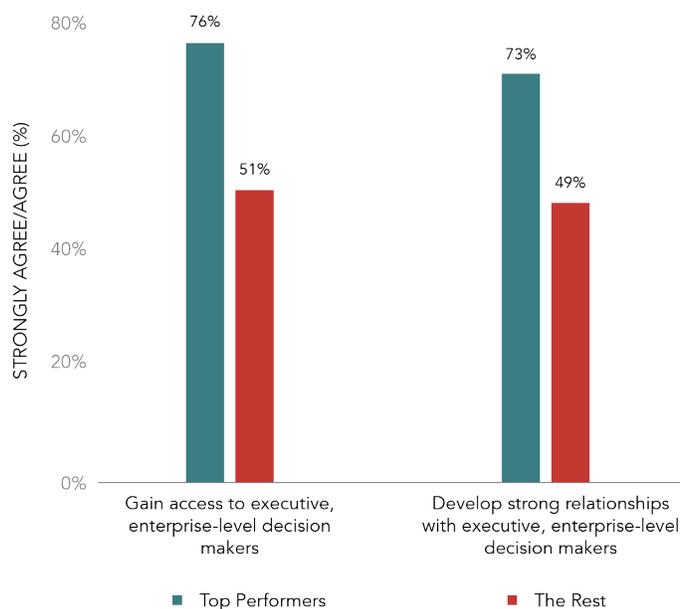
Relationship Leads:

- Gain access to executive, enterprise-level decision makers
- Develop strong relationships with executive, enterprise-level decision makers
- Generate meetings that can drive new revenue
- Create and deepen relationships with decision makers over the long term

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

Even though the Relationship Lead is one of the skills more commonly played across all performer groups, Top Performers are still markedly different in key areas, especially as it relates to selling to high level executives.

Figure 5. Noteworthy Relationship Lead Differences



# Competency #4: Collaborator

The Collaborator is the internal team builder that builds internal bridges and trust, and gets the right people involved at the right times to produce the best outcomes. We've heard time and again, especially at larger organizations, that a major factor preventing the expansion of accounts is lack of cooperation and collaboration among the various groups at a company. In fact, nearly one-third of all respondents cited lack of internal collaboration as challenging or very challenging.

We also hear that lack of alignment in processes or operations make it difficult for different groups to collaborate—in fact, 39% of respondents find this challenging or very challenging—but in our experience, the right person can break down these barriers and drive growth regardless of whether the organization's structure is aligned to sell broad sets of offerings.

## INSIGHT

Assuming the systems, processes, and culture don't thwart the Collaborator's efforts, this role can—especially at larger, multi-divisional organizations—make a huge difference.

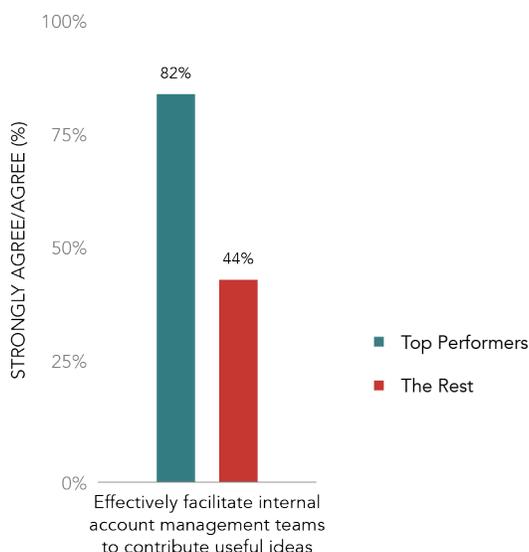
### Collaborators:

- Effectively facilitate internal account management teams to contribute useful ideas
- Create internal relationships within the organization to help drive revenue growth for accounts
- Effectively facilitate client teams to contribute useful ideas
- Break down internal trust barriers that may hinder collaboration to grow accounts

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

The number one skill difference most separating Top Performers from The Rest was that Top Performers were much more likely to “effectively facilitate internal account management teams to contribute useful ideas.”

Figure 6. Top Skill Difference Most Separating Top Performers from The Rest



# Competency #5: Technical Expert

It's fundamental that any company that sells products and services to accounts should sell the right ones in the right solution combinations and help buyers get the greatest success from them.

Competence in the offerings themselves is not only essential for client success, but also for sales success. Technical buyers can be more prone to shooting down ideas than helping new ideas grow wings and fly. Having your Technical Expert in the conversation can help you overcome this, especially when your offerings are new, either in general or to the client.

## INSIGHT

Sometimes the technical evaluators on the buyer side come right out and say why something might not work, but more often it happens behind the scenes. You need your Technical Expert competency played well on the strategic account team, working proactively to make sure this doesn't happen.

Technical Experts:

- Craft the best solutions
- Solve implementation roadblocks with the offerings they are selling/have sold
- Provide competent technical information and knowledge

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

Having the Technical Expert competency played by the core strategic account manager or someone on the strategic account team is necessary, but by no means sufficient, for success. Of the 32 skill areas we studied, the most common skill played well across all performer groups was "provide competent technical information and knowledge" (71% Strongly Agree / Agree). It was also the smallest difference between Top Performers (74%) and The Rest (71%). In other words, you need to do it well, but most everyone does it well. It's by exhibiting other competencies well that you differentiate from the competition and win.

It is worthwhile to note that when it comes to crafting the best solutions, Top Performers do a much better job (78% Strongly Agree / Agree) than The Rest (49%). When we see this in action with our clients, it's often because the strategic account manager collaborates well internally to get the right minds creating the right solutions. It's a team effort.

# Competency #6: Innovator

Also called the Value Creator and the Visionary, the Innovator sees ways to increase value delivered to the account that others often don't. Tell an Innovator about a new company capability and he "gets it" and its value right away. The Innovator is often an internal evangelist for the breakthrough change your company can create for clients and value you can co-create with clients. Innovators synthesize information and can communicate the big picture to executive-level clients. They are also instrumental in facilitating idea exchanges in collaboration with clients.

## INSIGHT

Executive-level clients—the elusive "enterprise buyers"—need the kind of vision and energy delivered by Innovators in interactions with your company or they'll lose interest. Then you end up working a level, or two, or six lower in their organizations. It's more difficult to co-create value with clients when your key contacts are not in the position to make major decisions and lead change initiatives.

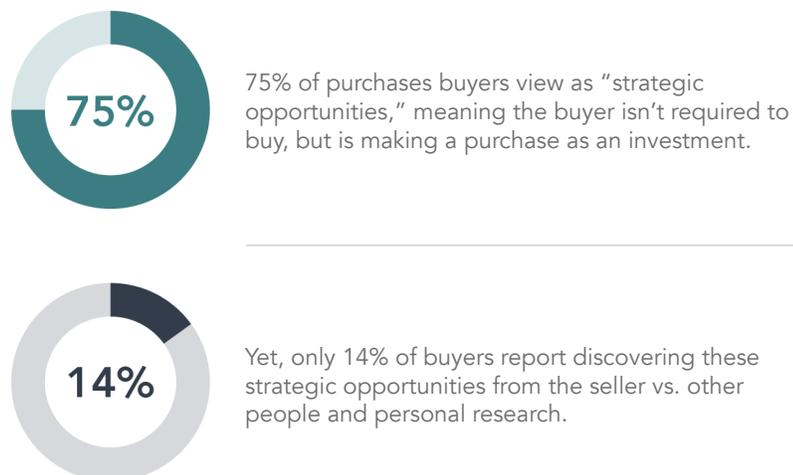
Note that every strategic account manager does not personally need to be an Innovator themselves. If they are a good Results Driver and Relationship Lead, they can "borrow" an Innovator for planning and client meetings for a few hours here and there. The strategic account manager must get innovative ideas in their plans, and get those ideas introduced to clients. They don't, however, need to do it all themselves.

Innovators:

- Cross-pollinate ideas and collaborate directly with decision makers at accounts to co-create value
- Think expansively about the value the organization can bring to bear across all capability sets of the organization
- Create compelling and inspiring ideas to bring to account decision makers

## STATISTICALLY SPEAKING

Figure 7. Driving Opportunities and Satisfying Buyers<sup>3</sup>



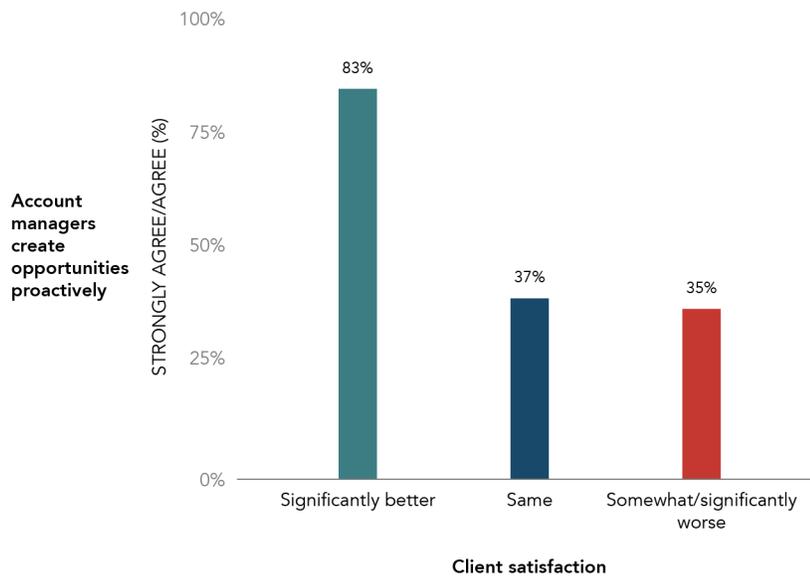
<sup>3</sup> Mike Schultz and John Doerr, *What Sales Winners Do Differently* (RAIN Group, 2013).

Buyers are looking for ideas, but few sellers bring them forward. When we talk to SAMs, they often tell us they don't want to seem too aggressive in the pursuit of new business because they don't want to infringe on the trust their buyers place in them.

This line of thinking couldn't be more wrong. If you take the perspective of driving value (which is so important it's embedded in the Strategic Account Manager Competency Model), and you believe you have more value you can add, you're doing buyers a disservice by not talking to them about it.

And buyers want your ideas. We studied the effect of sellers proactively driving new opportunities on client satisfaction. It turns out buyers are *more* satisfied when sellers drive new opportunities.

Figure 8. Account Managers Create Opportunities Proactively



When sellers focus on driving value versus merely selling more, buyers appreciate it and plan to buy more. It's a virtuous cycle that SAMs must learn to execute better.

# The Surprising Difference between Top Performers and The Rest

What separates Top Performers from The Rest? Answering this question was the primary objective of our research. When it came to SAM competencies, the results were fascinating.

For both Top Performers and The Rest, the competencies most commonly played well were, in rank order:

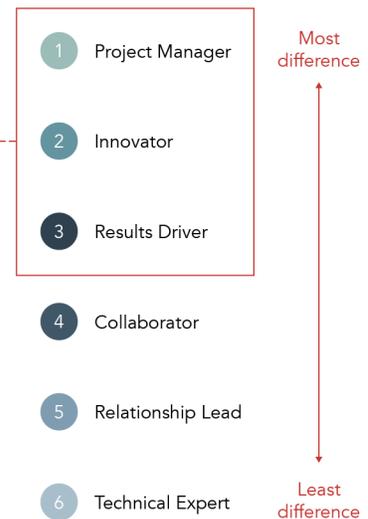
1. Technical Expert
2. Relationship Lead
3. Collaborator
4. Results Driver
5. Innovator
6. Project Manager

What's more interesting, however, is to look at the roles with the greatest competency gaps between Top Performers and The Rest. Note that the ranking is completely flipped upside down compared to those most commonly played across all organizations.

## Competencies Most Commonly Played Across All Organizations



## Competencies Most Separating Top Performers from The Rest



Think of it like this: you need Technical Experts, Relationship Leads, and Collaborators to get a seat at the table, and get opportunities to drive conversations and sales. Without these roles played well, you'll be disqualified from competing. These are the price of entry.

If you want to drive the greatest account growth, make sure Project Managers, Innovators, and Results Drivers are played well. When you do, you'll create compelling strategic account plans, and use the plans as guides to execute and drive results with hustle, passion, intensity... and accountability.

# Strategic Account Manager Competency Reference Sheet

Use this reference sheet to evaluate your performance as a strategic account manager or the performance of someone on your team.

## Competency #1: Results Driver

- Proactively lead the process to grow accounts
- Accept accountability for achieving business goals (e.g., account growth, profit, satisfaction, etc.)
- Lead the account planning process effectively
- Create or find the resources needed to grow accounts
- Are effective at selling major opportunities inside accounts
- Drive internal change in my company, as needed, to maximize account growth
- Vet account plans to ensure they're solid and defensible
- Negotiate effective agreements
- Possess the financial and business acumen to build compelling account growth plans

## Competency #2: Project Manager

- Lead members of account teams effectively
- Ensure the execution of the account plan
- Display discipline in adhering to our process for growing strategic accounts
- Create compelling and effective written account plans
- Hold account team members accountable
- Ensure account plans are appropriately thorough
- Perform the research needed to plan for and drive account growth
- Maintain analysis and tracking against plan
- Ensure account plans are current

## Competency #3: Relationship Lead

- Gain access to executive, enterprise-level decision makers
- Develop strong relationships with executive, enterprise-level decision makers
- Generate meetings that can drive new revenue
- Create and deepen relationships with decision makers over the long-term

## Competency #4: Collaborator

- Effectively facilitate internal account management teams to contribute useful ideas
- Create internal relationships within our organization to help drive revenue growth for accounts
- Effectively facilitate client teams to contribute useful ideas
- Break down internal trust barriers that may hinder collaboration to grow accounts

## Competency #5: Technical Expert

- Craft the best solutions
- Solve implementation roadblocks with the offerings they are selling/have sold
- Provide competent technical information and knowledge

## Competency #6: Innovator

- Cross-pollinate ideas and collaborate directly with decision makers at accounts to co-create value
- Think expansively about the value the organization can bring to bear across all our capability sets
- Create compelling and inspiring ideas to bring to account decision makers

# RAIN Group Can Help You Grow Your Strategic Accounts

## How to Penetrate, Expand, and Protect Key Accounts

There's no question that Top Performers in Strategic Account Management achieve higher revenue growth, profit, and customer satisfaction than the rest.

The right training coupled with the right advisory services can have a significant effect on your success.

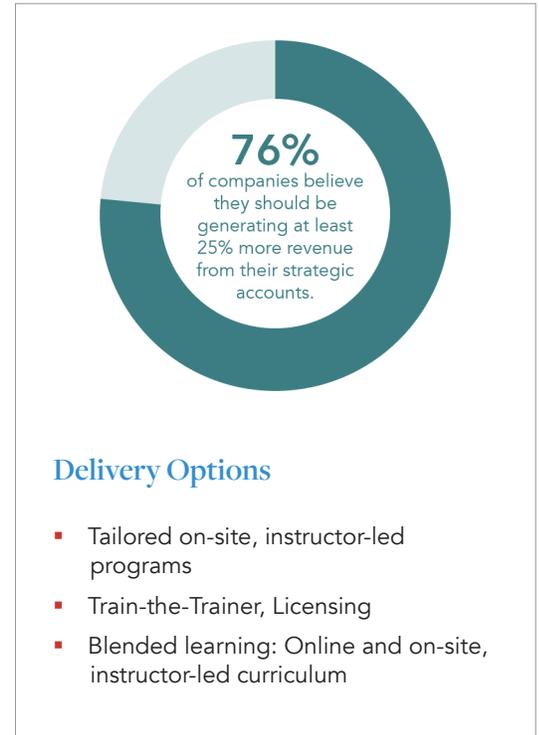
At RAIN Group, we help build and execute strategic account management initiatives that achieve the greatest possible success. We'll work with you to build the processes and skills needed to penetrate, expand, and protect strategic accounts.

We help clients succeed with strategic account management in two ways:

1. **Consulting and Advisory Services** to help build, implement, and improve strategic account management initiatives.
2. **Training in Strategic Account Management** to help your teams build skills and knowledge to succeed in SAM planning and implementation.

Our on-site program gives your team the critical skills and knowledge needed to significantly grow accounts. We teach your team how to:

- Build account plans that actually work and result in revenue growth, deeper partnerships, and overall account success.
- Lead value discovery sessions internally and with accounts for the purpose of value discovery, connection, and co-creation.
- View needs from the customer's perspective to strengthen and deepen your ability to create value for accounts.
- Assess SAM success and determine whether they need to stay the course, pivot, or otherwise adjust the strategy.



### Delivery Options

- Tailored on-site, instructor-led programs
- Train-the-Trainer, Licensing
- Blended learning: Online and on-site, instructor-led curriculum

## Contact Us to Learn How to Sell More to Existing Accounts

If your team needs to learn how to:

- Develop enterprise-level relationships
- Keep the competition at bay
- Sell more across the full capabilities of your organization
- Play the 6 Strategic Account Manager Roles

Contact RAIN Group today at (508) 405-0438 or [info@raingroup.com](mailto:info@raingroup.com).

# About RAIN Group

## Unleash the Sales Potential of Your Team with RAIN Group

RAIN Group is a sales training, assessment, and performance improvement company that helps leading organizations improve sales results. We've helped hundreds of thousands of salespeople, managers, and professionals in more than 62 countries increase their sales significantly with RAIN Group's consulting and sales methodology.

We can help you:

### Implement Sales Training that Delivers Real Results

RAIN Group's sales training system inspires real change and delivers real results that last. Our rigorous approach includes sales team evaluation, customized training programs, robust reinforcement, and coaching to help you and your team develop sales and negotiation skills, and maximize your results.

### Grow Your Key Accounts

At most companies, there's a huge, untapped opportunity to add more value—and thus sell more—to existing accounts. We help our clients capitalize on these revenue growth opportunities. Whether it's simply increasing cross-selling and up-selling or implementing a major strategic account management program, we can help.

### Identify Who Can and Will Sell with Great Success

Our assessments measure sales attributes and skills, identifying the factors that really make a difference in sales performance. Whether you're looking to hire someone who can and will sell, or looking to improve sales performance, we'll help you build the most successful sales team.

### Implement World-Class Sales Coaching

We coach sellers, professionals, and leaders individually and in groups to achieve the greatest and fastest increase in sales results. And we train and certify leaders and managers in our RAIN Sales Coaching system. Often, it's RAIN Sales Coaching that truly unlocks the team's potential, and keeps them motivated to produce the best results consistently.

Find out more about how RAIN Group can help you  
unleash the sales potential of your team by visiting  
[raingroup.com](http://raingroup.com) or calling (508) 405-0438.

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## Connect with Us



## About the Authors

Mike Schultz is President of RAIN Group and is based out of RAIN Group's Boston office. Ago Cluytens is the Practice Director of the EMEA region and is based out of RAIN Group's Geneva office. Mike Jones is Practice Director of the UK region and is based out of RAIN Group's London office.