WHERE VALUE LIVES

EXECUTIVE COMPANION RESOURCE

The Living Account Plan

A practical chapter guide for keeping strategic account thinking current, evidence-based and connected to the customer's changing world.

SUPPORTING CHAPTER 16

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How to use this resource

This companion edition preserves the complete Chapter 16 text while presenting it in the same executive visual system as the other Where Value Lives downloads. Use the highlighted questions and the Living Account Plan Canvas sections to review an existing plan, challenge assumptions and decide what needs to change.

EXECUTIVE NOTE

A living account plan is not judged by how many boxes are completed. It is judged by whether it improves decisions about the customer.

Chapter 16 — The Living Account Plan

There are account plans, and then there are documents that sit in the CRM wearing the clothes of account plans.

The difference matters.

A real account plan helps people think, choose and act.

A fake account plan helps people pass an internal review, satisfy a management process, or create the comforting impression that a complex customer relationship is under control because several boxes have been completed.

Many organisations have far more of the second kind than the first.

You can usually spot them.

They are created once a year, often in a rush, just before the sales leadership review. They contain a short description of the customer, usually copied from the customer's website with only moderate shame. They include financial targets, product opportunities, stakeholder names, risks, actions and perhaps a section called "strategy", which often means "things we would like to sell if the customer becomes unusually cooperative".

They are uploaded.

They are approved.

They are forgotten.

Then, eleven months later, someone opens the plan again and discovers that it has aged like an avocado.

For a moment it looked fresh and promising. Then suddenly it became brown, soft and faintly disappointing.

This is not Strategic Account Management.

It is annual account planning theatre.

And by now, you will have noticed that I have a low tolerance for theatre masquerading as strategy.

An account plan is not a document

An account plan is not a document.

It may live in a document. It may be supported by a CRM field, a slide deck, a spreadsheet, a dashboard or a beautifully designed template with boxes in tasteful corporate colours.

But the plan itself is not the file.

The plan is the discipline of understanding the customer's world, making choices, aligning the organisation and creating recognised value.

The document is just the container.

This distinction is important because organisations often become obsessed with the container.

They ask:

- Has the account plan been completed?
- Has it been uploaded?
- Has every field been filled?
- Has the opportunity table been updated?
- Has the stakeholder map been colour-coded?

Has Finance seen the numbers?

Has the executive sponsor added a comment?

These are not bad questions. Some are necessary. But they miss the deeper issue.

The real question is:

“Is the account plan helping us make better decisions about this customer?”

If the answer is no, the plan is not yet doing its job.

It may be tidy.

It may be compliant.

It may even be quite attractive.

But it is not alive.

A dead plan describes. A living plan thinks.

A dead account plan describes the customer.

A living account plan helps us think.

A dead plan says:

“This is who the customer is.”

A living plan asks:

“What is changing in their world, and what does that mean for us?”

A dead plan says:

“These are the opportunities.”

A living plan asks:

“Which of these opportunities are connected to customer-recognised value?”

A dead plan says:

“These are the stakeholders.”

A living plan asks:

“Who influences value recognition, risk, access and future choice?”

A dead plan says:

“This is our revenue target.”

A living plan asks:

“What customer outcomes would justify that growth?”

A dead plan says:

“These are our actions.”

A living plan asks:

“Are these the right actions for the investment choice we have made?”

This is the shift.

The purpose of the account plan is not to prove that the account manager has done some thinking. It is to help the whole organisation keep thinking.

The annual ritual

Most account planning processes begin with good intent.

Senior leaders want more discipline. They want better visibility. They want account managers to think strategically. They want growth to be more planned and less opportunistic. They want to reduce surprise. They want internal teams aligned around important customers.

All sensible.

Then someone designs a template.

This is where danger enters the room quietly, carrying a laptop.

The template grows. Every function wants a section. Sales wants opportunity detail. Finance wants margin. Service wants delivery risk. Marketing wants references. Product wants innovation potential. Leadership wants strategic alignment. Someone adds competitor analysis. Someone else adds stakeholder influence scoring. Then someone, probably after a difficult meeting, adds a mandatory field called “customer intimacy plan”, and we all have to pretend that is a normal phrase.

Before long, the template becomes so heavy that completing it feels like applying for planning permission.

Account managers respond as human beings do when given too much administrative burden.

They comply.

They cut and paste. They fill the boxes. They recycle phrases. They write things like “develop trusted advisor relationship” and “expand wallet share” because those phrases appear to fit almost anywhere, like business wallpaper.

The plan is submitted.

Management reviews it.

Everyone agrees that the account is important, the opportunities are attractive and the relationship needs to become more strategic.

Then the real work resumes, largely unchanged.

This is the tragedy of many account planning systems.

They create documentation without changing attention.

Start outside-in

A strategic account plan should not begin with what we want to sell.

It should begin with the customer’s world.

This takes us back to Chapter 8: the customer’s world is the account plan.

Before we list opportunities, we need to understand context.

- What is changing in the customer’s market?
- What pressures are they under?
- What are their strategic priorities?
- What risks are increasing?
- What are their customers demanding?
- What is their board or leadership team trying to achieve?
- Where are they investing?
- Where are they cutting back?
- What operational problems are consuming attention?
- What internal politics affect decisions?
- What external forces are reshaping their choices?

What would make them look successful?

Until we understand these things, our account strategy is mostly projection.

We are looking at the customer through the window of our own ambition.

That window can be surprisingly dirty.

Outside-in planning forces us to begin somewhere better.

It asks:

“What is happening over there?”

Not:

“What do we want from them?”

This does not mean supplier ambition is wrong. Of course we have goals. We want revenue, growth, profit, influence and opportunity. But those ambitions must be connected to the customer’s reality.

Otherwise, the account plan becomes a sales wish list wearing strategic shoes.

The customer does not care about our account plan

This is worth remembering.

The customer does not care about our account plan.

They care about their own world.

They care about their targets, risks, pressures, politics, customers, budgets, transformation programmes, service problems, reputations and futures.

They care about whether we help.

So the account plan must be built around a translation exercise.

How do our capabilities connect to their priorities?

How does our service affect their experience?

How does our innovation support their future?

How does our relationship reduce their risk?

How does our insight make their decisions better?

How does our attention create progress they recognise?

This is where Strategic Account Management becomes useful.

Not by documenting the customer.

By interpreting them.

The plan should convert insight into choices

A good account plan is not simply a storage place for information, it is a choice engine.

It should help the organisation decide what to do and what not to do, and where to invest

Where should we protect, where should we grow, where should we repair?

Where should we maintain efficiently?

Where should we stop wasting effort?

Which stakeholders deserve more attention?

Which opportunities are real?

Which risks require escalation?

Which customer problems align with our strengths?

Which requests should we decline?

Which internal resources are justified?

This is where the account plan connects directly to Chapter 15.

Choosing where to invest is not an abstract portfolio exercise. It must show up inside the plan.

If the account is in protect mode, the plan should focus on risk reduction, service stability, stakeholder reinforcement and value evidence.

If the account is in grow mode, the plan should focus on future value, expansion, access, innovation and mutual opportunity.

If the account is in repair mode, the plan should prioritise trust recovery, delivery credibility, honest communication and evidence that things have changed.

If the account is an incubator, the plan should define what we are testing and what evidence would justify deeper investment.

If the account is maintain, the plan should be lighter, efficient and appropriate. There is no need to build a cathedral around a garden shed.

Perfectly good garden sheds exist. They keep things dry. They do not require stained glass.

The account plan should match the investment choice.

Otherwise, we either over-plan ordinary accounts or under-plan strategic ones.

Both are wasteful.

Opportunity lists are not strategy

Many account plans are dominated by opportunity lists.

This is understandable. Opportunity lists are exciting. They show potential. They give the sales organisation something to pursue. They allow senior leaders to look at a pipeline number and feel briefly taller.

But an opportunity list is not a strategy.

It may be part of the strategy, but only if the opportunities are connected to customer value, decision reality and our right to win.

A weak opportunity list says:

Product A.

Service B.

Renewal C.

Expansion D.

New division E.

A stronger account plan asks:

Which customer priority does this opportunity support?

Who cares about it inside the customer?

What value would it create?

What evidence would the customer need?

Why would they act now?

What alternatives do they have?

What is our credibility?

What would we need to invest?

What could stop it?

What would success change in the relationship?

These questions turn pipeline into strategy.

Without them, the opportunity list is just a set of commercial hopes, and hope, as we have noted before, is not a route to market.

Stakeholder maps must move

Stakeholder maps are another account planning favourite.

There is usually a grid. Names appear on it. People are classified according to influence, attitude, power, support, decision role or some other sensible dimension.

This can be useful.

But stakeholder maps often become stale.

The customer reorganises. A senior sponsor leaves. Procurement gains influence. A technical expert becomes a hidden blocker. A new finance leader changes the approval criteria. An operational manager who loved us moves to a different role. Someone who seemed peripheral suddenly becomes central because the customer's priorities have shifted.

Meanwhile, our stakeholder map remains frozen in last year's confidence.

That is dangerous.

Value is not recognised by "the customer" in general.

It is recognised by specific people, in specific roles, under specific pressures, with specific views of what matters.

A living account plan keeps stakeholder understanding current.

It asks:

Who defines value?

Who experiences value?

Who influences the decision?

Who controls access?

Who carries risk?

Who benefits from our work?

Who is affected by our failures?

Who would defend us internally?

Who would quietly replace us?

Who do we not understand well enough?

This goes beyond contact management.

It is perception management.

Not in a manipulative sense, but in a strategic sense. We need to understand how different stakeholders experience the relationship.

The same supplier can be seen as excellent by Operations, expensive by Finance, risky by IT, useful by Customer Service and invisible to the board.

Which one is the truth?

All of them.

The expression of value is contextual.

The account plan must show that.

Mutual value belongs in the plan

Traditional account plans often focus heavily on supplier value.

Revenue. Growth. Margin. Pipeline. Share of wallet. Renewal. Competitive position.

Again, these matter. We should not apologise for measuring whether the relationship is good for us.

But a strategic account plan must also capture value for the customer.

Not as a decorative paragraph about partnership, but as evidence.

- What value have we helped the customer create?
- What outcomes have changed?
- What risks have reduced?
- What friction have we removed?
- What capabilities have improved?
- What confidence have we built?
- What value has the customer recognised?
- What value may still be invisible?
- What future value could we create together?

This is where Chapter 9 and Chapter 14 come back into the account plan.

From Value Proposition to Value Evidence.

Measuring What the Customer Actually Values.

A living account plan should contain recognised value evidence, not just proposed value claims.

It should help the account team say:

- “This is where we have earned trust.”
- “This is where value is being created but not seen.”
- “This is where we need to help the customer build an internal business case.”
- “This is where our future opportunity should come from.”

This makes the plan more than a sales document.

It becomes a value memory.

The plan is cross-functional, or it is incomplete

A strategic account plan that lives only with the account manager is incomplete.

The account manager may own the orchestration, but they do not own all the value.

Service affects value.

Operations affects value.

Product affects value.

Finance affects value.

Legal affects value.

Implementation affects value.

Customer support affects value.

Leadership affects value.

Even the invoicing process can affect value, as anyone who has spent three months trying to correct a billing error will confirm, usually with the haunted expression of a person who has seen things.

The customer experiences the organisation as a whole.

The plan should therefore align the organisation as a whole.

This does not mean everyone needs access to a massive document or must attend every review. Please do not invite half the company to a meeting called “strategic alignment” and then wonder why people lose the will to participate.

But relevant functions should understand:

Why this account matters.

What the customer is trying to achieve.

What value we are trying to create.

Where the relationship is vulnerable.

What promises have been made.

What support is needed.

What decisions are required.

How their function affects customer-recognised value.

This is where the account plan becomes an internal alignment tool.

It helps the organisation behave coherently.

And coherence is valuable because customers are very good at detecting fragmentation.

They know when the left hand and right hand have never met.

The account plan should be used in governance

A living account plan is not separate from governance.

It is refreshed through governance.

The operational pulse may update risks, delivery issues and customer friction.

The internal account team review may update cross-functional actions, stakeholder intelligence and resource needs.

The customer value review may update recognised value, changing priorities and future opportunities.

The executive alignment conversation may update strategic context, senior commitment and barriers.

The annual joint value and innovation review may update the whole direction of the plan.

In other words, governance is the circulatory system of the account plan.

Without governance, the plan becomes static.

Without the plan, governance becomes disconnected activity.

They need each other.

This is why annual planning alone is too weak for strategic accounts.

The customer’s world does not update once a year for our convenience.

Markets move. People leave. Budgets shift. Priorities change. Competitors appear. Crises happen. Strategies are rewritten. New bosses arrive with fresh phrases and dangerous levels of confidence.

A living plan must be able to absorb change.

That does not mean constant editing for the sake of it. It means keeping the plan current enough to guide decisions.

An out-of-date account plan is not harmless.

It can actively mislead.

The Living Account Plan Canvas

Here is a practical structure for a living account plan.

Not a huge template. Not a bureaucratic beast. A canvas.

Something clear enough to use, but rich enough to matter.

1. Customer World

What is changing around and inside the customer?

Capture market pressures, strategy, regulation, competition, transformation, leadership changes, financial pressures, operational priorities and customer expectations.

This is the outside-in starting point.

2. Customer Value Priorities

What does the customer currently value?

Use their language wherever possible.

Cost reduction. Risk control. Growth. Speed. Reliability. Innovation. Simplicity. Customer experience. Compliance. Capability. Visibility. Sustainability. Confidence.

Do not translate everything into supplier jargon. The plan should sound like the customer's world, not a brochure.

3. Our Current Position

Where do we stand today?

Are we trusted, tolerated, loved, doubted, invisible, embedded, vulnerable, expanding, recovering, or quietly being benchmarked by someone in Procurement called Martin?

Be honest.

A flattering plan is less useful than an accurate one.

4. Recognised Value Evidence

What value has the customer recognised?

Include outcomes, evidence, quotes, examples, business impact, behavioural signals and internal customer advocacy.

Also identify value delivered but not yet recognised.

This is often where significant opportunity sits.

5. Relationship and Stakeholder Map

Who matters, and why?

Who defines value?

Who experiences value?

Who influences decisions?

Who supports us?

Who blocks us?

Who is missing from our relationship?

Who needs confidence?

Who has power now, and who may have power next?

Keep this current.

The customer's stakeholder system is alive, so the map must be too.

6. Strategic Opportunities

Which opportunities are genuinely connected to customer priorities and recognised value?

For each one, ask:

What customer outcome does this support?

Why now?

Who cares?

What evidence is needed?

What is our right to win?

What value would it create for both sides?

If an opportunity cannot answer these questions, it may belong in a different list.

Possibly one called "things we fancy".

7. Risks and Friction

Where is the relationship vulnerable?

Include service issues, stakeholder gaps, competitor threats, procurement pressure, value invisibility, profitability concerns, delivery complexity, overdependence on one contact, internal misalignment and unhelpful customer behaviours.

Also capture friction.

Where are we hard to work with?

Where does the customer have to chase, translate, coordinate or endure us?

Friction quietly destroys perceived value.

8. Investment Choice

What is our investment posture?

Protect, grow, incubate, repair, maintain, simplify or exit.

This section should make the strategic choice explicit.

It should also explain what attention is justified and what is not.

A plan without an investment choice can become a container for random ambition.

9. Mutual Value Objectives

What are we trying to achieve together?

This should include customer value objectives and supplier value objectives.

For example:

Customer: reduce implementation risk across three regions.

Supplier: deepen executive access and expand into adjacent service line.

Customer: improve adoption and reduce manual work.

Supplier: create reference evidence and build profitable expansion.

The best strategic objectives show mutuality without pretending both sides want exactly the same thing.

10. Governance and Next Actions

How will the plan be kept alive?

What is the governance rhythm?

What decisions are needed?

Who owns which actions?

What will be reviewed next month, next quarter and at executive level?

What evidence will we gather?

What customer conversations are required?

What internal alignment is needed?

This is where the plan turns into movement.

Keep it short enough to matter

Here is a slightly heretical view.

A strategic account plan should be as short as it can be while still being useful.

Not as short as possible. That becomes superficial.

But as short as useful.

Too many account plans collapse under their own weight.

They become so detailed that nobody reads them, so comprehensive that nobody updates them, and so impressive that nobody uses them.

A plan that is too heavy becomes a museum.

A living plan should be usable in real conversations.

The account manager should be able to brief an executive sponsor from it.

A service leader should be able to understand what matters.

A product manager should be able to see where innovation might help.

A finance leader should understand the commercial logic.

A new team member should be able to grasp the customer's world quickly.

If the plan cannot do those things, it may be detailed but not practical.

And practical matters.

This book is not called Where Value Lives so that we can bury value under administrative rubble.

Honesty is more valuable than optimism

Account plans have a tendency to become optimistic.

This is understandable. They are often reviewed by managers who like growth, pipeline and reassuring narratives. Account managers may feel pressure to show ambition. Nobody wants to be the person whose plan says, "The customer sees us as expensive, our main sponsor has left, Operations are furious with us and most of the pipeline is imaginary."

Although, to be fair, that would be a refreshingly honest plan.

The problem is that optimistic plans make poor decisions more likely.

They hide risk.

They exaggerate opportunity.

They understate friction.

They assume access.

They mistake friendliness for commitment.

They describe hoped-for value as if it has already been recognised.

A living account plan must be honest enough to be useful.

That means saying:

“We do not yet understand this stakeholder.”

“The customer has not recognised this value.”

“Our relationship is too narrow.”

“This opportunity is attractive but weakly qualified.”

“We are operationally exposed.”

“We have overinvested relative to return.”

“The customer is important, but not currently strategic.”

This honesty is not negativity.

It is respect for reality.

And reality, inconvenient though it can be, is one of strategy’s closest friends.

The account plan as organisational memory

Strategic relationships are vulnerable to memory loss.

People change roles. Account managers move on. Customer stakeholders leave. Executives rotate. Service teams restructure. CRM notes become archaeological fragments. Someone remembers that “there was an issue a few years ago”, but nobody can quite recall what happened, who promised what, or why the customer still becomes tense whenever implementation timelines are mentioned.

A living account plan helps preserve memory.

It records not only data, but meaning.

What has the customer been through?

What have we learned?

Where have we earned trust?

Where have we damaged it?

What commitments matter?

What language does the customer use?

What sensitivities should new people understand?

What value has been recognised?

What must never be casually promised again, unless we enjoy pain?

This kind of memory matters because customers expect continuity.

They do not want to educate every new person from the supplier. They do not want to repeat their history. They do not want hard-won insight to vanish because someone changed jobs.

When a supplier remembers well, customers feel understood.

And feeling understood is part of value.

The plan belongs to the relationship, not the software

A final word on systems.

CRM systems are useful. Account planning tools are useful. Dashboards are useful. Templates are useful.

But none of them creates Strategic Account Management.

A poor account plan in an expensive system is still a poor account plan.

A thoughtful plan in a simple format may be much more valuable.

Do not let software define the quality of your thinking.

The system should support the discipline, not replace it.

This matters because organisations often believe that implementing a new account planning tool will improve account strategy.

It might help.

But if the underlying questions are weak, the tool will simply help people answer weak questions more efficiently.

Technology can store information. It can prompt updates. It can visualise metrics. It can make plans more accessible. It can remind people to act.

Wonderful.

But it cannot care about the customer's world.

It cannot judge strategic relevance.

It cannot feel the change in a stakeholder's tone.

It cannot know whether a customer's polite satisfaction hides declining interest.

It cannot decide where organisational attention should go.

People must still do that.

Human attention creates the strategy. Technology can help scale the discipline.

That distinction will only become more important as AI enters account planning, insight gathering and customer analysis. AI can help us see patterns, summarise information and generate hypotheses. But it must not become a machine for producing more polished supplier-centred fantasy.

The customer's world still comes first.

The living plan test

Here is a simple test.

Take one of your strategic account plans and ask:

- Would this plan help a new executive sponsor understand how to be useful?
- Would it help Operations understand what the customer values?
- Would it help the account manager decide what not to pursue?
- Would it show where value has been recognised and where it has not?
- Would it reveal the biggest risks to the relationship?
- Would it explain why the account deserves its current level of investment?
- Would it change after a meaningful customer conversation?
- Would anyone miss it if it disappeared?

That last question is always rather sharp.

If the account plan vanished tomorrow and nobody's decisions became worse, the plan was probably not alive.

It was storage.

And storage is not strategy.

The point of the living account plan

The point of the living account plan is not to create a better document.

It is to create a better relationship.

A relationship in which the supplier understands the customer’s world.

A relationship in which value is evidenced and recognised.

A relationship in which internal teams know how they contribute.

A relationship in which executive sponsors can be useful.

A relationship in which investment choices are clear.

A relationship in which risks are seen early.

A relationship in which opportunities emerge from customer priorities, not supplier appetite.

That is what the plan is for.

It is the practical expression of everything we have discussed so far: attention, context, recognised value, orchestration, sponsorship, governance, measurement and choice.

But there is one more layer we must now examine.

The account plan may speak about “the customer”, but the customer is not one mind.

The customer is a system of people.

Different people value different things. They carry different pressures, fears, incentives, ambitions and definitions of success. They may work for the same organisation and still experience us in entirely different ways.

So if value lives in the five inches between the customer’s ears, we must ask a more precise question.

> Which customer?

That takes us into the stakeholder system.