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Today's topic is **capture planning**. *Capture planning* is the process of identifying opportunities, assessing the environment, and implementing winning strategies to capture a specific business opportunity. The aim is to position the prospect to prefer your organization and your solution to alternative solutions before proposals are submitted. Consistently successful capture planning requires a written, action-oriented capture plan.



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The term *capture planning* was increasingly used in the 1990s, but the concept is as old as complex sales. As a sign of the increasing use of the term and interest in the concept, a primary theme of the 19th Annual APMP International Conference is the importance of the capture phase of business development.

So, why is capture planning suddenly so important? A majority of industry veterans agree that prospects' buying decisions are 40 to 80 percent decided before proposals are submitted. Organizations that practice capture planning win more frequently; win larger, more competitive bids; reduce bid time and cost; and make better bid-, no-bid decisions.

Still not convinced? Then *Google* books that include "positioning" in the title. Amazon.com lists more than 20,000 books in "Business & Investing" and more than 55,000 in the "Professional & Technical" category.

The term capture planning originated in the business development organizations of major United States government contracting organizations in the 1990s. The term is increasingly accepted in other business sectors in the United States and in other countries. In 2008, books, articles, web sites, professional organizations, training workshops, and consultants on capture planning abound. I've listed a few of these in my podcast transcript.

Covering a subject as broad as capture planning in a brief podcast is impossible. Today's podcast will define capture planning in the context of the business planning process, describe essential elements of effective capture plans, and discuss balancing preparing and executing a capture plan.

A key point in the prior *Proposal Guide* podcast on Customer Focus was that while most sellers claim to be customer focused, few are. Similarly, while the concept of capture planning is relatively simple, the practice is complex and difficult.

CAPTURE PLANNING IN CONTEXT

Let's start with a few definitions; but first, I'd like to note why definitions are critical. If someone speaks to you in a language that you don't understand, you know that you haven't understood the message. In business, people often use familiar terms, and both parties think that they understand each other. Yet this situation is riskier,

because neither one knows that the other person didn't get it. Now, back to capture planning.

Capture planning relates to complex sales, not simple sales. *Simple sales* have few people involved, (usually just the seller and the buyer); a short sales cycle, (maybe a single buyer-seller interaction); low monetary value; low risk; and a simple, implicitly understood buying process. Most store, catalog, or on-line sales are simple sales.

Complex sales have selling and buying committees; a long sales cycle, (perhaps years); high monetary value; high risk; and a complex, sometimes formal buying process. Bid requests and formal proposals usually involve complex sales.

The driving difference is the buying committee. A lone account manager can seldom identify, gain access to, and adequately address the buying issues of every member of the prospect's buying committee.

Imagine, Goliath Corporation with billions in annual sales, is selecting an information technology-outsourcing vendor. A committee headed by the Chief Information Officer, assisted by a specialist consulting firm, prepares requirements, issues a bid request, evaluates the responses, and recommends a vendor. How likely is it that the IT vendors' account manager will be able to meet with key members of the buying committee, and Goliath's CEO, who will make or at least approve the selection?

The solution is to assemble a selling committee, directed by the account manager, who is assigned the role of capture manager. The capture manager prepares and owns the capture plan, and manages capture activities according to that plan.

Consider this statement from a successful account manager:

Many sales professionals see describe their role like an actor that must perform well in front of the prospect. I see my role more like the director of a play. I must rehearse both the individuals in my organization to convince their counterparts in the prospect organization, and then we all must rehearse individuals in the prospect organization to make the sale for us when we can't be in the room.

Let's not confuse different types of plans. Major organizations have strategic plans, business plans, market plans, account plans, and capture plans. *Strategic plans* define an organization's direction and approach for multiple years. *Business plans* typically are in yearly segments and primarily financial. *Market or sector plans* are for multiple accounts within a defined market. An *account plan* usually includes multiple opportunities within a single account. A *capture plan* is opportunity specific.

Being opportunity specific, capture planning begins when a specific opportunity is identified, and management decides that that opportunity is both winnable and worth winning. This milestone decision initiates the capture-planning phase. The initial management directive is to name a capture manager whose first task is to prepare the capture plan, review it with management, and then to manage to that plan. While access to the prospect might be limited during the buying process, capture planning continues until the contract is signed.

ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE CAPTURE PLANS

Establish a common capture plan framework that is consistent across your organization, scalable to the opportunity, and flexible to the situation. To meet management expectations consistently, capture managers need a consistent plan framework. Smaller opportunities warrant smaller, less elaborate plans. Situational differences might be short time frames, limited prospect access, or limited capture resources.

Capture plans should be written, either as documents or structured briefings. If the opportunity doesn't warrant preparing a written plan, then the opportunity is too small or you are pursuing too many opportunities with your limited capture resources.

Most organizations have standard templates for both types of capture plans. Documents work better in organizations with formal management processes and longer sales cycles. Briefing formats are better suited for organizations with less-formal, collaborative management processes and shorter sales cycles.

Whether in a document or briefing format, capture plans should include four framework elements:

1. External analysis
2. Internal analysis
3. Strategy development
4. Execution and Monitoring

External analysis is done in the context of your corporate planning process, including or linked to directly relevant data from strategic, business, market, or account plans. External analysis includes a description of the opportunity, customer analysis, and competitor analysis.

Internal analysis focuses on early definition of a solution to enable you to influence the prospect's requirements and select the best teaming partners. Internal analysis also includes cost and pricing analysis, relevant past performance data, and risk analysis.

Strategy development comprises a series of action plans that specify what actions will be taken, by whom, and when. All actions are to position your solution favorably.

The sole objective of a capture plan is to win a specific opportunity. The primary reason for the external and internal analysis is to define effective positioning strategies. *Tactics* are the specific actions that someone takes to implement a strategy.

Here are several examples:

If your strategy is to convince the prospect that your organization can complete a project on schedule, then your tactics might include:

1. Tell them about three, similar projects that you completed on schedule.

2. Take them on one or more site visits of those projects, where they can talk to a customer that verifies your claim.
3. Send them an independent news article or a document from that customer, verifying your on-time claim.

If your strategy is to convince the prospect that your proposed project manager is capable, then your tactics might include:

1. Set up a meeting where they can meet and question that project manager.
2. Review a tailored resume of that project manager with the prospect in a sales meeting, and then include that resume in your sales proposal.
3. Feature your project manager prominently in sales presentations, and post-proposal-submittal presentations.
4. Insert specific client references and quotations in sales presentations and proposals.

In essence, the *strategy* is your aim; the tactic is what you do to *achieve* your aim. *Execution and monitoring* are focused on making sure that positioning happens, results are evaluated, and adjustments made. Keep capture plans current, making adjustments as circumstances change.

BALANCING CAPTURE PLAN PREPARATION AND EXECUTION

Effective capture plans are balanced for the audience, both managers and implementers; and the focus, between analysis and execution. Let's look at each.

The target audience for a capture plan is the people who review, approve, manage, and support the plan and the people who execute the plan. For example, a plan primarily focused on winning management approval and resources might have little direction for the implementers. As with any plan, each action must describe the intent, the action, who takes the action, when, and how the result will be assessed. In short, implementers need to know what they are supposed to do.

Analysis and execution must be balanced. Consider the extremes. An exquisitely crafted analysis and capture strategy is useless if no one takes action to influence the prospect. Conversely, an extensive selling team can repeatedly call on various people in the prospect organization, but without a consistent objective and message, the best outcome is that they simply confuse the prospect. In the worst case, the prospect might be offended, finding your organization inept or dishonest.

Every organization has limited business development resources. Better to quickly identify a few potentially effective positioning strategies and tactics, and execute them, than to expend most of your time preparing a plan, and then implementing little of the plan because you lacked the time and resources.

Let's summarize key points about capture planning and capture plans:

1. Capture planning is the process of identifying opportunities, assessing the environment, and implementing winning strategies to capture a specific business opportunity. Capture plans are not account plans. Capture plans are opportunity specific.
2. Capture plans are written, whether in prose or briefing formats. If they are not worth writing down, they are probably not worth doing.
3. Capture plans are for complex sales.
4. An effective capture planning process is scalable to the opportunity and flexible to the organization and situation.
5. Capture plans include four framework elements: external analysis, internal analysis, strategy development, and your execution and monitoring process.
6. Capture plans target management and the people who execute the plan.
7. With limited resources, balance analysis and execution. Nothing good happens until someone takes an action that positively positions your organization with this prospect.

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You can download a script of this podcast, and prior Proposal Guide podcasts, at www.apmp.org. I'll post some additional references at the end of each podcast script. As a member service, APMP members can also search the APMP BD-KnowledgeBase™ for information on this topic and a range of business development topics.

Proposal Guide is Larry Newman, author of the *Proposal Guide for Business and Technical Professionals*. As a personal note, I'd like to add that the *Proposal Guide* book was selected for an *Award of Excellence* by the Society for Technical Communication in its 2008 International Technical Publications Competition.

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That's all. Thanks for listening.

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