Capture Planning is the process of identifying opportunities, assessing the environment, and devising and implementing winning strategies oriented toward capturing a specific business opportunity. Consistently successful capture planning requires written, action-oriented capture plans.

Most sales and marketing veterans agree that 40 to 80 percent of the time, customers decide whom they would prefer to buy from before proposals are submitted.

The aim of capture planning is to position the customer to prefer your organization and your solution to the exclusion of competitors, or to at least prefer to do business with your organization prior to proposals being submitted.

The phrase capture planning originated in the 1980s in organizations that were primarily focused on large U.S. Department of Defense opportunities. Concurrently, commercial organizations pursuing large, complex opportunities were developing detailed account or sales planning disciplines. Both were pursuing complex opportunities with the following characteristics:

- High value
- Buying committees (multiple people influencing the purchase decision)
- Long sales cycles (months or years)

Some commercial organizations use the terms capture plan and account plan interchangeably. However, many account plans are not opportunity specific and may merely allocate the organization’s revenue objective among accounts.

Capture Planning

1. Implement a capture planning discipline to capture new business more efficiently.
2. Enhance capture planning effectiveness by aligning activities and capture plan elements.
3. Select a compatible medium (whether text, presentation, or web-based) to develop, review, share, and update capture plans in your organization.
4. Keep the process dynamic, flexible, interactive, and current.
5. Maintain a balance between planning and execution.
6. Complete the Integrated Customer Solution Worksheet and the Bidder Comparison Chart—even when time is short.
7. Gain and maintain senior management approval and support.
8. Commit the right people to the capture team.
9. Assign specific, measurable objectives, schedules, and completion dates to different department managers by name.
10. Establish regular decision gate reviews to determine whether to advance the opportunity to the next phase or end the pursuit.
11. Schedule color team reviews to improve the product—whether a capture plan, strategy, proposal, or underlying processes.
12. Use the capture plan to jump-start the proposal planning process.
A capture planning best practice is to prepare a written, action-oriented capture plan. While the length, complexity, and format may vary, a written plan offers reviewable evidence of the quality of thinking of the planners and soundness of the plan.

The primary audience for a capture plan is each person who will manage, approve, or execute the plan, the proposal, and the resulting contract.

A good capture plan will be realistic and specific, detailing the objective, action, responsible individual, timing, and frequency of review.

Organizations that use a formal capture planning discipline are helped in the following ways:
- More realistic understanding of each opportunity
- Improved bid decisions
- Improved solutions and capture strategies
- Greater consensus and information transfer among individuals pursuing each opportunity
- Saved time, reduced capture cost, and improved win rates

Capture planning is initiated following the pursuit decision process milestone and continues into program start-up.

Implement a capture planning discipline to capture new business more efficiently.

Capture planning offers benefits to everyone involved:
- **Executives** gain early and regular visibility over business development opportunities.
- **Sales and business development professionals** win more opportunities by efficiently specifying and managing capture activities.
- **Senior managers** increase sales revenue by efficiently deploying limited business development resources.
- **Participants** are motivated by knowing their efforts are productive.
- **Employees** stay employed.
- **Stockholders** make money.

Unlike the top-down, management-driven corporate planning process, capture planning is opportunity specific. Capture plans are driven bottom-up by the opportunity and the customer, as illustrated in figure 1.

To meet the organization’s goals, sufficient specific business opportunities must be won. The discipline associated with best-in-class capture planning aligns organizational objectives and investment with high-win probability opportunities within approved strategic business objectives.
Figure 1. Planning Hierarchy. Capture planning is influenced top-down within the context of the overall corporate and sales planning process. However, it is driven bottom-up by the customer’s opportunity-specific needs.

Figure 2. Capture Planning Improves Capture Efficiency. Much of the data in each plan can be reused; it transfers or flows into the next plan. While the estimates vary, approximately 40 percent of the data from the account plan applies to the capture plan. Up to 80 percent of the capture plan data is reused in the proposal plan or closure plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRE-PLAN STATE</th>
<th>POST-PLAN STATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fuzzy concepts</td>
<td>Clear concepts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information known individually</td>
<td>Information shared among entire team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potential actions not aligned, assigned, or managed</td>
<td>Potential actions are aligned, efficiently allocated, assigned, and manageable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willingness to take action is unknown</td>
<td>Willingness to take action is still unknown but likely increased</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Benefits of Written Plans. In the pre-plan state, each individual may have inconsistent information. When the plan is collaboratively written, individuals share information, every individual has more information, and potential actions can be agreed and aligned. Both states require the willingness to take action, or your efforts are wasted.
Enhance capture planning effectiveness by aligning activities and capture plan elements.

In the overall context of moving from an unknown to a favored position with the customer, figure 4 shows the types of activities and the focus of those activities aligned with capture plan elements.

To move from an unknown to a known position with the customer, research, analyze, and validate your data with the customer. Validation is key because the only relevant view is the customer’s view.

The next step is to develop and define your solution, strategy, cost, and price to win from a known position. The listed capture plan elements comprise tools and templates that help you develop and document your position.

Next, implement your action plans to influence the customer and improve your position. Change requires action.

Keep iterating to achieve and then maintain a favored position. With every action, factor newly gained information into your analysis. Fine-tune your solution, strategy, cost, and price to win. Update your action plans and implement.

Figure 4. Aligning the Capture Planning Process to the Capture Plan. In the over-arching capture planning process, you seek to move from positions of “unknown,” to “known,” and then to an “improved position.” Elements of the capture plan are matched to this iterative process by phase. Specific content of your capture plans will vary depending on the opportunity, your organization, and the value of the opportunity to your organization.
Select a compatible medium—whether text, presentation, or web-based—to develop, review, share, and update capture plans in your organization.

Envision a capture plan as a framework, a series of folders or buckets where you assemble and organize data by topic. Ask capture team members to add, update, share, and purge data as relevant and permitted.

The original capture plan medium and structure was a text-based document that evolved from strategic plans, annual business plans, market plans, and account plans. Given a preferred table of contents, preparers knew what was expected, information could be adapted from prior plans, and the plan could be read before a gate review—which potentially shortened the information transfer portion of the review. Text-based plans are good vehicles to inform new capture and proposal contributors. However, text-based plans take more time to prepare, are harder to update, and often not kept current.

Many organizations select presentation-based plans instead of text-based plans, primarily because they are easier to prepare, review, and update collaboratively. Some business development managers use the presentation format to collaboratively construct the first draft with a prospective capture manager. They use the initial gate review to gain maximum participation and input, turning the review into a facilitated free-for-all. Handled diplomatically, this is an effective, constructive approach.

An additional advantage of presentation-based plans is that they are web-conference adaptable, which eases scheduling of busy executives, reduces meeting costs, and secures input from geographically dispersed experts. Presentation-based formats are easily customized, both a positive and negative aspect.

A disadvantage of presentation-based templates is the omission of supporting detail. Ask preparers to link, reference, or attach support files or folders.

Web browser-based collaboration tools are supplanting presentation-based plans as secure ways to collaboratively prepare and share capture information and documents. While many of these tools lack full drag-and-drop flexibility, they are an effective way to structure, collaboratively develop, share, and document current data in a single location. Keeping the latest data available to all authorized participants is far preferable to having multiple, outdated versions on laptops and desktops, where the capture manager and key participants cannot locate or identify the current version.

One of the best features of the web browser-based format is that senior managers can readily track progress, updates, and activity. The lack of updates suggests that nothing is happening.

Another advantage is immediate access for participants dispersed across multiple time zones. While conferencing might be inconvenient, web material is always available and can be updated while others sleep.

Many participants will have a collaboration tool installed as an organizational standard, but getting business development professionals to use browser-based tools takes some initial file structuring, training, and then management persistence to convince them to use it consistently. If not, participants will revert to old habits of keeping multiple, out-dated files on their laptops.

A disadvantage is that to maintain file security, each participant must be granted access to specific folders. The person controlling access must be readily available, or participants will become frustrated and not use the tool.

Database products offer advantages over web browser-based tools:

- Transparent and near automatic data reuse from plan to plan saves time and preserves data.
- Data security and control are improved.

For example, a customer requirement entered in the initial account plan could transfer to the capture plan, to the proposal plan, to section storyboards, and then to a section draft without re-keying. Verify that the data is still accurate before approving the transfer.

Database products might require additional software and training. While browser-based tools generally work well across operating systems and platforms, database products might not. Verify compatibility before selecting a tool.
4  **Keep the process dynamic, flexible, interactive, and current.**  
Keep your capture planning process flexible to permit adjustments depending on the importance of the opportunity to your organization, the competitive situation, and the resources you can afford to commit. Avoid becoming a slave to your process. Adapt to the needs and acceptable norms of your organization. Build the plan interactively to support a fast start with reasonable effort and to encourage regular updates. Capture plans are living documents that are repeatedly updated as you gain information. Information will change and become more specific as the opportunity matures. Figure 5 reflects a practical progression: populate, validate, update, and implement.

![Figure 5. Iteratively Develop Your Capture Plan.](image)

- Aggressively populate capture plan sections.  
- Maintain customer focus and perspective.  
- Use multiple sources for customer and competitor information.  
- Confirm agreement and support for internal information and decisions.  
- Seek information to fill gaps.  
- Add new information as it becomes available.  
- Communicate across the team.  
- Gain management support.  
- Use the capture plan to guide action.  
- Talk to your team members; do not rely on the capture plan as your sole means of communication.

![Figure 5. Iteratively Develop Your Capture Plan.](image)

5  **Maintain a balance between planning and execution.**  
Changing perceptions requires action. Detailed plans without action are a waste of time because they fail to influence customers’ perceptions.

Limit your plans to the resources available. If more resources are needed than your organization will commit to win, reconsider your pursuit decision.

Effective capture planning requires a balance between action and planning.

6  **Complete the Integrated Solution Worksheet and the Bidder Comparison Chart—even when time is short.**  
The Integrated Solution Worksheet, shown in figure 6, is a powerful analysis tool that should be applied throughout the capture process. Early in the process, use it to focus collaboratively with your customer to define the issues and influence the requirements. If you discover an opportunity after requirements are defined, use it to define the underlying issues driving the customer’s requirements. Next, extend your analysis to outline your solution, outline your competitors’ solutions, identify discriminators, and then develop your strategy and actions to better position your solution with the customer.

The Bidder Comparison Chart, shown in figure 7, is used to analyze the customer’s current perception of how your solution compares to various competitors. Use it repeatedly throughout the capture process to measure the strength and effectiveness of your positioning.

*See Strategy; and Discriminators, Proposal Guide.*  
The “gap” is the difference between the customer’s requirement and your available solution.
**Shipley Associates**

**Integrated Solution Worksheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>Customer Issues</th>
<th>Customer Requirements</th>
<th>Available Solution</th>
<th>Gap</th>
<th>Competitor Solution</th>
<th>Discriminators</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Action Required</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>System must be available.</td>
<td>8 hr. response time.</td>
<td>2 hr. response time</td>
<td>1 hr</td>
<td>3 hr. response time</td>
<td>Faster response but more expensive?</td>
<td>Emphasize no additional cost with cellular.</td>
<td>Show current response time. Show photo-service with cell phone.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 6. Integrated Solution Worksheet.** Begin by filling down the Customer Issues column when you are early in the process. If the customer has already drafted requirements, fill-down the Customer Requirements column. Then complete each row horizontally, carefully relating each item.

Additional uses and alternative approaches for the Integrated Solution Worksheet and Bidder Comparison Chart are discussed in Executive Summary, Strategy, and Teaming.

Customers have issues. Sellers have gaps. Essentially, gaps are sellers' issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issues</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Us Points</th>
<th>Competitor A Points</th>
<th>Competitor B Points</th>
<th>Competitor C Points</th>
<th>Competitor D Points</th>
<th>Competitor E Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific Experience</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Price</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familiarity with Manager Named</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Meet Schedule</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Totals                  | 270    | 240       | 230                 |

**Figure 7. Bidder Comparison Chart.** First list the customer’s issues, then the relative importance of each issue as perceived by the customer in the Weight column. Then complete each row horizontally, indicating your estimate of the customer’s perception of each competitor’s ability to satisfy that issue. Scores can range from 0 to the total number in the Weight column.

**Gain and maintain senior management approval and support.**

Top management must endorse and help communicate the plan to everyone managing and executing the plan, as well as those impacted by the reassignment of individuals to support the plan.

Management support must begin with the pursuit decision and continue through to the signed contract. If the opportunity remains worth winning, keep management sold by emphasizing the value to your organization.

If contingent items change your assumptions, then revisit your pursuit or bid decision.

Recognize and avoid the bias towards happy information. Capture managers should feel free to reveal negative information to senior management. Similarly, senior management should never punish a capture manager for honestly revealing new information that might suggest a no-pursuit or no-bid decision.
Commit the right people to the capture team.
Organizations pursuing competitive business should assign their best people to capture teams. Organizations that assign only the people they can spare from other activities usually lose the sale. Figure 8 summarizes the focus of the capture, program, and proposal managers.

Capture manager is normally a role rather than a position. In most organizations, the sales or business development lead is assigned the capture manager role. However, in organizations focused on the largest opportunities, the capture manager role may be assigned to a person from program management, business development, or line management.

The capture manager role requires a person with customer and market knowledge, sales savvy, proposal experience, leadership skills, broad technical understanding, knowledge of the organization, and positive enthusiasm. The capture manager advocates the customer’s position while focusing on winning the opportunity. The capture manager is concerned with the customer’s budget, program cost, risk, competitive analysis, capture strategy, price to win, the customer’s view of best value, and implementing the capture strategy.

Program manager is likely to be a position as well as a role. If the solution is design oriented, then a chief engineer, systems engineer, or solution architect might support or overrule the program manager. The program manager advocates for the selling organization, focusing on profit, the seller’s risk, schedule, personnel, resources, assumptions, terms and conditions, and the shape of the delivery organization.

Proposal manager as a role, while not mutually exclusive to the capture manager role, requires different skills to integrate the concerns of the capture and program managers. The proposal manager focuses on compliance, responsiveness, keeping the proposal strategy aligned with the capture strategy, proposal strategy implementation, and managing a team to produce a persuasive document within set deadlines.

In addition to the triumvirate leadership, capture team members’ skills must be suited to their assigned action, whether direct customer contact, internal development, or assisting the proposal team.

Figure 8. The Business Development Opportunity Triumvirate. Win rates improve when the capture, program, and proposal manager triumvirate are balanced and integrated.
Assign specific, measurable objectives, schedules, and completion dates to department managers by name.

Most capture team action assignments are part-time and for a limited duration. Only the managers of the assigned individuals can ensure task completion.

Many capture efforts fail because the individuals assigned to the task are expected to complete the task in their spare time.

Get serious about completing the task, eliminate the task, or no-bid due to lack of resources. The single biggest reason for losing competitive business is the failure to adequately influence the customer prior to proposal submittal.

The individuals assigned to the management roles listed in figure 9 manage the capture and proposal preparation action assignments.

The chart roughly depicts typical involvement by management role throughout the opportunity lifecycle.

Set and schedule specific measurable action objectives to simplify task management.

Contrast poor and better objectives:

**Poor**

Discuss service call procedures with the customer.

**Better**

Demonstrate our on-line service call management system with Ms. Bell, Global's office manager, during the week ending May 15, 20XX.

Figure 9. Capture Time Commitment by Role. This notional representation shows how time commitments of individuals in different roles vary throughout the business development phases. A business development manager leads the process, then hands responsibility to a capture manager. The capture manager’s involvement declines as the technical lead and proposal manager become more involved in proposal development. All but the proposal manager might have a spike in commitment after proposal submission in preparation for final contract negotiation and award.
Establish regular decision gate reviews to determine whether to advance the opportunity to the next phase or end the pursuit.

Decision gate reviews are milestones between business development process phases. Focus on four key questions:

1. Is the opportunity winnable?
2. Do the potential returns justify the expenditures?
3. Is the capture team prepared for the next phase?
4. What additional resources are required to win?

Decision gate reviews are the decision milestones between phases of the business development process, as shown in figure 10. Until you pass through a decision gate review, you remain in the same phase. For example, if senior management only reviews proposals before submittal, then you have a two-phase process.

To keep reviews short and effective, focus on reviewing the actions taken, analyzing the results of those actions, and then adjusting future actions.

Base every decision gate review on the current capture plan. Keeping your capture plan updated eliminates the need to prepare for each review.

Establish organizational standards for each review. Set clear expectations by specifying review inputs and outputs linked to the value of the opportunity, selling environment, and strategic importance to your organization and the customer.

Progressively add content and detail as the opportunity matures and you advance through successive gates. Your initial interest decision gate review will likely be short, perhaps requiring less than 10 slides with information at a basic level, but successive bid and bid validation reviews might grow to 30–60 slides with increasing levels of detail, depending upon the opportunity, organization, and selling environment.

Recheck the underlying data, assumptions, and analysis only when objectives are not met or new data is uncovered. Reviewers that over-focus on the data and analysis usually under-focus on future actions. Changing a customer’s perceptions requires action, not analysis.

Maintain a positive, constructive tone. Avoid penalizing contributors who raise unfavorable information that might lead to no-pursuit or no-bid decisions. Remember that the most successful organizations eventually pursue less than 30 percent of their pipeline and achieve win rates of 70 percent or greater. Seek good decisions while avoiding a bias towards go-forward decisions. Eliminating personal opinions, bias, and ego is difficult in most organizations.

Early warning signs leading to a no-bid decision are limited information, indecision about where to obtain needed information, and limited capture team or senior management commitment. Winning competitive business requires laser-focus on winnable opportunities.

Losing bids are the most costly bids. No-bid decisions free you to shift limited resources to winnable opportunities.
Schedule color team reviews to improve the product—whether a capture plan, strategy, proposal, or underlying processes.

The essential quality-improvement principle is to review for the right things at the right time. Use color team reviews to solicit constructive recommendations for improvement.

Differentiate color team reviews and decision gate reviews. Focus color teams on quality improvement; focus decision gate reviews on whether to advance, defer, or end the pursuit.

Adapt the number and types of reviews to your organization, your business development process, selling environment, and the importance of the opportunity. While six different color reviews are shown in figure 10, most organizations conduct some variant of the following three reviews:

1. Competitors, competitive assessment, and probable discriminators (Black Hat review)
2. Proposal planned content and messages before writing (Pink Team review)
3. Proposal near-final content against the customer’s needs, requirements, and evaluation criteria (Red Team review)

Both the number of reviews and color designsations for reviews vary widely by organization.

Align the background of the reviewers to the color team review. Seek reviewers that offer varied perspectives on the customer, competitors, selling organization or team, and solution.

Seek comprehensive and constructive recommendations for improvement. Appoint an independent, experienced facilitator to manage the review team. Train inexperienced reviewers, and then establish clear instructions and standards before initiating the review.

Request consolidated recommendations from the review team. The capture triumvirate and executive sponsor then must decide which recommendations will be implemented, who will implement them, and debrief the team. Avoid direct color team debriefs, as unfiltered recommendations might have negative consequences.

Use the capture plan to jump-start the proposal planning process.

As shown earlier in figure 2, approximately 60 percent of the information needed to prepare the proposal management plan can be extracted from a current and complete capture plan.

Relying on the capture plan to quickly prepare the initial proposal management plan saves both time and maintains a consistent message. Without a capture plan, a newly assigned proposal manager starts from scratch, often with little help and under severe time constraints.

Capture plans and proposal plans have the common elements illustrated in figure 11. Information on the customer, requirements, and competitors transfers directly. The capture strategy needs to be extended or converted into a proposal strategy. Only the proposal outline, compliance checklist, proposal preparation schedule, and the writer’s packages need to be created.

Figure 11. Capture Plans Evolve into Proposal Plans. A current capture plan effectively front-loads the proposal plan. With approximately 60 percent of the information transferring from the capture plan, you only need to add proposal-specific material. Shortening the final proposal planning interval prior to kickoff leaves more time to develop a winning proposal.