

## Three Key Themes from SIIA's Deciphering Customer Success Conference

An Overview by  
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While skeptics might assert that Customer Success is a well-defined and understood business capability that is hardly in need of deciphering, it is apparent from the discussions and Q&A at SIIA's Deciphering Customer Success conference in Irvine, California, last week that there is still plenty of decoding to be done.

Chief Customer Officers, Customer Success practitioners, technology providers, and consultants assembled to tackle topics that ranged from Customer Success as a culture to data strategies and Customer Success manager (CSM) coverage considerations, the journey mapping journey, and evolving requirements for Customer Success organizations. Across the various panels, three consistent themes emerged:

### 1. Customer Success Is Still in the Formative Stages

Many companies with recurring revenue business models maintain some form of Customer Success capability, yet the operational and organizational maturity surrounding this function is still evolving. This isn't surprising when you consider that Customer Success as a discipline is, by most measures, only 10 or 12 years old. During my session on customer journey mapping with Dave Blake of ClientSuccess, we conducted an informal poll of the audience to gauge the level of maturity with which the attendees' organizations are leveraging journey maps. When asked if they had documented journey maps for their key segments, about 90 percent of the audience raised their hands. However, when asked if those maps receive ongoing care and feeding, less than half of the hands stayed up. When asked whether they share some form of the journey map with their prospective customers during the pre-sales cycle as a vehicle for expectation setting and differentiation, only a few hands remained raised. Across this dimension—and others—there's opportunity for improvement.

### 2. Customer Success Organizations Are Struggling to Operate at the Strategic Level

Indicative of Customer Success's early-stage maturity is the challenge companies are having effectively applying the Customer Success/Customer Success manager (CSM) function within the organization. Throughout the day, participants repeatedly cited instances of CSMs getting bogged down in "code red" account issues. This reactive vs. proactive focus for CSM resources is a habit that is hard to break. Organizationally, the CSM seems like the perfect resource to tackle the tough retention issues. As an escalation occurs and the at-risk customer is identified, it's passed to a CSM. Through a mix of listening, (re)aligning expectations, and (perhaps) heroic actions, the customer is retained. While this seems like a good outcome, unless the process is changed to insert the CSM at a

point where they can mitigate the escalation to begin with, this is a recurring (inefficient) cycle. Which leads me to the final theme I came away with:

### **3. Customer Success Must Permeate the Organizational Culture to Be Truly Effective**

The topics that came up throughout the day—organizational structure, incentives, compensation, metrics, tools, techniques, pitfalls, tips and tricks—were truly plentiful and diverse. As the conference wrapped up, there was a resounding sense that Customer Success must move beyond being positioned as a function within the organization to become an organizational mantra if recurring-revenue-based businesses are to achieve sustainable growth.

If you would like to discuss these themes in greater detail, feel free to contact me at [jzuk@waterstonegroup.com](mailto:jzuk@waterstonegroup.com), or find me on LinkedIn at [www.linkedin.com/in/johnzuk](http://www.linkedin.com/in/johnzuk).