

The Senses Gap

Why Organisations Lose Customers
Before They Realise Anything Is Wrong

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June 2026



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Foreword

An organisation is convinced it knows the customer. The account is strategically important. The relationship feels strong. The executive sponsor is engaged. The latest service review was broadly positive. The CRM is current, the forecast looks stable and the account team can explain the history, stakeholders, opportunities and risks. From the organisation's side, the customer appears understood. Then the ground shifts.

A renewal becomes unexpectedly difficult. Procurement starts asking sharper questions. A service issue carries more weight than anticipated. A previously supportive stakeholder becomes cautious. An expansion opportunity quietly moves elsewhere. A competitor appears where none was expected. Operational frustrations the customer once absorbed become commercial concerns.

In those moments, the problem is rarely that the organisation did not care. More often, it never saw the whole customer. In complex B2B relationships, the customer is an organisation made up of competing priorities, incentives and lived experiences. Different stakeholders can experience the same relationship in fundamentally different ways: the executive sponsor values the strategic relationship; users find the service harder to navigate; procurement questions whether the commercial terms remain defensible; finance struggles to evidence the value; operations quietly absorbs recurring friction; risk teams sense fragility; and transformation leaders wonder whether the organisation is still relevant to what comes next.

All of these perspectives can be true at the same time. This is why partial relationship confidence is so dangerous. It can feel professional and evidence-based while still representing only a narrow part of the customer organisation. Oak Consult developed the Customer Spectacles principle to challenge that confidence: look deliberately at the relationship through the customer's eyes and test whether the organisation's internal view would be recognised as true by the customer itself.

This whitepaper builds on that principle. It introduces the Senses Gap, which exposes the distance between internal confidence and customer reality; the Five Senses of B2B Reality, which help leaders detect signals conventional reporting may overlook; SCORE, which diagnoses Strategic, Commercial, Operational, Resilience and Evolution realities; and the Relationship Reality Map, which turns insight into governed commercial action.

This is not another generic customer-experience paper. It is a practical argument for better customer truth in complex B2B relationships. Most organisations already have plenty of customer data. The harder question is whether they have customer reality. If existing and strategic customers represent a significant share of your future revenue, the real test is not whether your organisation has a view of the customer. It is whether the customer would recognise that view as true.

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Oak Consult, June 2026



Executive Summary

In complex B2B relationships, organisations routinely mistake partial relationship confidence for whole-customer truth. From inside the organisation, the account may appear solid:

- The CRM is current
- The Quarterly Business Review was positive
- The senior sponsor remains engaged
- Service dashboards are mostly green
- The renewal forecast looks stable

The account team feels confident. The customer organisation may be experiencing something quite different. Users are quietly frustrated. Procurement is preparing a commercial challenge. Finance is questioning whether the value case still stands. A transformation leader no longer sees the organisation as relevant to the future. A recent incident was technically closed but never relationally recovered.

The organisation sees a well-managed account. The customer lives a more complicated reality. Oak Consult calls the difference between these two views the **Senses Gap**: the distance between an organisation's internal interpretation of relationship health and the customer organisation's validated lived experience.

The gap matters because a B2B customer is an organisational system, not a single decision-maker. Complex B2B decisions typically involve around 13 internal stakeholders, alongside external influencers, and those networks continue to shape adoption, renewal and expansion long after the initial purchase. Sponsors, buyers, users, finance, procurement, operations, risk and transformation teams may all hold different views of the same relationship. Strong confidence in one part of the customer organisation does not prove health across the whole. The commercial consequences are significant.

Forrester evidence cited in the source notes indicates that existing customers typically account for 61–73% of B2B revenue, depending on organisational context and maturity. A hidden Senses Gap can therefore contribute to:

- Renewal and retention risk
- Margin pressure and discounting
- Rising service and recovery costs
- Stalled expansion
- Reputational damage
- Gradual strategic displacement

The problem is not that CRM, Net Promoter Score, Quarterly Business Reviews, health scores or account plans are useless. Each provides valuable evidence. The problem begins when any one of them is treated as complete customer truth. This whitepaper introduces a practical system for closing the gap.

Customer Spectacles The leadership discipline of deliberately viewing the relationship through the customer's eyes and testing whether the organisation's internal account would be recognised as accurate.

The Five Senses of B2B Reality A practical signal language that helps leaders notice what conventional reporting may miss:

- Sight — what the customer sees when assessing strategic relevance and future alignment
- Hearing — whose voice the organisation is listening to, and whose it may be missing
- Touch — how the relationship feels in daily operational use and the effort it creates
- Taste — whether the promised value can be experienced, evidenced and defended
- Smell — whether the customer senses risk, fragility or declining trust

The Five Senses help leaders detect evidence. They are not five additional scores.

SCORE The diagnostic model that tests customer reality across five commercially important dimensions:

- Strategic Reality — whether the organisation remains aligned with the customer's priorities
- Commercial Reality — whether the relationship still makes clear financial and commercial sense
- Operational Reality — whether the relationship works for those who live with it every day
- Resilience Reality — whether trust holds and recovers when something goes wrong
- Evolution Reality — whether the organisation remains relevant to where the customer is heading next

The Relationship Reality Map The governed operating tool that:

- Compares organisation confidence with customer-validated reality
- Identifies relevant stakeholders on both sides
- Rates the quality of the supporting evidence
- Measures the size of material gaps
- Assigns ownership
- Connects action directly to commercial outcomes

The recommended starting point is deliberately practical. Pilot the Relationship Reality Map on three to five strategic accounts where misunderstanding the customer would carry material commercial consequences. Use a focused 90-day rhythm:

Days 0–30: Establish the organisation-side baseline Select the accounts and make the internal view explicit. Gather existing CRM records, account plans, service evidence, commercial data, renewal assumptions and leadership judgements. Separate what is known from what is assumed.

Days 30–60: Validate customer reality Gather proportionate evidence from the relevant customer stakeholders. Compare their experience with the organisation's view across the five SCORE realities. Identify both material gaps and areas where the evidence itself is weak.

Days 60–90: Act and govern Prioritise the most commercially significant gaps, assign clear ownership and connect each intervention to a defined outcome, such as retained revenue, protected margin, stronger renewal confidence, reduced service friction, restored trust or credible expansion.

The central question for CEOs, CCOs, CROs, COOs and strategic account leaders is no longer whether the organisation has a view of the customer. Most do.

The better question is: Would the customer organisation recognise that view as true? If the answer is uncertain, the organisation may already have a Senses Gap. Where existing customers represent a material share of future revenue, that gap is not soft. It is commercially active.



1. The Illusion of Knowing the Customer

Most B2B organisations believe they know their customers. They have account plans, CRM records, service dashboards, Quarterly Business Review packs, renewal forecasts, Net Promoter Score responses and senior stakeholder conversations. On paper, the relationship appears visible.

The danger is that visibility is not the same as truth. In complex B2B relationships, organisations are rarely short of customer data — they are short of customer reality. Their systems show what has been recorded. Their dashboards show what has been measured. Their Quarterly Business Reviews often confirm the version of the relationship both parties are prepared to discuss formally. None of this proves the organisation understands how the customer actually experiences the relationship.

That distinction matters because a B2B customer is not a single person. It is an organisational system containing executive sponsors, budget holders, procurement teams, operational users, finance leads, risk managers, technology teams and informal influencers. Some are visible to the organisation; many are only partly visible or never appear in the CRM.

An organisation may have an excellent relationship with one senior sponsor and still be losing credibility with the people who use the service every day. It may receive positive feedback in a quarterly review while procurement is quietly testing the market. It may believe the account is strategically secure while finance questions value and operational teams absorb recurring friction. This is the illusion of knowing the customer. It is created when partial signals are treated as complete evidence. A senior relationship, a positive Quarterly Business Review or a green dashboard may each be useful signals — none is enough on its own.

Partial relationship confidence

Oak Consult describes this as **partial relationship confidence** — the belief that a customer relationship is healthy because selected internal signals or senior contacts appear positive, even though the wider customer organisation may be experiencing friction, doubt or declining value. It is one of the most dangerous forms of confidence in complex B2B relationships because it feels rational. There is usually evidence behind it. The problem is that the evidence is incomplete or drawn from too narrow a part of the customer organisation. The more important question is: Would the customer organisation, in full, recognise that version of the relationship as true?

The account may look healthy until it does not

Complex B2B relationships rarely deteriorate in a single dramatic moment. They drift. Users stop raising issues because they no longer expect improvement. Procurement starts asking sharper questions. Finance challenges the value case more aggressively. Operational teams create workarounds. The sponsor becomes quieter. A competitor appears in informal conversations. By the time a formal signal appears — a retender, price challenge or delayed renewal — the underlying gap may have existed for months.

This is why partial relationship confidence is commercially dangerous. It delays action until the customer has already started to detach.



2. The Real Shape of B2B Customer Reality

The reason partial relationship confidence is so dangerous is straightforward: in complex B2B relationships, the customer is rarely one person. It is an organisational system made up of multiple roles, functions, pressures and incentives.

The person who signs the contract is often not the person who lives with the day-to-day reality. The strategic sponsor is rarely the one managing operational friction or preparing the next procurement challenge. One stakeholder may value the partnership while another is quietly questioning its worth.

The customer is a system, not a contact

B2C understanding often starts with the individual. In B2B, the picture is fundamentally different. The “customer” is a dynamic system of executives, budget holders, procurement specialists, operational leaders, users, finance, risk and technology teams. Each group experiences the same organisation through a different lens.

The sponsor may see strategic alignment. Procurement sees commercial risk. Finance focuses on measurable return. Users judge daily support and effort. None of these perspectives is the full truth on its own. Together, they constitute the customer’s lived reality.

This is why single-threaded relationships are fragile. A strong sponsor connection can mask operational frustration. Positive usage numbers can hide procurement unease. A clean dashboard can hide the real cost the customer incurs to make the relationship work.

Buying centres and usage centres are not the same

Many organisations over-index on the buying centre before signature. The long-term health of the account, however, is often determined after the sale, inside the usage centre — how quickly issues are resolved, how much effort the customer must expend, and whether the organisation genuinely understands their context.

A strong buying relationship cannot indefinitely compensate for poor usage reality. Good day-to-day delivery does not automatically protect the relationship if finance or senior leadership no longer see sufficient value.

The buying network is expanding

Typical complex B2B decisions now involve around 13 internal stakeholders plus external influencers. This network continues to shape adoption, renewal and expansion long after the initial contract. Persuasion alone is no longer sufficient. Even a convinced sponsor must still align colleagues and satisfy procurement and governance.

Post-sale reality is where most of the value sits

For many organisations, the greatest commercial value sits after the first contract is signed — in renewals, expansions and long-term partnership. Forrester evidence shows that existing customers typically account for 61–73% of B2B revenue. In most established businesses, customer reality *is* the growth agenda.

Yet many organisations still invest heavily to win the customer, then manage the relationship through fragmented governance and internal dashboards.

The customer experiences the organisation across many moments

Organisations think in functions. Customers experience moments: onboarding, issue resolution, invoicing, escalations, roadmap reviews and recovery after failure. Each moment either builds or erodes confidence.

A polished Quarterly Business Review can coexist with slow support hand-offs. The sponsor may feel heard while users feel ignored. These small frictions accumulate quietly. The internal language shifts first:

“They are a good partner” becomes “They are hard work.” “They understand us” becomes “They do not really understand how we operate.”

By the time that shift becomes visible internally, it is often already commercially significant.

Whole-customer truth

Oak Consult describes the required discipline as **whole-customer truth**: a structured, evidence-based understanding of how the customer organisation experiences value, effort, risk, trust and future relevance across all material stakeholders — not only the organisation’s preferred or most accessible contacts.

It requires deliberate comparison between the organisation’s assumptions and the customer’s reality across strategic alignment, commercial value, operational experience, resilience under pressure and future relevance.

Many B2B organisations still lack this discipline.

Why this matters now

The external environment has become less forgiving. Buying groups are larger and more distributed. Procurement is more assertive. Finance scrutiny is sharper. Customers are better informed and quicker to question relevance.

In this environment, relationship confidence and incumbency are no longer protective. An organisation can remain familiar and well liked while still being vulnerable — renewing reluctantly, losing scope or watching expansion opportunities move elsewhere.

This is why complex B2B organisations must move beyond partial relationship confidence towards whole-customer truth. The distance between the two is the Senses Gap.



3. The Senses Gap

Most B2B customer risk does not begin with a formal complaint. It begins with a gap — between what the organisation believes and what the customer is actually experiencing. Between the polished account review and operational reality. Between sponsor warmth and user frustration. Between reported service performance and the real effort required from the customer.

Oak Consult calls this misalignment the **Senses Gap**: the distance between an organisation's internal interpretation of relationship health and the customer organisation's validated lived experience.

The gap is especially dangerous because it can exist inside accounts that still look healthy: strong meetings, engaged sponsors, stable usage and reassuringly green dashboards. It can remain hidden for months before any formal signal appears.

The gap is often hidden by relationship confidence

Strong relationships create goodwill and access. They can also mislead. A trusted sponsor and long history do not prove health across the whole customer organisation. The sponsor may remain strategically positive while procurement becomes uneasy about commercial terms, users become numb to recurring friction, and transformation leaders quietly conclude the organisation is no longer central to the future.

These realities can coexist. The real risk arises when visible strengths are allowed to obscure hidden weaknesses.

The gap widens quietly

The Senses Gap grows through ordinary moments: an issue that takes longer than expected to resolve, the customer repeating the same context, value promised but never clearly evidenced, or a service incident that is technically closed but never fully recovered relationally. Individually these moments appear minor. Collectively they reshape the customer's story about the organisation. Small disappointments become patterns. Patterns become internal narratives. Narratives become commercial decisions.

The gap appears across five realities

The Senses Gap becomes actionable when leaders test the relationship across five realities that determine long-term health:

- **Strategic Reality** — does the customer still see the organisation as aligned with its direction?
- **Commercial Reality** — does the relationship still make clear financial and commercial sense?
- **Operational Reality** — does it work in practice for the people who live with it every day?
- **Resilience Reality** — does trust hold when something goes wrong?
- **Evolution Reality** — is the organisation still relevant to where the customer is heading next?

SCORE: The Five Realities of B2B Customer Reality

The Senses Gap becomes actionable when leaders stop judging the relationship through one overall score and begin testing it across five realities that determine long-term health.



An organisation can be strong in one reality and exposed in another. A strong operational relationship does not guarantee strategic relevance. A positive sponsor relationship does not guarantee commercial value or future fit. This is why aggregate confidence is so misleading. Each type of gap carries its own commercial consequence: strategic gaps weaken influence and future relevance; commercial gaps increase margin and renewal pressure; operational gaps create friction and rising cost; resilience gaps damage trust; evolution gaps expose the organisation to competitive displacement.

The commercial risk is delayed recognition

The most expensive customer problems are often recognised too late. Customers absorb friction, build workarounds, reduce commitment and test alternatives before any formal challenge appears. The organisation often sees only the final act. This makes the Senses Gap a direct business issue affecting retention, pricing power, margin, service cost, expansion, reputation and future relevance. It belongs on the board agenda.

Why existing measures often miss the gap

Most organisations already have plenty of customer metrics. The challenge is misplaced confidence in them. Net Promoter Score reflects those who respond. CRM records activity but not understanding. Service dashboards measure internal process more easily than customer effort. Quarterly Business Reviews can become rituals of reassurance. These tools are useful inputs. They become dangerous only when treated as complete pictures. The Senses Gap is not closed by adding another number. It is closed by rigorously comparing organisation confidence with customer-validated evidence.

The Senses Gap is a leadership problem

When boards and executive teams receive filtered summaries that have not been tested against customer reality, strategic and commercial decisions rest on incomplete evidence. Naming the Senses Gap turns a vague unease into a manageable discipline. Once identified, it can be tested, scored, governed and acted upon.

The next section introduces the practical leadership principle and signal language used to help close it:

Customer Spectacles and the **Five Senses of B2B Reality**.



4. Customer Spectacles and the Five Senses of B2B Reality

Closing the Senses Gap does not start with another dashboard. It starts with a deliberate change of perspective. Most organisations view customer relationships through their own operating lens: sales activity, service metrics, product adoption, commercial terms, support tickets and renewal forecasts. These views are useful. They remain organisation-side interpretations.

Customer Spectacles asks a sharper question: What does this relationship actually look like through the customer's eyes? Not just the sponsor's eyes or the Quarterly Business Review attendee's. The full customer organisation — the executive sponsor, operational owner, daily users, procurement, finance, risk, transformation leaders and those who deal with the organisation when something goes wrong.

This is the discipline of Customer Spectacles. It is not empathy theatre or another “customer-first” slogan. It is the structured practice of testing whether the organisation's internal view of the relationship would be recognised as accurate by the customer organisation itself.

Seeing is not enough

The metaphor is deliberately simple, but the practice is not passive. In complex B2B relationships, customer reality must be actively detected through multiple signals. Some are formal. Many are subtle: silence from previously engaged stakeholders, repeated operational workarounds, slower decisions, reduced strategic access, changes in tone, weaker advocacy, or a growing reluctance to commit.

This is where the **Five Senses of B2B Reality** become useful. They are a practical and memorable form of executive signal language designed to help leaders and account teams notice what conventional reporting may miss. Together, the Five Senses move the conversation beyond the simplistic question “Is the account happy?” They encourage the more useful question: What signals are we missing?

The Five Senses of B2B Reality

The Five Senses help leaders detect and interpret different forms of customer evidence. Each sense widens the field of observation. None should be treated as a standalone score. Their role is to help leaders notice and gather evidence. SCORE provides the structured diagnosis that follows.

Sight examines whether the customer still sees the organisation as relevant to its future direction. Does the customer recognise its own priorities in the organisation's roadmap, or does it see a partner still solving yesterday's problems?

Strategic misalignment often remains hidden at first because day-to-day operations continue. The organisation may be proud of its roadmap. The customer is asking a different question: “How does this help us now, and why does it matter for where we are going?”

Key diagnostic questions include:

- Do we understand the customer's current strategic priorities, or are we still working from last year's assumptions?
- Does the customer see us as essential, useful or simply familiar?
- Are we included in future-facing conversations or only operational reviews?
- Would the customer's executive team describe our role in the same way we would?

A Sight gap typically appears when an organisation remains operationally present but strategically peripheral.

Hearing is about whose voice reaches the organisation. Too often, organisations hear the loudest, friendliest or most accessible voices — usually the sponsor or principal commercial contact — while missing quieter but commercially important perspectives. The issue is not simply whether the organisation listens. It is whether it is listening broadly enough.

Key diagnostic questions include:

- Whose voice are we hearing most often?
- Whose voice are we not hearing at all?
- Are we mistaking sponsor confidence for organisational confidence?
- What are users, finance, procurement and operational teams saying when we are not in the room?
- Where has silence been misread as satisfaction?

A Hearing gap is common in accounts with frequent contact but shallow understanding.

Touch concerns how the relationship feels in practice. Support hand-offs, issue resolution, invoicing, reporting, escalation and day-to-day ownership all contribute to the customer's lived experience. Organisations often believe performance is acceptable because service levels are met and tickets are closed. Customers may experience something different: repetition, chasing, unclear ownership and accumulating effort.

Key diagnostic questions include:

- How easy are we genuinely to work with?
- Where is the customer forced to chase, repeat information or create workarounds?
- Do our service measures reflect customer effort or only our internal process?
- Which parts of the relationship consume more customer time than they should?

A Touch gap appears when the organisation reports acceptable performance while the customer absorbs avoidable friction.

Taste asks whether the customer can genuinely experience, measure and defend the value the organisation claims to deliver. This matters particularly to finance and procurement stakeholders, who need credible evidence rather than relationship sentiment. A product can be used without being valued strongly. A service can be retained without being expanded. Taste gaps appear when value remains theoretical, poorly evidenced or visible only to a narrow group within the customer organisation.

Key diagnostic questions include:

- Can the customer clearly evidence the value received?
- Does the sponsor have enough proof to defend the relationship when budgets are challenged?
- Is value visible to finance and procurement, or only to the day-to-day contact?
- Does the customer's assessment of value reflect the full effort and cost required to manage the relationship?

A Taste gap exists when the organisation believes value is self-evident but the customer struggles to experience, quantify or defend it.

Smell detects the early signs of risk and fragility. It is the sense that something is wrong before the concern becomes formal. Smell becomes particularly important when something fails and the customer judges not only the original problem, but the organisation’s response: ownership, speed, transparency, empathy and recovery.

Key diagnostic questions include:

- What does the customer experience when something breaks?
- Do we recover trust quickly or create additional doubt?
- Has the issue been technically closed but left relationally unresolved?
- Would the customer trust us with a more critical role after seeing how we respond under pressure?
- Are there signs that the customer is reducing reliance before expressing formal concern?

A Smell gap often exists when the customer has not yet complained formally but has already begun to question reliability or prepare alternatives.

From sensing to diagnosis

The Five Senses are designed to help leaders notice and discuss customer reality in practical, memorable language. They widen observation, challenge dominant narratives and help reveal evidence that formal reporting may overlook. They are not the complete diagnostic. The Five Senses help leaders detect evidence.

SCORE organises that evidence across Strategic, Commercial, Operational, Resilience and Evolution realities. The Relationship Reality Map then compares the organisation’s confidence with the customer’s validated view, tests the quality of the evidence and turns identified gaps into governed action. The hierarchy is deliberate:

Customer Spectacles changes the perspective. **The Five Senses** help leaders notice the signals. **SCORE** structures the diagnosis. **The Relationship Reality Map** converts that diagnosis into commercial action.

Used together, they help B2B leaders move from comfortable internal confidence towards customer-recognised truth.





5. SCORE: The Five Realities of B2B Customer Reality

If the Five Senses help leaders notice the signals, SCORE tells them where to test reality. That distinction matters. A leader may sense that something is shifting in an account but still struggle to identify the underlying cause. Is the customer questioning strategic direction? Is the commercial case weakening? Is day-to-day experience becoming too difficult? Is trust more fragile than it appears? Is the organisation losing relevance to the customer's future?

Without structure, these concerns collapse into a vague description of “account risk”. SCORE provides the discipline. It examines the customer relationship across five distinct realities: Strategic, Commercial, Operational, Resilience and Evolution.

Together, these realities reveal where organisational confidence aligns with customer reality and where it does not. The Five Senses help leaders detect evidence. SCORE provides the structured diagnosis.

Why SCORE matters

Many customer-management tools compress complex relationships into a single colour, score, probability or narrative. Each has a role. Each can also conceal important differences.

An account can appear green overall while being commercially exposed, operationally painful, strategically peripheral or increasingly fragile under pressure. SCORE prevents that flattening. It requires leaders to examine the five realities that determine whether an account is likely to retain, grow, weaken or eventually fail. This is not unnecessary complexity. It is commercial discipline.

S — Strategic Reality

Strategic Reality asks whether the organisation remains aligned with the customer's direction. The central question is no longer “Do we have a relationship?” It is: Does the customer still see us as relevant to what matters most?

Customers evolve. Leadership changes. Markets shift. Priorities move. Technology develops. Expectations of partners rise. Organisations that fail to recognise those changes continue managing yesterday's relationship while the customer defines tomorrow's needs.

Senior stakeholders tend to judge organisations through a future-contribution lens. An organisation can remain operationally reliable while becoming strategically peripheral, gradually losing influence, access and expansion potential.

Key tests include:

- Are we aligned with the customer's current strategic priorities?
- Do we understand recent changes in its market, operating model or leadership agenda?
- Are we included in future-facing conversations or limited to performance reviews?
- Would the customer's executive team describe our role in the same way we would?
- Are we helping shape future priorities or merely responding to established requirements?

Common gap: The organisation believes the account is strategically secure because it is large and long-standing. The customer views the organisation as useful, but no longer central to its future direction.

C — Commercial Reality

Commercial Reality asks whether the relationship still makes clear financial and commercial sense to the customer. This is where relationship warmth meets economic scrutiny. Organisations often assume value is understood because revenue remains stable or the service continues to be used.

The customer may see something different: rising costs, weak evidence of return, pricing rigidity, a difficult internal business case, or growing effort required to manage the relationship. Finance and procurement judge the relationship through evidence, not sentiment. A strong sponsor relationship will not indefinitely protect a weakening commercial case.

Key tests include:

- Can the customer clearly evidence the value received?
- Does procurement see the relationship as fair, disciplined and defensible?
- Can finance justify the investment internally?
- Are we helping the customer demonstrate value or relying on goodwill?
- Does the commercial case reflect the full cost and effort of making the relationship work?

Common gap: The organisation believes value is strong because the service continues to be used. The customer increasingly sees the relationship as expensive, difficult to justify or commercially inflexible.

O — Operational Reality

Operational Reality examines whether the relationship works in practice for the people who live with it every day. It covers implementation, support, hand-offs, usability, invoicing, ownership and the real effort required from the customer. Organisations often point to service levels, closed tickets and completed milestones.

Customers experience the friction that sits outside those measures: repetition, chasing, unclear ownership, avoidable escalation, internal workarounds and additional effort. This reality is frequently underestimated because customers often absorb the pain rather than report it formally. That does not make the pain commercially insignificant. Operational friction is one of the strongest early indicators of future dissatisfaction, rising service cost and eventual churn risk.

Key tests include:

- How easy are we to work with in practice?
- Where is the customer forced to chase, repeat or create workarounds?
- Do our measures reflect customer effort or only internal process?
- Which recurring issues remain unresolved despite appearing closed?
- How much hidden cost does the customer absorb to manage the relationship?

Common gap: The dashboard is green, but the customer finds the relationship harder to manage than it should be. Friction accumulates quietly until it becomes a renewal, reputation or cost issue.

R — Resilience Reality

Resilience Reality tests whether trust holds when something goes wrong. A relationship can appear strong under normal conditions. Its real strength is often revealed during incidents, outages, missed milestones, escalations or commercial disputes.

Customers judge not only the original failure, but the organisation's response: ownership, communication, speed, transparency, empathy and recovery. Poor recovery can turn a contained operational issue into lasting relational doubt. A technically closed incident may still remain commercially active if the customer no longer trusts the organisation in the same way.

Key tests include:

- What happens when something breaks?
- Do we take visible ownership or shift responsibility?
- Do we recover trust or create additional doubt?
- Has the issue been technically resolved but relationally left open?
- Would the customer trust us with a more critical role after seeing how we respond under pressure?

Common gap: The organisation considers the issue closed because the technical problem was resolved. The customer believes the response exposed weakness, poor ownership or limited understanding of its pressure.

E — Evolution Reality

Evolution Reality asks whether the organisation remains relevant to where the customer is going next. This is the future-fit test. Markets move. Technology advances. Business models change. Customer expectations rise.

Many relationships weaken not because delivery has failed, but because the customer gradually outgrows the organisation's relevance. The incumbent remains in place but loses the future. Expansion, innovation and strategic conversations begin to move elsewhere.

Key tests include:

- Are we helping the customer move towards its next phase?
- Does the customer see us as adaptive and future-relevant?
- Are we contributing ideas or only protecting the existing position?
- Are we co-creating improvement or defending the status quo?
- Are future opportunities moving towards us or quietly away from us?

Common gap: The organisation feels secure because it remains embedded. The customer sees it becoming less relevant to the next chapter of the business. Incumbency has quietly become complacency.

SCORE as a diagnostic discipline

The real power of SCORE lies in the structured comparison it requires across each reality. For every SCORE reality, leaders should ask:

- What do we believe?
- What does the customer believe?
- What evidence supports each view?
- Whose perspective is represented and whose is missing?
- How confident are we in the evidence?
- What commercial consequence follows if we are wrong?

This discipline prevents strength in one reality from masking weakness in another. It also stops a familiar relationship, strong sponsor or reassuring dashboard from becoming a substitute for evidence. SCORE is therefore more than a framework. It is a management discipline for testing whether organisational confidence is justified.

How SCORE differs from existing approaches

SCORE does not replace CRM, Net Promoter Score, key account management, customer success, journey mapping or account planning. It organises and elevates them. Its distinctive role is to bring strategic, commercial, operational, resilience and future relevance into one view, compare organisation-side confidence with customer-side evidence, expose gaps hidden by aggregate account-health measures, identify where evidence is strong, partial or untested, and connect customer reality directly to commercial consequence.

SCORE prevents customer understanding from remaining trapped inside functional silos. It provides a fuller and more commercially useful picture of relationship health.

From SCORE to the Relationship Reality Map

SCORE identifies where reality should be tested. The next step is to make that diagnosis operational. That is the purpose of the Relationship Reality Map.

The map compares organisational confidence with customer-validated reality, assesses the strength of the supporting evidence, measures the size of material gaps and assigns clear action.

SCORE provides the diagnostic structure. The Relationship Reality Map turns that structure into governed commercial action.

SCORE: The Five Realities of B2B Customer Reality

The Senses Gap becomes actionable when leaders stop judging the relationship through one overall score and begin testing it across five realities that determine long-term health.



Why aggregate confidence is misleading

- A strong operational relationship does not guarantee strategic relevance.
- A positive sponsor relationship does not guarantee commercial value.
- Stable usage does not guarantee future fit.
- Technical recovery does not guarantee restored trust.

The commercial risk is delayed recognition

The most expensive customer problems are often those recognised too late. Customers rarely move from loyalty to exit in one step. They absorb friction. They build workarounds. They reduce commitment. They test alternatives. They move future conversations elsewhere. Only then does the formal challenge appear.

It affects Retention Pricing power Margin Service cost Expansion Reputation Future relevance

For leadership teams, this is not a soft customer-experience topic. It is a revenue, margin and risk issue that belongs on the board agenda.



6. The Relationship Reality Map

SCORE gives leaders the five diagnostic realities. The Relationship Reality Map turns those realities into a practical, governed tool. Its purpose is straightforward: to compare the organisation's view of the relationship with the customer organisation's lived reality, using evidence rather than assumption or wishful thinking.

Most account reviews still begin on the organisation's side of the glass: what the account team believes, what the CRM shows, what the forecast says and what the sponsor has reported. These inputs have value. They remain incomplete until they are tested against the customer's perspective.

The Relationship Reality Map makes that comparison visible and actionable. It does not replace CRM, Net Promoter Score, Quarterly Business Reviews, customer health scores or account planning. It integrates them. Its distinctive value lies in forcing the question: Would the customer organisation recognise our view as true?

From opinion-led reviews to evidence-led reality

Traditional account reviews are often opinion-heavy. The account director feels the relationship is strong. Customer Success sees improving adoption. Service believes issues are controlled. Leadership sees a stable forecast. Each perspective may be partially correct. The danger is that none has been properly validated against the full customer organisation.

The Relationship Reality Map changes the conversation by asking: Where does our view differ from the customer's view, and what evidence proves it? This prevents warmth being mistaken for value, activity for progress, compliance for ease, usage for loyalty and incumbency for future relevance.

The map is not another reporting artefact. It is a governed reality check that maps relevant stakeholders on both sides, compares organisation and customer perspectives, tests the strength of the supporting evidence, measures material gaps, assigns ownership and links action to commercial outcomes.

The core structure

For each SCORE reality, the map captures:

- The organisation-side owner
- The relevant customer-side stakeholder
- The organisation's score
- The customer-validated score
- The supporting evidence
- The evidence-confidence rating
- The size of the gap
- The action required

A simplified structure is shown below.

SCORE REALITY ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

Comparing organisation confidence with customer reality across five dimensions

SCORE REALITY	ORGANISATION-SIDE OWNER	CUSTOMER-SIDE STAKEHOLDER	ORGANISATION SCORE (1-5)	CUSTOMER SCORE (1-5)	EVIDENCE	EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE	GAP (ORG - CUST)	ACTION
STRATEGIC REALITY Is the supplier aligned to the customer's strategic direction?	Account Director / Executive Sponsor	Executive sponsor / strategy lead	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	Strategy alignment, roadmap evidence	A B C	Difference	Action required
COMMERCIAL REALITY Is the commercial relationship delivering and defensible?	Commercial Lead / CCD delegate	Procurement / finance / budget owner	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	Pricing, value case, procurement feedback	A B C	Difference	Action required
OPERATIONAL REALITY How well is the supplier delivering day-to-day in practice?	Service / Operations Lead	Operational owner / users / service contact	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	Service data, support themes, effort indicators	A B C	Difference	Action required
RESILIENCE REALITY How well does the relationship withstand pressure and risk?	Risk / Service / Executive Lead	Risk owner / continuity lead / sponsor	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	Incident review, escalation history	A B C	Difference	Action required
EVOLUTION REALITY Is the supplier relevant to the customer's future?	Product / Transformation Lead	Digital / Innovation / change lead	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	(1 = Weak 5 = Strong)	Roadmap engagement, co-creation	A B C	Difference	Action required

SCORING (1-5) 1 = Very weak 3 = Moderate / Neutral 5 = Very strong	EVIDENCE CONFIDENCE A High confidence – strong, recent, verifiable evidence B Moderate confidence – some evidence, but incomplete C Low confidence – limited or anecdotal evidence	GAP (ORG - CUST) Positive gap = Organisation more optimistic than customer (potential blind spot) Negative gap = Customer more positive than organisation (possible opportunity)	HOW TO READ Compare organisation confidence with customer reality across the five SCORE dimensions. Focus action where the gap is largest and confidence is lowest.	PURPOSE The SCORE Reality Assessment drives better conversations, sharper actions and stronger commercial outcomes.
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The table is deliberately simple. The discipline sits behind the scoring, evidence and review process.

Scoring the relationship

Each SCORE reality is rated from 1 to 5:

- 1 — Materially failing the customer's reality
- 2 — Weak and creating visible concern
- 3 — Acceptable but fragile
- 4 — Strong and broadly trusted
- 5 — Demonstrably creating recognised value

The purpose is not to create false precision. The score provides a common language for comparing the organisation's confidence with the customer's validated experience. A score is only useful when the evidence behind it is clear.

Rating evidence confidence

Every score is paired with an evidence-confidence rating:

- A — Triangulated evidence from both sides, supported by strong operational or commercial data
- B — Partial evidence with some triangulation
- C — Predominantly internal opinion or untested assumptions

A low-confidence score can be as dangerous as a low numerical score. An account that appears green but is supported only by internal assumptions should trigger investigation, not reassurance. Any gap supported only by a C evidence rating should therefore be marked Untrusted until stronger evidence is gathered.

Calculating the gap

The Senses Gap becomes concrete when the organisation and customer scores are compared. For example:

- Organisation score for Operational Reality: 4.0
- Customer-validated score: 2.0
- Gap: 2.0

Suggested Oak Consult prototype thresholds are:

- 0–0.5 — Aligned: normal monitoring
- 0.6–1.0 — Watch: validate and assign an owner
- 1.1–1.5 — Material: create a cross-functional action plan
- 1.6+ — Critical: treat as a significant commercial risk affecting renewal, margin, reputation or future growth

The thresholds are not intended to create mechanical certainty. Their purpose is to create a consistent trigger for discussion and action.

Worked example

Consider a strategic account the organisation views as healthy. The sponsor is positive. Two renewals have been completed successfully. Usage is stable. Service levels are mostly green. The account team sees credible expansion potential.

The Relationship Reality Map reveals a more exposed position:

- Strategic Reality: Organisation 4.0 / Customer 3.0 / Evidence B / Gap 1.0 / Watch
- Commercial Reality: Organisation 4.0 / Customer 2.5 / Evidence B / Gap 1.5 / Material
- Operational Reality: Organisation 3.5 / Customer 2.0 / Evidence A / Gap 1.5 / Material
- Resilience Reality: Organisation 4.0 / Customer 2.0 / Evidence B / Gap 2.0 / Critical
- Evolution Reality: Organisation 3.0 / Customer 2.0 / Evidence C / Gap 1.0 / Watch and Untrusted

On paper, the account still appears green. The map shows that it is warm but materially exposed, particularly across Commercial, Operational and Resilience realities. This changes the leadership conversation. The question is no longer “Are we at risk?” It becomes: Which realities are putting future revenue at risk, and who is accountable for closing the gaps?

What the map reveals

A well-executed Relationship Reality Map reveals where organisation confidence is unsupported, where customer reality differs across stakeholders, where evidence is weak or incomplete, where one strong relationship is masking wider exposure, which gaps require strategic, commercial or operational intervention, and who owns the next action.

The map also reveals where the organisation’s view is accurate. This matters. The purpose is not to manufacture concern. It is to distinguish justified confidence from untested confidence.

What the map is not

The Relationship Reality Map is not a sentiment survey, a cosmetic upgrade to the account plan, a replacement for quarterly business reviews, another generic customer-health score, a one-off workshop, or a tool for applying unnecessary bureaucracy to every account.

Used properly, it becomes a core governance mechanism that helps leadership move from comfortable internal narratives to evidence-led customer truth.

Where to use it first

The full map should not be applied to every customer.

It should begin with the accounts where the commercial cost of misunderstanding reality would be highest.

These may include accounts that are:

- High revenue or strategically important
- Approaching renewal
- Facing procurement or pricing pressure
- Experiencing service friction
- Carrying significant expansion potential
- Affected by leadership or organisational change
- Overly dependent on one sponsor
- Showing stalled growth despite an apparently strong relationship

Targeted use maximises insight while avoiding unnecessary burden.

Simpler accounts can use a lighter version.

From map to action

The value of the Relationship Reality Map does not lie in the completed template. It lies in the action it triggers.

A completed map should produce:

- Clear gap prioritisation
- Named organisation-side owners
- Identified customer-side stakeholders
- Plans to improve weak evidence
- Specific interventions
- Links to commercial outcomes

Those outcomes may include:

- Retained revenue
- Protected margin
- Reduced customer effort
- Stronger renewal confidence
- Restored trust
- Credible expansion
- Improved future relevance

This elevates customer reality into the senior governance rhythm rather than leaving it buried in account paperwork. Customer Spectacles changes the perspective. The Five Senses help leaders detect the signals.

SCORE structures the diagnosis. The Relationship Reality Map converts that diagnosis into governed commercial action. This is the practical bridge from believing the organisation knows the customer to testing whether it truly does.



7. From Diagnosis to Commercial Action

The Relationship Reality Map is not designed to produce another report. It is designed to change what leaders do next. A diagnosis only creates value when it drives tangible outcomes: retained revenue, protected margin, stronger renewal confidence, reduced service friction, better executive alignment, credible expansion or restored trust. Without that connection, even the strongest insight tool risks becoming another well-intentioned document that is reviewed once and then absorbed back into business as usual. The Senses Gap is commercially active. It sits behind silent churn, aggressive discounting, stalled expansion, rising service costs, retender risk and reputational damage. Closing it is not a separate customer-experience initiative. It is a growth, margin and risk discipline. The Relationship Reality Map and SCORE provide the evidence and structure.

The practical question is: What are we going to do about it?

The commercial uses of the Relationship Reality Map

When applied to strategic, high-value or high-risk accounts, the map supports six areas of commercial action.

1. Retention: finding silent churn risk before it becomes visible Many customers do not announce detachment. They absorb friction, build workarounds, challenge value internally, test alternatives and shift future spend before the organisation sees a formal red flag. The Relationship Reality Map helps leaders identify accounts that appear stable internally but feel weaker to the customer. The source of risk may differ: a Strategic gap may indicate declining relevance; a Commercial gap may signal procurement or finance challenge; an Operational gap may expose accumulating friction; a Resilience gap may reveal unrecovered trust; an Evolution gap may show that the customer's future is moving elsewhere. Early visibility creates room to act before renewal pressure hardens.

2. Expansion: identifying where future value remains credible Sustainable growth within existing accounts depends less on aggressive selling than on whether the customer sees credible future value. The map helps distinguish accounts where expansion is realistic from those where underlying gaps must be resolved first. Strong Strategic and Evolution realities may create the conditions for roadmap collaboration and wider scope. Weak Operational or Commercial realities suggest that customer effort, value evidence or commercial confidence must be addressed before an expansion conversation will carry credibility.

3. Margin protection: defending value with evidence Margin pressure often presents as a pricing conversation. Frequently, it is a symptom of weak value confidence. The Relationship Reality Map helps leaders separate a genuine price challenge from a broader failure to evidence value. When Commercial Reality is weak, the relevant questions become clearer: Can finance see and defend the value received? Does procurement

understand the full commercial contribution? Is operational friction increasing the customer's internal cost? Has the original business case weakened or simply gone unmeasured?

4. Service improvement: prioritising what the customer experiences Most organisations have more improvement opportunities than capacity. The map helps leaders focus on the changes that matter most to the customer and carry the greatest commercial consequence. An Operational Reality gap may show that teams are solving the wrong problem: closing tickets while users continue to repeat information, or meeting formal targets while the customer carries avoidable effort. The map forces service improvement to be judged against lived customer experience rather than internal completion measures alone.

5. Trust recovery: making resilience visible after pressure Resilience gaps are frequently mishandled because the organisation treats the technical incident as closed while the customer continues to judge the relational response. The customer may still be assessing whether ownership was visible, whether communication was timely and honest, whether the organisation understood the pressure created, and whether recovery addressed the cause or only the immediate symptom. The Relationship Reality Map separates technical closure from trust recovery and creates the basis for a deliberate recovery plan.

6. Executive governance: bringing customer reality into leadership rhythm Leadership teams routinely review revenue, risk, forecast and account performance. The Relationship Reality Map adds a missing layer: Is the organisation's view of the customer actually true? It gives executives a structured view of which accounts carry material Senses Gaps, where organisation confidence and customer reality diverge, where evidence remains weak, which gaps require cross-functional intervention, and which commercial outcomes are exposed. This changes the leadership conversation from "Is the account green?" to "Where is it green on our side but amber, or red, on the customer's side?"

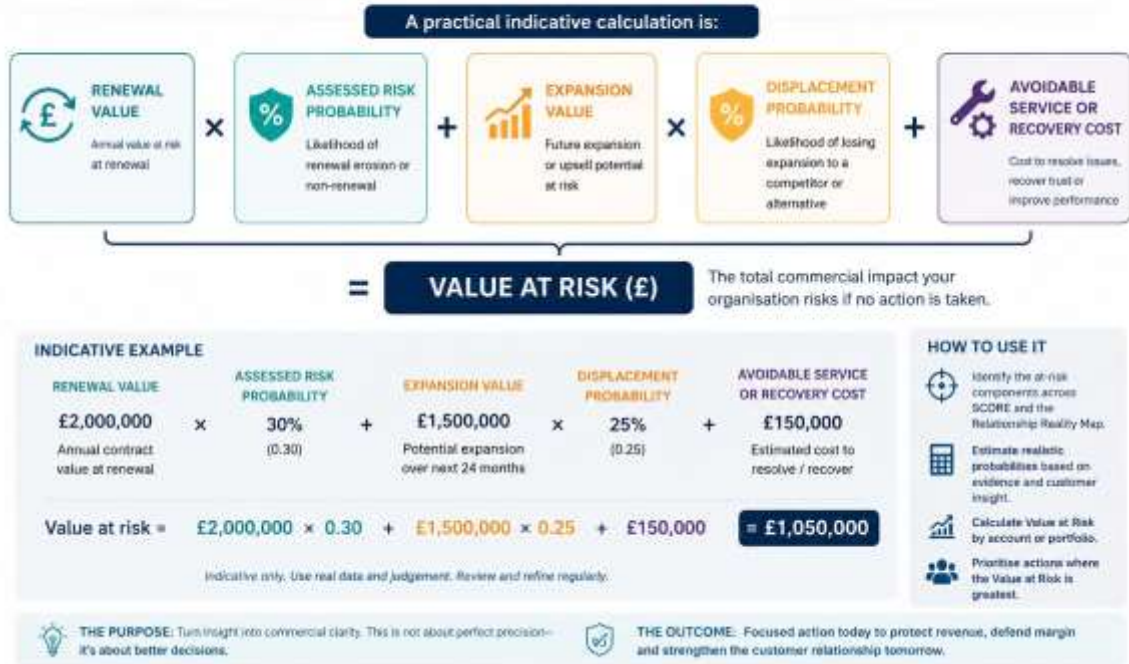
Estimating the commercial exposure

The purpose of the Relationship Reality Map is not to create false financial precision. It should, however, help leaders connect identified gaps to the value potentially at risk. For each priority account, leaders should consider current annual revenue or contract value, gross margin contribution, renewal value within the next 12 to 18 months, credible expansion potential, additional cost to serve, recovery or remediation cost, and the likelihood that a material gap will affect renewal, scope, margin or future growth.

A practical indicative calculation is: **Value at risk = renewal value × assessed risk probability + expansion value × displacement probability + avoidable service or recovery cost.**

THE VALUE AT RISK FORMULA

Quantify the commercial exposure created by the Senses Gap.



This is not a prediction. It is a disciplined way to translate customer reality into a commercially meaningful conversation. The purpose is to make the cost of delayed recognition visible enough to support action.

A focused 0–90 day pilot

The recommended starting point is deliberately practical: a focused pilot across three to five strategic accounts where misunderstanding customer reality would carry material commercial consequences.

Days 0–30: Select and baseline Choose the right accounts and build the organisation-side SCORE view using existing evidence, including account plans, CRM data, service reports, Quarterly Business Review notes, renewal forecasts and leadership assumptions. The objective is to make internal beliefs explicit. For each SCORE reality, separate what is known, what is assumed, what is missing, and how strong the evidence is. This stage should reveal where confidence already exists without sufficient validation.

Days 30–60: Map and validate Gather proportionate customer-side evidence across the relevant stakeholders. This does not require a large survey. It may involve targeted conversations, existing service evidence, commercial feedback, incident reviews and direct validation with the stakeholders best placed to judge each SCORE reality. Compare the organisation and customer views, rate evidence confidence and identify material Senses Gaps. A weak evidence base at this stage is often one of the most valuable findings.

Days 60–90: Act and govern Prioritise the most commercially significant gaps. Assign clear owners, agree specific interventions and connect each action to a defined outcome, such as retained revenue, protected margin, stronger renewal confidence, restored trust, reduced customer effort, credible expansion or improved future relevance. Establish an appropriate governance rhythm and decide whether the approach should be extended to other accounts.

At the end of the pilot, the organisation should have completed Relationship Reality Maps, identified material gaps, challenged unsupported assumptions, strengthened weak evidence, created targeted action plans and tested a repeatable governance rhythm.

Governance rhythm and scaling

For strategic accounts, the Relationship Reality Map should become part of normal governance. The review frequency should reflect the level of risk and change: quarterly for stable strategic accounts; monthly during renewal, significant delivery or recovery periods; immediately following a major incident, leadership change or material shift in the customer’s direction.

Success should be measured through tangible outcomes: earlier risk identification, clearer value evidence, reduced customer friction, stronger executive alignment, better prioritisation, more honest account conversations, and improved renewal and expansion confidence.

The most important shift is often cultural. The organisation moves from asking “What do we think?” to “What would the customer recognise as true?” Scale should remain proportionate. The full map should stay focused on high-stakes accounts. Lighter versions can be used where risk and complexity are lower.

From action to advantage

The commercial advantage does not come from simply knowing that a gap exists. It comes from closing the right gaps before competitors, procurement pressure or accumulated customer frustration force the issue. An organisation that sees customer reality earlier can protect important accounts before risk becomes visible, defend margin with credible evidence, remove friction before advocacy erodes, recover trust while it can still be rebuilt, and remain relevant before the customer’s future moves elsewhere.

The Senses Gap names the risk. SCORE locates it. The Relationship Reality Map makes it visible. Commercial action closes it.



8. Scenario Stress Testing and Executive Objections

A useful framework must work under pressure. It should not only describe the ideal customer relationship. It should help leaders understand what happens when conditions change: when an account appears stable, when complexity is lower, when renewal pressure arrives, when a service incident hits, when procurement becomes more assertive or when the customer’s future moves faster than the organisation’s roadmap.

The Senses Gap, SCORE and the Relationship Reality Map are designed for this kind of practical stress testing. They encourage leadership teams to ask not only “What do we think is happening?” but the more important question: What would we see differently if our confidence was wrong?

Scenario 1: Base case — a stable strategic account

The account appears healthy. The sponsor is positive. Usage is stable. Service performance is acceptable. The relationship is familiar and the account team sees expansion potential. In a conventional review, the account would probably remain green.

Applying the Relationship Reality Map may reveal a more uneven picture. Strategic Reality may still be reasonably strong, while Commercial Reality is exposed by procurement and finance scrutiny. Operational Reality may show recurring friction. Resilience may remain largely untested. Evolution may be weaker because the customer's agenda has moved ahead of the organisation's roadmap.

What it reveals: Risk in complex accounts is rarely uniform. Strength in one reality can mask weakness in another. Likely action: Validate the relationship across procurement, operations and future-facing stakeholders. Strengthen the value evidence and test roadmap alignment before small gaps become material ones. The purpose is not to manufacture concern. It is to keep a strong account genuinely strong.

Scenario 2: Conservative case — a lower-complexity account

Not every customer requires the full Relationship Reality Map. Smaller, simpler and lower-risk accounts may involve fewer stakeholders, lower commercial exposure and limited expansion potential. Applying the full framework indiscriminately would create unnecessary burden.

What it reveals: The framework must be proportionate. Over-applying it risks turning useful discipline into bureaucracy. Likely action: Use a lighter SCORE review, gather selective customer input and focus on the realities carrying the greatest risk (often Commercial and Operational). Escalate to the full map only if complexity, exposure or uncertainty increases. The principle remains the same: Never mistake organisation confidence for customer reality.

Scenario 3: Renewal pressure — confidence meets scrutiny

Before renewal, the account feels secure. The relationship has history. Service is stable. The forecast looks positive. The sponsor remains engaged. Then procurement sharpens its questions. Finance asks for stronger value evidence. The sponsor becomes more cautious. A competitor appears.

This is often the point at which a hidden Senses Gap becomes visible. The Relationship Reality Map may show Commercial and Resilience realities to be weaker than assumed. Evolution may also be unclear because future alignment was never properly tested.

What it reveals: Renewal pressure often exposes gaps that were already present but remained hidden behind familiarity, goodwill and internal confidence. Likely action: Run a focused value-realisation review with finance and procurement, address operational weaknesses, strengthen executive alignment and test future roadmap relevance against the customer’s current priorities. The objective is not simply to renew. It is to renew with credibility, protected margin and future relevance intact.

Scenario 4: Downside shock — trust under pressure





A major incident occurs. It may be a service outage, failed implementation, cyber concern, missed milestone or significant commercial dispute. The customer stops judging the organisation by its proposition and starts judging its response. Ownership, speed, transparency, communication and empathy become more important than the original sales story.

The Relationship Reality Map can quickly expose whether the organisation has overestimated Resilience Reality. Technical closure may not equal relational recovery. Operational and Commercial realities may also weaken if the incident increases customer effort, cost or perceived exposure.

What it reveals: The real strength of the relationship is often clearest under pressure. An issue can be technically resolved while trust remains damaged. Likely action: Conduct a dedicated post-incident trust review, establish clear executive ownership where appropriate, improve escalation protocols and agree a deliberate recovery plan before discussing renewal or expansion. The objective is genuine trust recovery, not simply incident closure.

SCENARIO SUMMARY: TESTING RELATIONSHIP REALITY

Four common situations. One framework. Different actions.

1 BASE CASE A STABLE STRATEGIC ACCOUNT	2 CONSERVATIVE CASE A LOWER-COMPLEXITY ACCOUNT	3 RENEWAL PRESSURE CONFIDENCE MEETS SCRUTINY	4 DOWNSIDE SHOCK TRUST UNDER PRESSURE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Account appears healthy Sponsor positive Usage stable Service acceptable Expansion potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer stakeholders Lower commercial exposure Limited expansion potential Simpler operating model 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renewal feels secure History and goodwill Sponsor engaged Then... scrutiny increases Competitor appears 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major incident occurs Customer focus shifts Response judged, not just the original story Trust is on the line
<p>RELATIONSHIP REALITY MAP</p> 	<p>RELATIONSHIP REALITY MAP</p> 	<p>RELATIONSHIP REALITY MAP</p> 	<p>RELATIONSHIP REALITY MAP</p> 
<p>WHAT IT REVEALS</p> <p>Risk in complex accounts is rarely uniform. Strength in one reality can mask weakness in another.</p>	<p>WHAT IT REVEALS</p> <p>The framework must be proportionate. Over-applying it risks turning useful discipline into bureaucracy.</p>	<p>WHAT IT REVEALS</p> <p>Renewal pressure often exposes gaps that were already present but hidden behind familiarity, goodwill and internal confidence.</p>	<p>WHAT IT REVEALS</p> <p>The real strength of the relationship is often clearest under pressure. An issue can be technically resolved while trust remains damaged.</p>
<p>LIKELY ACTION</p> <p>Validate the relationship across procurement, operations and future-facing stakeholders. Strengthen the value evidence and test roadmap alignment before small gaps become mutual ones.</p>	<p>LIKELY ACTION</p> <p>Use a lighter SCORE review, gather selective customer input and focus on the realities carrying the greatest risk (often Commercial and Operational). Escalate to the full map only if complexity, exposure or uncertainty increases.</p>	<p>LIKELY ACTION</p> <p>Run a focused value-realisation review with finance and procurement, address operational weaknesses, strengthen executive alignment and test future roadmap relevance against the customer's current priorities.</p>	<p>LIKELY ACTION</p> <p>Conduct a dedicated post-incident trust review, establish clear executive ownership where appropriate, improve escalation protocols and agree a deliberate recovery plan before discussing renewal or expansion.</p>
<p>THE OBJECTIVE</p> <p>The purpose is not to manufacture concern. It is to keep a strong account genuinely strong.</p>	<p>THE PRINCIPLE</p> <p>The principle remains the same: Never mistake organisation confidence for customer reality.</p>	<p>THE OBJECTIVE</p> <p>The objective is not simply to renew. It is to renew with credibility, protected margin and future relevance intact.</p>	<p>THE OBJECTIVE</p> <p>The objective is genuine trust recovery, not simply incident closure.</p>

THE COMMON THREAD

LOOK THROUGH CUSTOMER SPECTACLES
Challenge internal confidence with external truth.

TEST ACROSS ALL FIVE REALITIES
Risk hides in the gaps between realities.

PROPORTIONATE DISCIPLINE
Right depth, right context, right outcome.

TURN INSIGHT INTO ACTION
Diagnosis without action delivers no commercial value.

PROTECT VALUE. DEFEND TRUST. SHAPE THE FUTURE.
That is the purpose of the Relationship Reality Map.

Executive objections and credible responses

A board-level framework should anticipate honest resistance. The following objections are reasonable. They also reveal the implementation friction leaders will need to manage.

Objection 1: “We already have CRM, Net Promoter Score, account plans and health scores.” Keep them. The issue is not that these tools are useless. It is that they are incomplete when treated as whole-customer truth. The Relationship Reality Map uses them as evidence but asks the question they often leave unanswered: Would the customer organisation recognise this view as accurate?

Objection 2: “Our account directors already know the customer.” They may know important parts of the customer exceptionally well. The framework does not undermine that knowledge. It strengthens it by turning individual insight into shared, evidence-based governance and reducing the organisation’s dependence on one person or one interpretation. The risk is assuming that access to key contacts provides complete customer truth.

Objection 3: “This sounds like a soft customer-experience exercise.” Only if it is implemented badly. The Senses Gap directly affects retention, margin, renewal terms, service cost, expansion, reputation and future relevance. The central question is whether the customer’s lived reality supports future revenue and commercial confidence. That is not soft. It is a leadership, growth and risk issue.

Objection 4: “Customers will not give us this level of insight.” Some will not. Many will, when the conversation is proportionate and framed around mutual value rather than another organisation-led survey. The discussion can be positioned simply: “Where is this relationship working well, where is it harder than it should be, and what should both sides do next?” The objective is to gather enough customer-side evidence to challenge unsupported confidence and improve the relationship.

Objection 5: “We cannot run this across the whole customer base.” You should not. The full Relationship Reality Map should be used where the commercial stakes, complexity and uncertainty justify it. Lower-risk accounts can use a lighter approach. The goal is sharper focus, not more bureaucracy.

Objection 6: “This will expose uncomfortable truths.” Yes, and that is the point. The greater danger is that those truths already exist but remain invisible until the customer acts on them. Early visibility gives the organisation time to respond. Late visibility usually leaves fewer options and higher commercial cost.

Objection 7: “Our teams may see this as a challenge to their judgement.” They may, particularly if the process is framed as an audit rather than a shared test of reality. Leadership must position the framework correctly. The purpose is not to prove the account team wrong. It is to strengthen its understanding, protect important relationships and give teams access to evidence and cross-functional support they may not currently have. The process should begin with existing knowledge, distinguish evidence gaps from individual failure, involve the account team in the diagnosis, provide authority and support to act across functions, and reward early visibility rather than punishing uncomfortable findings.

What stress testing proves

These scenarios and objections demonstrate why the framework matters. It is not only for failing accounts. It may be most valuable in accounts that still look healthy from the organisation’s side. In stable accounts, it prevents complacency. In simpler accounts, it enforces proportionality. In renewal situations, it surfaces gaps before negotiation begins. In crisis moments, it tests whether trust has genuinely survived pressure.

The central conclusion is clear: A customer relationship should not be judged solely by how it appears in the organisation’s internal review. It should be judged by whether the customer organisation would recognise that review as true. That is the test the Relationship Reality Map is designed to apply.



9. Conclusion and Call to Action

Most B2B organisations do not lose customer understanding because they stop caring; they lose it because they mistake internal confidence for customer truth. The account plan looks sensible. The CRM is current. The Quarterly Business Review is professional. The sponsor is engaged. The forecast is stable. The dashboard is mostly green. The relationship feels familiar and under control.

Yet complex B2B customers do not experience an organisation through its reporting structure. They experience it through strategy and relevance, commercial value, operational effort, trust under pressure, recovery after failure and whether the organisation remains useful for what comes next. They experience it through multiple stakeholders — executives, users, procurement, finance, operations, risk and transformation leaders — across hundreds of moments rather than one quarterly review. That is why partial relationship confidence is no longer enough. The central leadership question is not: “Do we have a view of the customer?” Most organisations do. The better question is: Would the customer organisation recognise that view as true?

The cost of not seeing clearly

The Senses Gap is the hidden distance between what the organisation believes about the relationship and what the customer organisation is actually experiencing. When the gap is small, visible and actively managed, it can support better conversations, earlier action and stronger trust. When it is large, hidden or ignored, it becomes commercially dangerous. It can contribute to churn, margin erosion, rising service cost, retender risk, stalled expansion, reputational damage and strategic displacement. The gap can exist inside accounts that still appear healthy, hidden behind friendly meetings, long-standing relationships and green dashboards.

That is why it deserves board-level attention. It is not simply a customer-experience concern. It is a revenue, margin, growth and risk issue. The evidence behind this whitepaper is clear. B2B customer reality is multi-stakeholder and commercially decisive. Complex buying and relationship networks extend far beyond one sponsor or contact. Existing customers typically account for 61–73% of B2B revenue. Current tools remain valuable. They are insufficient when they are treated as complete truth.

Leadership teams need a better way to test customer reality before the customer has already made its decision.

The Oak Consult approach - This whitepaper introduces a connected approach:

- **Customer Spectacles** — the leadership principle of viewing the relationship through the customer’s eyes
- **The Five Senses of B2B Reality** — practical language that helps leaders notice what they may be missing
- **SCORE** — the diagnostic model that tests Strategic, Commercial, Operational, Resilience and Evolution realities
- **The Relationship Reality Map** — the governed operating tool that compares views, rates evidence confidence, measures gaps and drives action

This is not intended to replace CRM, Net Promoter Score, key account management, customer success, journey mapping or account planning. It is designed to strengthen them by testing whether the conclusions drawn from them would be recognised as true by the customer organisation itself. Oak Consult is not arguing for more customer theatre. It is arguing for better customer truth.

The first move: pilot the Relationship Reality Map

Do not begin with a large transformation programme. Start small and focused. Pilot the Relationship Reality Map across three to five strategic accounts where misunderstanding customer reality would carry material commercial consequences. These may include accounts that are high revenue or strategically important, approaching renewal, facing procurement or margin pressure, experiencing service friction, carrying significant expansion potential, affected by leadership change, or overly dependent on a single sponsor.

For each account:

1. Build the organisation-side view
2. Gather proportionate customer-side evidence
3. Identify material Senses Gaps
4. Rate the strength of the evidence
5. Assign clear owners
6. Agree actions linked to commercial outcomes

Those outcomes may include retained revenue, protected margin, stronger renewal confidence, reduced customer effort, restored trust, credible expansion or improved future relevance. This is the smallest practical step with the potential to create meaningful commercial value.

What leaders should ask now

CEOs, CCOs, CROs, COOs and customer leaders should ask:

- Which of our most important accounts are we most confident about, and what evidence supports that?
- Which customer stakeholders are represented in our view, and which are missing?
- Where are we relying on relationship warmth rather than validated customer reality?
- Which accounts look green internally but may feel amber, or worse, to the customer?
- Where could customer effort, weak value evidence or incomplete recovery damage our position?
- Which areas of confidence are based mainly on internal opinion?

These questions are not designed to create anxiety. They are designed to create earlier and more accurate visibility. The worst time to discover a Senses Gap is during a retender, price challenge or lost renewal. The best time is while there is still trust, access and room to act.

From customer knowledge to customer truth

The next era of B2B leadership will not be won by organisations that simply collect more customer data. It will be won by those that can distinguish between data, confidence and truth, and then act on the difference. Data is what has been recorded. Confidence is what the organisation believes. Truth is what the customer would recognise. The commercial opportunity lies in closing the distance between them.

Oak Consult works with B2B leadership teams to pilot the Relationship Reality Map across their most important accounts, reveal hidden Senses Gaps and convert better customer understanding into retained revenue, protected margin and stronger growth.

If existing customers represent a significant share of future revenue, the first step is not another dashboard or more reporting. It is a reality check. Select the accounts where misunderstanding the customer would be most expensive. Test them across the five SCORE realities. Compare internal confidence with customer evidence. Then act while there is still time. The question is no longer whether you have a view of the customer. The question is whether your customer would recognise it as true.

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15. **BCG — What If B2B Companies Trusted Their Sales Intelligence?**

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Used to support the difficulty of restoring trust after failure.