

Key Drivers of High Performing Customer Advisory Boards

BEST PRACTICES FROM GLOBAL B2B COMPANIES
RUNNING SUCCESSFUL CAB PROGRAMS



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Introduction: Customer Advisory Board Management Roles and Resources

As customer advisory boards (CABs; also known as “*client* advisory boards,” “customer advisory *councils*” or “*executive* advisory boards”) have proven their worth and value to the companies that host them, the discipline and management of CABs has continued to grow and evolve.

While the many benefits from CABs can impact sales, support, product management, marketing, strategic planning and other corporate departments, it is typically marketing that oversees management of CABs, which itself has become a specific discipline within the marketing organization.

CAB managers today tend to be more experienced and senior than in prior decades, as they need to be able to juggle myriad project timelines and deadlines; manage the multi-department CAB steering committee, various other event and graphic design specialists and the executive CAB members themselves; and report progress (or issues) to senior management including the CAB executive sponsor, who also must take an active role in CAB progress, communication and follow-through to ensure its success.

Fortunately, there are many more resources today to help companies establish and manage their CAB programs. These would include online resources (e.g. articles, newsletters, webinars, videos, etc.), in-person or online CAB management and facilitation training, independent CAB management professional associations (e.g. customeradvisoryboard.org) and third-party CAB management and facilitation consulting agencies (e.g. Ignite Advisory Group).

Despite these resources, many CAB managers today remain unaware of how CABs are managed at other companies or industries, or the best-practices they can learn and adopt for their own CAB program’s success. Ultimately, what does good performance for a CAB really look like?

This report provides insights into how CABs are being successfully operated by leading B2B companies. **Ignite’s** clients that participated in this report include **ABB**, **AVI-SPL**, **Forcepoint** (a division of Raytheon), **Ryder**, **UPS Capital** and **Wolters Kluwer**. These clients were interviewed in the fall of 2019 on CAB management best practices and key drivers for their overall program successes.

1 OVERALL KEYS TO CAB PROGRAM SUCCESS

While there are many key elements to ensuring the success of a CAB program, after a decade of working with Fortune 500 and leading growth companies, the prioritized “top 10” would include:

- 1 Establish strong executive support and program commitment
- 2 Create and communicating a mutually beneficial engagement platform (between customer members and the host company)
- 3 Allow enough planning time, resources and budget
- 4 Aligning internal stakeholders and creating a CAB steering committee
- 5 Recruit the right CAB members (companies and people)
- 6 Measure program success (by creating a CAB scorecard)
- 7 Create member-driven meeting content
- 8 Expertly holding meetings that include stimulating exercises, skilled facilitation and engaging social activities
- 9 Turn meeting insights into company actions (the progress of which are reported back to CAB members)
- 10 Keep meeting initiative going in-between meetings, taking a long view

Companies with robust CAB programs verify the importance of these key steps, with **Ryder** and **Forcepoint** emphasizing the significance of first garnering strong company executive support in initiating their CABs.

“Our CAB initiative has buy-in from our CEO, CMO, our Chief Sales Officer, two presidents and various other VPs – all of whom attend every meeting, review each account beforehand, engage with customers and remain actively involved,” said Stephanie Wicky, Group Marketing Director at **Ryder**. “Their buy-in drives the participation and dedication of the rest of the **Ryder** company participants.”

Ben Tao, VP of Marketing at **Forcepoint**, echoed the importance of enlisting executive support for the success of his CAB program, as well as clearly defining their desired membership. “We have the extreme support of our CEO, who understands the value and benefit of getting an outside view of our company,” said Mr. Tao. “In addition, we were very specific about the caliber of our board members – each is a Fortune 500 CISO. Finally, we dedicated ourselves to candid discussions – no sales pitches and less presentations and more conversations during the meetings.”

ABB, **Wolters Kluwer** and **AVI-SPL** stressed the importance of establishing strong initiative foundations, creating robust program charters and identifying specific business challenges to address for the successes of their CABs.

“Our previous research uncovered a need of our customers for more executive engagement and guidance on the complex compliance challenges they were facing,” said Lisa Mohs, Client Experience and Delivery Program Manager from **Wolters Kluwer**. “As such, gathering executive buy-in and establishing a strong charter document were keys to our program success.”

Others agreed with the need to create an effective charter document. “We started with a strong foundational charter, thought about what we wanted to get out of our CAB, and were disciplined about allowing enough time to prepare, which enabled us to really listen to and engage our members, not just present to them,” said Kelly Bousman, SVP of Marketing at **AVI-SPL**.

Rob Massoudi, SVP of Digital Transformation at **ABB** agreed with the importance of specifically identifying potential members, as well as meeting content. According to Rob, “We focused on being deliberate about all meeting participants and the value each brings, the topics and content themselves and outstanding meeting orchestration and facilitation.”

Selecting the right members is a key element to the success of any CAB program.

Member recruitment recommendations:

- 1 Define the recruitment criteria and ideal CAB member
- 2 Collect nominations from sales and support teams
- 3 Prioritize and vetting the right company accounts and people to participate
- 4 Create strong recruiting materials and establishing a robust recruiting process
- 5 Train recruiters who have the deepest relationships with target members
- 6 Communicating shared challenges and mutual, strategic value of the CAB program, as well as commitment expectations
- 7 Recruit a group of similar-level colleagues representing a cross-section of industries, markets and geographies
- 8 Consider CAB recruiting an ongoing activity

Companies with successful CAB programs reinforce the importance of these recruiting steps. **ABB**, **Wolters Kluwer** and **UPS Capital** focused on the preparation needed to identify the best candidates by investing in background research, ensuring prospective members have the right combination of experience, perspective and skills.

According to Mr. Massoudi from **ABB**, “to find the right members for our CAB program, we reviewed the professional backgrounds of all candidates, leveraged our strong customer relationships, and conducted internal education for all those involved in the recruiting process.” **UPS Capital** employed a similar approach by closely working with sales to identify optimal member profiles. “We worked with sales to determine ideal customer types, including products in use and the industries we wanted to learn more about, such as healthcare and insurance,” said Keely Jabloner, Strategy Manager at **UPS Capital**. “Leveraging the strong relationships our salespeople have was key to recruiting our CAB members.”

As analytics and data mining are core company strengths for **Wolters Kluwer**, they have applied similar rigor to the CAB recruiting process. “We tapped into our data mining team to assemble the customer profiles that best met our recruiting criteria, in addition to engaging with our sales reps who know our customers well,” said Ms. Mohs. “We now have a great cross-section of customers to address a broad range of issues.”

Some firms even involve their CEOs in their recruitment efforts, especially when planning a strategic CAB. Obviously, it’s easier to do so when the CEO sees the value in the CAB and is willing to dedicate some time to make the CAB stronger by collecting the best members possible. “We went right to the top and leveraged our strong existing relationships,” said Ms. Bousman from **AVI-SPL**. “We also demonstrated the opportunity for participants to interact with likeminded IT peers and those operating in similar environments, which served as the proverbial ‘tipping point’ to gather commitment to join our CAB program.”

Forcepoint also attested to the value that a personal commitment from the CEO can bring. “Our CEO is personally involved in CAB member recruiting,” agreed Mr. Tao. “We communicated how our CAB members were going to be a part of a board that is taking a novel approach to solving cyber security issues.”

Finally, companies need to consider the right balance of existing “happy” customers with “at-risk” accounts who may need more attention, as well as the need for long-term management of the recruitment process. According to Ms. Wicky from **Ryder**, “we had customers who were eager to add value to their relationship with us. In addition, we considered accounts that were potentially at risk to which we needed to invest in our relationship. Ignite has also convinced us of the need for ongoing recruitment; bringing in new members and sun-setting longtime ones.” As we say at Ignite, recruitment never ends!

In-person meetings are the highlight of any CAB program, and an opportunity to showcase the preparation and hard work invested in front of your best clients.

Top meeting success factors:

- 1 Follow a content creation process that includes interviewing CAB members in advance to understand their challenges and desired topic priorities
- 2 Prepare each session owner, and reviewing and practicing their content to ensure it's optimized for the CAB meeting
- 3 Create all meeting materials, including a meeting booklet overview
- 4 Make the meeting interactive with workshops, games and breakout sessions
- 5 Expertly facilitate the meeting to ensure an optimal experience for all participants
- 6 Ensure there are no sales pitches or boring product demos
- 7 Include interesting and engaging meals and social activities that encourage deeper interactions
- 8 Capture meeting insights and potential action items, and creating a meeting report that is shared internally and with CAB members
- 9 Turn meeting insights into actions, the status of which are reported back to CAB members in future engagements

When it comes to holding impactful meetings, successful CAB practitioners agree with the importance of preparation; engaging with clients in advance, investing in creating mutually beneficial content and practicing and reviewing everything well before getting together with CAB members.

"Preparation including customer engagement ahead of time is key to synthesizing input to create a strong, rich agenda," said **ABB's** Mr. Massoudi. "It's also important to remember that this is not a sales forum, so you should let CAB members talk most of the time, and having a professional facilitator to properly guide the conversation really helps."

"Our CAB started with great information gathering and customer interviews that established a strong agenda," agreed **Wolters Kluwer's** Ms. Mohs. **UPS Capital's** Ms. Jabloner emphasized the importance of prep meetings. "Preparation with session owners is key, as is practicing how the conversations should go," she said. "The key to a successful meeting is the planning process. We assign senior members of our team to ensure content is on track and is reviewed by numerous stakeholders including our CEO," added Mr. Tao from **Forcepoint**.

Other members pointed to the need to deliver timely, helpful content to members, while at the same time addressing shared challenges that generate lively discussion and ideas for solving them. "We always make sure our content is relevant and timely, including technology and regulations which are constantly changing," said **Ryder's** Ms. Wicky. "Our customers look to us to provide insights beyond their roles and bandwidth, and to understand emerging market trends that give them a competitive edge." Ms. Bousman from **AVI-SPL** agreed. "None of our members just want presentations, but instead approaching a shared challenge from different angles and perspectives, collective problem solving and coming to a consensus," she said.

Lastly, companies expressed the importance of social activities and the overall meeting experience to increase relationship building. "Plenty of downtime and peer interaction make our meetings interactive and enjoyable for the members," said Ms. Mohs from **Wolters Kluwer**. **UPS Capital's** Ms. Jabloner agreed. "In addition to the sessions and breakouts, meaningful conversations take place during the social events that serve to deepen relationships." "Social activities provide opportunities for member bonding," concluded Ms. Bousman from **AVI-SPL**. Mr. Tao from **Forcepoint** said, "We also provide a 'white glove' experience for our members. We pay for all flights and hotel costs and we ensure first class dinners and social interaction, as networking is valuable to our members."

4 POST-MEETING AND ONGOING INTERACTION

At Ignite, we like to say that the CAB meeting is just the start of the fun – the real work begins after the face-to-face meeting is completed. Post-meeting activities and ongoing interaction is key to keeping program momentum going in-between meetings.

Key post-meeting and ongoing interaction activities:

- 1 Communicate the ongoing CAB program management plan
- 2 Circulate the meeting report including planned actions
- 3 Create any post-meeting workstreams, subcommittees or research
- 4 Ensure all action items are assigned a priority, a leader and a deadline
- 5 Hold interim strategy calls with members which include status updates on action items
- 6 Have members participate in media opportunities, sales references, case studies, speaking engagements, in-person meetings, etc.

Successful CAB leaders agree that post-meeting follow-up and ongoing interaction is important to keep program momentum going. Several commented that this starts with a strong meeting report, which summarizes the issues discussed, the different member perspectives gathered, and potential actions that can be taken by the host company as a result.

“Our meeting report included all the key discussion points and was provided to members within a month of our meeting,” said Mr. Tao from **Forcepoint**. “We review all actions internally, and we update our members on action status.” Ms. Mohs from **Wolters Kluwer** added, “We sent our planned actions to our customers and followed up with what we said we would do.”

Ms. Bousman from **AVI-SPL** agreed, and also pointed to the importance of ongoing strategy calls to keep program momentum going between in-person meetings. “We share our meeting reports with CAB members and internally, which provides our sales team some outstanding intelligence,” agreed Ms. Bousman. “We then hold quarterly conference calls with our members that include updates on actions taken.”

Ms. Jabloner from **UPS Capital** also emphasized the importance of planning and preparing for interim strategy calls. “We strive to ensure good, strategic content in our quarterly calls,” she said. “To further ensure ongoing communication, we proactively push out content such as our blog to our members.”

While other CAB leaders agreed with the importance of ongoing CAB member engagement, they also acknowledged this is an area for improvement in their programs. “Although we haven’t done this as well as we would have liked in the past, we are now dedicated to communicating actions to keep our CAB program momentum going,” added Mr. Massoudi from **ABB**. He wasn’t alone in sharing this challenge. “When I took over last year, I thought we could improve our post-meeting activities,” agreed Ms. Wicky from **Ryder**. “We are implementing some improvements to ensure CAB member input in new product launches, technology partner decisions and product roadmap development.”

Establishing, tracking and measuring a CAB program's impact and success will likely be key to ensuring ongoing support and participation by your company's executives. Through our years of guiding B2B Fortune 500 companies in measuring the impact of their CAB programs, we have seen this accomplished by myriad ways.

Top ways to measure CAB impact:

- 1 Create a CAB scorecard that is measured throughout the life of the program
- 2 Track member revenue and renewals before and after program participation
- 3 Enlist CAB members to serve as referrals to prospects
- 4 Count and track the number of product desires submitted by CAB members, and those that make it to future versions
- 5 Leverage CAB members for media interviews, speaking slots, case studies, webinars, video testimonials, social media posts, etc.
- 6 Turn meeting insights into thought leadership that can position your company as an innovative leader
- 7 Track and report on new markets entered, new partnerships or acquisition targets identified by your CAB members

Successful CAB leaders often point to uncovering and capturing product roadmap enhancements as a key benefit of their CAB program. "Our product and service teams came away with great input to our roadmap and how we support our customers," said Ms. Mohs from **Wolters Kluwer**. "We also gained some important insights into how our customers deal with various banking regulations, some of which we didn't realize they were struggling with as much as they actually were." **Forcepoint** agreed to this kind of impact and more. "Our CAB has informed our go-to-market and channel strategies, messaging and product roadmap," said Mr. Tao. "Our CAB is absolutely impacting our CEO and overall company."

According to Ms. Bousman from **AVI-SPL**, "Our CAB impacted our R&D efforts, changed our strategic direction, and changed how we deliver solutions to our international markets. We measure our CAB by how engaged our members are in the meetings and with each other, as well account growth, revenue, product footprint and the feedback we receive."

Other CAB practitioners pointed to additional marketing and positioning benefits from their CAB programs. "Our CAB has made a great impact on the core teams that participate in the meetings. For example, our discussion on ecommerce uncovered a range of vendors and platforms that led to changing our product positioning and helped us revamp our website," said **UPS Capital's** Ms. Jabloner. "In addition, our CAB members were trial users of our new solution, and their NPS (net promoter scores) rose significantly after we made the changes they suggested."

Successful CAB practitioners agreed with the positive impact of their programs on their brand and sales efforts. "The strategic output from our meetings has driven collective problem solving and work committees that have published thought leadership, which has significantly built our brand and created more sales opportunities," said Ms. Bousman from **AVI-SPL**. "Our CAB program has been well worth the expense," added **Ryder's** Ms. Wicky. "We are considered the 'secret sauce' behind the success of our customers."

Finally, in addition to inputs to product and service offerings, successful CAB practitioners point to their programs increasing their companies' focus and emphasis on their customers. "Our CAB has increased our customer centricity and made our organization more in-tune with our industry. Our senior executives now have much more awareness of customer interests, which has helped shape our product direction," said **ABB's** Mr. Massoudi. "We also gauge our program success by measuring participant satisfaction, as well as the feedback from participating executives; both of which have been very positive."

Other CABs forced companies to take a more external outlook. "Our CEO wanted to cultivate a more customer-driven organization, and our CAB has enabled us to become customer obsessed. In addition, we were somewhat internally focused and siloed in the past, and our CAB has helped break down those siloes by providing insights to which leadership may otherwise not be exposed," added Ms. Wicky from **Ryder**. "Our CAB has led to the development and launch of several successful products, and we acquired a company as a direct result of CAB input."

6 OTHER SUCCESS FACTORS

UPS Capital and **Wolters Kluwer** point to their use of experienced, proven outside experts to launch and guide the success of their programs. “Utilizing Ignite Advisory Group helped establish and build out our entire program structure, prepare for in-person meetings, generate live feedback and create real change,” said Ms. Jabloner of **UPS Capital**.

“The advice we received from Ignite was key – we don’t use third parties too often, but we were happy to use them, said Ms. Mohs from **Wolters Kluwer**. “I had no understanding of CABs before we initiated our program and didn’t know where to begin. I have been very impressed with the materials and guidance provided by Ignite – we made the right decision to go with them to guide our program.” **Forcepoint’s** Mr. Tao added that “Having Ignite manage, facilitate and ‘keep us honest’ in our planning and preparation has been key to our program success.” “We are considering expanding our program internationally to gather more of a global perspective.”

7 CONCLUSION

Customer advisory board programs are alive and well – and thriving better than ever as we start the next decade. Companies large and small continue to enjoy the benefits of well-run CAB programs, and, more importantly, provide tremendous value to their customer members who participate in them.

But well-run CAB programs need the attention, dedication, support, resources, budget and time to do them properly – poorly run or experimental programs will not deliver the desired value and, worse, will make a bad impression to top customers. With the benefits to be gained by all, and the stakes at hand, companies are wise to turn to third-party experts to ensure their programs operate on a world-class level.

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