

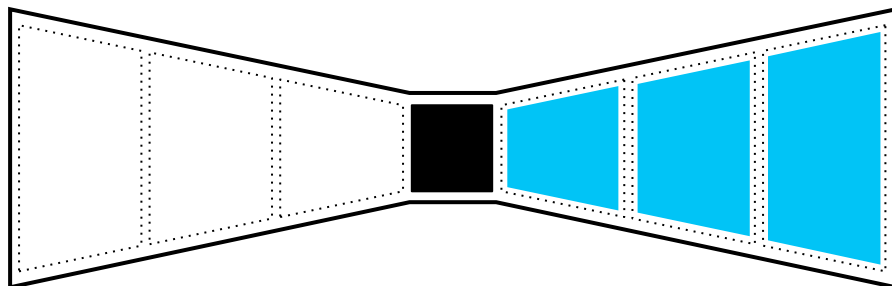


RESEARCH BRIEF

AI ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE BOWTIE

UNLOCKING EXPANSION
REVENUE USING AI

By David Gordillo and David Ellin, Revenue Architects at Winning by Design



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Research Abstract

This brief explores how AI is being deployed across onboarding, adoption, retention, and expansion workflows, spotlighting 11 vendors validated by WbD for their AI capabilities in Customer Success and Account Management. We break down where the market is today, how AI helps identify expansion opportunities, and what executives should consider when deploying AI across the right side of the bowtie.

For those looking to implement these approaches, the full version includes a feature-level vendor comparison and a ready-to-use RFP template, available to Winning by Design Advisory Access subscribers.

CEO Take: Expansion Revenue is an Often Neglected (but Powerful) Growth Lever, and AI Might Finally Make it Predictable

If your Ideal Customer Profile (ICP) doesn't expand by design, then it's not an ICP.

If annual recurring revenue (ARR) is over \$10M, then expansion is more important to future revenue growth than new customer acquisition, yet we often do not treat it that way. Let's get real: If we're still treating Customer Success like a defensive playbook focused purely on retention, we're missing the bigger picture. Since revenue growth is absolutely crucial to shareholder value creation, expansion isn't just a nice-to-have, it must be a primary growth focus.

The accounts that expand are the ones achieving Impact from the solution. For years, the smartest minds in our industry have been trying to crack the code of account health scoring, believing this could not only predict churn, but also expansion. First we used spreadsheets and complex equations, then we went to scoring models and algorithms, and finally we introduced machine learning. But here's the truth: most of those models failed to consistently predict churn and expansion. Why? Because they were blind to context.

We've tried everything. Product usage can be a lagging indicator, NPS is noisy, and a high quantity or frequency of touchpoints from a CSM/AM doesn't equal progress. But now, AI is giving us a shot at redemption. With access to unstructured data like call transcripts, stakeholder sentiment, email tone, and stakeholder shifts, it seems we will finally have a chance to see expansion before it happens.

It's early days. The models are improving fast, but we're not ready to declare victory yet. What's clear, though, is that growth-focused companies are shifting their post-sale investments from cost-efficiency to revenue creation. AI agents that scale white-glove service are interesting. But AI agents that uncover the next million-dollar expansion? They're game-changing. Welcome to the future of customer expansion.

Strategic Insights

Customer Success, Account Management, and post-sales as a whole are undergoing a major shift—from protect-and-renew motions to expansion-led growth engines.

As data complexity increases and headcount stays flat (or shrinks), organizations need systems that scale intelligent action. Whether it's prioritizing accounts using growth signals, running onboarding at scale, or generating QBRs automatically—AI is now helping post-sales teams move faster, with more precision, and with greater revenue impact.

The best GTM teams are using AI not just to automate tasks, but to generate pipeline from the customer base. What previously took a human hours to discover and address—or worse yet went completely unnoticed—can now be surfaced in seconds, with recommended actions.

Expansion happens when Impact is understood and amplified. AI helps us see where Impact has already taken root—so we can double down.

Vendors Validated by WbD for this Research Brief

Countless players are entering the AI-for-CS space. In this brief, we had the opportunity to talk with eleven of them and validate their AI capabilities (summarised in a [Vendor Comparison guide](#))

- **ChurnZero** - churnzero.com
- **ClientSuccess** - clientsuccess.com
- **CoWrkr** - mycowrkr.ai
- **Cust** - cust.co
- **DIVACS** - divacs.com
- **FunnelStory** - funnelstory.ai
- **Radiant Point (Sky)** - skyco.co
- **Signals AI** - getsignals.ai
- **Staircase AI by Gainsight** - gainsight.com
- **Sturdy AI** - sturdy.ai
- **Totango** - totango.com
- **Upollo** - upollo.ai

These vendors offer capabilities across:

- AI onboarding
- Expansion prediction
- Conversational sentiment analysis
- Relationship intelligence
- Value realization tracking

Jobs to Be Done (JTBD): Where AI Is Driving Value Now

Job to Be Done	AI in Action
Scaling onboarding without more headcount	AI agents guide users step-by-step and accelerate activation
Predicting risk and upsell readiness	Models surface churn risks and expansion opportunities in real-time
Extracting insight from unstructured data	AI parses support tickets, emails, and calls for sentiment and intent
Driving expansion through Impact realization	Agents track and quantify Impact to justify renewals and upsells
Optimizing CS/AM workflows	Co-pilots recommend and trigger next-best actions

Maturity Model: Art of the Present

Stage	Description	Examples
Reactive	Responding to churn with basic health indicators	Most Vendors
Proactive	Predictive scoring and play-triggering	Totango, Upollo, Signals AI
Prescriptive	AI recommends targeted actions in <i>real time</i>	ChurnZero, Gainsight, Radiant Point (Sky)
Autonomous	AI agents handle full playbooks: onboarding, check-ins, renewals	CoWrkr, Cust, FunnelStory

Most CS AI vendors today operate between Reactive and Proactive, but leading teams are pushing into Prescriptive territory. The future will increasingly feature Autonomous Agents capable of running entire customer success motions.

What Good Looks Like

Companies that are unlocking expansion with AI today typically share five core traits:

1. Unified Customer Data Across Product, CRM, Support, and Comms

What it means:

Your AI is only as good as the signals it receives. Companies that lead in post-sales AI have connected the key systems that capture customer interactions, product usage, CRM history, support tickets, call transcripts, and email threads, into a unified data layer.

Why it matters:

AI models need both structured data (like usage metrics) and unstructured data (like stakeholder sentiment or feature requests in support tickets) to identify patterns that humans miss. Fragmented data creates blind spots, and blind spots kill expansion.

What to do:

Start by auditing your existing data flows. Are your product analytics synced to CRM? Can your AI tools “read/hear” customer communications?

2. Defined Jobs To Be Done for CS/AM with Metrics Tied to Revenue

What it means:

Top-performing companies define specific, measurable outcomes that Customer Success and Account Management are responsible for. These JTBD are tied directly to expansion, retention, and account growth.

Why it matters:

AI needs direction. When teams are aligned around JTBD like “accelerate time-to-value,” “validate first Impact,” or “capture expansion intent,” AI tools can be trained and configured to optimize for those outcomes, not just for generic engagement.

What to do:

Map out your team’s critical workflows across the customer lifecycle. For each stage (e.g. onboarding, adoption, renewal), define what success looks like, what leading and lagging indicators matter, and what jobs AI could support. Then track against metrics like NRR, expansion rate, and onboarding velocity.

3. **Commitment to Experimentation: Piloting AI Agents and Playbooks**

What it means:

These companies run controlled pilots before scaling AI across their entire book of business. They test agents, observe how they interact with customers, and measure impact at every step.

Why it matters:

AI in CS is not plug-and-play. It's more like managing a new team member—you need to train it, give it feedback, and observe how it performs. Experimentation creates a low-risk path to high-impact transformation.

What to do:

Start with a **single use case**—onboarding reminders, risk alerts, or follow-up summaries. Assign a test group of AMs or CSMs to use the AI co-pilot while others serve as a control group. Track leading and intermediate indicators, then iterate based on what's working.

4. **Clear Executive Support for Post-Sale Growth. Not Just Retention**

What it means:

The C-suite doesn't see Customer Success as a cost center, they see it as a revenue engine. They align incentive structures, resource allocation, and strategic goals accordingly.

Why it matters:

Without executive buy-in, AI initiatives often stall in the middle. You need leadership that's willing to shift mindsets, reframe metrics, and invest in new capabilities that prioritize growth.

What to do:

Make the business case for AI in terms executives care about: increased Net Revenue Retention, shorter ramp time, or higher expansion velocity. Share early wins from pilot projects and demonstrate how AI enables scale without sacrificing impact.

5. **Treat AI not as a tool, but as a co-strategist.**

What it means:

This mindset shift is what separates leading companies from everyone else.

Instead of seeing AI as a feature, they treat it as a strategic partner that brings visibility, decision support, and execution to the table. The best teams involve AI in their day-to-day judgment calls, just like they would a trusted team lead.

Example:

Imagine a CSM preparing for a QBR. Instead of pulling data manually from the CRM, they ask their AI co-pilot to summarize:

- Account health trends
- Sentiment from support interactions
- Unread signals from emails or recorded calls
- Any recent org changes

In seconds, the co-pilot returns a 360° account brief, surfaces a likely expansion path based on feature usage, and suggests a next-best action. The CSM adds their strategic perspective and personal context and then walks into the QBR with insight, not just intuition.

What to do:

Pilot this shift by assigning specific decisions or workflows to an AI partner: “Show me which accounts are primed for upsell,” or “Summarize risks in my renewals pipeline.” Use the results to build internal confidence.

What to Watch

We are still early in the AI CS transformation. The foundation is being laid, but the best ideas have not all been built yet. Below are the seeds of a vision we hope to see the industry grow into—the capabilities and mindsets that could reshape the revenue architecture of modern companies.

1. The Rise of AI-Native Post-Sales Platforms

Today, most AI features are layered onto legacy Customer Success or CRM platforms, bolted onto brittle workflows that were never designed for dynamic, data-driven decision-making.

Where we are headed:

We need a new class of platforms designed from the ground up to be AI-first. Systems that assume AI agents are handling 80% of the volume tasks, and that humans step in where strategic context is required. These tools won't just manage accounts; they'll predict, adapt, and act across every touchpoint in the customer journey.

Why it matters:

True AI-native design unlocks automation, scalability, and insight without legacy constraints, and that is essential to move Customer Success from a cost center to a growth engine.

2. Better Contextual AI, Tuned to Revenue Reality

Generic AI isn't enough. We need contextual AI—LLMs and models that are fine-tuned on your product signals, customer personas, business rules, success milestones, and commercial objectives.

Where we are headed:

AI that understands not just what the customer is doing, but why it matters to their expansion potential. AI that can recognize when an onboarding milestone correlates with long-term account growth. AI that flags intent before it is expressed.

Why it matters:

This is what makes AI truly revenue-relevant. When contextualized correctly, AI becomes an insight engine, not just a task executor. It helps prioritize limited human bandwidth toward actions that move the revenue needle.

3. **Agent Orchestration Across the Entire Lifecycle**

Right now, most AI agents are point solutions: one for onboarding, one for renewals, another for product support, etc...

Where we are headed:

A future where multiple agents operate in concert, passing off context and customer data across stages, from sales handoff to onboarding, from adoption to QBRs, from renewal to expansion. We believe the encoding language for these handoffs is SPICED (see the WbD Research Brief, AI GTM Intelligence.) This is **agent choreography**: a system where each agent knows its role in a broader revenue generation playbook.

Why it matters:

Revenue is a lifecycle event, not a series of disconnected moments. Agent orchestration ensures continuity of experience, reduces operational drag, and creates a compounding effect on value realization.

4. **Human + AI Partnerships That Redefine Post-Sales Work**

The endgame is not automation for automation's sake, the endgame is **blended teams**. AI handles scale, surfacing, and repetition. Humans focus on strategy, relationships, and nuance.

Where we are headed:

CSMs and AMs will work like strategy consultants, backed by intelligent agents that do the prep, data crunching, and real-time nudging. CSMs won't be judged by how many emails they send, but by how well they direct the orchestra of signals and systems around them.

Why it matters:

This unlocks the holy grail of revenue architecture: high recurring Impact.

When human capital is deployed strategically, you create more value with fewer touchpoints, and improve customer experience at the same time.

The Future We're Betting On

We believe in a world where:

- Post-sales teams are measured by revenue outcomes, not task completion
- AI acts as a signal amplifier, not a blunt force tool
- Expansion is proactively earned, not passively awaited
- Human expertise is freed up to build relationships and drive impact, not assemble slides or hunt for data

To the builders reading this: we need tools that work like revenue strategists, not workflow managers.

To the operators: we need you to challenge the default settings of your CS tech stack.

To the execs: you now have the opportunity to properly architect the right side of the bowtie, not just manage it.

Let's build the post-sales systems we wish we had five years ago.

Practical Insights: Implementation

Feature Overview by Capability

Capability	Description
AI Onboarding Assistants	Guide users via email/chat with no CSM involvement
Expansion Prediction Engines	Surface upsell opportunities based on usage + engagement
NLP for Voice-of-Customer	Parse tickets and comms for intent, blockers, and sentiment
Next-Best Action Co-Pilots	Recommend plays based on account data
Value Realization & ROI Agents	Track outcomes and create a proof of value for upsells

More info in the [Vendor Comparison Guide](#).

How to Implement AI on the Right Side of the Bowtie

Bringing AI into your post-sales motion is not a big bang, it is a thoughtful progression. The most successful teams don't start with the flashiest use case. They start where AI can meaningfully reduce human lift or surface signals that would otherwise be lost.

But implementation isn't just about wiring tools together. It's a shift in mindset, design, and execution. This section walks through what to focus on across frameworks, people, and systems, with guidance to help you feel how this transformation unfolds inside an organization.

1. Frameworks: Lead with Playbooks, Not Just Platforms

AI only becomes powerful when it is attached to **purpose**. That means starting not with the tool, but with the **job to be done**.

Ask:

- What are your core customer workflows today: onboarding, QBRs, renewals, expansion?
- Where is **human effort** highest and **insight** lowest?
- What's reactive? What could become proactive with the right signals?

Most companies don't have to build new journeys, they just need to **map the ones they already have** and identify where AI could be plugged in.

Start by drawing your current customer journey. Step by step. Then annotate:

- Where is your team spending time?
- Where are you missing signals?
- Where do actions get delayed?

From there, define your **expansion plays**:

- What triggers them? (e.g. feature usage spike, stakeholder change, ROI milestone)
- What do they require? (e.g. outreach, QBR prep, data validation)
- Which of those steps could be AI-driven, now or in the future?

It's okay to start small.

For example, replace manual onboarding check-ins with an AI agent that:

- Greets the customer
- Tracks milestone progress
- Flags blocker signals before the first CSM call

This not only frees up human bandwidth, it builds confidence that AI can perform to standard.

What to watch for:

- Overengineering. Don't try to automate everything at once. Focus on **low-complexity, high-impact** workflows first.
- Blind spots. You may discover that key signals (like feature adoption) aren't actually tracked consistently, this becomes a data hygiene opportunity.

2. **People: Prepare Your Team for a New Kind of Partnership**

AI doesn't fully replace a Customer Success team. It **redefines their role**. That's a shift that requires both mindset change and skill development.

CSMs are no longer task executors. They become:

- Strategic advisors
- Relationship builders
- Insight interpreters
- Decision validators

The AI is the analyst, researcher, and operations assistant working behind the scenes. The human adds context, judgment, and influence.

RevOps and CS Ops become the architects of this transformation. They:

- Orchestrate systems
- Define signal thresholds and triggers
- Monitor model performance
- Validate impact with dashboards and revenue metrics

Product and Data Teams need to ensure:

- Product telemetry is flowing and usable
- Signals are structured in a way that AI models can learn from
- Event streams are mapped to meaningful milestones

Leadership must:

- Reset success metrics—from activity-based (calls, emails) to outcome-based (Time To Impact, expansion lift)
- Reinforce that AI is here to *elevate*, not displace

What to watch for:

- **Trust barriers.** CSMs may fear being “replaced” or question the reliability of AI-generated insights. Start in co-pilot mode—show them what AI sees, and let them choose how to act.
- **Incentive misalignment.** If your team is still rewarded for volume (e.g. number of touchpoints), they won’t adopt AI that does more with less. Align metrics with outcomes.

3. Systems: Connect Signals, Don’t Just Add Software

AI without clean, connected data is just guesswork with a cool user experience. Before enabling any AI capability, ensure your core systems are integrated and reliable.

Here’s what needs to talk to what:

System	Why It Matters
CRM	Provides customer context, segmentation, opportunity stage
Product Analytics	Offers behavioral signals, usage milestones, feature activation
Customer Comms	Surfaces tone, sentiment, blockers, intent through support and conversation data
BI / Data Warehouse	Adds revenue context, customer lifecycle stage, and historical trends

This becomes your **“Signal Lake,”** the centralized source of structured and unstructured insight that feeds your AI models.

From there, your AI systems consume these signals and generate:

- Risk alerts
- Expansion readiness flags
- Workflow triggers
- Draft outreach messages
- Prioritized daily task lists

What to watch for:

- **Signal distortion.** If your CRM is outdated or your support tools don’t capture data properly, AI insights will suffer. Start by fixing the pipes before turning on the engine.
- **Overintegration.** Resist the urge to connect every system “just in case.” Focus first on the **minimum viable signal loop** for your use case.

Final Word on Implementation

You can follow this loop:

1. Map your journey
2. Instrument it with meaningful signals
3. Deploy AI in specific moments
4. Measure the result
5. Expand from what works

Remember that **this isn’t just implementation—it’s transformation.** It requires buy-in, experimentation, and iteration.

Timeline: 12-Month Rollout Roadmap

Every company's path is different, but here's what a typical rollout plan could look like:

Phase	0–3 Months	3–6 Months	6–12 Months
Focus	Foundation & Pilots	Workflow integration	Orchestrated AI expansion
Implementation	Risk scores, onboarding	Trigger playbooks, alerts, flags, notifications	Multi-agent automation

Measurement: What Success Looks Like

Leading organizations track a range of indicators across three horizons: **leading**, **intermediate**, and **lagging**.

Indicator Type	Description	Examples
Leading Indicators	Measures of productivity and agent activity within workflows	Number of emails sent during handoffs, kickoff meetings booked, follow-up emails drafted by AI agents
Intermediate Indicators	Signals of successful workflow progress and customer momentum	Onboardings completed with AI, first Impact delivered, intent-to-renew validated
Lagging Indicators	Revenue-level outcomes that reflect true business impact	Renewal rate increase, expansion revenue lift

Pro tip: To quantify the business value, some organizations adopt an **A/B testing approach**:

- One group of AMs or CSMs continues operating with business-as-usual workflows (control group)
- A second group leverages AI agents throughout onboarding, adoption, and expansion workflows

In this setup:

- **Leading and intermediate indicators** show short-term productivity gains and improved workflow execution
- **Lagging indicators** validate long-term impact on revenue, but may take longer to reflect changes, depending on Time to Impact

This layered approach ensures companies don't wait 6–12 months to learn whether AI is working. Instead, they get **early signal clarity** from workflow adoption metrics—while keeping a line of sight to downstream revenue outcomes.

Risks and Considerations

Risk	Mitigation Strategy
Poor data quality / silos	Start with integration of key systems before applying models
CSM resistance to AI	Begin in co-pilot mode and showcase impact
Over-reliance on automation	Blend human + AI touchpoints, especially for high-value accounts
Privacy and compliance	Use vendors with masking, SOC 2, and controllable LLM logic

Final Thoughts

Customer expansion shouldn't be a guessing game anymore—and AI is the reason why.

We're entering a new era where post-sales is no longer reactive, underfunded, or disconnected from growth. With the right AI capabilities in place, Customer Success and Account Management can become powerful engines of predictable, scalable, and intelligent revenue creation.

The companies that win this decade won't just retain customers, they'll grow with them. And they'll do it by giving their teams an unfair advantage: context-rich, signal-driven, AI-augmented decision-making, at scale.

Expansion is the new pipeline. AI is the lens that helps you see it clearly and act on it with precision. Now is the time to reimagine what your post-sales team is capable of.

Want to make this happen?

[Book Time with an Advisor](#)

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

The following supplementary materials are available in the full version of this report, available to subscribers in the [reference library](#). For more information on subscribing, see winningbydesign.com/access-pass.

01 Vendor Descriptions

02 Vendor Comparison

03 RFP Template

**04 The Customer Success
Operating Model**

**05 Core Elements Across the
Customer Journey**

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