From Key Account Selling

to

Key Account Management

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Abstract

Recent interest in relationship marketing and customer retention has re-focused the attention of marketing academics and managers towards Key Account Management (KAM) systems as a means of operationalising long-term buyer/seller relationships.

This paper examines the nature of KAM in industrial markets. It is structured around several strategic issues elicited from two main sources: first, empirical research in the area of industrial sales management and selling to major accounts; and second, observations from running a series of management development programmes for account managers.

While different companies and industries are in different stages of KAM systems development, it is clear that many managers have found the shift from the relatively narrow focus of key account selling to the broader requirements of key account management problematic. Three inter-related conclusions have emerged from our work. First, most of the literature and debate on KAM has taken the seller's perspective. Second, there appears to be inadequate matching of the seller's total offering with the buyer's increasingly strategic and dynamic context. This is particularly evident in the short-term focus pervading some seller companies and in their failure to keep abreast of the kind of supply chain issues currently facing industrial buyers. Third, key account managers are often ill-prepared for the wider and more demanding roles which take them into areas of business development, industry/market analysis, benchmarking, relationship management and so on.

KAM processes appear to be under-researched and, therefore, only partially understood. An agenda for empirical research is therefore proposed as a necessary precursor to any attempt to define KAM competencies, management development and best-practice.

Introduction

Faced with unprecedented levels of international competition and technological change in industrial markets, many companies are seeking to achieve competitive advantage and bring stability to their operations by forming strategic alliances with customers and suppliers. One seller-initiated type of strategic alliance that has long proved popular where centralised purchasing and supply base rationalisation has been a strong feature of structural change is key account management (KAM).

Successful adoption of KAM relies heavily on the ability/willingness of individuals to build close, long-term relationships. Yet, despite widespread implementation across a range of industrial sectors, it is only recently that academic research on relational aspects of KAM is showing signs of catching up with practice.

Marketing academics, for example, have laid claim to the concept of relationship marketing and are vigorously constructing/testing integrative models of customer retention which encompass such areas as customer service, branding, public relations, database management and, of course, key account management. Similarly, purchasing academics are examining relational aspects of supply chain management, supplier development, total quality management, electronic data interchange, benchmarking, etc. While professional self-interest is likely to perpetuate separate marketing and purchasing perspectives, it is to be hoped that common sense will prevail and researchers will adhere to the true spirit of the IMP initiative by not losing sight of the marketing/purchasing interface.

This paper reports the findings of on-going research which takes the buyer/seller dyadic relationship as the unit of analysis . Its purpose is threefold: first, to explore the nature of KAM, with particular reference to the definition of key accounts, receptivity to KAM among buyers, and a "needs" approach to strategic/operational fit. Second, to propose a key account relational development model. And third, to examine the managerial implications for selling companies of progression from key account selling to key account management implied in the model.

What is a Key Account?

For the purpose of this paper we define a **Key Account** as a customer in a business-to-business market identified by a selling company as of *strategic importance* (Fiocca, 1982; Campbell and Cunningham, 1983; Yorke and Droussiotis, 1993; Millman, 1994). We offer this definition because the term Key Account tends to be used interchangeably with

National Account and **Major Account**, both in the literature and in practice.

Definitions of national accounts and major accounts typically focus upon the geographical spread and size of customers, emphasising such criteria as: sales turnover, profitability, centralised purchasing systems, requirements of special treatment, and so on (Shapiro and Posner, 1976; Platzer, 1984; Colletti and Tubridy, 1987; Barrett, 1986; Cooper and Gardner, 1993). National accounts, we would argue, are a sub-category of key accounts, which may require particular attention and specific ways of managing them, but to suggest that key accounts (and major accounts) are necessarily national is to ignore the importance of other accounts within the seller's customer portfolio.

Campbell and Cunningham (1983) classified customers as yesterday's customers, today's regular, today's special and tomorrow's customers; suggesting that long-term profitability may well depend on the cultivation and management of customers who do not represent a large proportion of present sales turnover/profit, but whose *future potential* renders them of strategic importance. Sellers may wish to consider some customers as key accounts, for example, for their prestige or reference value, or because they facilitate access to new markets and technologies.

Key accounts, therefore, may be small or large by comparison with the seller; operate locally, nationally or globally; exhibit a willingness to forge close long-term relationships with sellers, or operate at arms length and be brutally opportunistic in their dealings. What is critical in classifying customers as key accounts is that they are considered by the seller to be of strategic importance.

The Special Problem of Assessing Key Account Profitability

If KAM is to be successful, there is an urgent need to develop reliable measures of performance and customer value which support strategic marketing decisions. Of these measures, the most promising involves attempts to discriminate among customers or groups of customers in terms of their profitability.

Unfortunately, one of the major obstacles to implementing customer account profitability analysis is the inability of most management accounting systems to cope with cost allocation, or more precisely, defining what attributable costs should be included in the analysis at different levels of aggregation. On the one hand, it is important to avoid merely spreading direct cost across the customer base in some arbitrary way; and on the other, it is desirable to include the real cost of servicing particular customers. Every account manager

or sales administration manager knows intuitively what a "good" customer looks like. The point is that different customers invariably have different sales mixes, order patterns, locations, levels of sophistication, etc. What is required is a means of capturing the incremental costs above and beyond routine order processing and service support.

A particular problem in some engineering and manufacturing companies is to ensure that the costs incurred in "customisation" are included, together with any special requests for stockholding, technical service, maintenance, etc. Making these costs visible is important because in an effort to please and retain customers, we have found numerous key account managers making loose promises and concessions which erode profitability. Similar promises are frequently made by technical managers, who are outside the direct control of the key account managers, resulting in "specification drift" and cost/time over-runs, both before and after a price has been agreed. Product/project cost monitoring should pick up these items, but by then it is often too late.

Sellers face a plethora of decisions related to their portfolio of key accounts: Which accounts are growing, for example, and is growth in profit commensurate with growth in sales? When should a customer be regarded as a key account? Are some customers claiming more than their fair share of service/support? What might be the impact of losing part or all of the business from a key account? When should the level of relational activity be raised? Computer systems offer plenty of scope for improving customer account profitability analysis: first, to generate financial performance reports on a regular basis; and second, to assess the future profit impact of key account decisions and changes in the trading environment. At the time of writing, few seller companies in our sample had installed sophisticated systems of this kind and for most, such investment seemed a long way off.

The Key Account Relational Development Cycle

Relationships evolve over time, with each specific transaction being affected by the history of the relationship, and the relationship modified by each specific exchange (Ford et al, 1986). Individual transactions will not only be affected by market considerations (price and product need), but also by relational or process factors (Szymanski, 1988) which demand that different key account selling and management strategies are adopted as the relationship evolves.

Ford (1980); Dwyer, Schurr and Oh (1987); and Lamming (1993); have each identified five stages in the development of buyer/seller relationships. Ford's *pre-relationship, early*

exploration, development, long term and *final* stages are closely mirrored in concept by the *awareness, exploration, expansion, commitment* and *institutional* stages proposed by Dwyer et al, and which relate to dyadic exchanges.

Lamming (1993) provides an historical model of relational development within the motor industry which suggests that the nature of relationships within whole industries may evolve over time from arms length *traditional* relations to the *partnership* and lean supply models observed amongst Japanese manufacturers. The prevailing relationship model in an industry thus acts as a back drop against which all other dyadic relationships are formed. This acts as a cultural constraint on the degree of closeness which might be achieved and at the same time points the seller towards a potential for achieving competitive advantage by going beyond the industry norm.

Table 1. Comparison of Relational Models

Ford (1980) Dwyer et al (1987)	Lamming(1993)	Wotruba (1991)	Millman and Wilson (1994)
Pre-relationship Awareness	Traditional	Provider	Pre-KAM
Early Stage Exploration	Stress	Persuader	Early-KAM
Development Stage Expansion	Resolved	Prospector	Mid-KAM
Long Term Stage Commitment	Partnership	Problem Solver	Partnership KAM
Final Stage Institutionalisation	Beyond Partnership	Procreator	Synergistic KAM
			Uncoupling KAM

Wotruba's (1991) five-stage model of the development of personal selling approaches may be seen as reflecting the seller's relational strategies. The *provider, persuader, prospector, problem solver* and *procreator* stages not only demand different skills of the sales person, but also represent different approaches to meeting customer needs.

Absolute parallels cannot be drawn between the various models but each have their contribution to make to understanding relational development. Ford (1980) and Dwyer et al (1987) were at pains to show the complete life-cycle of relationships and thus show the final or institutionalised stages which represent the possible dissolution of the relationship, whereas Wotruba's procreator stage has more in common with Lamming's partnership stage.

Our six-stage model of key account relational development builds on the aforementioned models. It provides a useful tool for examining sources of competitive advantage and characterising managerial behaviour. A comparison of stages in the various models is shown in Table 1 and the main features of each stage of our model will now be outlined:

Pre-KAM

Not all customers are key accounts. The task facing the sales and marketing function in the pre-KAM stage is to identify those with the potential for moving towards key account status and to avoid wasteful investment in those accounts which do not hold that potential. Pre-KAM selling strategies are concerned with making basic product or service offerings available, whilst attempting to gather information about the customer in order to determine whether or not they have key account potential.

Early-KAM

Early-KAM is concerned with exploring opportunities for closer collaboration by identifying the motives, culture and concerns of the account; with targeting competitor strengths and weaknesses; and with persuading customers of the potential benefits they might enjoy as "preferred" customers. A detailed understanding is required of the decision making process and the structure and nature of the decision making unit, as well as the buyers' business and the problems that relate to the value adding process.

At this stage, tentative adaptations will be made to the seller's offer in order to more closely match buyer requirements. The focus of the sales effort will be on building trust through consistent performance and open communications.

Sales people will need to demonstrate a willingness to adapt their offering to provide a bespoke solution to the buyer's problems. High levels of uncertainty about the long term potential of the relationship may mean that they will need to promote the idea for non-standard product offerings into their own company. Where these attempts are unsuccessful, then "benefit selling" and the level of personal service provided by the sales person may serve to differentiate the seller's offer.

Mid-KAM

As the relationship develops, so do levels of trust and the range of problems that the relationship addresses. The number of cross-boundary contacts will also increase with the sales person perhaps taking a less central role.

The account review process will tend to shift upwards to senior management level in view of the importance of the customer and the level of resource allocation, although the relationship may fall short of exclusivity and the activities of competitors within the account will require constant review.

Partnership KAM

Partnership KAM represents a mature stage of key account development. The supplier is often viewed as an external resource of the customer and the sharing of sensitive commercial information becomes common place as the focus for activity is increasingly upon joint problem resolution.

Synergistic KAM

At this advanced stage of maturity, key account management goes "beyond partnership" when there is a fundamental shift in attitude on the part of both buyer and seller and they come to see each other, not as two separate organisations, but as parts of a larger entity creating joint value (synergy) in the market place.

Uncoupling KAM

Dissolution of a KAM relationship tends to be viewed in a pejorative way, as though a "successful" relationship is by definition one of long duration. While in most cases buyers and sellers may perceive benefits in developing long-term relationships, we have uncovered some short-term relationships deemed to be successful by the participants and many others which, with the benefit of hindsight, were ill-conceived. As Low (1994) reminds us: "Deciding when to get out of an existing relationship and into a new one would minimise the substantial economic, political and emotional cost associated with building a relationship that was never destined to last". In essence, many relationships

are propped up beyond their relevance or some event precipitates their termination, suggesting the need for an uncoupling process and contingency planning.

Receptivity to Key Account Management Systems

The notion of *receptivity* is central to relationship development. No matter how appropriate KAM systems may appear in particular buyer/seller situations, it is clear from our research that different companies are often at different stages of readiness to adopt KAM.

Senior managers in both buyer and seller companies may extol the virtues of getting closer to suppliers/customers, but in reality many either do not wish to migrate the whole way to full partnership or they wish to do so at a different rate than the other partner would like. This potential mismatch in objectives/aspirations has emerged as a critical issue in our research on buyer/seller dyads and is best illustrated by reference to two examples.

The first example involved divisions of two supposedly customer-oriented multinational companies agreeing to develop jointly an advanced pigmentation system. The seller perceived the arrangement as 'moving towards a long term partnership' with good prospects for broadening into other product/market areas, whereas the buyer (user) regarded it as a 'single project opportunity'. When the buyer recommended termination after two years, with no resulting sales volume, the seller was shocked and disappointed initially, and later, rather bitter about the way they had been treated.

Not only was the project terminated, it was disclosed that the buyer had been "backing two horses", ie running a similar project in parallel with another supplier which turned out to be more promising. A "lost opportunity" analysis conducted by the seller revealed that there was minimal top management involvement and the relationship was largely operational and based on technical exchanges and sales forecasts.

A second, more successful approach to KAM, based on a deep understanding of customer behaviour, is being pursued by a supplier of cleaning equipment and consumables to the food/drink industry. Two of their key accounts compete in the global market with similar product ranges, processing facilities and distribution networks. Their attitude towards building closer buyer/seller relationships, however, could not be more polarised. The first account (the acknowledged market leader) tends to prefer an "arms length" relationship with all suppliers, using its purchasing power to focus tightly on price, specified performance and delivery criteria. In contrast, the second account has demonstrated a

desire for close long-term relationships by setting up mechanisms for information sharing and joint applications development. Pricing is competitive, but kept continually under review and open to adjustment as the business environment changes.

In essence, the seller company handles both key accounts effectively because it recognises that *receptivity* to KAM is a major segmentation variable - each segment (account) requiring a different allocation of resources to the relational mix.

Buyer/Seller Strategic and Operational Fit

The model of key account relational development described earlier implies that fundamental changes in approach to customer needs are required by selling organisations. This is evident in the total offering, which tends to focus on product/service attributes and benefits in the early stages of KAM, moving towards a "bespoke" offering as buyers become more sophisticated and seek solutions to a wider range of problems.

Wilson and Croom-Morgan (1993) have proposed a problem-centred model of buyer/seller interaction which emphasises this process of strategic re-alignment and suggests ways in which operational synergy might be achieved. Their model confronts three orders of customer need or problem resolution tasks: *product* need; *process* need; and *facilitation* need.

Product need: The prominent position accorded to the product in the early stages of KAM is not surprising, given that it is the raison d'être for most buyer/seller relationships. The product embodies technical know-how and provides tangible evidence of what is being transferred from supplier to recipient. Moreover, product performance can be measured/monitored on a continuing basis against agreed standards and specifications (Millman, 1994). Ultimately, however, sellers in business-to-business markets must not lose sight of the fact that their product has to be incorporated into the buyer's own offering.

Process need: The seller's product and associated services also have to be incorporated into the buyer's internal transformation process. The problem facing the buyer is twofold: first, input logistics should be compatible with the process adopted (eg JIT delivery, palletisation and packaging); and second, bought-in products/services should preferably enhance the manufacturing process (eg by delivering higher quality/reliability, ease of use, lower cost).

An example in the first category was uncovered in the case of a small local supplier of filters for air conditioning equipment. The filter supplier took over the stock control and maintenance function for a cement products manufacturer when the latter was forced by its parent company to implement staff redundancies. This resulted in a single source supply agreement.

In the second category, an international manufacturer of textile yarns enabled its key account, a manufacturer of hosiery, to achieve brand leadership by not only offering a yarn which gave significant product benefits, but also by providing technical support and advice on how the manufacturing process should be modified to gain the best results. Similar, highly valued, process enhancements have been uncovered in our study of relational aspects of key account management in machine tools, pigmentation systems for plastics, and applications software.

Facilitation need: Managing the process of transformation often requires adaptation on the part of buyer and seller in order to facilitate the process - best described as "the way in which business is done".

Take, for example, the seemingly simple case of a small, but highly technical company which carried out a customer satisfaction survey. They expected to be told how wonderful were their products and technical support. The response was simultaneously disconcerting and reassuring. To paraphrase the findings:

> 'Yes, your products are good, but no better than those of your competitors ... And yes, you are all very highly qualified, but no more than competitor's staff ... What we really appreciate is that whenever we telephone your office, you always respond to our enquiries. You get samples turned round quickly, and if there is a problem, then you let us know about it ... What we like is the way you do business.'

Another company, supplying testing services to the oil industry, recognised the value of facilitation by establishing their own mobile testing laboratory in customer's refineries. The effect is that the supplier's chemist has become an integral part of the refinery production team. The time period for which test results are available has been shortened dramatically and the supplier has gained exclusivity against competitors with remote test laboratories.

The advanced stages of KAM are clearly about problem resolution in the areas of process and facilitation. Most industrial sales people are trained to identify customer need and to

present product benefits to customers which meet those needs. Their commercial and technical experience may well enable them to identify "process" and "facilitation" need, but they are rarely encouraged to suggest changes within their own organisation which go beyond the product.

Implications for Management Practice

Sales Force Training

Much of the traditional skills training associated with selling and sales management is of the generic "how to do it" variety with little theoretical/empirical underpinning and paying scant attention to context. Such techniques are inappropriate in the case of key account selling and many trainers have done the profession a disservice by putting the marketing/purchasing interface in adversarial mode.

What seems to be required now is a shift from confrontational and transactional selling styles towards relational and consultative approaches, consistent with the various stages of KAM development. This extends the role of the sales person in KAM to encompass a wider set of context-specific activities which demand more of the individual sales person and of their managers. Changing the prevailing mind-set is a major challenge. As the old adage goes: "Knowledge and skills are relatively easy to acquire. Attitudinal and cultural change takes a little longer!"

Role of the Key Account Manager

While we are not in a position to offer a tight prescription of the key account manager's role, tentative support for four main requirements is emerging from our exploratory research:

- Responsibility for sales/profit growth of one or more key accounts, consistent with the business objectives of the seller's total portfolio of key accounts.
- Co-ordination and tailoring the seller's total offering to key accounts.
- Facilitating multi-level, multi-functional exchange processes.
- Promoting the KAM concept within his/her own company.

The key account manager, like members of the sales force and customer service/support staff, performs the boundary-spanning role of "relationship builder", where the incumbent

is simultaneously negotiator, consultant, interpreter of customer needs/values, mediator, customer's advocate/friend, information broker, and so on (Millman, 1994). This demands the recruitment/training of high calibre people who are not only sufficiently "rounded" to be able to diagnose/analyse complex commercial and technical situations; but also equipped to cope with highly politicised interaction, together with personal tensions and ambiguities inherent in the boundary-spanning role.

The last point is important because it spawns several penetrating questions about the apparent vulnerability of selling companies which depend heavily on one person occupying a pivotal role in achieving customer orientation. Why, for example, despite widespread awareness that multi-level, multi-functional relationships reduce the risk of total relational breakdown, do some key account managers fail to develop such relationships? Do key account managers trust their top managers and colleagues to form relationships with counterparts in the buying company? Why, and under what circumstances, do some key account managers form stronger bonds with customers than with their own employer? What set of relational skills/competencies is necessary for effective KAM? Researching these questions would yield valuable insights on how key account managers spend their time and the influence of softer variables such as organizational culture and personal management style.

Organizational Integration

Adoption of KAM systems typically requires setting up dedicated teams to co-ordinate day-to-day interaction under the umbrella of a long-term relationship. This has significant implications for organization structure and communications processes in support of relational strategy.

For the seller this means positioning the key account management activity within the organization in a way which gives due regard to its boundary-spanning role and the need for a fast reporting route to top management. In practice, we have found companies organized in a variety of ways, with many organized for their own internal convenience rather than for easy access by external parties such as customers, distributors and suppliers. This is, of course, why radical approaches to business process re-design have come to the fore in recent years.

While it may be argued that the origins of KAM lie in the sales function, there is mounting evidence to question whether KAM activities should be retained under sales or set up as a separate entity at general management level. On the one hand, the mere existence of KAM activities suggests a strategic perspective and growing involvement of staff from other

functions. Separation, such as we have uncovered in our research, appears to be partly rooted in the unease felt by senior executives as they struggle to balance short-term and long-term demands, and partly a response to the external driving forces alluded to earlier. On the other hand, there is clearly a problem when accounts are upgraded to key accounts and taken out of the sales function, where they may have been nurtured by sales/service people over many years. Upgrading an account is a relatively simple operation when sales people are trained up and transferred along with the key account; but it can be disheartening for those who stay behind to grow, develop and maintain the usually larger number of accounts perceived to be of lesser strategic importance. Such channel decisions, in our experience, are seldom implemented in a sensitive way and often undermine the process of generating the key accounts of the future.

Management of Customer Relationships

Strategic advantage in business-to-business markets is achieved through the medium of relational interaction and management of the relational development cycle, rather than the product life cycle (Wilson, 1993). As Turnbull (1979) noted, buyers appear to value personal contacts and inter-personal communication channels, and the ease of contact and availability of technical advice reduces their perceived risk. Moreover, the network of contacts if often complex and can involve large numbers of people from different functions performing a wide range of communication and exchange roles (Cunningham and Homse, 1986). Without a system to control customer contact patterns based upon a strategic orientation of the firm and the potential represented by the customer, there is an obvious danger that scarce resources will be dissipated.

As Cunningham and Homse (1986) observed, while call frequency is often prescribed for sales and marketing staff, rarely is such control exercised over technical, manufacturing, research and development staff, or over senior general managers. Some of the factors which influence the level of resource allocation to specific customers are under the control of the seller, others are the result of response to environmental and competitive forces. The requirement is for sales and marketing managers to identify these factors and to take decisions which allow key account managers to direct appropriate levels of resources towards the defence of vital relationships.

A Research Agenda

The following selected topics offer scope for research in the field of key account management:

- Characterising the role of the key account manager (including skills/competencies).

- Examining buyer perceptions of KAM.

- Operationalising our key account relational development model: (a) to study the whole process on a longitudinal basis, and (b) to study transitions.

- Developing key account decision support tools (eg customer account profitability, database management, expert systems).

- Studies which explore the impact of particular management initiatives on KAM (eg electronic data interchange, business process re-design, empowerment).

- International aspects of KAM (eg global, regional, national co-ordination; implications of product mandates; cultural barriers; commercial/technology scanning systems).

- Assessing research methodologies and methods appropriate to the study of relational aspects of KAM.

Concluding Remarks

Our on-going study of the nature of KAM offers tentative support for the notion of a key account relational development cycle. We observe, however, that the way many selling companies have managed the overall transition from the relatively narrow focus of key account selling to the broader requirements of key account management has proved problematic. Indeed, much of what executives call KAM lacks a strategic perspective and is in most respects still in the realms of key account selling. This may be largely attributed to the strong sales orientation among top/middle managers in some companies and the uncomfortable relationship between the marketing and sales functions in others.

At top management level, recurring themes emerging from our research are: limitations on the amount of time they devote to key accounts, the variable quality of their exchanges with customers, and their often strained relationships with key account managers. In contrast, at middle management level we have been very cautious when attempting to interpret behaviour because so many of our sample companies were in a state of flux. Downsizing and de-layering in both buying and selling companies, for example, has left many middle managers overloaded and unsure of their new roles. Few senior managers have recognised the negative impact of such internal turbulence on their company's

knowledge base and long-term relationships.

The most striking observations from our work is how the presence/absence of a few enthusiastic and competent people occupying critical positions in buyer and seller companies can ease progression to a mature stage of KAM. While we have mentioned competencies and, by implication, best practice, we hesitate to prescribe "hard" and "soft" measures too closely, although this would be our intention ultimately. Nevertheless, our current state of understanding suggests that management training/development of seller company staff in two areas would not go amiss. The first may be summarised as a better appreciation of the process of matching the seller's total offering with increasingly dynamic supply chain developments in some industries. This requires the acquisition of knowledge of key accounts and their industry context, coupled with diagnostic and analytical skills related to customer behaviour and performance. The second is the urgent need for a systematic approach to the tricky area of relationship building. This has implications for individual, team and company level development. Much greater awareness is required, for example, of relationships as an integral part of the total product/service offering and overall positioning strategy. These concerns are reflected in our proposed agenda for empirical research.

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