KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT IN THE BUSINESS TO BUSINESS FIELD:
THE KEY ACCOUNTS POINT OF VIEW

Catherine Pardo
Lyon Graduate Business School
France

ABSTRACT

A research programme was set up three years ago at the "Institut de Recherche de l'entreprise" in Lyon. This programme aimed at bettering the understanding of industrial key account management.

This paper presents the outcomes of one of the studies carried out within this programme. This study focused on the perceptions a key account may develop according to the treatment he receives from his supplier.

Our aim with this research study is to shed a new light on key account management from the key accounts' point of view. Untill now, indeed, except for a few works, (see for example the recent report from Mc Donald, Millman and Rogers, 1996) the litterature on key account management has been focused on supplier perspective. In other words, the aim of the great majority of the studies was to discuss the characteristics, the implications, the evolutions of a supplier from the moment he decided to implement a key account management programme.

Today, given the maturity researchers are beginning to acquire on the subject, we are in a position to go further into our analysis by observing and discussing perceptions that firms - which are the key accounts of a supplier - have of this supplier.
This research is based on in-depth interviews with around twenty customers. These customers are considered to be key accounts for either their (or one of their) energy supplier(s) or for their (or one of their) telecommunications supplier(s). Our objective was to clarify which perceptions these twenty key accounts have about the key account management decided upon by their suppliers. Then we tried to identify and discuss factors which could explain differences or similarities between these perceptions.

INTRODUCTION

As stated by Håkansson and Snehota (1995, p.11): "Most industrial companies have only a few customers and suppliers that account for a major part of their total sales and purchases. These and relationships to third parties are decisive for the performance of the company whatever various measures of performance one might use". As a consequence, firms dedicate their main resources to their portfolio core made up by customers which represent high stakes: the key accounts. Many methods aiming at defining these key accounts and allocating relevant resources among several customers have been developed (Fiocca, 1982; Campbell and Cunningham, 1983; Turnbull and Valla, 1986; Salle and Rost, 1993). For quantitative reasons, which can be current or potential, (i.e. high generated or potential turnover, profit-margin or expected profit-margin, the high proportion of a given market segment they represent) and/or for qualitative reasons (image value, innovating capacity, reference in order to enter a new market, etc), these customers are of strategic importance, thus, unavoidable for the company.

The extreme importance of these accounts which have, frequently, high differentiated structures and complex behaviour (for example they are geographically dispersed and are located in many countries; they also have complex buying procedures involving several functions and negotiators at a high level in the customer organization and finally require specific
procedures, coordination, etc) leads suppliers to move from "traditional" management forms (those normally used for all the customers, for instance salesmen dealing with several customers in a geographical area) to dedicated management forms specifically designed. Barrett (1986) points out this specificity: 'key account management' (KAM) or 'national account marketing' consists in targeting the major customers of the company, by providing them with special treatment in the field of marketing, sales administration and service. This type of strategy generally relies on the support of a 'key account manager' called also 'national account manager', managing or not managing a sales team specialized in the account. This type of organization enables to generally improve the quality of business relationships with the customer, improve communication and helps increase both the coordination between the two parties and the quality service, while maintaining the same level of relationships as the size of the account grows'. This form emerges from a "muddling through process" within the interaction between the supplier and its customer (Pardo, Salle & Spencer, 1995).

Several research and managerial works have been published on key account management (Shapiro and Posner, 1976 ; Stevenson and Page, 1979 ; Stevenson, 1980 & 1981 ; Moriarty & Shapiro, 1980, 1982, 1984a & 1984b; Barrett 1986). These contributions bring out relevant elements but are relatively unconnected. Consequently they never provide a sufficiently integrated framework, nor suggest a satisfactory "reading grid" to this specific management situation. Actually the existing literature essentially takes into account several obvious factors explaining emergence and evolution of key account management: the characteristics of the customers' buying volume, the more or less high degree of geographically dispersed sites of the accounts, the specificity of the supplier organization, the complexity of the supplier offering. But, the evolution of the supplier organization appears to be a more complex process than the usual representations given in this literature. The theoretical background issued from the Interaction Model (Håkansson, 1982) ; the network approach (Håkansson &
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Snehota, 1995; and also the contribution of other disciplines - like sociology in particular - should improve our approaches.

For about three years, several researchers in Europe have been considering the theme of key account management as being one of interest. European studies were carried out and new ways of dealing with the theme were adopted (see for example: Araujo and Muzas, 1994; Diller, 1993; Gemünden and Walter, 1994 and 1995; Mc Donald, Millman and Rogers, 1996; Millman, 1994, 1995 & 1996; Millman and Wilson, 1994 and 1995; Nahapiet, 1995; Pardo, 1994a & 1994b; Pardo, Salle and Spencer, 1995; Pels, 1992; Vialle, 1996). The aim of the present communication is to continue the important research investment in this field. Here, we are adopting a customer point of view towards key account management programmes set up by suppliers.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL LANDMARKS

We focused on literature specifically dealing with key account management in order to point out how customer perspective was taken into account.

Adopting a market perspective we can notice that several authors have considered market structure (specifically the concentration of supply market as well as demand market) to influence supplier behaviour. According to Stevenson and Page (1979), the adoption of national account marketing can be seen as follows: "Major sellers in concentrated industries tend to use national account marketing to sell to major buyers in concentrated markets. Furthermore users of national account marketing tend to be large in terms of relative sales force size and tend to require their buyers to be relatively large. Yet bilateral concentration of major buyers and sellers is not an industry norm. There is a whole range of industries and markets that are not concentrated bilaterally. This study showed that national account marketing may be used under these circumstances also. The circumstances tend to be that of relatively larger sellers in

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unconcentrated industries selling to relatively large buyers in unconcentrated markets." (page 99).

In their article, these authors indicated that a survey from the Conference Board showed that "National account approach tends to be especially favored by sellers who are heavily dependent upon sales to major customers in markets dominated by a few very large users of their products - as for example in the automobile industry... Confronted with the highly concentrated purchasing power and lacking other promising prospects such sellers are less inclined to deal with these accounts in a routine way". So, the power balance between customers and suppliers is a key element: "One further observation that requires special mention at this early stage of operationalisation of the KAM model is the way assymetry of power between buyers and sellers influences perception of the strength and stability of relationships"(Millman, 1994). So, the bilateral concentration (suppliers side and customers side) as a factor conditioning the emergence of key account management forms appears to be too limited.

According to Hunter (1987), in some cases the customer may not understand what is expected from him. As a consequence Hunter suggests that the supplier's task: "is to teach the customer how to evaluate suppliers" (page 64). As stated by this author, the supplier has to explain what could happen in the future within the relationship: "you'll want to put out some feelers about the negotiable items important to that customer".

We must point out the recent work of Mac Donald, Wilson and Rogers (1996) where both supplier and customer perspectives have been taken into account. Nevertheless, the objectives of these authors differ from ours. These authors are not focusing on key account perceptions, they just want to stress what might be - for a buying company - the reasons for accepting a key account treatment seen there as a partnership. The results are interesting but differences in customer behaviour are not specifically treated.
As a conclusion we may say that in the key account management literature the customer perspective has never been taken into account as a central research issue. On the other hand, it is possible to find many developments concerning the customers perception of their suppliers in more "traditional" literature such as research into customer satisfaction. In this paper we will focus on the customer perception of the suppliers, the latter having developed special structures to manage this customer as a key account.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research we observed how around twenty firms which are considered as key accounts by a supplier (this central information has been given to us by the suppliers themselves) consider their "special status" of key accounts.

We selected twenty firms which are considered as key accounts either by their energy supplier or by their telecommunications supplier. These twenty customers belong to different industrial sectors such as: airlines; banking; insurance; hotel and catering; steel manufacturing; aluminium manufacturing and transformation; the car industry; food processing industry; electric motors manufacturing; industrial gaz manufacturing and distribution; the oil industry; founding industry; mechanical engineering; water pipes; the space industry; computer industry.

Within each of these firms, face to face semi-directive interviews were carried out with buyers (sometimes with buyers and several assistants) in charge of energy or telecommunications. We should point out that, in a few firms, buyers are exclusively specialized in energy purchasing (they are sometimes called "energy men") or in telecommunications purchasing. In other firms buyers are less specialized. Thus, energy buyers may also be responsible for buying equipment. As for telecommunications buyers, they can also take responsibility for buying computer goods.
Items treated in the interviews were the following:

- Context of the supplier-key account relationship
- Description of the relationship between the key account and the Key Accounts Management Division
- Perception (by the key account customer) of advantages and disadvantages of the implementation of a key account management programme by the supplier

The interviews were exhaustively retranscribed. They gave birth to several case studies (see Easton, 1995) - one for each buyer - written along a question-and-answer format (see Yin, 1989, page 134). This format facilitates cross-case comparisons.

The qualitative data analysis can be seen as an explanation-building one. This analytic strategy is, according to Yin, "mainly relevant to explanatory case studies" (Yin, 1989, page 113). We carried out the analysis of these twenty case studies trying to clarify, on the one hand, elements of the perceptions buyers have of the key account programme set up by their supplier, and, on the other hand, we looked for potentially explanatory factors for these perceptions. Looking for explanatory factors meaning "stipulating a set of causal links about it" (Yin, 1989, page 113).

In the following sections we will present the main outcomes of our research.

THE DIFFERENT PERCEPTIONS KEY ACCOUNT CUSTOMERS HAVE OF THE ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT PROGRAMMES SET UP BY SUPPLIERS

The research we carried out shows that the key accounts of a supplier do not constitute an homogeneous group. Similarities between key accounts are those that have been used as criteria to define the key account status (strategic importance for the supplier and/or complexity) and made it necessary to manage them in a specific way. But, other than these similarities, key accounts are very different.
Analysing the replies concerning the way key accounts perceive the specific management they benefit from their supplier makes it possible to identify three generic types of key accounts. We chose to give each type a denomination which tries to characterize the generic perceptions of key accounts within these types. Thus we will speak of: "The Disenchanted" ; "The Interested" ; "The Enthusiasts". We detail each of these types as follows:

1) "The Disenchanted". They might also have been called the "neutrals". But the nuance we tried to introduce is quite important. In this type, a few firms do not perceive specific advantages linked to the specific treatment they benefit from. But there is more than this. In the comments of those "disenchanted" firms, lies a criticism of the supplier. The supplier is seen as an actor that does not want to tackle the "real" problems (most of these problems are linked to the technical part of the exchange and, above all, to the financial part). The setting up of a department or a division totally dedicated to the management of key accounts is seen more or less, by this kind of key account, as a sort of activism which turns the key account away from its main expectations. Firms, of this type, do not see the key account management as a solution for problems existing within the relationship with suppliers. We will find in this type firms belonging to industries where hard price competition prevails. Thus, firms will focus all their efforts on reducing prices. These firms think that key account management is a too long-term project to be of interest in such a competitive context. These firms may even recognize the impact of key account management on better coordination, better adaptation of goods and services, better data transfer... all items contributing to bettering the supplier-customer relationship. But impacts of these factors on cost are too difficult to evaluate and temporarily too far away from their current concerns.
2) "The Interested" are firms which perceive key account management as a positive supplier effort, but a too limited effort. An effort which appears as a first step towards a global bettering of the supplier-customer relationship. These firms seem to be waiting for a kind of in-depth total mutation of their supplier towards a quasi-ideal firm. These expectations (on which a few firms agree to recognize as sometimes totally excessive !) are partly reduced by the "solution" called key account management. The key account management seems to be only a first stage in a transformation which needs to be more global. Nevertheless these firms are quite positively oriented towards the suppliers which are implementing key account management programmes, hoping change will go still further... In this type, we will find, for instance, customers which are working with public firms. Key accounts hope their public supplier will one day evolve so as to adopt a totally new orientation, or as they say: "real industrial behaviour". But at the same time, customers of this type do understand that their suppliers work under specific constraints (administrative supervision ; European directives,...). Nevertheless, the way these key accounts decode the key account management is quite positive... as long as it does not represent a disadvantage for them. For instance, if the key account thinks that negotiating with the local sites of the supplier is more interesting - even if a key account manager has been presented as a privileged entry to the supplier - this key account will continue negotiating with the local sites, if it is possible.

3) "The Enthusiasts" are firms for which the setting up of a key account management programme is perceived as a real solution to a number of problems occuring in the supplier-customer relationship. The key account manager in his role of privileged access to the supplier is clearly identified. His role in facilitating contacts, simplifying access to the supplier, mobilizing internal resources, understanding activities and constraints of key accounts
and their fields of activity, is tangible and appreciated by the key account customer. We can find in this type, for instance, firms concerned about the compatibility of their telecommunications equipment installed in different geographical sites. In this case the global coordination of the solution by the key account manager is considered to be a very positive factor in the relationship.

"THE DISENCHANTED"  THE "INTERESTED"  THE "ENTHUSIASTS"

Key account management not perceived or perceived as an unnecessary gadget
Key account management perceived as an effort from the supplier in the bettering of the supplier-key account relationship, but still insufficient
Key account management perceived as a real and important bettering in the supplier-key account relationship "if it did not exist we should invent it!"

LOW PERCEIVED ADDED VALUE  HIGH PERCEIVED ADDED VALUE

Perception by key accounts of the added value of a key account management set up by suppliers

Among the twenty firms contacted none of them had any real negative perception of key account management. Perceptions go from "neutral" to "positive" or even "very positive". The medium perception is one of a perception of key account management as a step towards a better customer consideration. But this step is quite often considered as too limited in its impact. The fact there is no negative perception, may signify that, in all cases observed, key account management is perceived as an added value or rather "something more". This "something more" might be positively perceived, or not perceived, but cannot be perceived in a negative way because it depends on the acceptance of the key account customer. If it was perceived in a negative way (for instance perceived as a new constraint in the relationship), the key account customer would not use it, which takes us back to a neutral perception.
The following section tries to detail those first previous reflections. We have suggested a few elements that might help explain the differences in those perceptions.

A FEW EXPLANATORY FACTORS OF DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTION OF KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT BY KEY ACCOUNT CUSTOMERS

In our analysis of individuals' discourses we have tried to link differences in perception with several characteristics of the supplier-key account customer relationship. We thus identified six factors that may influence the way a key account customer perceives key account management set up by the supplier.

1) **Factor #1**: The **degree of knowledge** the key account has of the existence and meaning of a key account management programme launched by its supplier. Cases exist where key accounts do not really know that a specific way of managing the relationship has been created. One explanation certainly lies in the fact that the supplier has not communicated sufficiently on its project. When key accounts are not really aware of what a key account management means, their perception is rather neutral, or let's say, "potentially positive".

2) **Factor #2**: The **position** (or ranking or importance) the key account thinks he has within the supplier portfolio. Here lies the debate between what we might call "little" key accounts and "big" key accounts. Each key account we encountered, has a representation of what importance he has for the supplier (sometimes this representation may not fit the reality of the importance evaluated, for example, on the basis of turnover realised with the supplier). What we can say is that "big" key accounts are quite aware of their strategic importance for the supplier: when you are the first customer or the second customer of a large supplier you know it. In these cases, key account management is quite well known by the key accounts,
which try to orientate it in their favour. Given that they are the more important customers, the power balance in the relationship might contribute to leading the supplier to answer a lot of the key accounts demands (Mazet and Pardo, 1994).

3) **Factor #3: Characteristics of the buying decision process.** The degree of centralization or decentralization of buying decisions might explain some differences in the way key account management is perceived. If buying decisions are centralized, the key account, in a majority of cases, will be happy to find a privileged interlocutor at a central level. On the other hand, if each site of the key account organization has its own autonomy in buying decisions, key account management (at least as far as its coordination impact) will appear of no use to the key account.

4) **Factor #4: Environmental constraints** on the key account. In a few cases, key accounts are globally mobilized on events occurring in their environment and do not have a real discourse on what key account management might represent for them. It is the case for firms restrained by hard competition on prices, or a recent failure, or a recent organizational re-design. In these cases, the energy of everyone in the firm seems to be focused on the current problem; and key account management might be pushed into second position, which does not mean it won't return to the forefront within a few months.

5) **Factor #5: Key account strategic choices.** Specific strategic orientations may give a key account a greater receptiveness to key account management (for instance, a global strategy of long-term competitiveness based on a global buying costs reduction; or the homogenization or standardization of certain products). In such cases, key account management represents a means to reach customer objectives.
6) **Factor #6:** The interlocutor's *openmindedness.* A few interlocutors we encountered were more aware than others of what key account management means. Because they were familiar with managerial practices; or because their own firms were carrying out a study on the theme; or because in their professional or personal circles they knew people with the status of key account managers. The more people are open to managerial reflection, the more key account management is tangible and considered an important evolution in their supplier strategy.

These six factors - which appeared to best explain the differences between perceptions in our sample - may be sorted into three categories. The first category is called "structural" factors; the second is called "situational" factors and last one "cultural" factors. We will briefly describe each of these categories and try to show the interest of such a distinction:

1) **"Structural"** factors are those which describe firms on dimensions linked to their organizational structure or to their buying strategy. These are relatively stable factors. We do not pretend they cannot be changed. But they can define the customer on a rather long-term basis. We can thus consider that they are quite difficult to modify so as to change the perception the customer has of key account management. Nevertheless we must point out that changes may occur; which means that perceptions may in the long-term change. This category counts the two following factors:

- Characteristics of the *buying decision process*
- The *position* (or ranking or importance) the key account thinks he has within the supplier portfolio

2) **"Situational"** factors deal with the characteristics of the customer environment. These are factors that the supplier cannot easily modify because he has no power over them (this is the case for what we called environmental constraints). We also put in this category factors which
determine strategic choices. We think that these strategic choices cannot be changed. Not because the key account has no influence on them, but because their change will call into question the key account. A change in the perception based on a modification of these explanatory factors means a total upset of the customer situation on the market (disappearance of all competitors; technological revolution; total repositioning of all products, etc). We have added the two following factors to this category:

- **Environmental** constraints;
- **Key account strategic choices**.

3) **Cultural** factors refer to the characteristics and experiences of individuals in the buying centre. These factors are linked to the cognitive representations the individuals from the buying centre have on every aspect of the relationship. This is the domain of discourses, psychological influences, cultural factors, etc. Planning an evolution of such factors means either a personal evolution of each actor in the buying centre (through communication the selling centre could lead each member to adopt a new attitude towards key account management) or more directly through a change of individuals in the buying centre: their substitutes might bring new values, new demands, and a new way of perceiving key account management. In this category of "cultural factors" we have added:

- Interlocutors' **openmindedness**
- Key accounts' **knowledge of key account management**

**DISCUSSION AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Our objective in this last section following our observations and analyses is to establish some implications for managers who are
responsible for creating or developing a key account management programme. Thus, we can formulate five comments:

1) Our first comment is related to the classification of the previous part. The distinction between structural, situational and cultural factors is interesting as far as they do not have the same temporal stability. This is important from the suppliers point of view. For the supplier, to change the key account perception on the basis of the most stable factors (structural and situational) is quite difficult, or almost impossible. Furthermore, for the supplier, means of action on these two categories are different. For structural factors, means of action for the supplier are to be centred around the customer only. For instance the supplier can stress a risk (Salle and Silvestre, 1993) linked to the current buying strategy, for example an important concentration on one sourcing. Situational factors can only evolve under great pressure. It is not easy to imagine a supplier powerful enough to make a customer's global strategy evolve. But the suppliers actions can aim at modifying the representations interlocutors have built concerning environment (See Koenig, 1987). Finally if cultural factors seem to be the more easy to transform, this is far from being systematic (see previous paragraph). In this last case, means of action will above all be linked to better communication between the supplier and the key accounts.

With the four following comments our objective is to enlarge the vision of key account management on the basis of the research we carried out:
2) Our second comment is related to one fundamental aspect of key account management: the creation of a key account programme is not only an answer to the characteristics of the customers (for instance geographical dispersion of customer sites) or their strategies (for instance the centralization of the buying decisions). We must point out that a key account management programme might also be a relevant choice in the case where the supplier presents specific characteristics (for instance, when several divisions or departments, or even subsidiaries, supply the same customer, a coordination carried out by a key account manager might help to promote and implement a global offer). Also, that competition sometimes forces you towards key account management because it can use it to a distinctive advantage. This last comment is important because it places reflection on key account management on the crossing of organizational considerations (the designing of the salesforce) and strategic considerations. We may also consider key account management as a new step on the path towards differentiation: after product differentiation, service differentiation, a supplier may use the opportunity of modifying the way business relations are managed through the modification of its organization by the creation of a new supplier-customer interface: the key account management). One final remark: reflection on the relevancy of the setting up of a key account management programme must take into account factors linked to the customers (characteristics, current and future strategies) and also factors relative to characteristics and strategies (current and future) and also items relative to the competitive environment (key account management being seen as a factor of differentiation) and factors related to the evolution of exchanges (more and more global offers, solution offers, turn-key projects requiring still more sophisticated coordination).
3) Our third comment will deal with the concept of transversality and facilitation which are both induced by the notion of key account management. First of all, we might stress that key account management can not only be boiled down to a specificic commercial management of the customer. In other words, the key account manager is not only (and sometimes even not at all...) a kind of a "super-seller". He may be a "super-seller", but he is, above all, someone who brings an added value to the relationship and takes on responsibility for a privileged coordination between a supplier organization and a customer organization. As a facilitator he is not a substitute for existing relationships (there will always be equipment installed on sites by specialists, maintenance carried out by other specialists, provision of services to different customer locations and representatives responsible for local relations. Tasks the key account manager can not do by himself). The objective of the key account manager is to facilitate and develop existing relationships and initiate new relationships with the key accounts. Thus, for the key account, key account management is "something more". Key account management is accepted by the customer as far as it does not generate additional constraints and at best when it brings a real and tangible added-value. This last reflection raises the problem of how to make a customer accept this new kind of management knowing that this acceptation is necessary for the existence itself of the function: without the acceptation by the customer of key account management, this new function loses all its signification.
4) Our fourth comment is concerned with one of the types we mentioned in the first part of the paper: "The Disenchanted" (firms for which key account management is something neutral, bringing neither advantages nor disadvantages). This result leads us to consider that in a few circumstances the customer does not see a specific advantage to this kind of management (the key account management). In this last case which attitude must the supplier adopt? Must he plan to stop key account management with this customer? The answer is certainly "no". Arguments are the following. First of all, the setting up of a key account management programme cannot only be justified because of specific customer characteristics, but also because of supplier specificities, or exchange specificities, or even environmental specificities. Second, the observation of factors influencing the perception key accounts have of key account management clearly shows that a few of those factors called "situational factors" can change over time. Under these conditions, a neutral perception can turn into a favorable perception of key account management. For instance, if the customer evolves towards a centralization or coordination of buying decisions, one can think that as soon as this programme is effective, the key account could be sensitive to, for instance, the presence of a privileged interlocutor with the supplier. In this case, one can plan to use this key account management and the existence of a privileged interlocutor as a device where the key account manager has a global (in time and space) vision of the key account so as to anticipate possible evolutions of this customer. In case of a buying decisions centralization, the supplier will already have an organizational form (the key account department) ready to negotiate with the customer. One can thus also imagine a key account management where the key account manager looks after the key account so as to react rapidly to its evolutions.
5) Our last comment is related with what we can call the hazards of key account management. It seems to us very important to consider that key account management can lead to two kinds of drifts. We briefly describe them here but they will certainly be the subject of future research.

First drift deals with the fact that faced with the emergence of this new management form, customers might develop new demands considering the key account management as a treatment for their own complexity. In other words, problems the customer does not want to solve alone, internally, will be handed over (under control) to the supplier. For instance, an executive, knowing that the supplier has a very sharp knowledge of each of his own sites would not hesitate to ask the supplier for numerous information he could not obtain directly because of his lack of legitimacy in front of several decision-makers.

Second drift is related to the never-ending complexity. Key account management might be considered as an organizational design that allows or facilitates a long-term relationship between a supplier and his customers. But one must not forget that key account management generates by itself a rise in organizational complexity for the supplier. We think that key account management is the first function in the firm which has such a vocation of perennility and transversality (the project function - see Baron, 1993 and Midler 1993 - is also a transversal function. But a project, by definition is limited in time). Key account management is not limited in time: for a given customer there is no end planned... This specificity has to be taken into account by managers: the setting up of a key account management programme implies a new form of coordination between the supplier and the key account but also by the supplier himself (a sort of integration of different departments of the firm. See Lawrence and Lorsch, 1968). That's why key account management
imposes changes in working habits and is rarely without opposition. Time, implication of a large array of persons, legitimacy of key account managers... are all dimensions to be taken into account to facilitate key account management programme success.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Previous implications do not conclude the study. Quoting Yin, we can say that this exploratory research "develop ideas for further study" (Yin, 1989, page 113). As a conclusion, we just want to point out a few indications for further research. Further steps on that kind of research could be:

- The use of the literature on customer satisfaction in the business to business field. The objective is to link key account satisfaction to key account perception of key account management. The objective might also be to check the relevance of the findings of customer satisfaction research in case customers are key accounts and, maybe, suggest a new way to deal with key account satisfaction;

- The study of links between key accounts characteristics and the specific factors we identified;

- The more thorough examination of the issues linked to the impact of the different generic perceptions on the possible actions for the supplier.
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