# Key Account Management in the Industrial Field. The Account Team for an Efficient Reconfiguration of the  Supplier – Customer Relationship

**Catherine Pardo**

Assistant Professor

E.M.**LYON**

23, avenue Guy de Collongue

69132 Ecully Cedex

(33) 4 78 33 77 78

pardo@em-lyon.com

**Abstract**

This communication deals with *key account management* (the management of a supplier's important customers) in an industrial field. It modifies the way we look at this management through the notion of a *key account team* (the set of the supplier's resources used for the management of a key account customer) as compared to the notion of a *key account manager* (an individual running the management of a key account customer for the supplier).

Key account management is a *strategic choice* for the supplier. The key account is "created" by the supplier to be managed in a *specific way*. Managing in a specific way means a different form of management that that usually used for his customers. More specifically, this means the creation of a *new mission* (thus the creation of a new job, new practices, etc) and its integration into the existing structure. This mission involves coordinating supplier information and actions in *time* and *space* in relation to a customer in its entirety (geographical and historical).

In this work, we are interested by the contacts between key account managers and supplier's internal resources. By resources we mean *individuals* with different functions and different hierarchical positions who have *a part to play* in the management of a key account customer. Shapiro et Moriarty, (1984b) suggest the term "support-systems" to designate these resources. We show that the key account manager and the support systems together form -for the supplier- an *account team* we shall describe as follows : 1) The account team is a *new team*: the account team (as described by the managers and the support systems) offers something which is not necessarily available elsewhere within the firm; 2) The account team is *transversal*: it became clear, following the interviews, that the account team brings together individuals from *diverse* (organizational) *origins*; 3) the account team is *a-hierarchical*: following analysis of the information gathered, we believe there is *no formal hierarchical link* between the key account manager and the support systems; 4) the account team is *plastic*: if the key account manager considers himself to have access to internal resources (the different support systems), *similarly* the support systems *also* consider the key account manager as a resource for them; 5) the account team is a *team of information*: basically, the account team

begins to make sense for its members -and subsequently its observers- because at a given moment the members are in a position to share *the same information* concerning a key account customer.

We then show that the key account manager can be considered as a *specific asset* and also as a means to *reduce key account customer opportunism*; while at the same time, allowing to avoid the use of a specific contract which entails transaction costs. However, the key account manager *does* represent a *cost* (an organizational cost) which is supported by the supplier. We could therefore wonder whether such a system is *beneficial* for the supplier. We could then imagine that he supplier who is aware of this cost could try to reduce it. Once again, we can return to the micro-economic model and imagine that the supplier *dissolves* his relationship with the key account manager by repositioning the market *between* himself (the supplier organization) and the key account manager. The result is that there is *no longer any position of authority* between the supplier and the key account manager, but also *no real market relationship* (everything remains within the firm). This is a quasi-integration solution (or quasi-disintegration depending from how we look at it), mid-way between a position of authority and market relationship. If we are to understand that the supplier can be likened to different resources as presented by the support systems, then we are producing a sort of theoretical explanation for the existence of an account team. Subsequently, we can finally imagine the account team as a *reconfiguration* of the supplier - key account customer exchanges. This reconfiguration stems from the exchanges *between* the supplier and the key account customer (*inter-organizational* outlook) and creates a *correspondence* to the exchanges between the support systems and the key account manager (*intra-organizational* outlook).

Remembering this idea of a *reconfiguration* of an inter-organizational exchange in an intra-organizational exchange, it becomes possible to *reinterpret* some of our initial fieldwork findings: the leading role of the key account manager; how the key account managers are perceived by the support systems; problems encountered in the contacts between key account managers and support systems… and to propose a discussion around the positioning of *marketing* in relation to *key account management.*

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**Shapiro B.P. et Moriarty R.T.** (1984b), Support Systems for National Account Management Programs : Promises Made, Promises Kept, *MSI Report*, n° 84-102, Avril, 21 pages.

# [1 – The nature and aims of the paper]

This paper presents some of our findings following our research within the framework of a PhD which was presented on November 2000. It deals with *key account management* (the management of a supplier's important customers) in an industrial field. It modifies the way we look at this form of management through the notion of a *key account team* (the set of the supplier's resources used for the management of a key account) as compared to the notion of a *key account manager* (an individual running the management of a key account for the supplier). Having clearly defined key account management, our paper will concentrate on the characteristics of the account team following interviews carried out with forty-five people involved in key account management within five companies in the following areas of activity : Steel manufacturing; Energy production and distribution; Paper manufacturing; Electrical distribution, industrial control and automation; Chemical and plastic products. These people are whether key account managers or "support systems". Then, using certain central concepts related to Transaction Costs Theory (transaction, assets specificities, opportunism) we shall study the account team as an efficient solution to customer management. This solution will be based on the idea of a *reconfiguration* of the exchanges between a supplier and a key account in the exchanges between a key account manager and different support systems.

## [2 – Introduction: a new and little researched phenomenon]

As a phenomenon which saw the light of day in the sixties in the United States (Boles, Johnston and Gardner, 1999; Dishman and Nitse, 1998; Shapiro and Moriarty, 1980, 1982, 1984a and 1984b; Stevenson, 1980 and 1981; Stevenson and Page, 1979; …) *key account management* has only really appeared in French and in European firms in the last ten years (Pardo 1997 and 1999; Pardo, Salle and Spencer, 1995; Millman, 1999; Millman and Wilson, 1999; Kempeners and Van Der Hart, 1999; …).

The term key account management designates a number of supplier activities implemented for the specific management of exchanges with some of his organizational customers. These customers, which are managed in a specific way, are the *key accounts.* The most visible element of key account management is the creation of a new function within the firm: the *key account manager.*

Today, key account management still remains a number of *emerging and little structured* management practices, which researchers (in general, and particularly French…) pay little attention to. The immaturity of the key account management phenomenon (in both its practical and theoretical aspects) in France, is extremely characteristic. This lack of attention could be due to (apart from the fact that it is a recent phenomenon) the fact that such practices did not initially appear to be unlike existing practices. Some for example, considered key account management as the natural outcome of an adaptation in supplier-customer exchanges, which is considered as being normal in the industrial field. However, our fieldwork within some industrial groups over the past few years clearly show that this adaptation goes much further than the adaptations regularly talked about –concerning products and services: it leads to a transformation in the supplier's organization, even the most structured elements.

**[3 – Key account management: a traditional and new definition]**

Classically, the definition given to key account management refers to North-American research findings. Barrett's definition (1986) is often quoted *" National Account Marketing simply means targeting the largest and most important customers by providing them with special treatment in the areas of marketing, administration and service […] through one key person (National Account Manager) or team headed by the NAM"* (Barrett, 1986, page 64).

We would like to propose a new definition which encompasses all situations related to the phenomenon. This new definition underlines the challenges of such a form of management. In a firm's customer portfolio, there is a central core (of customers). The supplier believes that if the exchanges with these customers are managed in a specific way, they can offer greater commercial efficiency. These are the customers the supplier designates as his firm's key accounts. To manage them in a specific way means a different form of management than that usually used for his customers. More specifically, this means the creation of a new mission (thus the creation of a new job, new practices, etc.) and its integration into the existing structure. This mission involves coordinating supplier information and action in time and space in relation to a customer in its entirety (geographical and historical).

Unlike Barrett's definition, our new definition underlines the supplier's role rather than simply concentrating on the customer's characteristics. Accordingly, we have to admit that in key account management, the key account customer does not exist as such. The key account

customer becomes a strategic choice for the supplier. The key account is created by the supplier to be treated differently, as this different treatment is considered to be strategically beneficial for the supplier.

## [4 – Fieldwork results: the exchanges between "key account managers" and "support systems"]

Our research took us to look closely at the exchanges the key account manager has, within the supplier firm, with the different resources; the unique "figure" of the individual key account manager we feel does not fully represent such a form of management on its own. By resources we mean individuals with different functions and different hierarchical positions who have a part to play in the management of a key account. Shapiro and Moriarty, (1984b) suggest the term "support systems" to refer to these resources. These intra-supplier exchanges (between the key account manager and the support systems) were described to us during the forty-five interviews held with people involved in the management of key accounts (both key account managers and support systems). We are subsequently in a position to confirm that the key account manager and the support systems together form, for the supplier, an account team which shall be described below. Such a team, we believe, represents an efficient solution in the organization of the supplier-customer relationship.

## [5 – The account team: a new team within the supply firm]

Below is a description of the account team divided into several parts according to the information we gathered during the interviews:

### [The account team is new]

What was noticeable during the interviews (with both the key account managers and the support systems) was that the account team represents a new organizational entity. The account team (as described by the key account managers and the support systems) offers something which is not necessarily available elsewhere within the firm. For example, the account team allows the support system to have access to (if so desired) to all customer information. Often, the only information available concerning a customer has been gained over one local site (which is often the case for salespeople) or part of the relationship (for

example a technical aspect for engineers). On the other hand, the team gives the key account manager access to detailed information held by a support system. This could be geographical insight (supplied by a regional director for example) or the creation of a tailor-made contract (managed, for example, by the firm's lawyers). However, it is not this access to different sources of information which is new. In fact, in the past, or outside the account team, different functions could work together. What is different, is that this integration of new resources revolves around one central basis, one, and only one, customer, and that the methods of integrating resources are different. This is the second point concerning the characteristics of the account team.

**[The account team is transversal]**

It became clear, following the interviews, that the account team brings together individuals from diverse (organizational) origins. This transversal aspect concerns, first, the functional position. Therefore, the account team is an assembly of *different functions*. Whereas Shapiro and Moriarty (1984b) describe eleven principal support systems throughout the firm (technical, administrative, legal, etc.) we widen the team to include all functions which can claim to have a part –in accordance with the previously proposed definition– in the customer-account team relationship. This transversal aspect can also extend on an hierarchical level. The account team includes people from *different hierarchical positions*. A salesman can be a member of an account team, just like the Production manager or Marketing director can be members. But, if we only consider this one characteristic, the account team could be likened to a project team, or one of the multiple task forces or committees often cited by organizational experts. Because this transversal aspect works in conjunction with other characteristics, the account team becomes a specific organizational entity. The other characteristics are the following.

**[The account team is a-hierarchical]**

Following analysis of the information gathered, we believe there is *no formal hierarchical link* between the key account manager and the support systems. In the firm, the support system is only responsible to his superior (which can be the Director of a laboratory, Branch manager, or Sales manager, etc.). However, coordination exists –information circulates– between the two levels, the key account manager and the support systems. This coordination

does not belong to any of the modes described by Mintzberg (1982), neither "direct control", nor any one of the "standardizations" mentioned. It belongs to the coordinations which Mintzberg describes as "informal". Other than the formal hierarchical link and standardization, there is an informal hierarchy which promotes the exchange of information which is vital for the efficient performance of the key account management mission. The support systems are not therefore ordered by "superiors" to supply information and act according to orders –or indications– from the key account manager. Here, the power is the legitimacy. And this legitimacy itself comes from the key account manager's knowledge of his account (and subsequently the information he can redistribute internally), and also from his symbolic position as the manager of an important relationship (the symbolic element coming from the strength of the relationship between the key account customer and the key account manager and also internally via the hierarchical level the key account manager is at). This takes us closer to the "ideological mobilization" presented by Nizet and Pichault (1995) as a complementary form of coordination to Mintzbzerg's methods. However, our a-hierarchical team is even closer to the research made by Lawrence and Lorsch (1967; 1989). It is interesting to see that in the coordination department they describe, the hierarchical power of the key account manager is seen as a guarantee of success. This is not the case here. Some of those interviewed even went so far as to say that the key account manager's position of authority could be a reason for conflict. For example, it could place support systems in a position of double or triple hierarchical dependence (if they are already positioned in a matrix).

**[The account team is "plastic"]**

An analysis of the interviews shows the presence of a "reverse perspective" of the account team. In fact, if the key account manager considers himself to be a manager of relationships (particularly external ones with the key accounts), with access to internal resources (the different support systems), *similarly*, the support system also considers the key account manager as a resource which is available and which it can use. The result is a team *with no real summit*, due to the absence of an hierarchy. Moreover, because the skills are divided between the key account manager and the various support systems, any legitimacy or skills hierarchy is difficult to establish. It should also be noted that the "binomial functioning" described by some interviewees (the key account manager and the support system in contact with the customer) strengthen this idea of a plastic team (there is no "boss" in a binomial

situation). However, we could imagine that, since a team becomes a team because of the existence of a key account, and a key account exists because of the existence of a key account manager, the latter naturally appears the leader of the account team. In this case, the leadership is clearly associated to a capacity to have *total customer knowledge* (see the introduction for a definition of "total"). Finally, because this total vision is possible, the key account manager can (or could) take on the role of team animator. Nevertheless, the key account manager's role of coordinator or animator, in the account team, is not always, as we discovered, carried out to the full, at least not systematically. This creates a double problem, as those interviewed pointed out. Firstly, if the key account manager does not coordinate, nobody does, as nobody else in the firm is responsible for the coordination. Secondly, the support systems' work may be cannibalized (particularly the commercial side) by the key account manager. To justify his mission, and if he does not want to (or can not) do the coordination, the key account manager may decide to perform tasks which could be superfluous in relation to the work done by the support systems. It is also possible, given the novelty of the team, that the key account managers have not yet fully understood their mission. Finally, it is also possible that the key account managers do not want to –or believe they lack the means to– undertake the position of internal animator.

**[The account team is a team of information]**

Basically, the account team begins to make sense for its members –and subsequently its observers– because at a given moment, the members are in a position to share the *same* information concerning a key account customer. Similarly, the account plan (customer file containing all key account customer information) can become a symbol of belonging to a team. This notion was frequently mentioned during the interviews: someone *belongs* to a team because he receives a copy (or part of) the account plan and/or because he helped create it.

**[The account team as a position]**

With the elements we have just looked at, based on the information we were able to collect during our research, we are now in a position to conclude with the position of the account team in the management of key accounts. The account team *does not exist*. It is impossible for the researcher and the practitioner to be presented to the account team. The account team is a group of individuals, each with a part to play in the management of a supplier-key account

relationship. The group does not physically exist. (even if the account team can meet in certain places, or be "listed", etc.): it is more a way of considering some people working in a firm. This is why we say the account team is *a position*.

## [6 –The account team to efficiently reconfigure the supplier-customer relationship]

Here, our aim is to offer an interpretation of the management of key accounts centered around the notion of transaction costs. This interpretation applies in particular to the role played, first, by the key account manager and, second, by the account team in this key account management. Hereby linking an *inter-organizational outlook* (the supplier-key account exchange) to an *intra-organizational outlook* ( the key account manager-support systems exchange) via the *reintegration* of one in the other.

### [Key account management as an asset specification]

Key account management could be seen as an adaptation of the supplier's offer to the customer. There have been product and service adaptations, and now there are organizational adaptations with a management structure of key accounts. The customer, treated like a key account by the supplier, experiences an offer which is different –and sometimes more related to his needs– than that of a competitor who does not deal in key account management. The offer from the supplier using a system of key account management is different from that of a competitor because it is *adapted* on this organizational element. It has an added value. The customer chooses this supplier for this reason. Key account management is therefore related to an *adaptation* in the marketing sense of the word. Key account management can be assimilated to asset specification. Williamson –in his categorization of specific assets– mentions a category of specific human assets, meaning the qualifications or skills which could be developed during the running of a contract (Williamson, 1985). Hence, the key account manager can be considered a specific asset. Obviously, the key account manager can manage different  customers, but the part/quota of skill, time, behavior he has devoted to the key account customer can not be redeployed –with the same value– for another customer. At best, key account management skills have been acquired (a form of apprenticeship) and perhaps this will be the only part to be redeployed for another key account.

As mentioned in the newly updated definition in the introduction to this paper, key account management only really exists with the presence of a key account manager (otherwise it becomes simply an adaptation, frequently seen in an inter-organizational framework). However, key account management implies adaptations/specifications other than the human specification. In fact, as the management of key accounts involves the *choice* by a supplier to offer special treatment to a particular customer, it can also include the aspects of the adaptation of the product, the services, delivery, terms of payment, etc. Clearly, the comparison between key account management and the concepts of the institutional economy adds much to the definition of management itself. Particularly at the specific/non-specific categorization level. In fact, whether it is a question of adaptation concerning the means of production or the offer itself, for key account management, what is important is to know whether or not these adaptations have been granted for only *one* customer. Valla (1987), then Salle and Silvestre (1992), studying the organizational client's purchasing behavior want to calculate the investments in an supplier-customer relationship, according to their degree of specificity. In key account management, the idea of asset specificity is primordial. We could almost say that, as long as the observation (of a situation of key account management) does not take into the consideration the existence of the specific human assets, then there *really is no such thing* as key account management.

**[key account management or reduced opportunism]**

Key account management can be seen as the creation of a specific asset. This was the subject of the previous passage. It can also be seen, via the key account manager, as a means to reduce key account customer opportunism.  This is the idea behind this section.

 If key account management is a specific asset, the exchange between the supplier and the customer requires specific devices to limit opportunism during the management process (customer opportunism that is). Therefore, the transaction costs increase. From a micro-economic point of view, one good solution, if the costs become too high, is to *integrate* elements of the exchange. As this is not conceivable –at least not in our case– alternative methods have to be thought up. For example, research into industrial partnerships (Baudry, 1995) shows that it is in the interest of those involved in the exchange to prolong it, and for this, several elements are mentioned. Confidence is one such element: the key account

manager, through his interpersonal relationships with the purchasing center, incites confidence, thereby dissuading opportunist behavior.

Thus, the reason behind the appearance of the key account manager can be twofold. He represents a specific asset, but also a source of intermediary or complementary control, to limit opportunist behavior. The key account manager is therefore *both* a *specific asset* and a *reducer of opportunism*.

**[The team as an organizational costs reducer]**

Bearing the above idea in mind, it is possible to make a parallel between key account management and the investment –for the supplier– in a specific asset. In this case, we find an explanation for the existence of the *key account manager*. And the added value of this parallel lies in the support it offers to our definition in the introduction to this paper, remembering that our definition –unlike all other existing definitions– made the key account manager the *visible element* of the organization, and on which it is possible to say that key account management exists.

Let us continue with this parallel between marketing exchanges and economic exchanges, by considering the *account team* phenomenon *rather* than just the *key account manager*. The key account manager as mentioned above represents an asset specification. This asset specification (or adaptation) contributes to the increased efficiency of the customer relationship, as described above. In other words a benefit for the supplier and/or the customer. If the key account manager is only a specific asset then if we continue in an economic vein, he will probably provoke increased transaction costs. However, we have found that the key account manager can also be seen as a factor for reduced opportunism, in as much as he creates *confidence* in the relationship between the key account and the supplier. If he reduces opportunism, this means he *is* a solution to the problem of opportunism other than that of a specific contract (which itself generates transaction costs), without however turning to the hierarchy.

The parallel between key account management and economic transactions could end here. It is already fairly interesting to see key account management with a *double role* of *asset specification* (the key account manager dedicated to the customer) and *mechanism* to rule

exchanges (confidence rather than legal contract), and this alone could be the object of further research. However, we feel the parallel goes even further, particularly because for the moment we have been concentrating on the key account manager, whilst our work involves what *surrounds* the key account manager. Why do we find that the key account manager is not alone in giving a meaning to key account management? Why, during the interviews, did the interviewees talk of both the key account managers and the support systems to describe key account management? We believe that the parallel with micro-economics offers the beginnings of an answer. If the key account manager represents the *means against opportunism*, while at the same time allows to avoid the use of a specific contract which entails transaction costs, he does however represent a *cost* (organizational cost) which is paid for by the supplier. We could therefore wonder whether such a system is beneficial for the supplier. We could also imagine that the supplier who is aware of this cost could try to reduce it. For Williamson –when he compares external (or market) and internal (within the firm) transaction– he concludes one solution might be for the supplier to externalize his exchanges with the key account manager. Accordingly, the supplier gains access to the resource represented by the key account manager on the market. But, the operating of this new tripartite system (supplier-key account manager-customer) itself involves transaction costs, in which case the problem continues: other methods to reduce supplier-customer costs have to be found. Such a situation would be even more complicated if there were no key account manager, as two exchange systems have to co-exist, therefore *two* contracts: supplier / key account manager, and key account manager / key account customer.

Obviously this is not a solution, so what are the other possibilities available to the supplier to reduce his organizational costs without increasing transaction costs? Once again, we can return to the micro-economic model and imagine that the supplier *dissolves* his relationship with the key account manager, not by referring to the market, but by repositioning the market between himself and the key account manager. The result is that there is *no longer* any position of authority between the supplier and the key account manager, but also *no real* market relationship (everything remains within the firm). This is a quasi-integration solution (or quasi-disintegration depending from how we look at it), mid-way between a position of authority and a market relationship. Here we find the notions of neoclassical contract, bilateral governance or hierarchy as presented by MacNeil and Williamson. If we are to understand that the supplier can be likened to different resources as represented by the support

systems we interviewed, then we have shown a *theoretical* explanation for the existence of an account team.

**[Conclusion: "supplier-customer / support systems-key account manager" homothety]**

Subsequently, we can finally imagine the account team as a *reconfiguration* of the supplier-key account exchanges. This *reconfiguration* stems from the exchanges between the supplier and the key account customer (inter-organizational outlook) and creates a *correspondence* to the exchanges between the support systems and key account manager (intra-organizational outlook).

**The supplier-key account/support systems –key account manager homothetic relationship**



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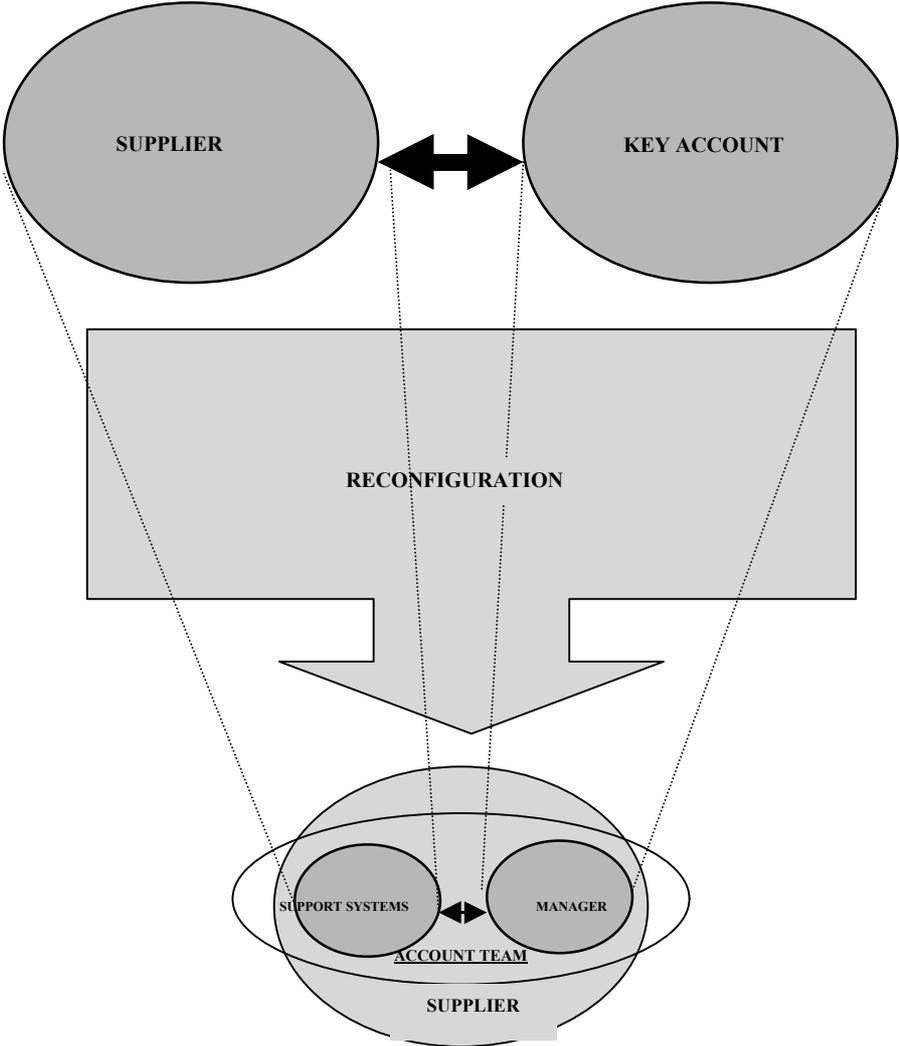
**[7 – Interpretation of behavior within the account team]**

Remembering this idea of a *reconfiguration* of an inter-organizational exchange in an intra-organizational exchange, it becomes possible to reinterpret some of our initial fieldwork findings. Firstly, the leading role of the key account manager; how the key account managers are perceived by the support systems and the problems encountered in the contacts between key account managers and support systems. We shall now look at this reinterpretation:

1 - As previously mentioned, key account managers rarely talk directly about team animation. We believe one of the reasons for this lies in the fact that the idea of animation is not necessarily *obvious* for the key account manager. In fact, as presented in the above diagram, the key account manager moves from a position of *seller* (to the key account) to a position of *buyer* – or quasi-buyer– (for the support systems). This turn around is not easy for the key account manager. He may not even fully understand it or take it into consideration, particularly those who order the creation of a key account management system, and the key account managers who run such systems.

2 - In our analysis of the information collected, we also consider the idea of the *judgment* the support systems have of the key account managers. This judgment is mostly *positive* and talks of a new mission. Let us try and interpret this by using the reconfiguration diagram presented above: the key account manager becomes a customer for the support systems. The relationship between the supply firm and the customer firm becomes unimportant: for the support system this relationship is *incarnated* by the key account manager. For a support system, the interest in a incarnation of the key account manager lies in the fact that the latter *reinterprets* the customer and that this reinterpretation is also a *selection* of the information. It thereby protects the support systems from too much stressful direct contact with the customer. We could therefore consider this as a skilful and new way of modifying the weight of the customer internally. This explains the support systems' judgment. By taking this idea further, we could also propose another interpretation and consider that it is also a skilful and new way of introducing or imposing the customer constraint upon the organization. Such an idea would require further research.

Moreover, the role of the account team in the introduction of the customer dimension into the supply firm –no matter how hard or visible this may be– has led us to qualify the account

team as "managerially shrewd". This opinion of the account team could represent the starting point of a new line of research into the meaning and means of "customer orientation" in firms.

3 - Finally, using our reconfiguration diagram once again, we could also attempt to interpret *the nature of the problems* mentioned in the exchanges between key account managers and support systems. It should be remembered that the support systems consider that such problems are due to the fact that the key account managers do not fulfill their *role of animator* to the full. We could imagine that the account team (in other words the key account manager which is basically all the support system sees of the team) simplifies customer orientation for the support system. After all, if a support system wants to know the customer he is managing a site for, or he is developing a product for, he simply has to meet up with the key account manager. Therefore, if there is a problem, it is not because of the structure, but because of the key account manager. Conversely, remember that for the key account manager, any such problems are due to the structure. We could imagine that for the key account manager, the creation of the account team would complicate his task by forcing him to take new colleagues into consideration and creating new objectives for him. Therefore, for the key account manager, a problem is not necessarily the individuals themselves, but rather the structure –or the team– which is set up.

**[8 - Conclusion and future research possibilities]**

Hence, key account management, as a marketing phenomenon, could benefit from being associated to the idea of a *reconfiguration* of the "supplier - key account" relationship in the "support-system - key account manager" relationship. In other words, the inter-organizational dimension in the intra-organizational dimension. But does this represent a real breakthrough in the way we imagine organizational exchanges? Not completely. The link between the intra-organization and the inter-organization has been clearly made (Hakansson, 1982; Valla, 1987). On the other hand, what makes the present case *remarkable* is that key account management (or more precisely account team) is, as far as we know, the only managerial phenomenon for which a notion of an homothetic link can be made.

We also believe that a new field of research could be the link between the idea of key account management –based on our notion of a reconfiguration of the "supplier-customer" relationship– and the evolution of marketing functions in the industrial field. When Webster

describes marketing as being "*responsible for more than the sale [...]: it is the management function responsible for making sure that every aspect of the business is focused on delivering superior value to customers in the competitive marketplace*" (Webster, 1992, page 14), this obviously offers several possibilities for the positioning of marketing in relation to key account management.

Firstly, key account management, or at least the key account manager's role, could be seen as a marketing task, whereby marketing takes on a role in every aspect of the firm. After all, Webster did say that "*marketing can no longer be the sole responsibility of a few specialists. Rather, everyone in the firm must be charged with responsibility for understanding customers and contributing to developing and delivering value for them*" (Webster, 1992, page 14). The key account manager therefore becomes a new marketing figure in the organization, as his role clearly fits Webster's definition of "*focusing on relationships*". However, whilst Webster suggests distinguishing different levels of marketing intervention (corporate, SBU[1] and operational / functional) we can consider that key account management covers all three levels. Indeed, if the choice of account to be managed is often up to the directors, determining the strategy for a key customer is often up to the key account manager and his team; and this goes as far as the operational stage where the various support systems *act* in the supplier-key account relationship. If key account management comes under this vision of marketing as a management tool in the supplier-customer relationship, which is not the case for Webster, the account team has a much more complete marketing mission.

Secondly, we can question the role of marketing with the emergence of such actors as key account managers. For at least some customers –the key customers – does not the emergence of the key account manager and his team raise the question of whether the marketing services are really necessary? Mention should be made here of the so-called ECR[2] theories – in the field of consumer goods marketing – where Pras writes that, because of the necessary involvement of different hierarchical levels in the firm and the necessary coordination of product and information flows, "*some firms go so far as getting rid of the marketing function as such and merge it with other functions such as sales*" (Pras, 1997, page 2775). By identifying these new marketing trends, and in particular the introduction of marketing in the management of the supplier-customer relationship, Pras also mentions the future emergence

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[1] Strategic Business Unit ou domaine d'activité stratégique (DAS).
[2] Efficient Consumer Response.

of " *possible new jobs (which) will always be part of a wide-ranging context including all the dimensions of the exchange* " (page 2777). So what becomes of marketing in relation to these new missions? Marion was right when he wrote *"the concerns of the marketers for their own legitimacy in the firm and in society",* Marion, 1999, page 81), meaning that the marketers in question would only be partly qualified to confront the new evolutions. If what is happening today corresponds to what Marion calls "*the culmination of the program assigned by marketing management to firms: to become a marketing organization, in other words, an organization designed as a sort of market where all its members are both customers and suppliers within transversal processes"*, then this evolution can call into question "*the professional identity of the marketers*" (Marion, 1999, page 83). After all, how does a marketing director, defined as a pilot of market relations differ from a key account manager? Rajala, Moller and Anttila (1995) suggest distinguishing three elements of the marketing mission: product marketing, sales marketing (customer oriented) and service marketing (before and after sales service), and they also mention that the decentralization of marketing increases the need for *coordination* between these three fields. On the other hand, Rajala, Moller and Anttila do not really take a stance on the modalities of this coordination. We believe an account team could represent one of these coordination points.

All the above hypotheses could justify further research in the missions –in the supply firm– related to the management of the supplier-customer relationship. For us, key account management would clearly benefit from a comparison with other functions. We strongly believe there is room for further research into the subject.

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