

# **BtoB relationships: the role of social media in the context of Key Account Management (KAM)**

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## **Abstract**

### **Purpose of the paper**

This paper looks at a topic that is recently impacting the way key account managers interact with their environment and more specifically with their strategic customers – *social media*.

Although there is recognition that social media is creating a new paradigm in customer-supplier relationships, no research so far has been conducted to study the role of social media in the context of KAM.

KAM can be considered as the ultimate form of social and relational exchange and we investigate how key account managers use the most popular social media tools (Linked’In, Viadeo, Blogging, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) or, whenever available, internal social platforms (such as Jive or Bluekiwi).

### **Literature addressed**

The recent, but growing, academic literature on social media tend to focus more on BtoC than BtoB, and we did not find any previous scholarly work linking social media and KAM, but the special issue of *JPSSM* in the 2012 summer, in which scholars explore some perspectives on personal selling and social media provide first insights how sales people use social media in the BtoB sales arena.

### **Methodology**

Our research, of an exploratory and qualitative nature, is built upon a Grounded Theory Framework (Glaser and Strauss, 1967)<sup>1</sup>, in which research design and theory construction are rooted in data.

Qualitative data were collected through Linked’In as we wanted to interview key account managers familiar with the use of social media. We interviewed over 20 key account managers from SMEs and MNCs supplying firms from different industries.

### **Main contribution**

Our research findings highlight first the difference between virtual and face-to-face relationships in a KAM setting, which are complementary but are not perceived by most key account managers to be substitutable. Second, we show how social media intertwine key account managers’ private and professional lives.

**Keywords:** Social media; Linked’In, Viadeo; KAM

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<sup>1</sup> Glaser, B., Strauss, A., 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Aldine, New York.