KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT IN TIMES OF CHANGE:
THE ROLE OF SENIOR MANAGERS

ABSTRACT

This article presents the previous results of an ongoing research that aims at identify the senior manager's role in the key account management (KAM). The research was based on previous studies on KAM. The results of such studies focused on the following elements: inter-organizational and intra-organizational challenges, teams/knowledge, and key account managers. Another research stream focused on the senior managers, since they can remove the internal and external forces that may block the KAM implementation, align goals/procedures, get involved in the decision-making of strategic issues, and induce the use of the customers' knowledge. Such actions mitigate the short-term orientation presented by some key account managers. In spite of the valuable work previously performed, the role of senior managers in KAM still seems to be an open question. This is especially true in the midsized suppliers that operate globally (no matter its importance in the B2B arena). Based on this assumption, this study is focused on how senior executives manage the changes requested by their customers. The suppliers' selection was based on big buyers' suggestions, since these big companies may be the key customers of several midsized suppliers.

KEYWORDS

KAM, Senior managers, Key account, Change, Relationships

Work in Progress

INTRODUCTION

The Key account management (KAM) consist on a strategy used by suppliers to improve its relationships with the most important customers (Brehmer and Rehme, 2009; Guenzi et al., 2007; Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015). Buyer-supplier alignment is mandatory for the establishment of long lasting relationships between the actors (Hald et al., 2009). However, the stability in key account relationships seem not to require symmetry of strategic interests (Ryals and Davies, 2013). In the key relationships (key accounts), suppliers develop customized solutions with a long-term perspective (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015).

The drivers of a successful KAM program include new inter- and intra-organizational management practices (Storbacka, 2012), as well as strategy, skills, values, style, structure, staff and systems (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015). Senior managers play a pivotal role in the KAM (Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015). They can influence goals, procedures and strategic decisions (Davies and Ryals, 2013; Guesalaga, 2014; Pressey et al., 2014; Zupancic, 2008), improve the middle managers' actions (Davies and Ryals, 2013; Salojärvi et al., 2010), and remove the internal resistance to the KAM projects (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014; Pressey et al., 2014; Wilson and Woodburn, 2014).

The analysis of the KAM literature suggests that the key relationships of a supplier will last forever. However, this assumption may not be true. Several problems may induce the buyer to substitute its suppliers (Kamp, 2005). A buyer-supplier misalignment can be verified when the objective of one actor is not achieved (Corsaro and Snehota, 2011). The ongoing business relationships may be affected by the offers of an alternative supplier (Pick and Eisend, 2014), or by the events outside the product or service (Hollmann et al., 2014). The changing environments induce the buyers to request changes to their suppliers. Such changes embrace alterations on the agreed-upon deliverables (Crosno et al., 2015). The change of one actor influences the future behaviors of the other actors (Corsaro and Snehota, 2010).

On the supplier's perspective, a request of change presented by a customer may have negative and positive implications. The negative implications can include cost increase (Niraj et al., 2008), new operational problems (Crosno et al., 2015), reduction on the supplier's focus on other priorities (Pache and Santos, 2010), and the change on the current sales process (Viio and Grönroos, 2015). However, by meeting these demands a supplier may also improve its sales and profits (Sarkees, 2011), as well as the customer's satisfaction (Crosno et al., 2015). The implementation of the changes required can also unveil new opportunities on other markets. Based on the perspectives of these opportunities, suppliers can decide to provide (or not) the value demanded by the customer (Biggemann et al., 2013).

As showed above, the literature presents the scenario of the KAM, the drivers of a successful KAM program, the changing environment in the B2B relationships, and the impacts of such changes on the supplier's business. In spite of the valuable work performed, the management of the alterations requested by the key customers still constitutes a challenge. Aiming to help academics and marketers to beat this challenge, this article investigates how the senior executives manage the changes requested by their key customers. The focus on the senior managers consider that such executives are responsible to guide e approve all important changes to be performed by a midsized supplier. Multiple case studies with 12 senior managers of global companies were performed from January to November of 2015.

KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT

Suppliers that adopt KAM may improve their customer's trust (Guenzi et al., 2009), account managers' performance (Guenzi et al., 2009), value creation (Storbacka, 2012), customer's satisfaction and retention (Davies and Ryals, 2014; Scheer et al., 2010), and financial returns (Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2013). KAM also helps suppliers to engage customers in joint investments, or in the development of new cost reduction projects (Davies and Ryals, 2014). Such benefits help suppliers to build barriers to their competitors (Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2014; Murphy and Li, 2015). Other advantage is to induce more companies to adopt KAM (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015). In order to extract all listed benefits, a supplier must focus on the following elements: inter-organizational and intra-organizational challenges, teams/knowledge management, key account managers, and senior managers. These elements are below described.

Inter-organizational challenges are related to how to improve the understanding about the customer's business, how to boost the mutual commitment and trust, how to improve the value delivered to the customer, how to implement joint actions, and how to improve the understanding about the KAM concept (Abratt and Kelly, 2002). Attention to the different types of buyer-supplier types of alignment is also mandatory. These types were classified as opportunistic, passive, mutualistic, and compensatory (Hsieh and Chou, 2011). To answer such questions the companies should monitor the business environment (which includes competitors and customers). This monitoring can unveil opportunities to improve the value delivered to the customer (Sharma, 2006; Zupancic, 2008). Attention to the services provided (Helander and Moller, 2008) or to the international specificities (Zupancic and Mullner, 2008) are also required. The definition of the value to be provided to the customer should simultaneously consider the customers and the suppliers perspectives (Ivens and Pardo, 2008). By analyzing the business environment and the different value perspectives the suppliers can manage its portfolio, plan business, define the value to be provided to the customer (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015; Storbacka, 2012).

The importance of intra-organizational alignment to the KAM success is recognized by scholars (Guesalaga and Johnston, 2010; Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). The intra-organizational alignment of a supplier requires long-term perspective, joint actions, as well as an internal culture that favors innovation, teamwork, and customer orientation (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015; Mu, 2015; Salojärvi et al., 2010; Storbacka, 2012; Zupancic, 2008). Other requirements to guide the KAM adoption include the management of the trade-offs arising from the conflict between short/long-term deliverables (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014), the structural redesign (Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2014), the account performance management (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015; Storbacka, 2012; Zupancic, 2008), the use of key performance indicators (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015), and the selection of the key accounts to be served by the supplier (Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015).

Team and knowledge management constitute two important pillars of the KAM. Attention to the profile and skills of team members is mandatory (Steward et al., 2010; Storbacka, 2012; Zupancic, 2008). A well-designed team can improve the utilization of the customers' knowledge (Salojärvi et al., 2010, 2013), thus leading to a better supplier's performance (Salojärvi et al., 2013). The use of the customer's knowledge embraces knowledge acquisition, assimilation and application (Hakanen, 2014). Cross-functional teams that deeply understand the customer's business and team-based rewards can leverage the KAM. Other requirements to the KAM success include attention to the esprit de corps (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015), evaluation of teams (Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015), cross-functional training and coaching, cross functional career paths and job rotation (Guenzi and Storbacka, 2015; Kotter and Schlesinger, 2008), the use of inter-organizational teams (Stock, 2006), and the enlargement of the teams job (Paiola et al., 2012).

Another research stream focused on the key account managers: roles, behaviors, abilities and requirements. Findings indicated that KA managers should identify, analyze and select suitable relationship strategies for the key accounts (Ojasalo, 2001). Some authors argue that the suppliers must pay attention on the executives that manage their key accounts (Abratt and Kelly, 2002). The improvement of the KA managers' performance embrace personal relationships (Gounaris and Tzempelikos, 2014; Sharma, 2006), attention to all activities associated to the KA managed by them, the identification of new alternatives to better satisfy the customers (Sharma, 2006), customer-oriented selling, adaptive selling and team selling (Guenzi et al., 2007). KA managers must also present abilities to communicate, influence and persuade senior managers to get involved with the KAM (Pardo et al., 2014).

Senior managers play a pivotal role in the KAM program (Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015), since internal and external forces may block the KAM implementation (Pressey et al., 2014). Some authors argue that only the senior management involvement can help to assure the commitment of everyone else, thus removing the barriers to the KAM (Wilson and Woodburn, 2014). To overcome barriers the senior managers must align goals and procedures of the different functional areas in the company, participate in decision-making of strategic issues (Doz and Kosonen, 2007; Guesalaga, 2014; Zupancic, 2008), and induce the customers' knowledge use (Salojärvi et al., 2010). Such actions aim to mitigate the short-term orientation presented by some key account managers. This short-term orientation may lead to insufficient consideration of the strategic consequences of the key account manager decisions for the key customer relationships (Davies and Ryals, 2013). Low formalized KAM programs may become effective if 'nurturing' senior management support is adopted coupled with a flexible definition of the key account manager role (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopted an abductive research process (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), since this is an exploratory investigation about an under researched topic - the senior managers role in the KAM. Abductive processes require a pendulous movement that encompass literature, data, theory, routines, and capabilities. Based on such assumption, we have first analyzed the literature about KAM. This analysis unveiled a set of requirements for the KAM. As showed, these requirements embrace the following constructs: inter-organizational, intra-organizational, teams/knowledge management and key account managers. Senior managers' requirements for the successful management of a key account were also identified. All requirements identified were used to define the questions to be proposed to the senior managers.

The researchers tried to collect documental evidences of the actions performed by the senior managers, to observe their gestures and postures, and to question them about the requirements extracted from the literature (if not mentioned in the answers provided). The questions, the observations, and the documents formed the research protocol used in this investigation. The questions proposed to the senior managers are shown on Table 1.

Table 1 – Research questions

Coding	Requirements	Evidences to collect
Inter-organizational	To improve the suppliers offers by monitoring the business environment, managing the value provided to the customer, and simultaneously meeting mutual demands. To develop relationships that help to improve the mutual commitment and trust, thus inducing the development of joint actions.	Do you get involved in the inter-organizational relationships? Can you leverage the value added to the customer (only if the previous answer was yes)? When and how? How your actions differ from the other ones performed by a key account manager?
Intra-organizational	To foster a corporate culture that favors a long-term perspective, innovation, teamwork, and customer orientation. To manage the trade-offs arising from the conflict between short/long-term deliverables, to reengineer the company, to manage the accounts performance based on key performance indicators, and to select the key accounts to be served.	Do you get involved in the intra-organizational relationships? What are your main internal actions or focuses (only if the previous answer was yes)? How your actions differ from the other ones performed by a key account manager?
Teams and knowledge management	To promote the acquisition, assimilation and use of the customer's knowledge. To evaluate teams or to establish team-based rewards. To promote cross-functional training, coaching, career paths and job rotation, as well as the use of inter-organizational teams.	Do you perform any action to promote the acquisition, assimilation and use of the customer's knowledge? What about the teams' improvement? What are your main actions or focuses on both topics (only if the previous answer was yes)? How your actions differ from the other ones performed by a key account manager?
KA managers	To evaluate the managers' role, behaviors, abilities and requirements. KA managers must improve their personal relationships and communication, monitor all suppliers' activities associated to the key customer (aiming to identify how to better satisfy this customers).	How do you manage the key account managers? Do you perform any action to improve their performance? Can you describe your main actions or efforts related to these managers (only if the previous answer was yes)?

Data collection

Activities associated with the data collection started on the definition of the profile of the companies to be investigated. The researchers defined that these companies should have from 100 to 999 employees, and annual revenues are ranging from US$ 50 million to US$ 1 billion. This is the typical profile of a midsized company (Gartner Group, 2015). The focus on the midsized companies consider the importance of such organizations to the global industrial scenario. By definition, these companies should also operate in two of the following continents: America, Europe and Asia.

The selection of the midsized companies that meet such conditions encompassed several stages. On the first stage, the researchers visited the chemical, electronic, automotive and equipment industries' associations aiming at identify their biggest affiliates. In these visits, the researchers initially presented the project. After that, they asked for a list of the associations' affiliates that present the higher annual revenues. The focus on these big companies encompass an assumption: a big buyer may be the key customers of several midsized suppliers. In this stage, it was possible to identify 40 big buyers.

On the second stage, the researchers asked the associations' managers to introduce the researchers to the general purchasing manager of each big company indicated by the association. During three months, the researchers tried to contact these 40 general purchasing managers. Twelve of them returned the researchers calls, and seven of them agreed to provide a list with their most important midsized suppliers. The list provided by all purchasing managers had 93 midsized suppliers.

On the third stage, the general purchasing managers of the big companies were asked to introduce the researchers to the senior managers of their best midsized suppliers. Aiming to help the purchasing managers, the researchers provided a project summary and a draft of an e-mail message. After two weeks, twenty-five senior managers of midsized companies agreed to participate in the research.

On the fourth stage, these twenty-five senior managers were asked to talk something about the KAM programs of their companies. Four of them declared that their companies did not have a KAM program. Another nine senior managers declared that their companies did not have enough experience about the topic. These thirteen companies were removed from the selected companies for the study. At the end, twelve senior managers of the midsized suppliers indicated by the big companies were deemed able to be included in the investigation. This process allowed the selection of knowledgeable senior managers of midsized companies, thus enriching the findings.

Three interviews with companies *A, B, and C* were applied to test the research protocol (pilot study). The senior managers of these companies were questioned about the research protocol at the end of their interviews. The first senior manager helped us to simplify some questions. The other interviewees offered small suggestions to improve the research protocol. The revised questions helped us to break the ice during the interviews, as well as to capture a more detailed picture about the senior managers' role in the KAM.

On the following interviews description, we tried to explore the elements that were identified in the previous ones. Such approach is aligned with the abductive research process. All interviews were finished when two conditions were met: all research protocol was already applied, and no new evidence was emerging from the interviewee (Corbin and Strauss, 2007). Since we were not allowed to tape the interviews sessions, we had to take extensive notes. The notes were transferred to the text editor (Word) resulting in 192 pages.

In all interviews, the collection of data encompassed semi-structured interviews with the senior executives, observations, and documental analysis (tools and templates provided by them). The interviews were scheduled by e-mail, and carried out through Skype. Four senior managers established three conditions in advance: anonymity, no taping (of audios), and a time limit for the interview (around 45 minutes). All interviews were scheduled for the senior managers' lunch break (all interviewees seemed to be in their own offices at this time). To our surprise, no single interview lasted less than 70 minutes (the longest interview lasted 90 minutes). At the end of the interview, we always asked the interviewees for documents about the topics discussed. Six managers sent us at least one electronic document.

Two researchers attended to all interviews aiming to improve the data collected. Once an interview was finished, the researchers wrote their own report. The individual reports were then crosschecked by a research team meeting. Findings extracted from electronic documents were also considered, thus allowing some triangulation between interviews, documents, and observations.

The crosschecked report was sent to the interviewees for validation. After two months, no single return was received by the researchers. A new e-mail was sent to the senior managers requesting a second Skype conversation. New interviews were booked with all interviewees. To the researchers' surprise, on the second round of interviews all senior managers seemed to be more relaxed (always in a hotel or at home, instead of their own offices). This relaxation helped to create an open atmosphere, thus facilitating the conversations about the report. Four senior managers suggested minor changes on our conclusions. No single Skype contact lasted less than 60 minutes (some of them, for 100 minutes). The senior managers used much of their interview's time to ask the researchers about the findings collected by the other managers. Several new and interesting information were collected during these conversations, thus helping us to improve our findings' reports.

Data analysis

The data analysis started with an individual analysis of the case (always on a few days after the interview, e.g. 2-3 days). It embraced all evidences related to the actions performed by each senior manager interviewed. After the all individual analysis was finished, a cross-case analysis was performed. These analyses aimed at identify similarities and differences among the senior managers interviewed, as well as the reasons for such similarities/differences. In both analyses, the findings were coded with the intention of confronting them with the elements extracted from the literature. The results of these confrontations will be presented in the discussion section.

Trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability

The combination of documents, observations, and data gathered in the interviews allowed the data triangulation. This triangulation was performed during the data collection and during the findings' analysis. The analysis were finished when its saturation was reached (Yin, 2003). Experts revised the study aiming to allow future replications (Eisenhardt, 1989). Interpretive research and grounded theory were used to assure reliability and validity (Flint et al., 2002). The final analyses and discussion of findings were always performed in the researchers' meetings. The conclusions were discussed with the interviewees.

The profile of the researchers team help to assure credibility to the conclusions (Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Hirschman, 1986; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989). The first author has 20 + years of consulting to the board of midsized companies and industries associations, and six + years of KAM support on a multinational midsized company. He has also several publications in important academic journals (Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, Journal of Cleaner Production, Business Process Management Journal, and Benchmarking). The second author worked in strategic positions for two large multinational companies in Brazil for + 20 years. She has also several publications in important academic journals (Industrial Marketing Management, Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, Journal of Cleaner Production, Business Process Management Journal, and Benchmarking). The third researcher has + 15 in academia, as well as several papers in Journal of Cleaner Production. Co-researchers with executive experience reviewed the process and the conclusions expressed in the consolidated document.

Table 3 presents the other criteria used to assure trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability. Such criteria encompass fit, understanding, generality, and control (Corbin and Strauss, 2007), transferability, dependability, confirmability, and integrity (Corbin and Strauss, 2007; Hirschman, 1986; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

Table 3 – Trustworthiness, credibility, and reliability.

Criterion	How the criteria was assessed
Transferability	The sampling included only the senior managers of best midsized suppliers (according to the big buyers consulted), as well as several years of experience with global KAM programs.
Dependability	The focus on the best midsized suppliers of large buyers companies helped to assure that the findings are consistent and unique.
Confirmability	Individual and cross-case analysis were performed by each researcher, and then consolidated by the research team. Co-researchers with executive experience reviewed the process and the conclusions expressed in the consolidated document. The revised document was audited by the interviewees.
Integrity	Anonymity and ethical standards were observed in all research stages. The researchers interviewed only experienced senior managers.
Fit	The selection of the companies and steps followed in the research helped to assure reliability and validity.
Understanding	Interviewees were invited to comment the findings and analysis in two different moments.
Generality	Senior managers of companies with similar size and industrial customers. Openness in interviews to increase the gathering of relevant information.
Control	Conclusions were validated by the participants.

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