

What differentiates a key account manager from a salesperson

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Research background and its relevance for past and/or future work.

Piercy and Lane (2003, 564) note that traditional sales forces are under pressure from the emergence of a new customer-facing activity: key account management (KAM). Workman, Homburg, and Jensen (2003, 6) define KAM as the “need to be more responsive to the needs of important (strategic) customers and to have intra-organizational programs, systems, and procedures in place to treat key accounts differently from other accounts”.

If some extensive academic research has been and still is carried out on KAM as a program (see, for instance, Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) for a review), research on the role of key account managers (KAMers) compared to standard selling in BtoB is scarce, particularly on the perception of the KAMers’ specific features and their evolution.

Purpose of the paper.

In some academic papers, the word “salespeople” is sometimes used in a generic way to refer to both salespeople and key account managers. For instance, Rapp et al. (2014, 245) write, “Salespeople also have had to modify the nature of their interactions with customers and key accounts.” The purpose of our paper is to review how key account managers are perceived, compared to the selling activity, in the academic literature and how this perception has evolved.

Methods

This review article has selected 31 academic articles (listed in the references) from 1996 to 2016 in English-language academic journals. An EBSCO database was used with the search terms key or strategic or global account manager related to “competency” and “skill”.

We classified the articles into 3 groups (from 1996 to 2005, from 2006 to 2011 and from 2012 to 2016): we found 8 papers in the earlier group, 9 papers in the middle group and 14 papers in the most recent group, whereby highlighting the recent surge of the research on KAM.

We used N’Vivo to carry out a word frequency research for each group and focused on the verbs of action to analyse the KAMers’ activities and the ones related to selling.

Findings

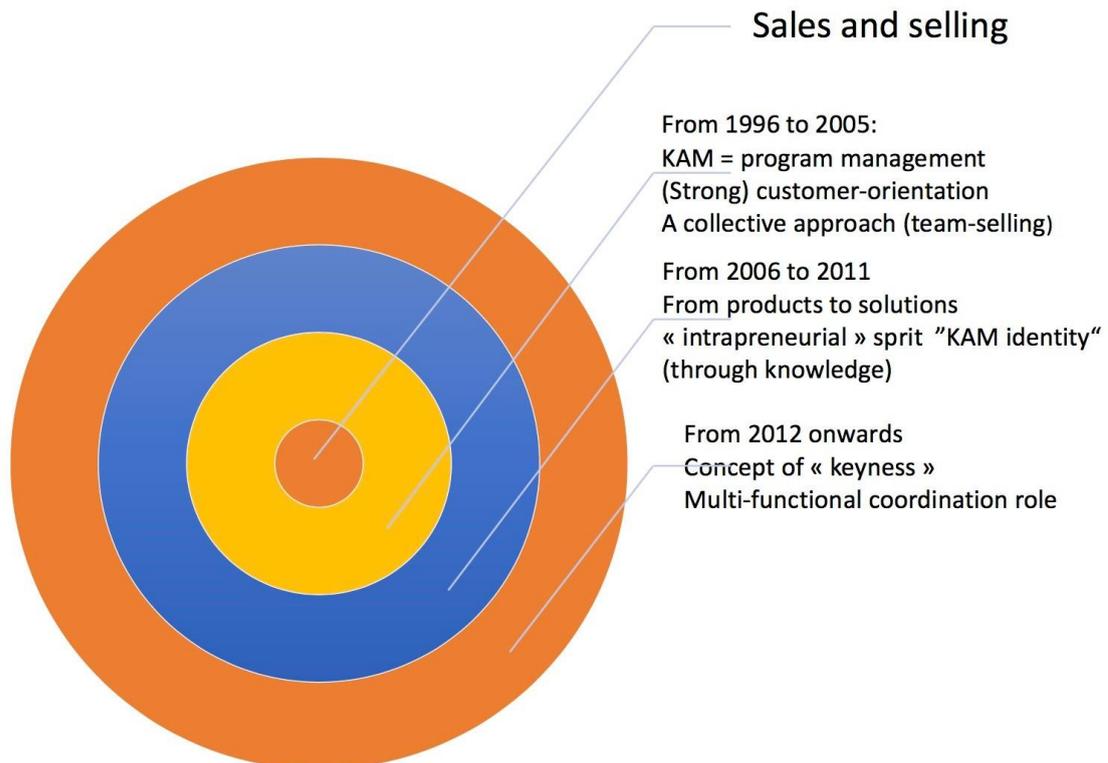
In the 8 articles from 1996 to 2005, we focussed on the main meaningful words that we listed in Table 1.

We find some occurrence of “sales and “selling”, but the first three occurrences are typical of KAM with the words “management”, “accounts”, “key”, but we find a focus on setting KAM as a structured program, with the words, “programs”, “development”, “organizing”, “resources”, “activity”, “process”; we recognize the early concepts around customer-orientation with the words “relationships”, “partnership”, “needs”, “customized”. We recognize the early stages of KAM within the industrial world, “product” and “industrial”. We can perceive the earlier stages of moving away from the individual job towards a more collective approach, “teams”, global” “involving”, collaborative”. We sense that short-term focus is being replaced by a more long-term, strategic vision: “strategic”, “competitive”.

In the 9 articles from 2006 until 2011 (the selected words of which are listed in Figure 2), there is still a minor occurrence of “sales” and “selling”. The focus is still on “managing” and accounts”, but “relationships”, “customers” have a high level of occurrence. Some new words are appearing, such as “knowledgeable” and “intrapreneurial”. These two words highlight a KAMer identity is being forged, not only with a good knowledge of the supplying company’s products, but also a good knowledge of the customer’s needs and strategy. We also find the background of KAM extend to not just products but services and solutions.

In the 14 more recent articles (the selected words of which are listed in Figure 3), a new concept does appear, which is the concept of “keyness” and reinforces the specific status and engagement with such strategic customers. The emphasis is not only on the professional aspect of the relationship, but also on the “social” and “behavioural” aspect of such a relationship. The appearance of the word “function” also highlights the multi-functional coordination role of the KAMer.

Is the key account manager a salesperson?



Discussion and main contribution of the paper.

We seek to better delineate the basic selling function from the KAM function and to highlight the function idiosyncrasies. Previous literature has stressed that the function of KAMer (was) “the creation of a new mission (thus the creation of a new job, new practices, etc.)” (Pardo, 2001, p 2), but the detailed understanding of this function and its evolution remains fragmented throughout different streams of research (see for instance, Abratt and Kelly 2002; Davies and Ryals 2013; Durif, Geay, and Graf 2013; Workman, Homburg, and Jensen 2003) and, furthermore, we find some confusion (cf. Rapp et al., 2014).

Our review contributes to a better understanding of the different facets of the KAMer function, but also showing how it has evolved from the basic selling skills (see the seven steps of selling from Moncrief, 1986), which may be considered as the basics of any customer-facing job, towards more complex competencies.

The early research on KAM focused mostly on the concept of “KAM” and started to expand on the deeper customer-orientation, than the one required in selling, stressing also the need to have a more collective approach (whereas traditional selling used to be considered as an individualistic job).

A second layer of specific competencies was highlighted from 2006 onwards with the first

research on “servitization” and the need to provide customers no longer with a product but to “augment” the offering adding services around the product. This added complexity in the customization of the KAM offering request from KAMers new competencies around the concept of “intrapreneurial” spirit. Hence, a SAM identity is being forged, away from a selling one, to highlight this “fit” with the customer.

From 2012 onwards, the present conceptualization on the KAMer’s function evolve around the concept of “keyness” has emerged in the context of reflexivity and reinforced “strategic fit” between both partners, which leads KAMers to manage multi-functional teams, sometimes at a global level.

Hence, our research may contribute to demonstrate how KAM and Key Supplier Management are getting closer together as the perfect match of the flipside of the same coin.

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Appendixes

Word	Length	Number	Weighted percentage	Similar words (included)
managing	8	1003	2,25%	manag, manage, managed, management, management', manager, managers, managers', manages, managing
accounts	8	967	2,17%	account, accounted, accounting, accountization, accounts, accounts', accounts'
key	3	776	1,74%	key
customized	10	660	1,48%	custom, customer, customers, customers', customers', customize, customized
markets	7	619	1,39%	market, marketers, marketing, markets
relationships	13	481	1,08%	relationship, relationships
sales	5	377	0,85%	sale, sales, sales', sale'
teams'	6	338	0,76%	team, teams, teams', team'
supplier	8	334	0,75%	supplier, suppliere', suppliers, suppliers'
selling	7	307	0,69%	sell, selling, selling'
kam	3	303	0,68%	kam
values	6	252	0,57%	value, valued, values
development	11	224	0,50%	develop, developed, developing, development, developments, development', develops
buyer	5	210	0,47%	buyer, buyers, buyers'
organizing	10	169	0,38%	organ, organization, organizations, organizations', organize, organized, organizes, organizing
performed	9	156	0,35%	perform, performance, performed, performing
strategic	9	154	0,35%	strateg, strategic, strategically
global	6	140	0,31%	global, globally
product	7	138	0,31%	product, production, productive, productively, productivity, products
industrial	10	137	0,31%	industrial, industries, industry
buying	6	132	0,30%	buy, buying

needs	5	129	0,29%	need, needed, needs
resources	9	124	0,28%	resource, resources
partnerships	12	120	0,27%	partnership, partnerships
activity	8	117	0,26%	active, actively, activities, activity
process	7	114	0,26%	process, processes, processing
measurement	11	113	0,25%	measure, measured, measurement, measurements, measures, measuring
competitive	11	108	0,24%	competition, competitions, competitive, competitiveness
success	7	107	0,24%	success, successful, successfully
advantages	10	100	0,22%	advantage, advantageous, advantages
approach	8	99	0,22%	approach, approached, approaches, approaching
involving	9	98	0,22%	involve, involved, involvement, involves, involving
provide	7	95	0,21%	provide, provided, providers, provides, providing
programs	8	94	0,21%	program, programs
collaborative	13	94	0,21%	collaborate, collaborates, collaboration, collaborative

Figure 1 - Articles from 1996 to 2005

Word	Length	Number	Weighted percentage	Similar words (included)
managing	8	1416	2,98%	manage, manageable, managed, management, manager, managers, managing
accounts'	9	920	1,93%	account, accountable, accountancy, accounted, accounting, accountization,
relationships	13	753	1,58%	relationship, relationships, relationships'
customers'	10	682	1,43%	customer, customers,
markets	7	464	0,98%	market, marketing, markets
key	3	457	0,96%	key

supplier	8	332	0,70%	supplier, suppliers, suppliers'
internationally	15	324	0,68%	internal, internally, international, internationally
business	8	318	0,67%	business, businesses
values	6	288	0,61%	value, valued, values
performed	9	254	0,53%	perform, performance, performances, performed, performers
strategic	9	225	0,47%	strategic, strategically, strategizing
revenue	7	224	0,47%	revenue, revenues
supplying	9	202	0,42%	supplied, supplies, supply, supplying
knowledgeable	13	197	0,41%	knowledg, knowledge, knowledgeable
selling	7	196	0,41%	sell, selling
industrial	10	191	0,40%	industrial, industries, industry
services	8	185	0,39%	service, services, servicing
specialists	11	156	0,33%	specialist, specialists, specialists'
trusted	7	154	0,32%	trust, trusted
strategy	8	147	0,31%	strategies, strategis, strategy
sales	5	142	0,30%	sale, sales, sales'
buyers'	7	136	0,29%	buyer, buyers, buyers', buyers'
products	8	133	0,28%	product, production, productive, products
individuals	11	128	0,27%	individual, individualization, individually, individuals
opportunism	11	127	0,27%	opportunism, opportunities, opportunity
teams	5	126	0,26%	team, teams
focus	5	124	0,26%	focus, focused, focuses, focusing
solutions	9	124	0,26%	solution, solutions
measuring	9	124	0,26%	measurable, measure, measured, measurement, measures, measuring

sharing	7	124	0,26%	share, shared, shares, sharing
organization	12	122	0,26%	organ, organization, organizations, organize, organized, organizing
firm	4	122	0,26%	firm, firms, firms'
quality	7	120	0,25%	quality
develops	8	120	0,25%	develop, developed, developing, development, developments, develops
behaviors	9	119	0,25%	behavior, behavioral, behaviors
roles	5	113	0,24%	role, roles
informs	7	112	0,24%	informal, informality, informant, informants, information, informed,
ability	7	109	0,23%	abilities, ability
satisfaction	12	104	0,22%	satisfaction
intrapreneurial	15	97	0,20%	intrapreneurial, intrapreneurially

Figure 2 - Articles from 2006 to 2011

Word	length	Number	Weighted percentage	Similar words
managers	8	2539	2,23%	manage, managed, management, manager, managers', manages, managing
kam'	4	1995	1,75%	kam, kams, kams', kams', kam'
accounts'	9	1726	1,52%	account, accountability, accountable, accountancy, accountants, accounted, accounting, accountization, accounts,
keyness	7	1382	1,21%	'key, key, keyness, keys
relationships	13	1294	1,14%	relationship, relationships
markets	7	1194	1,05%	market, marketer, marketers, marketing, markets, market'
customized	10	1166	1,02%	custom, customer, customers, customers', customization, customize, customized, customizers, customizing

business	8	604	0,53%	business, business', businesses, business', busy
sales	5	568	0,50%	sale, sales
supplier	8	535	0,47%	supplier, suppliers, suppliers', suppliers', supplier'
industry	8	496	0,44%	industrial, industries, industry
practices	9	484	0,43%	practical, practically, practice, practiced, practices, practices', practicing
strategic	9	445	0,39%	strategic, strategical, strategically, strategic'
implements	10	438	0,38%	implement, implementation, implemented, implementing, implements
organizing	10	400	0,35%	organic, organization, organizations, organizations', organizations', organize, organized, organizing
develops	8	368	0,32%	develop, developed, developing, development, developments, develops
performing	10	349	0,31%	perform, performance, performance', performativity', performed, performers, performing
company	7	332	0,29%	companies, companies', companies', company
programs	8	322	0,28%	program, programs, program'
service	7	318	0,28%	service, serviced, services, servicing
socially	8	296	0,26%	social, socialization, socially
organizational	14	293	0,26%	organizational, organizationally
conflict	7	278	0,24%	conflict, conflicts
process	7	277	0,24%	process, processes, processes', processes', processing
roles	5	273	0,24%	role, roles
selling	7	262	0,23%	sell, selling
behaviours	10	262	0,23%	behaviour, behavioural, behaviours, behaviours', behaviour'

measuring	9	257	0,23%	measurable, measure, measured, measurement, measurements, measures, measures',
results	7	235	0,21%	result, resultant, resulted, resulting, results
functions	9	232	0,20%	function, functional, functioning, functions

Figure 3 - Articles from 2012 to 2016