



What's next in key account management research? Building the bridge between the academic literature and the practitioners' priorities

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ABSTRACT

This research contrasts the academic literature on key account management (KAM) with the topics in this subject that are most critical to practitioners. Sixty four academic articles published in 17 journals, and ninety practitioners' articles appearing in the Velocity Magazine – published by the Strategic Account Management Association – were content analyzed and classified under ten 'topic' categories. Similarities and differences in the results for academics and practitioners are discussed. In addition, two specific topics were identified as being extremely important to managers but still under-researched by academics: the role of senior management in KAM, and the importance of internal alignment in determining KAM success.

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1. Introduction

Buyer–supplier relationships have evolved tremendously during the past decade and a half, due to increased competition, globalization, account concentration, a reduction in the number of suppliers, and a stronger procurement function (Capon, 2001). Consequently, key account management (KAM) has gained relevance to supplier companies. A very powerful sign of KAM importance to practitioners is the existence of the Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA), dedicated to “the professional development of the individuals and companies involved in the process of managing national, global and strategic customer relationships,” as mentioned in SAMA's mission statement. Their focus is global, and they currently have over 3000 members, who benefit from a series of knowledge resources on KAM, such as articles, cases, and presentations.

Likewise, academics have been interested in key account management since the late seventies and early eighties, when Stevenson and Page (1979), Stevenson (1980), and Shapiro and Moriarty (1982), investigated issues related to the adoption and implementation of what they called “national” account management. After those seminal pieces of research, dozens of articles on key account management have been published, mainly in journals with a focus on business and industrial marketing, and selling. But then the question becomes: Is academic research on KAM really responding to the problems that

managers face to deal with their most important customers? This question motivates this research, and the belief that academics and practitioners must work together to advance the knowledge of marketing and sales.

The purpose of this research is to contrast the KAM topics being investigated by academicians with those that are most relevant to practitioners, to contribute to building the bridge between these two worlds and identifying fruitful areas for future research in key account management. To that end, we content analyze articles on *key account management* written by scholars and by practitioners.

The rest of the article is organized as follows. First, we explain the procedure and present the findings from the content analysis of academic articles. Next, we classify the topics that have been addressed by KAM practitioners, and contrast them with those being investigated by academics. We conclude by identifying two specific topics that, being critical to practitioners; have received little attention in the academic literature.

2. The academic literature on key account management: a content analysis

To uncover the KAM topics investigated by academics, we content analyzed 64 articles, published in 17 journals, for the past 30 years (1979 to 2009). To select the articles, we searched academic databases using several key words. In addition to “key” (for key accounts), we used “major,” “national,” “large,” and “strategic,” as considered in the literature; for “account” we also searched for “customer” and “client.” We then reviewed the reference lists of the articles selected, and added a few more articles. Finally, we went through the title, the abstract, the introduction, and the conclusions of each preselected

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article, and kept only those that had key account management as its primary focus. We came up with 64 articles, which we think adequately represent the academic literature on KAM written in English for the past 30 years. Table 1 shows the list of journals included in the analysis, and the frequency of articles under each one.

We conducted a content analysis to categorize each article in terms of seven dimensions: topic (the main purpose of this study), article type (conceptual or empirical), research design, sampled unit, data collection method, data analysis method, and geographic setting.

Two coders (the leading author and a Master of Science student involved in KAM research) independently content analyzed the 64 articles on the seven dimensions. Inter-rater reliability was measured using Cohen's Kappa (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002), an index with value between 0 (no agreement at all) and 1 (perfect agreement). This index is considered conservative and robust; it adjusts the percentage of agreements by those that may have occurred just by chance. Generally, Cohen's Kappa values greater than .70 are considered satisfactory. The inter-rater reliabilities (Kappa) for the different dimensions are: topics (.87), article type (1.00), research design (1.00), sampled unit (.90), data collection method (.94), data analysis method (.91), and geographic setting (.96).

2.1. Results from the content analysis

2.1.1. Article topics

We first identified the main one or two topics in each article's abstract, obtaining a list of approximately thirty topics. We then grouped these topics into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. To validate these categories, we compared them with classifications of sales topics that have been used previously in the literature (Bush & Grant, 1994; Williams & Plouffe, 2007), and reviewed the organization of topics used in books on KAM from authors with a well-established reputation in this domain (Capon, 2001; McDonald & Woodburn, 2006). Based on this procedure, we classified the articles under the following ten 'topic' categories: reasons to adopt KAM; selection of key accounts; elements of a KAM program; role and characteristics of key account managers; organizing for KAM; adaptation of KAM approaches; team selling; customer relationships; global account management; and success factors in KAM. Table 2 provides a brief description of each topic.

The coders followed a multiple listing approach (e.g., Bush & Grant, 1994; Helgeson, Kluge, Mager, & Taylor, 1984); i.e., articles could be assigned to more than one topic. This approach seems a reasonable way to capture the breadth of topics that have been addressed by academics in KAM. In total, 102 topic allocations were made from the 64 articles. Table 3 shows the frequency of KAM topics in academic journals for the past three decades, ordered by total frequency.

2.1.2. Article type

This dimension refers to whether the paper is conceptual or empirical. Conceptual papers provide ideas, conjectures, frameworks, or comment on theoretical approaches on KAM, but without collecting data for the particular study. Empirical articles analyze data (secondary of primary) and show results or conclusions based on it. Of the list of 64 articles, 33% were conceptual, and 67% were empirical.

2.1.3. Research design

This dimension refers to whether the article – when empirical – uses a cross-sectional or a longitudinal design. Only one article was longitudinal (representing 2%), while the rest (98%) were cross-sectional.

2.1.4. Sampled unit

This is the source of primary data (those who are interviewed or surveyed). When data was collected from more than one respondent, we computed them all. From the forty three empirical papers, fifty

three allocations were made, resulting in the following frequency: key account managers (40%), other managers² (25%), customers (21%), and sales vice-president or equivalent (15%).

2.1.5. Data collection method

Most of the empirical papers used surveys (52%), followed by qualitative methods (40%), and secondary data (9%).

2.1.6. Data analysis method

We computed the methods that were used to show results (e.g., support main findings, test hypotheses, etc.), thus leaving out methods that were used to support the research process (e.g., compute reliabilities, measurement of scales, etc.). Table 4 shows the frequency of the methods that were used in the 64 articles.

2.1.7. Geographic setting

For the empirical articles, we classified the geographic setting by continent. Using multiple allocations, we find that North America concentrates 53% of the empirical research, followed by Europe, with a 40%. The other 8% divides between Asia (5%) and Africa (3%). From the list of articles considered in this study, we do not find empirical research conducted in Australia or Latin America.

2.2. Interpretation of the findings

Overall, we observe a nice evolution in KAM research. First, the number of articles published has increased significantly from decade to decade. In addition, although still concentrated in three main journals (IMM, JPSSM, and JBIM), we find an increase in the number of journals that have published articles on KAM during the past decade. This result shows that KAM is a relevant topic not only for the disciplines of marketing and sales, but also for management and international business.

Also, we observe an evolution in the topics addressed. We see a greater variety of topics published during the past decade, as compared to the previous ones. Moreover, the increased emphasis of subjects such as KAM success factors, customer relationships, adaptation of KAM approaches, and global account management reveals advancement in the understanding – and probably practice – of key account management. All these topics respond to trends of high competition, globalization, and customers being more informed, powerful, and demanding.

Furthermore, we find a greater depth in the analysis of data and findings over time. More complex relationships among variables have been addressed, with the increased use of structural equation modeling, analysis of variance and multiple regression techniques. The results also show that qualitative analysis is core in KAM research, both as the primary method (to deeply understand new subjects, or build grounded theory) and to support and interpret quantitative analysis. It is interesting to observe an increase in the use of multiple methods (triangulation) to build and test theory.

Finally, we observe an effort by scholars to collect data from both sides of the relationship with key customers. Key account managers have been the primary sample unit (40%), but we also observe a significant number of studies where KAM team members (25%) and customers (21%) are interviewed or surveyed.

² "Other managers" included, depending on the specific case, owners of the supplier company, marketing executives, and executives from other functional areas in the supplier company.

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