

CONTRIBUTIONS TO SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF KAM PROGRAMS

Introduction

Key accounts are customers in industrial markets identified by selling firms as of strategic importance (McDonald, Millman, and Rogers, 1997). Key Account Management (KAM) is an approach adopted by major suppliers in order to build a loyal customer base by offering continuously, a product/service package tailored to their individual needs. To coordinate the interaction under the umbrella of the long term relationship; large providers form dedicated teams, which are led by a key account manager (McDonald et al., 1997).

Over time there have been various studies analyzing the factors of success of KAM programs; however theoretical works that reveal performance inductors and its implication in the B2B context are scarce. The objective of this proposal is to contribute to a better understanding of the successful implementation of this type of programs.

In that sense, we want to study the impact of the Top Management Involvement, Alignment (internal and external) and Account Planning on the results of the KAM programs. The findings of this study supported by our hypotheses may provide useful both academic and management implications and identify future research proposals.

Literature Review

KAM programs are now widely adopted by firms (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010. ; Pardo, Ivens, & Wilson, 2014). Changes in customer requirements, enhanced competitive conditions and emerging disruptions are affecting firm strategies, making KAM more critical and KAM performance essential to any firm's success (Guesalaga, Gabrielsson, Rogers, Ryals, & Marcos Cuevas, 2018).

Although companies widely use KAM programs, research in this area has great potential and development (Mark-Cuevas et al., 2014; Henneberg, Pardo, mouzas, and Naude, 2009; Ivens and Pardo, 2008; Workman et al., 2003). Not all companies succeed in achieving the objectives they are aiming for through KAM programs (Pardo et al., 2014) .The literature has tried relevant topics such as; selection of key accounts, KAM program elements, features and roles of key accounts manager, adoption and

implementation of KAM Equipment Sales, KAM success factors, global perspective of KAM, KAM organization (Mark-Cuevas et al., 2014; Abratt and Kelly, 2002; Davies and Ryals, 2009; Georges and Eggert, 2003; Gosselin and Bauwen, 2006; Guenzi et al., 2009; Guesalaga and Johnston, 2010).

However, Möller and Parvinen (2015) believe that despite these efforts, the current understanding of the successful implementation of KAM is still relatively limited. Other authors consider this issue, an important topic of research agenda B2B (Lilien, 2016; LaPlaca, 2013; Wiersema, 2013); especially in its implementation and determinants.

According to Guesalaga and Johnston (2010), there are two areas of concern that have not yet been sufficiently addressed by academics but have great interest for managers: a) Role of Top Management Involvement in the KAM programs b) Internal Alignment; both as critical determinants of success performance in key accounts.

In the literature, there are several definitions for the Top Management Involvement, for our work we will use the construct according to what is proposed by Homburg, Workman, & Jensen (2002); “The top-management involvement construct, adopted from the literature on strategy implementation and market orientation, is conceptually close to the centralization construct used in organization theory, which refers to the extent of decision authority that is concentrated on higher hierarchical levels”.

For the case of internal alignment, Workman et al. (2003) study the effect of team spirit (*esprit de corps*) on the effectiveness of KAM, they define team spirit as the degree of participation, that the people involved in the management of key accounts, feel forced to common objectives and to each other; this manifests itself as interest in the needs of the other members of the team and the sense of "belonging" to the group, which impregnates multiple levels of the organization. *Esprit de Corps* is related to the development of a culture organizational that supports customers. (Workman et al., 2003) consider that when signatures fail to achieve *esprit de corps*, there may be a lack of commitment to common goals for key accounts and people will follow their personal agendas, which makes it difficult to needs of this type of clients. These authors found that *esprit de corps* is the variable with greater impact on the effectiveness of KAM (Guenzi & Storbacka, 2015); the only problem is that the authors do not say much about how to develop it (Pardo, Ivens, & Wilson, 2012). A major source of problems

seems to reside in poor internal alignment between the KAM unit and other organizational units (such as logistics, product management, manufacturing, customer care, etc.) that existed before KAM implementation (Pardo et al., 2014).

In line with the above review, Storbacka (2012) expands the academic research of Guesalaga & Johnston (2010) and directs his efforts by focusing both on internal and external alignment. His investigation aims generating a better understanding of the design elements and related management practices of KAM Programs. External alignment is the process by which we understand the problems and opportunities of our key accounts and jointly develop and deploy a value proposal that resolves and addresses these problems and opportunities (Storbacka, 2012).

Continuing with this thought stream, academic research of Marcos-Cuevas et al. (2014), aims to further explore the internal practices that support the configuration of the KAM Programs (Storbacka, 2012), For which it carries out a review of existing research on the intra-organizational level and operational practices. At the strategic level, Davies & Ryals (2013a) identified as a prerequisite for successful implementation, a deep organizational change through internal alignment (organizational culture, performance measurement, organizational structure and information systems all aligned to support KAM). At the operational level, KAM implementation requires the development of Account Planning and the active participation of senior management (Top Management Involvement / TMI) (Davies & Ryals, 2009).

According to Davies & Ryals (2009); "...but this still leaves us with little understanding of how companies could implement KAM better, or move from one of these inefficient models to a better performing, more robust model.". This idea is reinforced by reviewing the nature of the works presented in Table 1 (summary of factors in KAM research).

TABLE 1 - SUMMARY OF FACTORS IN KAM PROGRAMS

AUTHOR(S)	TYPE	FACTORS
Fiocca (1982)	CONCEPTUAL	Proposes approach to industrial marketing strategy based on portfolio analysis of accounts. It proposes the concept of "Important Account". Develop a series of factors (strategic, market, economic-financial, etc.) that make these accounts attractive.
Weilbaker & Weeks (1997)	CONCEPTUAL	Research focuses on determining the evolution of KAM. Presents a partial list of possible investigations around organizational, relational and external factors.
McDonald (2000)	CONCEPTUAL	Scope of KAM expanding and at the same time becoming more complex. Describe the different stages of KAM development. Identify strategic and operational factors.
Homburg, Workman & Jensen (2002)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	The authors identify eight prototypes / approaches (some organizational factors are measured). Future research is suggested on the context surrounding the KAM programs (external factors)
Abbratt & Kelly (2002)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	Study investigates the perception of suppliers and key clients regarding the success factors of the KAM programs
Homburg, Workman & Jensen (2003)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	The authors focus on the KAM context and develop a conceptual model of the factors that affect the effectiveness of KAM.
Wengler, Ehret & Saab (2006)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	The research focuses on the decision factors to implement KAM and in the process of implantation. Intensities of competence and coordination are of great importance. Selling companies pay minimal attention to the selection of key accounts.
Sharma (2006)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	Examine the success factors for the key accounts.
Piercy & Lane (2006)	CONCEPTUAL	This research seeks to better understand the weakness inherent in KAM strategies in order to find the balance between it and the potential benefits and thus develop more robust alternatives
Richards & Jones (2009)	CONCEPTUAL	The study combines relational marketing theory and organizational theory to build a framework of theoretical work to explain the relational and performance aspects in the key accounts.
Shi, White, Zou & Cavusgil (2010)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	The authors conceptualize on the strategies of the Global account Management (GAM) and they develop a theoretical model that relates these strategies to their factors and results
Guesalaga & Johnston (2010)	CONCEPTUAL	This study compares the academic literature of KAM with the most critical topics for the managers according to Velocity magazine and classifies them into ten categories; finding that two topics have been little studied: top management and internal alignment
Storbacka (2012)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	The work focuses on internal alignment (goals, principles and practices) and the external alignment between the company and its key accounts. It proposes a framework for both types of alignment.
Marcos-Cuevas, Natti, Pab & Ryals (2014)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	Longitudinal study of internal decisions and dilemmas faced by KA managers during the implementation process. The findings are presented at a strategic and operational level
Azila & Ahmmed (2013)	CONCEPTUAL	Presents a conceptual framework for work on operational, organizational and relational factors about the performance of KAM.
Wilson & Woodburn (2014)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	Study some of the contextual reasons for the failure in the KAM programs. Compare the formal factors with the informal factors of the organizational context. They include a significant amount of implications for managers.
Guenzi & Storbacka (2015)	CONCEPTUAL	7s Model in Case Study (strategy, shared-values, style, systems, structure, skills, staff)
Lai & Gelb (2015)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	The study focuses on communication as a factor for teams that handle a small number of significant customers characterized by large purchases and highly customized needs.
Sharma & Evanschitzky (2016)	EMPIRICAL QUANTITATIVE	Despite increased efforts on behalf of key accounts, sufficient research has not quantified the returns on key account strategy nor has it firmly established performance differences between key and non-key accounts within a firm. This study aims to examine returns on key accounts.
Guesalaga, Gabrielsson, Rogers, Ryals & Marcos-Cuevas (2018)	CONCEPTUAL	KAM research remains largely atheoretical and lacking in conceptual foundations. This paper argues for an organizational-level, resource-based view of KAM. The authors discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this unique view of KAM.
Leischnig, Ivens, Niersbach & Pardo (2018)	QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	The objective of this article is to advance extant knowledge on KAM by developing a framework that outlines essential processes to assess and diagnose barriers to KAM implementation. The authors illustrate the model in a case study analysis with a large-scale European industrial company.

KAM literature suggests that the success of these programs should be measured both in economic terms and in relational results (Guesalaga, 2014). For example, Homburg et al. (2002) and Workman et al. (2003) consider the effectiveness of KAM as critical, including the economic aspects,

such as sales and margins, and all matters relating to the relationship with customers; as mutual trust and long-term (Homburg et al., 2002; Workman et al., 2003; Guesalaga, 2013). Similarly, Sengupta, Krapfel, and Pusateri (1997) consider the objective performance of KAM (sales, profit, percentage of customer purchases) and the subjective performance (customer satisfaction and mutual cooperation among other things). According with Weitz and Bradford (1999); both behavioral and attitudinal performance should be considered in the context of the business relationship. Also, according with Tzempelikos (2015), there is evidence of the link between relationship quality and financial performance (Workman et al., 2003).

Therefore, we can consider the that following factors have not received sufficient attention in academic works as determinants of successful implementation of the KAM programs: i) Top Management Involvement, ii) Internal Alignment, iii) External Alignment and iv) Account Planning.

Theoretical development

From the discussion of the literature review, a conceptual model is proposed, as shown in Figure 1.

1.

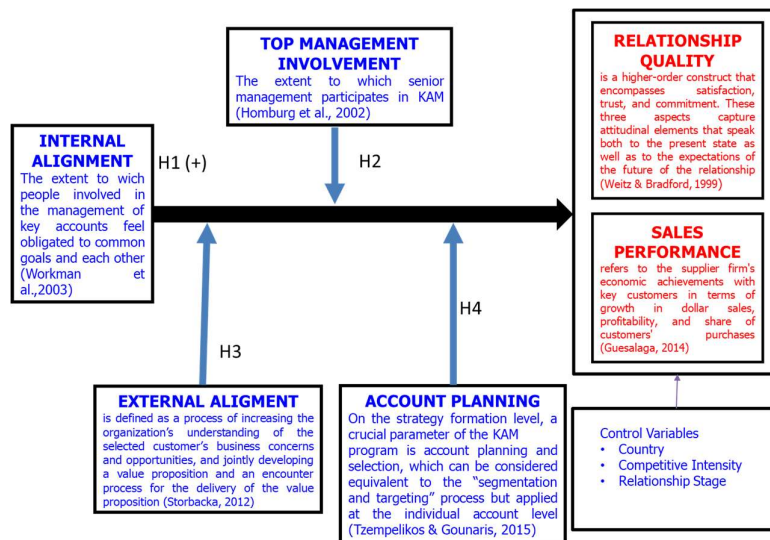


Figure 1

Internal Alignment and KAM Program Results. Internal alignment consists in the creation of a collaborative culture with focus on key accounts, flexibility and commitment (Storbacka, 2012).

Supplier organizational structure affects the quality of the relationship between the two companies (Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2014). Specifically, KAM programs designed so that meet the expectations and needs of customers affect the value of customers (Brady and Cronin, 2001) and as a result, customer satisfaction (Fornell, Johnson, Anderson, Cha, and Bryant, 1996; Slater and Narver, 1994). Similarly, when the supplier offers a personalized service to customers (Anderson and Weitz, 1989; Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Ivens and Pardo, 2007) and senior management takes the necessary initiatives to ensure prompt response to customer needs (Millman and Wilson, 1999; Homburg et al, 2002), a climate of trust is established in the relationship. As a result, customers feel more committed to the relationship and therefore want to keep it in the long run (Thorsten Hennig-Thurau and Klee, 1997; Hennig-Thurau T., Gwinner, and Gremler, 2002). With these fundamentals, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Internal Alignment is positively related to KAM Program Results.

Top Management Involvement and KAM Program Results. According to literature on the upper echelons (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Hambrick, 2007), top management is involved in the most important and strategic aspects of the organization. They can provide knowledge that key account managers could not, given their broad vision of the company, industry and business in general (Guesalaga, 2014). They are in the possibility of taking additional risks when dealing with customers because they have more power than the key account managers (Guesalaga, 2014). Their ability to be more connected to networks beyond the industry, allows them to identify business opportunities that other executives junior could not (Collins & Clark, 2003).

Additionally, having senior management team involved with the strategic aspect of key accounts, customers perceive commitment, which generates satisfaction and confidence in the provider (Guesalaga, 2014).

Social contact with customers who can develop senior management should help increase the performance of key accounts. Establish personal ties improves confidence and encourages information sharing. The exchange of information between the senior management team of the supplier and the

senior management team of the customers can accelerate business between the two companies (Guesalaga, 2014). Therefore, the proposed hypothesis is:

H2. Top Management Involvement moderates the relationship between Internal Alignment and KAM Program Results.

Account Planning and KAM Program Results. Key account plans are particularly valuable in KAM implementation (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). An important tool to help drive KAM programs ahead is the design and deployment of key accounts plans; constant updating of plans is a must (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). All plans had in common two important components : strategic analysis of the customer and the definition of actions and investment for this particular key account (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). Abratt and Kelly (2002) argue in their research, that the focus of key account managers is orchestrating inter-company relationships to ensure achievement of mutually beneficial goals of increased sales and profitability. In this line of thought, Storbacka (2012) highlights the growing importance of the role of account planning at the inter-company alignment and increased depth knowledge of customers (Ryals and Davies, 2013). Which it indicates that account planning can help achieve collaborative relationships (Tzempelikos and Gounaris, 2015). Key account plans became important “vehicles” to summarize activities with the strategic customer, and to link them into internal practices such as Top Management Involvement and the exploitation of marketing research insights (Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). Key account plan should be firmly rooted in corporate strategy as it uses the firm’s strategic resources. Corporate planning needs to give its input to key account planning, specifically focusing on the goal setting for the key accounts, and conversely, key account planning should feed corporate planning with investment needs and ideas for new offerings (Storbacka, 2012). Thus, the following hypothesis is generated:

H3. Account Planning moderates the relationship between Internal Alignment and KAM Program Results.

External Alignment and KAM Program Results. The external alignment is defined as the process by which we increase the understanding of the opportunities and concerns of key accounts and

jointly with the customer, we develop a value proposition and the process of delivering this value proposition (Storbacka, 2012). This may require adapting business models of the supplier firm and the client; as well as relational rules (Tuusjärvi and Moller, 2009). Therefore, the following hypothesis is generated:

H4. External alignment moderates the relationship between Internal Alignment and KAM Program Results.

Research Method

Design of the investigation

The objectives of this research study will be evaluated by the analysis of KAM attitudes and practices, for which a quantitative study, correlational and cross-sectional scope arises. The exhibition will consist of team members who are involved in KAM programs in several Latin American countries and in various industrial sectors. At the time of collecting information, it will be done through self-administered questionnaires.

Homburg et al. (2002) in his seminal work, use the KAM program as the unit of analysis because it covers relations with several important customers. Also, we note that the proposed scales revolve around this unit of analysis (as presented or require purification)

Richards and Jones (2009) in the same line of thought, considered in their proposed conceptual framework, KAM program as the unit of analysis because the expansion of knowledge at this level is more useful for all the team.

Therefore, the unit of analysis is the KAM program (at team level), so the analysis will be interpreted according to it.

Design support

We will use structural equation modeling to test our hypotheses, through self-administered surveys because they allow to reach larger samples and have a lower cost than interviews. To avoid bias

common method, we will use the procedures suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003) and Podsakoff & Organ (1986).

This study will be used as control variables country, competitive intensity and phase relationship.

Population and Sample

The effectiveness of the sample is related to the variety of industries that should participate. These cross-sectional samples will allow us to better generalization of findings (Geyskens, Steenkamp, Scheer and Kumar, 1996; Hooley, Lynch, and Shepherd, 1990; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993).

The sample we want to get, is mainly from various B2B companies established in Chile, Peru and Argentina, in the sectors of banking, insurance, mining, systems integration, software, hardware and telecommunications. Access to considerable statistical analysis that do not contain distortions sample is sought.

Operationalization of Constructs

We are going to use survey measures detailed in Table 2 and figure 2. For all constructs, we are going to use the seven-point Likert-type scales.

We are going to use the procedure suggested by Guesalaga (2014): The questionnaires will be available in English and Spanish. To make sure that the two instruments are consistent, one person will translate the questionnaire from English to Spanish, and then a second person will translate the Spanish version back to English; if we found differences in the translations, they will be reviewed by the translators until they reached an agreement. The questionnaires will be pre-tested with six key account managers (three for the English version and three for the Spanish version) from different industries and back- grounds. The final questionnaire will be sent to participants along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, the confidentiality of the individual responses, and the reports that they would receive in appreciation for participating in the study. A key aspect in this study is to clearly communicate to participants who should be considered the relevant top manager when completing the survey

Type	Construct	Definition	Operationalization (team level)
IV	Internal Alignment	Workman et al. (2003)	“esprit de corps”.
DV	Relationship Quality	Weitz & Bradford (1999)	Satisfaction, Trust and Commitment.
DV	Sales Performance	Guesalaga (2014)	Sales, Profit and Share of Wallet.
Moderator	Top Management involvement	Homburg et al. (2002)	Degree in which senior executives participate in the management of this type of customers.
Moderator	External Alignment	Storbacka (2012)	We need to adapt the scale from Birkinshaw et al. (2001).
Moderator	Account Planning	Tzempelikos & Gounaris (2015)	It ensures commitment from company management to assign the required resources.

Table 2

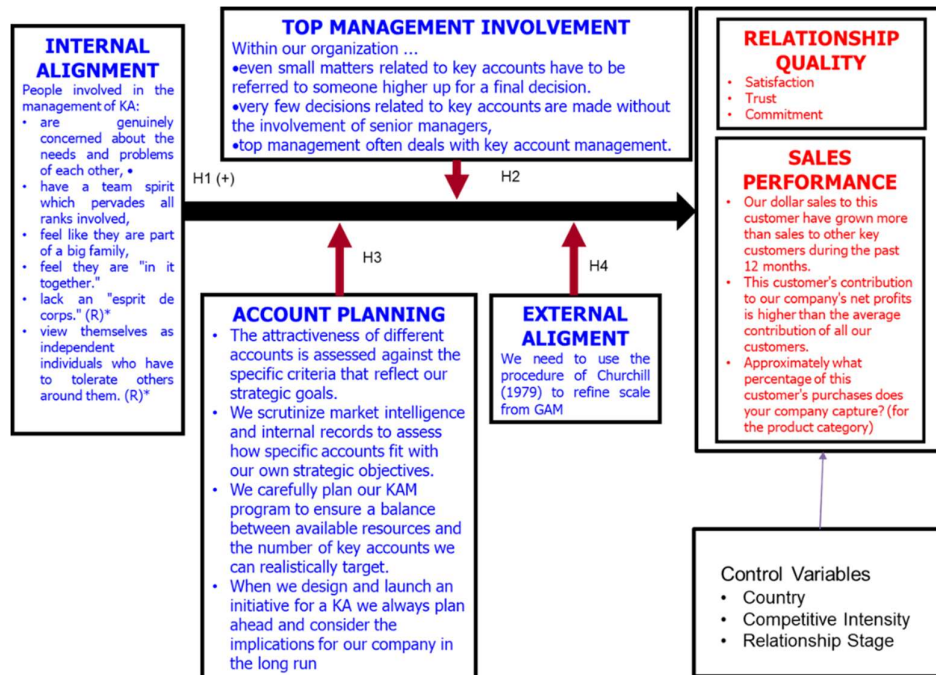


Figure 2

Limitations and Future Research

There are some limitations that we can mention and offer the opportunity for future research. Our study focuses on the internal alignment, top management involvement, external alignment and account planning. However, there may be other factors affecting the effectiveness of programs KAM. Future research may consider customer's purchasing strategy or the internal organization of the KAM program and thus contribute to a better understanding of the performance of KAM Programs.

A second limitation is that this study does not consider the idiosyncratic aspect of key accounts. Here we can mention, for example, the differences between private accounts and public sector accounts. According to Lilien (2016), there is virtually no academic work on the different levels of government, either in the US or any other country.

Finally, regarding account planning, which is critical to build loyalty and strengthen relationships with key customers, we can consider that further research to explore the incorporation of technology and social networks in the process of planning sales for these kind of customers (Lacoste, 2016).

Contributions

For academics, this study seeks a better understanding of Top Management Involvement, Alignment (internal and external) and Account Planning on the successful implementation of the KAM programs. In this specific case, we believe these variables can help us understand the achievement of these programs from a perspective that has not been widely studied.

Likewise, it will be important to understand from academia, the interaction between the internal and the external alignment under the umbrella of the KAM programs.

Possible practical implications have to do with a more active and close involvement of senior management in activities with these customers and therefore would be beneficial if they participate in drawing up the account plan for the most critical customers.

On the other hand, a practical understanding that non-alignment is detrimental to the smooth running of businesses, could have important implications on the expected results of the most important customers (key accounts). Emphasizing the role of managers in the ongoing pursuit of alignment at all levels because it is a dynamic phenomenon.

Also, you should consider from the management perspective, evaluation, selection and use of a tool of CRM (customer relationship management) in order to safeguard all information collected in the various plans account and allow adequate transition if there is a change in equipment on account or desired to carry out the development of long-term strategies, which involves deeper and detailed customer analysis.

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