

## Managerial Implications of KAM Research

Review of what academics say about KAM management issues

Article  
For KAM programme  
directors and academics

Key account management is not a new concept: it can be traced back to the 1960-s and 70s. There has been time for research to come up with some clear suggestions for managing KAM effectively, although some are still commonly overlooked in practice: for example, the need for cross functionality, the role of the key account manager as the leader of an internal team, a multifaceted approach to key account selection. This paper discusses critical managerial elements identified by researchers, even while it concludes that practice would benefit from further explorations into management in KAM.

### Are your management practices aligned with researched knowledge of KAM?

If not, presumably you have a good reason - but does it stack up against properly analysed findings from other companies? Implementation of KAM is most challenging in this area of management in the organisation, where company culture and long-held personal beliefs may clash with more objective recommendations. The authors of this article point out that while we may not have certainty, on a number of management issues we do have strong indications of how to proceed. This paper can be used by KAM-pursuing companies to check out where they have the right approach and where they have baulked at an important change, or just failed to realise the requirement.

The authors would like to see a direct feedback loop from knowledgeable managers to researchers that would establish whether findings are 'realistic, plausible and helpful in reshaping their practices'. Please contact Björn, Catherine or Kevin Wilson ([kevin.wilson@kedgebs.com](mailto:kevin.wilson@kedgebs.com)) if your company is prepared to be involved in KAM research.

## Managerial Implications of KAM Research on Key Account Management

Björn S. Ivens (*corresponding author*)  
Otto-Friedrich-University  
Feldkirchenstraße 21, D-96052 Bamberg  
Germany  
[bjorn.iven@uni-bamberg.de](mailto:bjorn.iven@uni-bamberg.de)

Catherine Pardo  
EMLYON Business School  
23, avenue Guy de Collongue  
69134 Ecully Cedex, France  
[pardo@em-lyon.com](mailto:pardo@em-lyon.com)

### ABSTRACT

An important body of academic literature discusses KAM. Our purpose is to identify what the most important managerial implications from this research are.

### 1. Introduction

Strategic customers are often referred to as key accounts (KAs) and the management approach used by suppliers to handle this specific type of relationship is typically labelled key account management (KAM). According to Ivens and Pardo (2007, p.472), "KAM is a concept through which companies introduce the principle of relationship marketing into their customer policy and become closer to the customer. They select important customers in order to - based upon an increased individualization of business processes - better interact with them and possibly integrate them into value creation".

Our work provides a longitudinal analysis of the implications the academic literature on KAM has formulated for practitioners based on the considerable number of empirical studies conducted over

the past decades. KAM represents a major organizational effort and requires important resources. Although it has emerged as a managerial concept in the 60's, scholars have not identified a unique "best practice" for the implementation of KAM. Rather, they have shown that different types of KAM exist and that none of the different KAM types observed systematically leads to optimal performance outcomes. Thus, we expect that when implementing KAM programs managers could benefit from advice formulated by researchers who analyse KAM practices, their various forms, the boundary conditions for performance, and who analyse them following a rigorous methodological approach.

Our work differs from prior KAM reviews, such as the one conducted by Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) that contrasted the KAM literature and the topics considered as critical by practitioners. Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) focused their analysis on the topics studied by academia. Our research moves the focus from research topics to managerial implications. As compared to the days when the first studies on KAM were published some 35 years ago, have we improved our ability to not only provide theoretical implications but also relevant implications for managers concerned with the introduction, ongoing management, and modification of KAM programs?

The remainder of our work is organized as follows. First, after recalling the main aspects of inter-organizational interfaces and the KAM concept, we briefly show how the issue fits into the general interactive networked business landscape as proposed by the IMP Group. Second, we discuss the relationship between managerial implications and managerial relevancy. We then review the managerial implications formulated in a sample of academic KAM articles. We finally discuss the nature of these implications and explore sources for practices (whether they are the ones of scholars or managers) that could help "*spelling out more effectively the managerial implications*" of research findings (IMP Group, 2014).

## **2. Method**

In order to generate an appropriate set of academic publications for our review, we entered search terms such as 'key account management', 'national account management' or 'strategic account management' into the EBSCO database. We made no restriction with respect to a time span and the results confirmed that the main body of KAM related research has been published from 1979 on. Our review includes articles published until the first half of 2015.

The 51 articles identified using this approach are listed in appendix 1. We added the four MSI reports written by Shapiro and Moriarty between 1980 and 1984 because they constitute frequently cited documents, in particular in early KAM research.

We read the articles focusing on managerial contributions. We searched for keywords such as 'managers', 'practitioners', 'marketers', 'managerial', 'business' and all turns of phrases using normative words such as "should", "must", etc. Moreover: we paid analysed how authors introduce the concept of managerial implications as – or not – a purpose of their work. This approach led us not to focus exclusively on 'managerial implications' sections but also to read introduction sections and other parts of the text to identify the positioning of the contribution relative to managerial implications.

## **3. Findings**

### ***3.1 Managerial implications in early KAM research***

In this section, we review fundamental contributions to the key account management literature that have been made during the first years in which KAM emerged as an academic topic, at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s.

Stevenson and Page (1979) clearly orientate their article toward a managerial purpose; they propose to "help" marketers to "*determine if national account marketing is relevant to their specific circumstances*" (p. 94). As a result of their work, they present a "*decision tree*" and invite the "*marketing practitioners*" to consider it as a decision tool "*to determine the appropriate strategy*" (p. 99). An industrial marketer in charge of implementing a KAM strategy in a company is then invited by the authors to consider first, the degree of concentration in the industry and, second, the relative size of its company in comparison to others, and the recommendation follows: if the company is a large one in a concentrated market, then a KAM program is recommended.

Stevenson (1980) building on Stevenson and Page (1979) is less strongly managerially oriented, and defines the purpose of his article as to report "*on criteria used to determine which customers should be classified as national accounts*" (p. 133). Nevertheless, the article provides direct managerial implications and invite "users" of KAM program: first, not to use the "practice" on all customers and, second, to consider a set of explicit criteria (1/ centralized purchasing, 2/ establishment locations, and 3/ buyer volume) in determining which accounts to classify as national accounts.

Stevenson (1981) bases his new work on the statement that only "*little research*" exists to "*help industrial marketers determine the value*" of KAM (p. 119). But, surprisingly, the managerial contributions of this new work are less clearly visible compared to previous articles. Results from the study carried out do not translate in "advice" for managers. This may be due to the limited data gathered which make it difficult any kind of "*generalization*" (p. 123).

In Barrett (1986) the "managerial" purpose of the work is clearly mentioned; the "hope" of the author being that "*management, especially marketing management, of a seller in an industrial market, will be better able to determine if it is right for their company and to develop customized criteria for establishing a national account organization*" (p. 64). The author discusses a set of implications with an objective of identifying "*what all this means to the business manager*" (p. 71). Barrett's objective is then to provide managers with "*concrete, customized methods and criteria to determine if [a KAM program] is an alternative*" (p. 72). What managers can learn from Barrett (1986)? The article refines previous works and proposes to consider new reasons why a KAM programs could be considered. The implications section is replete with sentences formulated in the normative turn of what "should be done" or "must be done" by the managers. A KAM program *should be* considered if "*the product is costly, complex or requires a major commitment in time or resource*"; A KAM program. Following Stevenson (1980), a KAM program should be considered if there is a bilateral concentration (seller industry AND buyer market) but Barrett (1986) says that "*buyer market concentration is a more important factor*" which means that sellers "*should look at that regardless to their own concentration*" (p. 72). A KAM program *should be* considered when a buyer purchases a large percentage of a sellers output (e.g. > 70%). A KAM program *should be* considered (for defensive purpose) if competitors offer KAM programs. Second, Barrett (1986) provides managers with advice concerning the key account manager who "*must display [...] leadership characteristics*" (p. 72); whose "*position must<sup>1</sup> have esteem and power within the selling company*" (p. 73) and who "*should be skilled in a specific manner*" (p. 73). Third, once key account customers are identified, Barrett (1986) indicate that "*companies should put their resources*" on them. (p. 73).

From 1980 to 1984, four reports authored by Benson P. Shapiro and Rowland T. Moriarty were published by the Marketing Science Institute. They present results of a research project on National Account Management. This piece of work is relevant with respect to managerial implications of academic works since it was conducted with a strong managerial orientation.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Godfather is the "proponent" of the NAM approach in a company. The equivalent for the "product champion"

From their very first paper, Shapiro and Moriarty (1980) clearly indicate the aim they pursue as to "*help management address [...] problems*" (p. III). But this first article (within the series of four) is rather dedicated to an analysis of the background, key issues etc. of KAM. Although relevant dimensions of KAM take shape (for instance the difference between "selling to a key account" and "servicing a key account"; the role of KA managers; KAM organization), they do not translate into direct implications for managers.

Shapiro and Moriarty (1982)'s section titled "project background" explicitly mentions the managerial objective of the work and introduces the whole MSI project (gathering the four Shapiro & Moriarty's papers 1980, 1982, 1984a, 1984b) as a project "*to investigate how firms should and do market their products and services to firms that are both large and complex in their needs*" (Shapiro & Moriarty, 1982, p. 1). As emphasized by the authors, "*the research is intended to be of interest to thoughtful business people*" (p. 1). But, though openly positioned with a definitely managerial purpose, the paper remains a very descriptive one, at least in all its first part dealing with the nature of national account management and the definition of a national account. The second part which proposes a "NAM Life Cycle", though being largely descriptive, nevertheless provides, in addition, a set of "recommendations" to managers. These recommendations, are rarely written in a direct normative way - though such normative sentences exist, for instance the following one "*to be effective the Godfather<sup>2</sup> must have substantial political power and understanding*" (p. 11) – but rather indicate what can "likely happen" if certain choices are made, or certain circumstances gathered. For instance, if there is already a sense of cooperation between the operation units within the supplier company, then, KAM "*is likely to be accepted and succeed*" (p. 18) or a KAM program "*is likely to be formed when there is a high level of centralized purchasing*" (p. 19). But there is no specific section dedicated to the managerial implications. The Shapiro and Moriarty (1984a)'s article is largely dedicated to the organizational aspect of KAM. The managerial purpose takes the form of the indication provided to managers to help them choose between different organizational options and may be considered as visible through sentences formulated in an imperative turn, for instance: "*all these function must be integrated into the account management function*" (p. 28); "*the management structure and system for these people must give them appropriate career paths...*" (p. 29) or sentences with "suggestion" made to managers, for instance: "*we suggest that a span of five<sup>3</sup> is a "safe bet" to begin with...*" (p. 31). But again, no specific section or sub-section is gathering all managerial implications.

Finally, the last paper in the MSI series shares the same normative phrasing with the previous ones, to for example, "*careful analysis and allocation processes must be put in place<sup>4</sup>*" (p. 18) ; "*managers [...] must decide how much variation they will encourage<sup>5</sup>*" (p. 17) ; "*urgent information must be handled through open lines of communication<sup>6</sup>*" (p. 21). Furthermore, in this paper, a total sub-section dedicated to the "specific activities" (the operation of specific parts of the organization beyond the account managers (p. 23) is written in a more direct "advices for managers" style. The authors propose "*some general advice*" (p. 23) such as "*we suggest that a manager attempt to develop very detailed set of specifications for each support areas<sup>7</sup>*" (p. 23) or "*we suggest that the national account managers and NAM program managers work to get the managers of support functions actively involved*" (p. 23).

---

<sup>3</sup> This refers to the number of key account managers a manager can reasonably manage.

<sup>4</sup> Here, processes refer to the processes to deliver specific services to key accounts.

<sup>5</sup> Here, variation refers to the degree of specificity of service provided (variation from standard service) to key accounts

<sup>6</sup> Here, the comment concerns the communication system to be developed for KAs. Urgent information (as opposed to routine information) is "out of the ordinary" information, particularly time-sensitive (e.g., information about a delivery failure).

<sup>7</sup> Here, the authors talk about what kind of support different functions or departments of the supplier company may bring to the KAM entity.

### **3.2 KAM implications formulated in the 1990s**

In their review of the KAM literature, Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) identify 18 articles published in the period between 1989 and 1998. Various topics are dealt with during this period, but two directions are taken by academic research on KAM, that is, (a) additional studies on topics developed during the previous decade, for example, KA selection or the nature of KA customers (Pels, 1992; Sharma, 1997; or authors attempting to refine the selection of KA customers using more ad-hoc criteria, e.g., Dishman & Nitse, 1998); and (b) articles dealing with issues related to KAM program *implementation*, for example at a global level, in the form of a KAM process (Millman & Wilson, 1999; Pardo et al., 1995; Weilbaker & Weeks, 1997), or referring to specific aspects of this implementation, such as the organizational aspect of KAM (e.g., where to locate a KAM unit in the organizational chart), how to dimension it (Dishman & Nitse, 1998; Kempeners and Van der Hart, 1999), the roles and characteristics of the KA managers (Weeks and Stevens, 1997), the KA team (Cespedes, 1992; Pardo, 1999), or the nature and specificity of relationships with KA customers (Lambe & Spekman, 1997; Sengupta, Krapfel, & Pusateri, 1997).

Weilbaker and Weeks (1997) discuss the relationship between scholars and practitioner associations. Introducing the NAMA (National Account Management Association, which becomes the SAMA a few years later) the authors promote developing closer links between academics and the association. *"Instead of being receivers of information, academics have an opportunity to be the ones that develop and disseminate new information on national account management. If academics do not respond to this call, then businesses will take matters into their own hand and the academic will be on the outside looking in"* and ask for *"theoretical and applied research regarding NAM"* (Weilbaker & Weeks, 1997, p. 56).

Papers published in the *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing (JBIM)* during this period (Boles et al, 1999; Kempener & Van der Hart, 1999; Spencer, 1999) deserve specific attention in the sense that the journal proposes an executive summary provided to *"allow managers and executives a rapid appreciation of the content of this issue"*. For instance, in the 1999 *JBIM* Special Issue, after a synthesis of the *"main practical and organizational issues"* the editor provides a checklist of issues a firm must consider when implementing a key account program. These issues range from internal strategic ones, such as board level commitment or an open corporate culture, to operational issues, such as *"links between key account management and other functions"* or the *"translation from traditional to key account customer"*. Despite its relevance this list does not provide indications how management should deal with these issues and which choices produce which outcomes.

Sharma's (1997) objective is to identify the nature of companies that would appreciate being treated as KAs. While in the introduction section the author promises to provide *"implications for sales managers"* these implications remain rather limited. For instance, the article suggests that *"when firms develop key account programs they should be careful that their customers make decisions that are multifunctional, multi-level and take a longer time"* (p. 35); or it recommends the *"ideal sales organisation"* in business to administration KA relationships *"will have the sales personnel make the initial contact and a support department for proper follow-up and fulfilment of the buying organizations procedural requirements"* (p. 38).

Lambe and Spekman (1997) propose to interpret KAM through the lens of alliance management. They invite managers not to define a KA only on the basis of their sales potential but rather on the basis of their *"collaborative behaviour/tendencies"* (p. 71) and to look for companies that have *"a strong recognition of the potential benefits of collaboration, and a desire to work in such a fashion"* (p. 73). The authors also describe several traits of a key account manager in charge of "NAM alliances": he must have *"a broad base of intra-company experience"*; he needs to be *"effective administrator and manager"* (p. 71) and have not only *"a thorough knowledge of their customer's industry but also of their own organization"* (p. 71).

Dishman and Nitse (1998) investigate the premises behind the implementation of a KAM program. Though the presence of a "managerial implications" section, "advices" to managers remain limited with an invitation made for a more enlarged view of what a key customer is : "*firms need to examine their national account not only in light of their sales volume...*" (p. 8), "*accounts need to be selected with regard to detailed information...*" (p. 8)

Sengupta et al. (1997) narrowing the concepts of KAM and relationship marketing examine the role of switching costs in KA relationships. There is no specific "managerial section" but the final sentences of the discussion part provide advices to the "selling firm" which "*needs to allocate resources from all over the organization*" (the key account manager is then seen as an actor of internal marketing) and that "*ultimately a higher level of management within the selling firm must take responsibility for allocating the necessary resources*". (p. 16)

Weeks and Stevens (1997) focus on the adequate training to be developed for key account managers, they wish to offer "recommendations" to practitioners to "*move toward strengthening national account management sales training programs*." (p. 423). The conclusion provides a list of eight advices given to managers to engage in productive training for key account managers. These advices range from "*Management should identify measurable objectives that they want to achieve*" to "*management should request feedback*" etc.

In Kempeners and Van der Hart (1997) a model is presented that can be used as a guide for companies that are planning to implement an account management system or want to improve their account management system further. The authors clearly position themselves relative to the managerial scope of KAM research "*We think that formulating useful guidelines is possible. The decision-making model for developing account management systems we have presented here will be helpful for the design and implementation of account management systems*".

Pels (1992) investigates several aspects of KAM strategies and their implementation. She proposes to "*help the selling firm to identify the marketing team which should face each of its key clients*". The whole article provides "tools" to run a deep analysis of a customer so as to determine its status and the nature of marketing team to dedicate. Throughout the article, managers are encouraged to carry out the analysis. For instance: "*the supplier must try to assess the level of (un)certainly which its customers have*" or "*the selling firm must try to influence the partner's perception*" (p. 11). A case is also provided as a manner to show the manager how to use the different "analysis tools" proposed throughout the article.

### **3.3 Managerial implications in recent KAM research**

Subsequent to early publications that discussed fundamental issues in KAM, the stream of research that has been published from the late 1980s on is often dedicated to the development of a more precise understanding of KAM practices and the implementation of KAM programs. Although not a general characteristic of this research, there is a tendency for authors to use more large-scale quantitative research approaches rather than single cases or their professional experience when writing about KAM as compared to the early years of KAM research. Several issues are at the center of this more recent KAM research. Three of them emerge as central topics several authors investigate: KAM organizational implementation, KAM performance, and KAM actors (such as teams or KA managers).

A first question concerns the homogeneity of KAM when implemented as a management concept. The most prominent study seeks to identify configurations of KAM implementation. Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2002) collected data from 121 US companies and 264 German companies practicing KAM. Using cluster analysis and studying four dimensions of KAM implementation, that is, actors, resources, activities, and formalization, they identify eight ways of implementing KAM in practice. They find that firms with KAM programs perform better than firms without KAM. In their managerial implications section they inform practitioners that cross-functional, dominant KAM shows the best effectiveness.

They stress that KAM requires the support of the whole organisation, not only of the sales function. They highlight that top management support is particularly important for KAM success. Moreover, they stress that when establishing a program, managers need to answer four questions: (1) what should be done for key accounts?, (2) who should do it?, (3) with whom in the organisation is cooperation needed?; (4) how formalized should the program be?

In the discussion section of his article, Storbacka (2012) addresses related issues. With respect to the design dimensions of a KAM program he asks "*whether elements are reinforcing and whether there are critical elements that set the foundation for configuring effective programs*" (p. 269). His conclusion is that managers will need to focus particularly on KAM roles and goals, account portfolio composition, and value propositions for KAs as framing elements as they set the scene and determine the prerequisites for other elements of KAM design. Marcos-Cuevas et al. (2014), who explore the different strategic and operational dilemmas in KAM implementation argue that their research "*provide a valuable map*" a "*set of guidelines*" for practitioners (p. 1223). Indeed, on aspects such as: incentives, nature of tasks, or budget, they provide "lessons for managers" (p. 1223). For instance, managers are advised to manage a central budget at the beginning of KAM. They are advised of tensions triggered by embedding KA tasks to staff with a "*strong professional identity*" and thus encouraged to prefer KA functions spanning organizational silos.

A second group of studies focuses on explanations for *KAM performance*. Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003) provide partial support for Storbacka's suggestion. Based on the same data set as in Homburg, Workman and Jensen (2002), they study intra-organizational determinants of KAM effectiveness. They conclude that managers need to ask themselves five important questions about their KAM program: (1) To what extent does our firm actually do differential activities for our KAs?, (2) Does our firm proactively initiate these activities?, (3) Is top management involved in KAM?, (4) Has our firm developed a culture of esprit de corps among those involved in KAM?, (5) Do KA coordinators have sufficient access to marketing and sales resources? They find that these factors have a positive impact on KAM effectiveness while KAM formalisation has a negative effect on effectiveness. From an IMP Group perspective it is interesting to note that their results provide evidence for the pertinence of the A-R-A model since actors, resources, and activities in KAM seem to matter much more than the formalization of KAM programs.

Focusing on effectiveness too, Davies and Ryals (2014) advise managers that through the implementation of KAM programs they can expect to become more effective in improving customer relationships whereas it is less probable that they succeed in reducing costs of interaction. They see this as an important result to bear in mind when formulating expectations at the launch of KAM. In their research, Gounaris and Tzempelikos (2013) develop the concept of KAM Orientation. They encourage suppliers to strengthen their orientation toward KAs and propose that their KAMO scale should serve as a diagnostic tool. They warn managers about the cost of customization a KA relationship implies and encourage managers to shift from the traditional sales grounded view to a long-term view of KAM. The same authors (Gounaris and Tzempelikos 2014) remind practitioners that the adoption of a KAM orientation allows improving the quality of a supplier's relationship with a KA.

Sharma (2006) studied KAM success and failure factors, too. However, his research was based on an analysis of 29 successful and 28 unsuccessful KA relations of a US consulting company with their KA customers. He advised that managers should monitor KAs with scorecards. He posits that four factors need particularly to be monitored: (1) Investments by the marketers in customer-specific processes (positive effect), (2) Levels of dissatisfaction on the side of the KA (negative effect), (3) Social/personal bonds must be maintained with the KA, KA managers are central actors that need to be retained (positive effect), (4) Environmental changes in order to identify threats and needs for adaptation in KAM (negative effects).

A third perspective certain researchers pursue is studying the role of individual KA managers or of KA teams in the implementation of KAM programs. They formulate implications for example for the

selection of KA managers and teams or for their training or remuneration. Hence, this research is located at the intersection between marketing/sales and human resources management. For example, Davies and Ryals (2013), based on an empirical comparison of attitudes and behaviours shown, on the one hand, by KA managers and, on the other, by sales representatives advise firms to carefully determine career paths of future KA managers. Specifically, they argue that recruiting former sales people as KA managers may be possible, but requires training as well as specific incentive systems in order to ensure that the required attitude change (e.g. from short-term to long-term orientation) occurs. Gounaris and Tzempelikos (2014), emphasize the role to be played by managers at middle or even lower levels to support decentralized decision making (that the KAM orientation supposes). They draw managers' attention to the time and training investments such a change requires. Guesalaga (2014) gives advice to both key account managers and senior executives about what they "should" or "must" do to support KAM performance.

Finally, several studies analyse the actual nature of the relationship between supplier and KA. Lacoste (2012), for example, analyses the reason why KAs co-optate with suppliers. She formulates implications for both supplier and KA. She calls for KAs to organize their purchasing department in a new way with senior buyers taking care of cooperation and junior buyers organising tenders as well as supplier benchmarking in order to maintain both a relational and transactional dimension to the exchange with the supplier. She also encourages suppliers to 'decompartmentalise' their KAM structure so as to "find synergies" and "create relational benefits that can be offered to different non-competitive key accounts" (p. 656). Lacoste and Blois (2015) analyse the relationship between supplier and KA from a power perspective. They position their research as a 'framework' for suppliers to "think about their customer's and their own power" (p. 569) in order to better align their own strategy with a KA's strategy.

#### **4. Discussion**

The aim of our paper is to revisit the managerial or practical implications of scholarly research in the field of KAM. In this section, we provide a synthesis of the main characteristics of the managerial contributions provided by the KAM literature as they flow from our review and we discuss each one of these issues.

##### ***4.1 The evolution of the literature's managerial focus***

A first observation concerns the evolution of the KAM literature's managerial *purpose*. A clear managerial purpose is affirmed in the very first academic publications that study an emerging phenomenon. This is particularly the case from an academic point of view and prior to these papers, references to KAM are present only in some practitioner oriented journals or academic conferences (see for instance Lang (1973) quoted by Stevenson & Page (1979)). From a practitioner point of view, the KAM phenomenon has benefited from the creation of the NAMA (National Account Management Association) in 1964 in the US, and the connection has soon been made between NAMA and the academic world. This context (emerging nature of the issue and the practitioner/academic connection at an early stage) may explain the importance given to managerial scope in the first academic works discussing KAM: there was a demand (see Weilbaker & Weeks 1997, p. 49) emanating from the companies (mainly big ones (see Shapiro & Moriarty, 1982, p. 3) which may explain their capacity to connect with academia) and relayed by associations (NAMA) - thus clearly audible by scholars - about the phenomenon. This may explain the managerial orientation, at an early stage, of KAM academic works.

For the following periods (mainly the 1990's), a managerial concern is also systematically present in academic research, whether it is stated as central "purpose" or as "implications" of the theoretical results produced. Yet, the managerial purpose is no longer stated as the main concern. Once KAM (thanks to studies conducted during the preceding period of research) is considered a phenomenon that deserves academic attention, one observes a sophistication of methodological while the concern



for managerial implications diminishes. Yet, managerial implications never totally disappear from academic articles.

One possible interpretation of this evolution is that – through its very nature - KAM is a predominantly managerial phenomenon that is regularly theorized while maintaining a strong link with its managerial "roots". Indeed, as compared to certain other concepts studied in organizational and inter-organizational research, such as for example organizational culture, KAM constitutes a quite clearly described management practice and, hence, a very concrete concept when it comes to implementation issues. Moreover, KAM has spread, over the years, from being practiced by some larger firms who acted as pioneers to a considerable number of large and medium-sized firms practicing the concept in various forms. As such, academics may assume that given the growing number of empirical cases it becomes increasingly easy and relevant to study the concept.

At the same time, one might argue that the strong scholarly interest for KAM – together with the fast growing body of theoretical knowledge about the KAM concept, KAM practices, and KAM actors – has helped rooting and stabilizing the shape of the managerial phenomenon. It is part of the evolutionary path many fields of research follow to apply more large-scale quantitative analyses of the phenomenon they focus on as the number of cases available for analysis increases and fundamental theoretical issues related to the very nature of the phenomenon have been clarified.

#### **4.2 Different types of managerial implications**

We also observe that managerial implications come in a variety of *forms*, such as criteria to be considered by decision makers (Stevenson & Page, 1979; which criteria to take into account to select a KA); warnings (see for instance Barrett, 1986: KAM is an expensive practice and requires specific skills); advice for managing a specific situation (see for instance Barrett, 1986: a KAM position *must* have power); or Shapiro & Moriarty (1984b: an allocation process *must* be put in place). In the more recent periods, with the topic becoming more mature, we observe checklist type of implications (Kempeners & Van der Hart, 1997; Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014; Pels, 1992) reminding managers of the mandatory steps in KAM (in account selection, organization, etc. ).

Moreover, the individual management position addressed by the implications varies. The targeted position may be the one of an industrial marketer (Stevenson & Page; 1979), or it is referred to as the one of a seller (Barrett; 1986), a manager (Davies & Ryals, 2014; Shapiro and Moriarty, 1980), or more globally as the executive or the practitioner (Gounaris & Tzempelikos, 2014; Guesalaga, 2014; Marcos-Cuevas et al, 2014). Unfortunately, most authors, so far, do not express more precisely whom exactly they address through their managerial implications. Yet, it makes a difference whether they are addressed at a key account manager, a member of a KAM team, the head of a KAM team or a KAM department, the CEO of a firm or a business unit, a manager from a different sub-unit inside the firm who is involved in business processes directed at the key account, a representative of the key account firm, or another stakeholder of a given KAM system. In order to improve the managerial value of the implications formulated, a more specific discussion of what a research result means for different stakeholders may augment the value of the research finding for practitioners.

#### **4.3 Managerial scope of implications**

Our research suggests that the sophistication of managerial recommendations remains rather limited. Concerning research dating from the early period, the limited normative scope is in line with the *emerging* nature of the KAM phenomenon in companies. This may explain that recommendations, at that time, only cover very fundamental KAM issues such as the selection of KAs, the profile of KA managers, alternatives for organizational implementation. Still, this remains a partial explanation. Indeed, the writings of Shapiro and Moriarty (particularly 1984a) already provide a strong academic foundation. The analysis of the KAM situation using Lawrence and Lorsch's (1967) differentiation and integration concepts represents an important contribution.

In the following periods (the 90's and the most recent period), the scope of managerial still does not evolve strongly. Yet, the field is no longer emerging. This observation is interesting as, from a conceptual vantage point, important issues are dealt with during this period. For instance, the emphasis put on the importance of differentiating key account "management" from key account "selling" (Millman & Wilson, 1995) or the necessity to consider the KA manager not only as the manager of a relationship with a customer but also as manager of an internal KA team (Pardo, 1999). Despite the importance of these issues for research and practice, their translation into actionable advice for managers managerial audiences remained limited.

Overall, we come to the conclusion that while extant research contains a relevant body of empirical studies, and while it is safe to say that certain general implications that are of practical relevance emerge from this research, we are far from a situation in which most of the questions practitioners may or should ask can be answered with a high level of certainty.

While many scholars contributing to the academic KAM literature discuss the practical implications of their work, in many cases the implications contain questions rather than advice (e.g. Homburg, Workman & Jensen, 2002) or they point to dilemmas rather than solutions (e.g. Marcos-Cuevas et al., 2014). From our vantage point, this situation is neither surprising nor negative. It is not surprising because KAM is a managerial practice that is, at the same time, relatively young (since in practice it truly emerged in the 1970s and 1980s), requires longer periods of time for comprehensive implementation in practice (i.e. planned change management processes involving an adaptation of organizational structures, resource allocation, or management skills), and is still evolving (e.g. through the extension of national account management programs to European, corporate, or global account management programs or through the infusion of digital components in core KAM processes). Moreover, the situation is not negative because it reflects academic prudence in formulating normative statements about what managers should/ should not do. Hunter (2001) criticizes the "*widespread belief that single studies establish findings*" (2001, p. 149).

What may be lacking in order to strengthen the relevance of managerial implications in academic studies? A direct feedback loop from knowledgeable managers to the researchers that allows (a) evaluating whether the findings appear to be realistic and plausible and (b) determining if managers find the results helpful for reshaping their operative and/or strategic practices would likely sharpen the scholarly eye with respect to the potential impact of current and future research projects. More generally, it is our vantage point that stronger ties between researchers and managers may be helpful.

#### **4.4 Toward replicative and quantitative KAM studies?**

In addition to the suggestions formulated above, we believe that another aspect may help increase the managerial relevance of KAM research. This aspect relates to the question whether the results obtained through extant studies are generalizable or whether they are too strongly dependent on their context. Hunter (2001) argues for the desperate scholarly need for replications in all fields of research. We believe that his arguments are valid in the context of KAM research in which contingency factors are important when interpreting results of empirical studies. Replication studies are helpful not only in laboratory research environments. They acknowledge that several factors may limit the generalizability of empirical findings, such as, for example, sampling error or construct operationalizations.

In the field of KAM, to the best of our knowledge, there are no published replications of empirical studies. At best, certain authors focus on the same concept (e.g. KAM effectiveness). However, authors building on earlier work in the same topic area then argue that they pursue an approach that differs from other authors' work in order to provide more detailed insights (e.g. Davies & Ryals, 2014). While this fundamental argument is valid, in one perspective, because it may provide fine-grained results on a specific issue or construct, from another perspective, it limits the comparability of study results and, hence, does not strengthen scholarly ability to formulate reliable advice for managers.

As a consequence, it could be an aim of future research into KAM to conduct more replications in order to turn today's managerial implications into stronger statements on which managers may more readily rely in decision situations. Such replications do not have to be perfectly replicated studies (i.e., studying the precise same dependent and independent variables using the precise identical measures with the same procedure drawing samples from the same population). Given the dynamic and heterogeneous character of KAM in managerial practice, even "imperfect" replications that aim at testing the relative stability of findings across industry contexts, cultures, countries, or time would already add value. These replications may be the necessary condition for scholars to be able to not only formulate some initial ideas about what their research may mean for managerial practice, but to confidently move towards more normative statements about causal relationships between managerial action, mediating and moderating variables, and economic outcomes in KAM.

More generally, the base of empirical results available is still relatively limited and quantitative research allowing testing of causal relationships remains scarce. In their review of empirical approaches used in extant KAM studies, Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) show that out of 79 empirical articles the largest part relied upon qualitative analysis or descriptive statistics. Thus, as compared to many phenomena studied, for example, in organizational research, predictions about if-then-relationships in KAM are hardly available. We believe that this state-of-the-art should be seen as an encouragement for scholars. It does not necessarily imply the use of large samples, for example for structural equation modelling. Increasingly, methods allowing analyses of small samples are now available. For example, qualitative comparative analysis (e.g. Fiss 2007, 2011; Leischnig et al. 2014) provides interesting opportunities. For example, it allows performing contrarian case analysis that shows that opposite relationships may occur for cases from the same sample, that is, X relates to Y positively, negatively and not at all in the same set of data - even when the main effect of X on Y is positive and substantial (Ordanini et al., 2013). In this context, researchers may consider applying complexity theory and configural analysis to have a deeper and richer perspective on data than we currently have in quantitative studies on KAM (Woodside 2013, 2016).

Future research may create value for practitioners by enlarging the empirical basis, be it through additional case-based qualitative research or through research including multiple objects of research, for the formulation of managerial implications as well as by strengthening the reliability of such implications through replication studies.

## References

- Amabile, T. M., Patterson, C., Mueller, J., Wojcik, T., Odomirok, P. W., Marsh, M., & Kramer, S. J. (2001). Academic-practitioner collaboration in management research: A case of cross-profession collaboration. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(2), 418-431.
- Ankers, P., & Brennan, R. (2002). Managerial relevance in academic research: an exploratory study. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 20(1), 15-21.
- Baraldi, E., La Rocca, A., & Perna, A. (2014). Good for science, but which implications for business? An analysis of the managerial implications in high-impact B2B marketing articles published between 2003 and 2012. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 29(7/8), 574-592.
- Barrett, J. (1986). Why major account selling works. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 15(1), 63-73.
- Boles, J., Johnston, W., & Gardner, A. (1999). The selection and organization of national accounts: a North American perspective. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 14(4), 264-282.
- Carter, C. R. (2008). Knowledge production and knowledge transfer: closing the research-practice gap. *Journal of Supply Chain Management*, 44(2), 78-82.
- Cespedes, F. V. (1992). Sales coordination: an exploratory study. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 12(3), 13-29.
- Cunningham, M. T., & Homse, E. (1982). An interaction approach to marketing strategy. *International Marketing, Purchasing of Industrial Goods/Ed. by H. Håkansson. New York: John Wiley, Sons*, 323-345.

- Cunningham, M. T., & Homse, E. (1990). Controlling the marketing-purchasing interface: resource development and organisational implications. In *Understanding business markets: Interaction, relationships and networks*. D. Ford (Ed.). London: Academic Press, 104-123.
- Cunningham, M. T. (1986). The British approach to Europe. In *Strategies for international industrial marketing*, Turnbull, P. W., & Valla, J. P. (Eds.), Croom Helm, London, 165-203.
- Davies, I. A., & Ryals, L. J. (2013). Attitudes and behaviours of key account managers: Are they really any different to senior sales professionals?. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 42(6), 919-931.
- Davies, I. A., & Ryals, L. J. (2014). The effectiveness of Key Account Management practices. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(7), 1182-1194.
- Dishman, P., & Nitse, P. S. (1998). National accounts revisited: New lessons from recent investigations. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 27(1), 1-9.
- Easton, G. (2000). Is relevance relevant? *Communication to the 16th IMP Conference, Bath, UK*. <http://www.impgroup.org/uploads/papers/50.pdf>
- Fiss, P. C. (2007). A set-theoretic approach to organizational configurations. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(4), 1180-1198.
- Fiss, P. C. (2011). Building better causal theories: a fuzzy set approach to typologies in organization research. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(2), 393-420.
- Geuens, M. (2011). Where does business research go from here? Food-for-thought on academic papers in business research. *Journal of Business Research*, 64(10), 1104-1107.
- Gounaris, S., & Tzempelikos, N. (2014). Relational key account management: Building key account management effectiveness through structural reformations and relationship management skills. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(7), 1110-1123.
- Guesalaga, R. (2014). Top management involvement with key accounts: The concept, its dimensions, and strategic outcomes. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(7), 1146-1156.
- Guesalaga, R., & Johnston, W. (2010). What's next in key account management research? Building the bridge between the academic literature and the practitioners' priorities, *Industrial Marketing Management*, 39(7), 1063-1068.
- Gulati, R. (2007). Tent Poles, Tribalism, and Boundary Spanning: The Rigor-Relevance Debate in Management Research, *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(4), 775-782.
- Homburg, C., Workman, J. P., Jensen, O. (2002). A Configurational Perspective on KAM. *Journal of Marketing*, 66(2), 38-60.
- Hunter, J. E. (2001). The desperate need for replications. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(1), 149-158.
- IMP Group (1990). *Understanding business markets: Interaction, relationships and networks*. D. Ford (Ed.). London: Academic Press.
- IMP Group (2014). IMP – Making sense of the interactive business world. *Call for paper for the Symposium 2016*. <http://www.impgroup.org/symposium2016.php>
- Ivens, B. S., & Pardo, C. (2007). Are key account relationships different? Empirical results on supplier strategies and customer reactions. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 36(4), 470-482.
- Ivens, B. S., Pardo, C., Salle, R., & Cova, B. (2009). Relationship keyness: The underlying concept for different forms of key relationship management. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 38(5), 513-519.
- Jaworski, B. J. (2011). On managerial relevance. *Journal of Marketing*, 75(4), 211-224.
- Kempeners, M. A., & Van der Hart, H. W. (1999). Designing account management organizations. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 14(4), 310-335.
- Lambe, C. J., & Spekman, R. E. (1997). National account management: large account selling or buyer-supplier alliance?. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 17(4), 61-74.
- Lang, R.H. (1973). National Account Selling. *Speech presented to an American Management Association Seminar, Chicago, February 15*.
- Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). Differentiation and integration in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 12, 1-47.
- Leischnig, A., Geigenmueller, A., & Lohmann, S. (2014). On the role of alliance management capability, organizational compatibility, and interaction quality in interorganizational technology transfer. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(6), 1049-1057.
- Lilien, G. L. (2011). Bridging the academic-practitioner divide in marketing decision models. *Journal of Marketing*, 75(4), 196-210.
- Marcos-Cuevas, J., Nätti, S., Palo, T., & Ryals, L. J. (2014). Implementing key account management: Intraorganizational practices and associated dilemmas. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(7), 1216-1224.

- Millman, T., & Wilson, K. (1995). From key account selling to key account management. *Journal of Marketing Practice: Applied Marketing Science*, 1(1), 9-21.
- Millman, T., & Wilson, K. (1999). Processual issues in key account management: underpinning the customer-facing organisation. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 14(4), 328-344.
- Mitra, D. & Golder, P.N. (2008). Does Academic Research Help or Hurt MBA Programs? *Journal of Marketing*, 72(5), 31-49.
- Ordanini, A., Parasuraman, A., & Rubera, G. (2014). When the Recipe Is More Important Than the Ingredients A Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) of Service Innovation Configurations. *Journal of Service Research*, 17(2), 134-149.
- Pardo, C. (1999). Key account management in the business-to-business field: a French overview. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 14(4), 276-297.
- Pardo, C., Henneberg, S., Mouzas, S. & Naudé, P. (2006). Unpicking the meaning of value in key account management. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (11/12), 1360-1374.
- Pardo, C., Ivens, B. S., & Wilson, K. (2014). Differentiation and alignment in KAM implementation. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 43(7), 1136-1145.
- Pardo, C., Salle, R., & Spencer, R. (1995). The key accountization of the firm: A case study. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 24(2), 123-134.
- Pels, J. (1992). Identification and management of key clients. *European Journal of Marketing*, 26(5), 5-21.
- Piercy, N. F. (2002). Research in marketing: teasing with trivia or risking relevance? *European Journal of Marketing*, 36(3), 350-363.
- Rayport, J. F., Jaworski, B. J., & Kyung, E. J. (2005). Best face forward: improving companies' service interfaces with customers. *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 19(4), 67-80.
- Rust, R.T. (2006). From the Editor: The Maturation of Marketing as an Academic Discipline. *Journal of Marketing*, 70, 1-2.
- Sengupta, S., Krapfel, R. E., & Pusateri, M. A. (1997). Switching costs in key account relationships. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 17(4), 9-16.
- Shapiro B.P. & Moriarty R.T. (1980). National Account Management. *MSI Report*, No. 80-104, 21 pages.
- Shapiro B.P. & Moriarty R.T. (1982). National Account Management : Emerging Insights. *MSI Report*, n° 82-100, 23 pages.
- Shapiro B.P. & Moriarty R.T. (1984a). Organizing the National Account Force. *MSI Report*, n° 84-101, Avril, 38 pages.
- Shapiro B.P. & Moriarty R.T. (1984b). Support Systems for National Account Management Programs : Promises Made, Promises Kept. *MSI Report*, n° 84-102, 21 pages.
- Sharma, A. (1997). Who prefers key account management programs? An investigation of business buying behavior and buying firm characteristics. *Journal of Personal Selling & Sales Management*, 17(4), 27-39.
- Sharma, A. (2006). Success factors in key accounts. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 21(3), 141-150.
- Snehota, I., & Hakansson, H. (Eds.). (1995). *Developing relationships in business networks*. Routledge.
- Spencer, R. (1999). Key accounts: effectively managing strategic complexity. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 14(4), 291-310.
- Stevenson, T.H. (1980). Classifying a Customer as a National Account. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 9, 133-136.
- Stevenson, T.H. (1981). Payoffs from National Account Management. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 10, 119-124.
- Stevenson, T.H. & Page A.L. (1979). The Adoption of National Account Marketing by Industrial Firms. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 8, 94-100.
- Storbacka, K. (2012). Strategic Account Management Programs, Alignment of Design Elements and Management Practices. *Journal of Business & Industrial Marketing*, 27(4), 259-274.
- Thomas, R. W., Clifford Defee, C., Randall, W. S., & Williams, B. (2011). Assessing the managerial relevance of contemporary supply chain management research. *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management*, 41(7), 655-667.
- Varadaradjan, P. R. (2003). Musings on relevance and Rigor of Scholarly Research in *Marketing Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 31(4), 368-376.
- Weeks, W. A., & Stevens, C. G. (1997). National account management sales training and directions for improvement: a focus on skills/abilities. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 26(5), 423-431.
- Weilbaker D.C. & Weeks D.C. (1997). The evolution of national account management: a literature perspective. *The Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management*, 17(4), 49-59.

- Wren, D. A. (1967). Interface and interorganizational coordination. *Academy of Management Journal*, 10(1), 69-81.
- Woodside, A. G. (2013). Moving beyond multiple regression analysis to algorithms: Calling for adoption of a paradigm shift from symmetric to asymmetric thinking in data analysis and crafting theory. *Journal of Business Research*, 66(4), 463-472.
- Woodside, A. G. (2016). The good practices manifesto: Overcoming bad practices pervasive in current research in business. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(2), 365-381.
- Workman, J. P., Homburg, C., Jensen, O. (2003). Intraorganizational determinants of KAM effectiveness. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 31(1), 3-21.