

## KAM in the coronacrisis

Confusion reigned in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, not surprisingly. Government advice and laws changed on a daily basis, and nobody was clear about what was advisory and what was compulsory. But recently large parts of life have settled into a new shape, and business into new ways of conducting itself. The changes may be permanent or temporary, but anyway no-one has any idea of how temporary.

Communication with your accounts is crucial: one customer said 'You can always tell a good key account manager from a bad one – when things go wrong, good ones will be there (albeit virtually), but the bad ones go to ground, you won't see them'.

So as a Key Account Manager, how should you approach the situation? AKAM offers some suggestions.

### Dealing with the business

- First of all, communicate, communicate, communicate. But listen too.
- Tell your key account what you can, tell them what you can't tell them. Tell them what's happening to find answers to critical issues, and when you might have an answer. Contact them even if you don't get the answer when expected.
- Your company should have had a crisis communication strategy – if it didn't before, it should now. Understand it, apply it but if it doesn't suit your customer's needs make sure the authors of the policy know and change it or accept what you are doing.
- Find out what are the critical issues for your key account. Make a list of their 'must-haves' and 'can-waits'.
- Don't expect complete answers and be patient with rethinks and changes, this is new and shifting territory for everyone.
- Discuss together possible solutions, even previously unexplored or rejected ideas. In recent days the formerly unimaginable has actually happened, so make sure you yourself are receptive to novelty.
- If you or your customer has innovative ideas on how to tackle issues, find out who to address with these ideas in your company and follow up. Identify barriers and work on them.
- Be prepared to go down new paths– maybe government was never previously involved in the business, but perhaps it is now and you must deal with that (more patience!).
- Establish who in your company will have the latest picture on your customer's critical issues and stay close to them. Supply chain and finance are top of the list.
- Key accounts expect preference – it's your job to secure it for them.
- Deliver 'bad news' as soon as you get it, delay will enrage your customer and will make it worse if you have blocked other options for them by delaying.
- Trust is more important than ever – don't take risks or be casual with it now.
- Understand that cash flow is critical for both parties, try to accommodate both.
  
- Whatever you do or don't do during this crisis, your account will remember - will it be the real added value of having a key account team supporting them, or how you were missing or messy when they needed you?

## Be aware of personal issues

- You are probably working from home and many of your contacts may be too, which can be very stressful, more for some people than others. Extroverts will probably be more uncomfortable than introverts, some people will feel exposed without the authority of the office environment. Be prepared for changes in people's normal behaviour and responses, and be sensitive to how to interpret them and respond yourself.
- You also may feel stressed by the relative isolation and informality of working from home, so consider carefully how it is affecting you and try to normalise your reactions.
- If you and your contacts do not regularly work from home you/they may not have an appropriate workspace, which can itself cause stress. Those with children who are now confined to home as well are likely to be constantly interrupted! They may find it easier to work different hours, early or late, when they can concentrate better. Don't read too much into it if you receive emails or requests for conferences at odd times – in fact, if you do, you may consider offering to adapt to that pattern and communicate at those times.
- Wear smart casual clothes, don't work in your pyjamas! You won't feel workmanlike, and you could get caught out by a videoconference. Key account managers are always 'on stage'.
- Build a structure to your day. Think of how to incorporate exercise and other stress-reducing activities.
- Everyone now is making social contact by Zoom, Skype etc etc. Some people are already Zoomed out, so use videoconferencing carefully and don't overdo it. Be sensitive to who needs more contact and who needs you to get through your discussion so they can move on.
- Be aware that through videoconferencing you are entering into someone's home and private space. That wouldn't normally happen with your customers, so be tactful and friendly but not over familiar.
- Have frequent team meetings to make sure you are all aligned, then trust your team to say and do what's agreed. This is not time to take on all the customer contact yourself.
- You may be madly busy or have 'spare time'. Think about how to use it constructively: increase your KAM knowledge (use AKAM resources), apply for the KAM of the Year Award (good time for reflection), think about starting the AKAM Diploma. Or something else with lasting value.

Key Account Managers play pivotal roles in securing smooth business operation in a crisis period. You control a major part of your company's business and much depends on you to help your company and your customer cope with the difficulties.

**Adaptation is compulsory, denial is not an answer!**