

AKAM BULLETIN

The Association for
Key Account Management

In this Issue:

**What's the
problem with
strategic account
plans?**

**Changing the
culture for KAM**

**Building a strong
KAM training
programme (2)**

Plus:

**Online PostGraduate
Certificate in KAM:
a global 1st!**

**Key Account Manager
of the Year 2021:
it should be you!**

**4th AKAM
Conference:
yes, it's online**

**New AKAM
Academic Board**

November 2021



editorial



Dr Diana Woodburn

AKAM Chairman



www.a4kam.org



The Association for
Key Account Management

Technological University Dublin,
School of Marketing, College of
Business, Aungier Street, Dublin 2,
D02 HW71 Ireland

Registered in Ireland No: 599726

Email info@a4kam.org
Website A4KAM.org

KAMaraderie

We're very excited to be able to launch the first academically-accredited course in Key Account Management anywhere in the world! And as it will be available online, it's accessible from anywhere in the world too!

Ever since AKAM was set up we've had queries about where people could take a recognised course in KAM and sadly, until now, we haven't had a good answer. While there are courses mixed with other disciplines; commercial trainers with a whole spectrum of courses in length and focus (some only slightly-disguised sales training); and in-house programmes which are obviously not available to individuals outside those organisations, none of these options fitted what most enquirers needed.

So we approached the Technological University of Dublin, which has a substantial interest and experience in this kind of programme, plus a brilliant learning platform. Between us we have the content and the technology to deliver the first academically-accredited programme exclusive to KAM – you will have that assurance of quality, plus 30 ECTS (European Credit Transfer points) in case you want to gain further qualifications, like a Masters degree. Check out the detail on page 5 and our [website](#).

In this issue, Dr Olivier Riviere concludes his article on how organisations should design strong training programmes. But what if your company is not offering KAM education and training and you're on your own in your desire to develop your KAM knowledge and competencies? Then the PostGraduate Certificate is a great option for you. Yes, it's a significant commitment of time and effort – you wouldn't learn anything otherwise – but it'll be a great investment in yourself and your career. It's practical, insightful, thorough and all-round worthwhile.

Other articles in this issue look at strategic account planning and why it is, frankly, so awful in so many organisations. It looks as if organisations don't care whether they have quality plans in place for the future of key accounts, but that is sheer folly. It's hard to imagine any other sphere of the business in which this would be acceptable. Imagine spending millions on equipment or R&D projects without knowing where the returns are coming from! Key accounts often equate to well over half the business, so it has to be a really bad idea to be blind-sided on their future.

This article emerged from the Programme Directors Forum, which is a peer-support group for KAM Programme leaders in their organisations that tackles some of the most challenging aspects of KAM and shares advice and ideas. Nothing beats being part of the discussion, though, so if you think you/your company would benefit from participation, do make contact directly, [click here](#).

Part of the issue with plans is undoubtedly down to the culture, that nebulous but powerful force – for better or for worse – that can fatally undermine KAM if left unchanged. Check out pages 8 & 9 to see why and how.

And don't forget to enter yourself, or your team members, for the Key Account Manager of the Year Award. You deserve real recognition!

Best wishes

Diana Woodburn

Dr. Diana Woodburn
AKAM Chairman woodburn@marketingbp.com or info@a4kam.org

contents

- 2 KAMaraderie
- 3 Contents & Calendar
- 4 & 6 What's the problem with strategic account plans?
- 5 PostGraduate Certificate in KAM: a global 1st online!
- 7 Key Account Manager of the Year 2021
- 4th AKAM Conference
- 8 Changing the culture for KAM
- 10 Building a strong KAM training programme (2)

Engaging Top Management in KAM

KAM is a corporate strategy, so obviously involvement of Top Management is essential. But does your organisation really have it? Astonishingly, many key account managers don't think so. Why not? Does your Top Management think they're accountable for KAM? What should their involvement look like? What can you do about it? This webinar will address these questions and more.

You'll discover:

- consequences of lacking TM engagement
- 5 roles Top Management can play in KAM
- the impact on key customers
- how to diagnose which roles your TM exhibits
- how to deal with their approach.

Whatever your role in KAM, you'll bear the consequences of your Top Management's attitude, so understanding it and what you can do about it is gold dust!



Webinar presenter Geoff Quinn is an exceptionally experienced KAM programme lead, based in Pfizer Biopharmaceutical's Global KAM Centre of Excellence. [Click here to register](#)

It just takes a few words to enter for Key Account Manager of the Year 2021

Because you're worth it!

(but how will we know unless you tell us?) Go to p7 for more info or [click here](#)

Closing date 31st December – but do it now!



calendar

Webinars

(To register for member-only webinars [click here](#), for open webinars [click here](#).)

- ▶ **Open Webinar** **Engaging Top Management**
Friday 3rd December Geoff Quinn, KAM Centre of Excellence Pfizer Biopharmaceuticals
- ▶ **Member Webinar** **Sustainability and Ethics in KAM**
Friday 14th January Professor Jakob Rehme, Linköping University, Sweden
- ▶ **Open Webinar** **Developing KAM structures: removing roadblocks and bottlenecks**
Friday 4th February Dominykas Cibulskas, SIA ZB, Lithuania
- ▶ **4th Annual Conference** **Focus on Developing Key Account Managers: 4 sessions**
Tuesday 8th & Wednesday 9th March
 - Business & customer understanding
 - Selling & business development
 - Organisational effectiveness
 - Relationships & interaction

What's the problem with strategic account plans?

Critical requirement with multiple issues

Fundamental interpretation Does 'Strategic account management' mean the strategic management of accounts, or the management of strategic accounts? Because obviously, those require different plans and planning processes. If an organisation isn't clear about this, and many are not, the plan's scope is muddled from the start.

Poor quality plans It is sadly rare to find an organisation with a good and complete set of strategic plans for its key accounts, even where they contribute well over half the business. Most organisations would not accept such a lack of documented direction in any other important function, so why here?

Lack of process Developing good plans takes a significant amount of time and involves a range of people, not just the key account manager. Making that productive and worthwhile requires a clear planning process but this seems to be lacking in many companies.

Adoption Even when strategic key account plans have been written and presented to senior management, they are not formally approved (or disapproved) and do not enter the corporate planning process. That means that arbitrary targets are set elsewhere (often by Finance) and they aren't resourced - in effect, they're ignored.

Why are (good quality) strategic key account plans needed?

These are strategic plans (i.e. more than 1 year span) produced for individual key accounts, resulting in a series of different plans which acknowledges that no two key accounts are the same, and that their differences are worthy of individually tailored responses from the supplier.

Such plans sit at the heart of KAM: the diagram shows why. And there are many more good reasons, they:

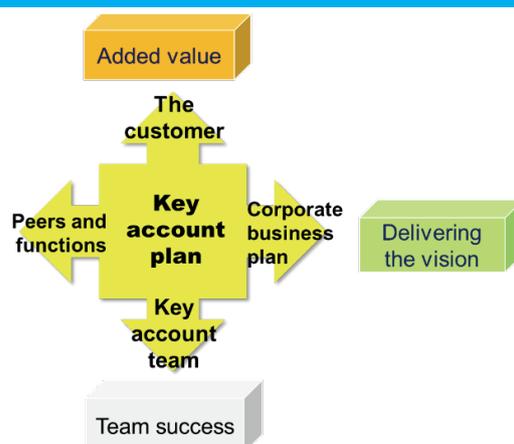
- Stimulate thinking about the account, drive forward thinking and new ideas
- Normally uncover more opportunity

- Set direction and priorities
- Set appropriate expectations, high or low
- Feed into the corporate strategic plan to set identifiable, doable expectations and targets
- Communicate to make sure everyone is 'on the same page' from the top to the bottom of the organisation, especially the KAM team
- Enable the team to make decisions, establish context for appropriate action
- Clarify and establish ground for alignment with customer strategy
- Open up debate, which improves and polishes the plan
- Drive a better, more balanced metrics set around the plan
- Reveal what part key accounts will constitute of the supplier's future performance and what it will take to secure that contribution
- Communicate with and encourage the key account to collaborate in the planned future
- Share learning for the benefit of other key accounts and key account managers

So how is it possible for suppliers to be satisfied with anything less than good quality, strategic plans for key accounts? And yet they often are.

What's wrong with strategic plans and planning?

Good examples of sharing insightful, forward-looking and creative plans with senior management and customers do exist, but they are in the minority. Where are most organisations now, and why? Perhaps they struggle to get good quality strategic account plans because they don't value them or even don't really want them, as some of the symptoms of poor planning suggest:



Professor Patrick Godfrey,
Strategic Relationship Director

- Misunderstanding of what strategic key account plans should be and contain. They are often tactical, operational and short-term
- No vision, strategy or objectives
- Little or no value for the customer, just maximise value for the supplier (hence customer unlikely to co-operate)
- Choosing a ready-made, off-the-shelf plan with pre-built value propositions, not tailored to the account.
- Just 'form-filling', mostly with action already happening
- Fear of imagined sensitivities, compliance, GDPR and other over-emphasized restrictions resulting in minimal, standardised, same-as-before, effectively valueless plans.
- Written by the key account manager alone, resulting in a limited range of ideas not optimising value the supplier could offer
- Not given enough time (research suggests account planning should be 10% of key account managers' time)
- Narrow accountability: assumed the key account manager is responsible for implementation, rest of team desert when it comes to action
- Never revisited and not used, as if planning is a stand-alone task
- Blocked or buried by line managers who have not received KAM training, don't understand the approach and are uncomfortable with it.

(Continued on p6')

A global first! Online Postgraduate Certificate in KAM



Now you can gain a Postgraduate Certificate in Key Account Management!

AKAM and the Technological University of Dublin have put together the first online Postgraduate qualification purely in KAM. Because, if KAM is what you want to do, why would you want to spend half your time on sales or some other subject?

- Designed for people in work
- Access **online** lectures when it suits you
- Earn 30 European Credit Transfer points - guarantee of academic recognition and transferable to further studies like Masters degrees
- Designed to demonstrate KAM insight and competency to employers
- Study from January to September 2022
- Subject expert lectures with insightful and interesting questions for you
- Practical assignments (3) based on exploration of your organisation
- 6 live online tutorials
- Flexible, engaging and reliable learning platform 'Brightspace' hosted by TUDublin



For whom?

Particularly for new key account managers and those with up to 3/4 years' experience; aspiring key account managers in other positions; and maybe more experienced key account managers who have missed out on proper KAM education and training.

Applicants should have an honours degree in any discipline and be working in an organisation, preferably but not necessarily as an account manager.

When?

Starting January 2022.
Applications by 31 December 2021.

How?

Applications can be made from late November

OK, how much?

Straight €3000, no extras. Payable when your application is accepted.

This is your chance to learn and validate your understanding of KAM and demonstrate it to the wider world. The Postgraduate Certificate in Key Account Management is an independent qualification that employers will recognise and value.

In an increasingly volatile world, you need an edge!

What's the problem with strategic account plans? (cont.)

- Senior management doesn't understand what plans should look like, 'approval' is cosmetic, not commitment.
- Not adopted by the organisation. These plans should be the company's plan for the account (there is no other), not just the key account manager's.
- Not shared with other functions or the account. How can functions or customers commit and play their part if they don't know what it is?

In summary, plans are often of poor quality and not adopted by the organisation and, in that case, make no contribution to the key account or the supplier's business.

Research suggests that KAM does not exist without strategic account plans.

Organisations need to be realistic about what they have and what they want and radically change their approach to planning if they really want to implement KAM.

Putting the strategy into strategic key account plans

Misunderstanding of strategy is endemic in many organisations, so the confusion in strategic account plans is not surprising. Strategy may simply and usefully be defined as a statement of direction, to achieve a defined objective

Strategy errors common in 'strategic' key account plans!

- **Just a budget/forecast, called a strategic account plan**
- **Just a sales plan, i.e. outcomes without strategies**
- **Just an action plan, actions mistaken for strategies**
- **Strategies without forecast inputs and outcomes**
- **Strategies are only generic possibilities, not specific**
- **Questions without answers, options without choices decided**
- **No hierarchy of objectives or integration with other strategies**
- **Just one strategy (no fallback)**
- **Too many strategies**
- **]Strategies without priorities**
- **Strategies unsupported by analysis**
- **No risk assessment or strategies/actions to minimise risks**
- **No relationship building strategies (organisation level)**
- **No internal strategies/actions (or resource needs identified)**
- **Customer not involved, strategies not confirmed with them**
- **No acknowledgement of customer's procurement**
- **No anticipation of competition**

from a clear start point. But over-use has made 'strategy' and 'strategic' such elastic words that they are close to the point of meaninglessness.

Often actions and desired outcomes are mistaken for strategies. A rush to action overlooks the possibility that more than one set of actions can fulfil a strategy, and first thoughts might not be the best ideas. Furthermore, focusing on immediate action screens out the need for other actions, which can then get overlooked and late.

As a minimum, each organisation should be clear about what it considers to be strategy. Asking 'How do you know when you see a good strategy?' might help to clarify a definition. Shown is a litany of common mistakes around

the strategies appearing in 'strategic' account plans.

The requirement for alignment with each key account means that a supplier needs to be flexible enough to pursue a variety of strategies simultaneously.

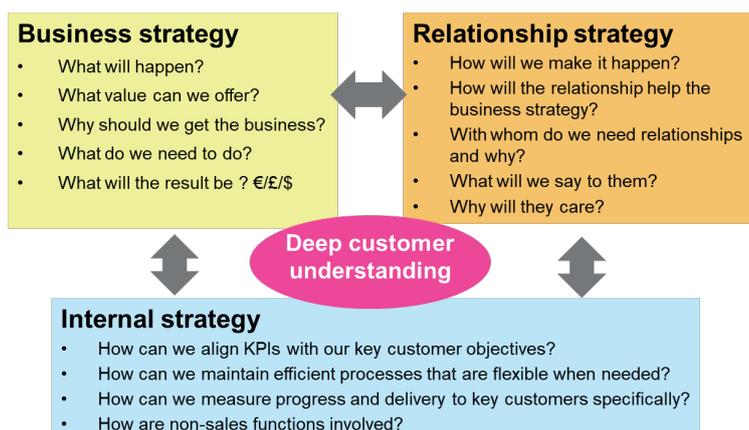
This can be challenging, which is why the number of key accounts must stay small however large the organisation, and why the strategies need to be clearly stated in good quality plans.

Different kinds of KAM strategy

Three kinds of strategy can be identified in KAM:

1. Business strategy (normally focused on product/service and money/profit)
2. Relationship strategy (designed to facilitate business strategies)
3. Internal strategies (need to facilitate the other two strategy types)

These may be regarded as parts of an overall strategy, but that may mean the need for Relationship and Internal strategies are overlooked. Nevertheless, clearly they should be linked. In some companies these different types of strategies are separated, whether deliberately ('organised to fail') or unconsciously, and they can conflict with each other and generate an internal war, to the detriment of the whole initiative and the key customer.



KAM of the Year Award, 2021

Designed to recognise and celebrate great key account managers

Maybe you think that's you - or maybe you don't?
So why don't you let us be the judge of that?

The judges aren't necessarily looking for looking for the biggest sales result. They're seeking:

- Depth and breadth of customer understanding
- Creativity (of any kind – offer/support/new approach...)
- Customer value
- Contribution to your organisation's strategic objectives

Those things take time to develop, so it isn't just what you've done in the last 12 months, we are looking back over a 3-year window. When you take that view, there will surely be some things of which you are justly proud - tell us about them!

Winning can do great things for your career - and your company



Maggie's story

Last year's winner Maggie Free said, "The Key Account Manager of the Year award provided me with the opportunity to present my work and learn from thought leaders in the field."

The judges said, "Maggie and her team maintained their clear focus, plan and long-term perspective despite complex hurdles and push-backs. Through sustained focus, deep listening to the customer, responsiveness and guidance, customer engagement has been transformed."

And even if you don't win, just reflecting on what you have done is really rewarding, giving perspective to what you have achieved and helping to revitalise your approach. Just think about it! [Click here](#) to find out what to do.

Maggie's message to you is, "I encourage all KAMs to apply this year and show the world how you made a difference for your clients."

But there's an interesting story behind this!

Key account management can be a tough job, and Maggie was questioning if she was on the right career path when she wrote out her application. Winning the Award reaffirmed that she is and gave her the boost she needed to continue.

So Maggie also said "I am beyond grateful for the difference it made for me and with my employer, Scheidt-Bachmann!"



Entries by
31st December

But do it now!
Before you get overtaken
by the holidays!

4th AKAM Conference: 8th & 9th March, 2022

Online – join from anywhere in the world!

This Conference focuses on themes related to Key Account Manager development, bringing you practitioner wisdom with an injection of the latest research to grow your current competencies in:

Business and customer understanding Tuesday morning (CET)

Selling and business development Tuesday afternoon (CET)

Organisational effectiveness Wednesday morning (CET)

Relationships and interaction Wednesday afternoon (CET)

Each session will feature a dynamic mixture of two presentations to set up expert panel discussions – and you're invited to participate, challenge if you wish!

AKAM corporate, programme and full individual members: FREE

Online members: 50€ Non-member guests: 90€

Probably the best value-for-money conference
KAM people can get!!



Changing the culture for KAM

KAM: strategy or culture? Both!

KAM is commonly regarded as a strategy. It should be seen as a corporate strategy more often than it is: corporate strategies tend to entail culture change and, regrettably, the culture changes required by KAM are often ignored, with a really detrimental effect, as shown by Wilson & Woodburn.

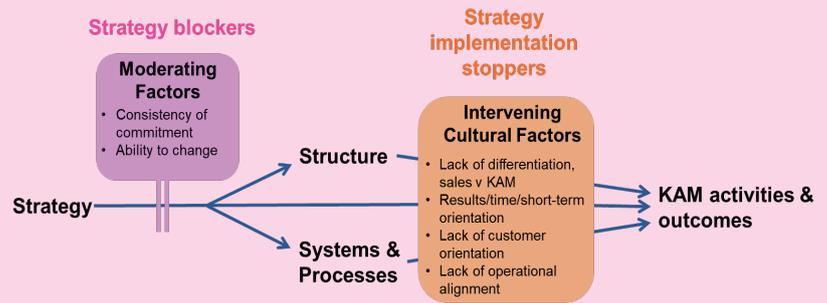
When key account managers are embedded in the Sales/Commercial function, they become subject to the prevailing, traditional sales culture, which just doesn't work for key customers:

- key account managers should be out visiting customers all the time ('busy fools'?)
- more calls equals more sales (quantity v quality)
- insistence on 'buy now' results
- winning new customers gets better results than developing existing accounts
- the size of the 'pie' is fixed ('we have to fight the customer to get a bigger share' v 'we're successful when the customer is successful').
- the manager's job is just to set targets.

All of which works against KAM.

The positioning of key account managers is not the only cultural element that challenges successful KAM:

- **Short-termism.** Strategies take time to be realised. If the plan is short-term, actions to fulfil a strategy that will take 18/24 months or more to even begin to pay back will never be started. Without strategies the constant picking of low-hanging fruit will eventually leave those branches bare.
- **Staff turnover.** Large organisations in particular tend to move people every two years, which is a big issue for KAM. It means that the job-holder may never reap the benefit of positive but long-term action and may suspect that the initiative will collapse when they move on: both are real disincentives to making tough but valuable changes
- **Lack of KAM processes.** Most processes are designed to handle large numbers of 'average' customers, not special cases like key accounts. Developing KAM-effective processes can help: processes can outlive tenure, e.g. annual planning process, process



The Impact of the Organisational Context...on KAM Wilson & Woodburn, 2013

for prioritising key accounts, monthly review of plans.

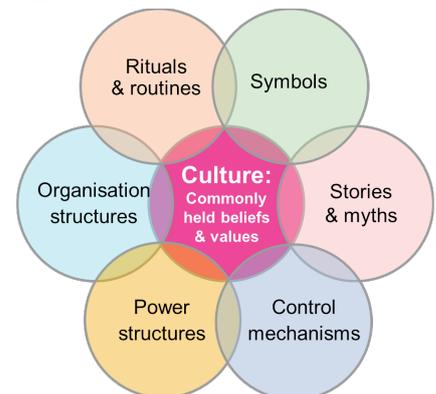
- **Egalitarianism.** Many staff have a simple belief in equality, for themselves and for customers, which doesn't stand up in most areas of business, especially in KAM, which is undoubtedly a culture of carefully calculated elitism. Most people expect better service if they spend more than others, but many parts of an organisation choose not to comply with the implications and apply their own preferences, e.g. 'first come, first served'.
- **Secrecy/unavailability of customer profitability.** Demonstrates lack of trust in key account managers (more often than IT shortcomings). It prevents demonstration of the value of the customer as a future financial asset, so then it's tough to secure resources to implement strategies.
- **Brand/product focus.** When budget is held by e.g. marketing rather than account owners, it is only available by agreement with the budget holder and often not given. Messages then address general needs imagined internally, rather than real, external, key customer needs.
- **Illusion of customer centricity.** Which is often more like sales centricity and focused on the customer's wallet rather than the customer's needs, but the illusion prevents appreciation of KAM and the genuine customer centricity core to it.

Culture web analysis approach

It would be a useful exercise for a company to apply Johnson and Scholes' Culture Web to its KAM organisation. The surrounding elements are powerful indicators of that normally elusive but powerful concept, the culture. They reflect what interests the people in an

organisation, what they care about, what they like to talk about and therefore, how they think and behave. It should reveal whether there is genuinely a KAM organisation, or only faintly disguised Sales.

Are the stories (and myths) told and retold about clever, one off, massive sales deals or long-term, game changing, partnership initiatives? Is a symbolic trophy cup given for Salesman or Key Account Manager or even Key Account Team of the Year? Who gets to meet with whom in the customer and routinely lunch with them? The team, or just the individual salesperson? And then there's organisation, power and control to consider. Who has the biggest department, who has the most budget, whose opinion matters most?



The Culture Web

Johnson and Scholes, 1999

Culture changes

Changing culture is one of the most difficult initiatives organisations have to tackle, but also one of the most important. There will be a time in the life of most of them when a positive culture has become negative and obstructive, even toxic, and cultural change becomes an imperative. For some companies, especially those with traditionally hierarchical structures, KAM requires such cultural change: it's not a straightforward business initiative.

Changing the culture for KAM (cont)

Case study

One company was very successful in making the change by conducting sessions in which participants were offered KAM scenarios and then developed their own projections and conclusions.

The workshops focused on cross-functional ways of working to make the requirements concrete rather than abstract, working with the functional business language in use.

KAM champions pinpointed where existing language was unhelpful, and where new language would be helpful and powerful, and introduced new, carefully-chosen vocabulary.

Successful cultural change starts with an exploration of the gap between the current situation and the desired situation (the culture web is a really useful tool for both). The change champion will then have to sell the change to senior management.

He/she may also have to sell the change to a salesforce that is likely to be lacking the skill set required to fulfil the new positions. That presents potential personal problems that must be recognised and responded to empathetically rather than dismissively, but firmly. There will be others around the organisation who are also threatened by the change, both in reality and in their imagination, and their issues need to be recognised too. People will need to be moved from positions where they have familiarity, control and comfort to situations that they cannot yet visualise.

There are multiple subcultures that need to be understood and addressed if they are to be aligned with a significant change like KAM. Obviously, it's foolish

and dangerous to make promises to key accounts unless the rest of the company follows through on them. Within the corporate culture are KAM fulfilment functions such as sales, delivery, service etc, which all have their own subcultures and, of course, national cultures affect each too. Furthermore, underlying the corporate culture in all companies are informal networks and links, the 'under-culture'.

Successful change programmes demand sensitivity, political awareness, clarity, consistency, translation into practicalities, energy and stamina from the people determined to make the change happen. An action research group at Warwick School of Business identified the most

Conclusion

Organisations that overlook the cultural aspects of the transformation to KAM are risking the whole initiative. Most corporate strategies have a limited time to prove themselves – KAM often has just the time-in-post of the KAM champion! So there should be a programme in place to tackle the culture changes required from the outset: the challenges should not be underestimated.

Dr Diana Woodburn, AKAM Chairman, woodburn@marketingbp.com

relevant players in a KAM culture change (most of an organisation!) and developed a picture of their attitudes and behaviour at four crucial points along the way.

Position in KAM culture change

	Change required	Ready to change	Transitioning	Best practice KAM
Key account manager	Sales culture. Secretive.	Recognising different customer needs/ limitations of traditional selling.	Relationship building. Longer-term view.	Collaborative, with customer and internally Open, trusting, communicative, empowered.
KAM unit	KAMs are competitive rather than collaborative. Focus on individual success.	Open to change. Focus on commercial v. individual success. Resignation of 'fighting for customer' v. business case	Formalisation of key account plans. Business case culture. More structured ways of working. Common working language. 'We' v. 'Me'	Significant % of shared objectives. Pro-active sharing of information. Open and transparent sense of equality.
KAM team	Silo team ethic. Building barriers. 'Prevention' rather than customer support.	Informal ad hoc engagement. Some customer awareness.	Sense of excitement around customer. Transcending functional or geographical boundaries. Open and learning new approaches.	Integrated team, shared sense of purpose and success. Regular recognition of success. Mutually supportive.
Associated functions	'My team' ethic. 'My' people. Driven by personal objectives.	See and feel they could add value to company through customer-related activities.	Good corporate citizenship. Quantify value of collaboration.	Active participation in key accounts. Actively creating barriers to exit with customers; see themselves as competitive force 'Helping to put a man on the moon' attitude (cleaner at Cape Canaveral.). Shared and aligned performance contract objectives.
Senior management team	Territorial. Not customer focused. Hierarchical and authoritarian. Power over v. power through.	Dawning awareness of key customers. Prepared for change/ innovation, 'prepared to enter the room'. Vision, courage and confidence.	Listening and hearing. Talking about key customers. Mutually supportive. 'Back to the floor' contact with key customers. Open to customers. Accepting matrix approach.	Actively promote cross-functional engagement. Addressing and removing barriers. Representing other functions – broadly knowledgeable. 'Our' not 'their' or 'your' Actively seeking customer information. Skilled at customer interaction. Trusting.



Building a strong KAM training programme

Dr Olivier Rivière

PART 2: Defining the KAM training path

This second part (see Bulletin 23 for the first part) will explore how to define a realistic KAM training programme which covers the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills, and then accompanies and supports people on their way towards full KAM proficiency

Step 1: KAM competencies reference framework

The goals, target audience and format of your KAM skills development efforts must be coherent with the state of development and maturity of your KAM initiative. If your KAM programme is just starting, you should focus on equipping the KAM Programme Director and the Key Account Managers with the knowledge and skills required to take your initiative off the ground. But if your KAM practice has been around for a while and doesn't have a formalised approach to developing KAM skills and competencies, you will have to explore the current situation to define the best way forward.

A KAM Individual Competencies Reference Framework is a crucial tool to help you build your KAM training path. It provides you with a precise description of the skills and competencies required from a true Key Account Manager (as opposed to a sales rep). A well-designed Competencies Reference Framework sets expectations of the skills required for a given position. It can be used to recruit people (internally and externally), to assess competencies and, of course, to define training needs and individual or collective development measures. Although it is perfectly possible to define a generic KAM Competencies Reference Framework (AKAM's Diploma is based on such an approach), the tool works best when customised to your own company's context.



Three types of KAM-relevant competencies

These three types of KAM-related competencies must be identified and prioritised.

KAM-specific knowledge & competencies:

Covering the key principles of KAM as well as the company's KAM strategy, methodology, processes and tools, plus being able to implement them successfully.

- For the KAM Programme Director and the support team, it is about the ability to design and implement an adequate KAM Programme and Methodology.
- For Key Account Managers, it is essentially about leading the design and implementation of a relevant and impactful Key Account Plan and overcoming the challenges of implementation.

Supporting competencies - soft skills & change management:

Implementing KAM is about finding new ways to collaborate and create value. It's a big change for most organisations, so people involved need strong collaboration-oriented soft skills as well as very good change management

competencies. Key Account Managers must be able to form and lead their (virtual) account teams and to manage without authority, frequently in ambiguous situations. In an international environment, a high-level of intercultural proficiency is also a must.

Supporting competencies - business acumen & complex sales:

These competencies cover general business knowledge as well as sales and negotiation competencies. Ideally, a high level of mastery of these competencies would be a pre-requisite for taking a Key Account Management position. In real life, specific competency development measures are commonly required. Some of these skills are quite universal (e.g. understanding financial matters) whereas others strongly depend on the company's activity (for example supply chain management or product development and joint R&D). In complex business environments, it is important to recognise that Key Account Managers must be highly proficient in complex sales, since the capacity to identify and influence key stakeholders and to articulate value – which is the essence of complex sales – is crucial in KAM.

Building a strong KAM training programme (cont.)

Example: KAM training curriculum

Step 2: Initial KAM training - simple and focused

For all companies starting a KAM initiative, the initial KAM Training for Key Account Managers, and possibly for selected members of the Key Account Teams, should be dedicated to understanding the company's KAM methodology, managing the Account Team and driving the Key Account Planning process.

- **KAM Strategy and Methodology**
Explains why and how the company wants to implement KAM and equips participants with general knowledge of what KAM is, and how it comes to life in various organisations.
- **Key Account Plans: how to create and implement them**
A good Key Account Planning training module is based on the company's tools and on carefully selected fundamental KAM best practices. It focuses on analysing a Key Account and its business: business strategy, network of relationships, depth of customer intimacy, nature of opportunities, competitive positioning. On that basis it should address how to build account strategy, associated action plan and account-specific Value Propositions. Plus the constitution of the Key Account Team, the identity and roles of team members, team management.

Step 3: The next phase - build a KAM training path

When the initial phase of the KAM Training and the reinforcement and

Core KAM training path

Basic

- KAM strategy & methodology
- Key Account planning

Intermediate

- Key Account teams
- Relationships and influence with Key Accounts

Advanced

- Driving growth initiatives
- Value co-creation with Key Accounts

coaching processes are in place, Learning and Development and the KAM Programme Director can start work on a more medium/long term development programme. Which will depend on available L&D resources and identified KAM-related competency needs, relative to the KAM Competencies Reference Framework.

The number and nature of modules integrated into a KAM training path will be influenced by the organisation's view on how strategic KAM and Key Account Managers are for the company, what is required to 'do the KAM job', and by available resources.

Large (and/or rich) companies with a broad Learning & Development offer, well developed job descriptions and associated skills profiles can afford to build a rich KAM training programme. Smaller organisations,

Supporting competencies

Soft skills & change management

- Understanding personality types, Communication styles
- Managing without power/Building trust & influence
- Fundamentals of change management
- Intercultural skills & conflict resolution

Business acumen & Sales competencies

- Fundamentals of finance, P&L management
- Negotiation
- How to work strategically with Purchasing
- Supply Chain Management
- Complex sales, Articulating value
- Strategic sales & influence

even if they also have formal training paths, tend to have a simpler, leaner approach, which is not necessarily less effective. In both cases, good design and good implementation – backed by reinforcement and coaching - bring better results and return.

In addition, as the KAM programme develops or even as part of your initial effort, you should consider developing a KAM training path for a broader audience. Both the format and nature of the training path should be simpler than for the Key Account Managers.

Conclusions

If KAM is really a strategic instrument at your company, you should have a KAM certification process that confirms the seniority and proficiency of your Key Account Managers, and will be wholeheartedly welcomed by them. You can issue certificates internally but external certification is much more valued, i.e. from universities or professional associations like AKAM.

[Click here.](#)

Dr Olivier Rivière

olivier.riviere@t-online.de

AKAM Board Member, KAM WITH PASSION

Case study: small/medium financial services firm

KAM introduction:

- 3 base modules of core KAM training created and delivered in 6 months
- reinforcement: each week, participants received a weekly reminder about one key idea and asked to complete a short exercise
- few sessions of on-the-job coaching

KAM development

- 2 years later, 2 advanced modules were defined and implemented

Calling KAM academics!

AKAM invites you to join its new Academic Board

Links with KAM academics have always been important to AKAM, right from the very beginning. We want to support the development of new insight into KAM through research, and we are keen to convey that knowledge to KAM practitioners.

It must be disappointing to researchers when their research subjects - the people and the activity they are investigating - know nothing of their findings and recommendations. Equally, it's important to practitioners to have genuine knowledge which they can apply, and which will help them stave off others' personal opinions and prejudices. AKAM has a useful role to play as a conduit between the two.

There are professors and researchers on our Board of Management, but that doesn't always allow enough consideration of how each 'side' - researchers and researched - might capitalise on the value of the other. So now we are building a new Academic Board and invite academics with an active interest in KAM to join.

There's a whole raft of mutually beneficial approaches and projects that the Board can facilitate, but it will be for the Board to decide where to focus. It won't be an onerous commitment, time-wise – and we believe it can move the whole KAM movement forward, for both 'sides'.

Maintaining an exchange with KAM academics is vital to AKAM's mission to educate and inform people in KAM, particularly helping practitioners to apply the knowledge you generate. Please email woodburn@marketingbp.com to talk about it.



What can the Academic Board discuss and do?

- **Identify KAM research projects that AKAM can support:**
 - Through finding respondents (otherwise it's tough to find appropriate populations)
 - Potentially with seed funding
- **Give research a wider audience. AKAM has a variety of platforms to offer:**
 - Events like conferences and webinars
 - Papers for the Bulletin and website
- **Support for KAM education**
 - Teaching materials for colleges' lecturers to develop their KAM offer
 - Visiting lecturers in KAM subjects
- **Participate in a global KAM hub**
 - Reach out to AKAM's members across the world
 - Make connections to support projects
- **Develop KAM qualifications**
 - Ensure standards are maintained
 - Share means to fulfil formal requirements
- **Enhance colleges' KAM reputations**
 - Expand KAM offering
 - Use AKAM as an independent professional organisation

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What's the problem with strategic account plans? (cont.)

Alternatively, they never meet up. Then they simply undermine each other or cause confusion internally and with the customer, without the situation even being recognised. For example, the relationship strategy may be to increase the range and quality of contacts with the supplier, but without an internal strategy to deliver a KAM education to staff in all relevant functions, they may react defensively and uncooperatively. Or the business strategy may be so aggressive that it damages the relationship with the customer and defeats itself (and key account managers are commonly driven by

sales results and traditional sales incentives which can damage relationships).

Conclusions

Strategic key account plans can and should be critical drivers of behaviour in the organisation: 'everything' revolves around the plan. But they are frequently of poor quality and very limited vision, and therefore without benefit to supplier or customer. Often they are not taken seriously and resourced by the organisation, unlike other functions' plans. The situation could be improved by more focused training of key account

managers, involved functions and their managers, but that would depend on a genuine desire on the part of the supplier organisation to have and to apply serious strategic account plans.

AKAM Programme Directors Forum September 2021

This paper was generated by confidential discussion at the AKAM Programme Directors Forum. If you think your organisation would benefit from this peer-support group of KAM Programme Leads, please get in touch. [Click here](#)