

# Key Account Management: Towards a Multidimensional Definition

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to propose an integrative definition of key account management (KAM) at the organizational level through a content analysis of the existing definitions of KAM available in the business literatures. A representative pool of definitions of key account management was generated through literature review from twenty three journals that covers the divergence of name variety like global account management, strategic account management, national account management, international key account management, key client management, major account management, key customers management and key account management. Relating to the definition of key account management various attributes are identified through content analysis and according to the relevance, profile for each attributes are developed. On the basis of these attributes a diagrammatic and textual definition is proposed that covers the different standpoints and aspects of key account management approach and captures its essence as well. Eventually, several strategic implications are derived that create the field for further empirical investigation.

Key words: Key account management, business strategy, multi-dimensional, seller initiation, competitive advantage.

## 1. Introduction

This article traces a special issue and provides an insight into the definition of key account management within the business-to business contexts. Organizations are facing fast paced changes of their business environment. Changing customer needs and requirements, evolving technologies, new offerings for meeting those needs and changes in managerial approaches and practices, new and severe competition from both local and overseas competitors, to name just a few that the marketers are encountering. Accordingly, to be responsive and

competitive in the volatile marketplace companies try to create new forms of organizations (Homburg et al., 2000) where marketers' need to pay greater attention on the most valuable customers who are strategically important for the organization (Millman and Wilson, 1995). These customers are key for the organization and managing them properly is a must for the organization as they account for a major part of the supplier's sales and revenues.

Hakansson and Snehota (1995) mention that "most industrial companies have only a few customers and suppliers that account for a major part of their total sales and purchases. These and relationships to third parties are decisive for the performance of the company whatever various measures of performance one might use." The importance of key account management is first mentioned by Pegram (1972) who relates it with part or full time job. Key account management is a critical approach for the organization as it demands special attention and requires organized efforts from the suppliers. Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003) explore the performance of additional activities and/or designation of special personnel directed at an organization's most important customers. Smith (2009) mentions that key account management differs from traditional customer management because key accounts create more than financial value for the organization.

Key account management term is tightly twined with different name and various issues like strategic alliance, customer focus strategy, competitive advantage, perennial interaction and means of success. Gosselin and Heene (2005) mention account management can be seen as a practical implementation of long-term buyer/seller relationships where perennial interaction takes place between seller and key account. The common terms used to describe the management of these customer are global account management (Capon and Senn, 2010; Montgomery and Yip, 2000), strategic account management (Al-Husan and Brennan, 2009), national account management (Stevenson and Page, 1979; Shapiro and Moriarty, 1980, 1982, 1984a, 1984b; Dishman and Nitse, 1998), international key account management (Zupancic and Müllner, 2008), key clients management (Pels, 1992), major account management (Coletti and Tubrity, 1987), key customers management (Homburg, Workman & Jensen, 2002) and key account management (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010; Pardo, 1997, 1999, 2001 and 2006; Ojasalo, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Abratt and Kelly, 2002; Homburg et al., 2002; and Sharma, 1997).

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Homburg et al.(2002) mention that some definition of KAM focus on the key dimensions and others on special activities and still others on dedication of special actors to key accounts. Ojasalo (2001) mentions that the meaning of KAM is very unclear, lacks coherence and clearly requires further conceptualization. Furthermore, conceptual inconsistencies are increasingly evident in the definitions of key account management (Kempener and Hart, 1999) because panoply of different terms is being used to define this term (Ivens and Pardo, 2008). These inconsistencies and lack of coherence hindered researchers from integrating their conceptual ideas into a clear and authoritative definition of key account management. As there is some overlap among the definitions, a general definition of key account management with different dimensions and covering various aspects would be beneficial for the academicians and practitioners. The present study will address the following questions:

What are the key definitions of key account management?

What are the similarities among them?

How do they differ from each other on different dimensions?

Is it possible and beneficial to generate a universal definition of key account management?

Concentrating on these study issues, one common definition on key account management will help the practitioners better understanding the notion of this term within the organizations and will help researchers to get a holistic view on this topic. Upon completion of the present paper we would like to get our aim of identifying one multi-dimensional definition of key account management based on the content analysis of previous definition of KAM. An important contribution of the present paper is that our analysis is based on 46 definitions of KAM taken from eighteen academic journals that covers the essence and generates a multi-dimensional definition of KAM.

The organization of the present paper is structured as follows: first we present a short literature review from 1970th to 2011th literatures from eighteen academic journals. Citation of some previous definitions on KAM will encompass various dimensions of KAM; make us familiar with the similarities and differences. The next section will discuss the methodology used for this study for the collection of definition of KAM and an analysis of 46 definitions from nineteen academic journals. This follows a finding section reporting the various attributes of KAM and the relating descriptors to explain those attributes. Driven by these attributes a pictorial definition of KAM is provided and it follows a textual definition. We organize our paper around these themes before offering a discussion of limitations and recommendations for some further research scopes.

## 2. Literature Review

In the literature of key account management, an array of diversified name is used to explain the term KAM (Abratt and Kelly, 2002; Al-Husan and Brennan, 2009; Capon and Senn, 2010; Coletti and Tubrity, 1987; Guesalaga and Johnston, 2010; Homburg et al., 2002; Ojasalo, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Pels, 1992; Pardo, 1997, 1999, 2001

and 2006; Sharma, 1997; Stevenson and Page, 1979; Zupancic and Müllner, 2008). The present study will use the term key account management from these alternates to maintain the uniformity, as it encompasses all of these (Sengupta et al., 2000).

At the outset, we here offer some previous definitions of KAM to demonstrate the diversity of definition and facilitate the development of a multi-dimensional definition of KAM. Barrett (1986) defines KAM as targeting the major customers of the organization where they are served with special treatment relating to the fields of marketing, sales, administration and service. In defining the key account management, Millman and Wilson (1995) term it as a seller initiated type of strategic alliance with the key customers of strategic importance. In the same vein, McDonald et al. (1997) mention that it is the selling company's adopted approach aimed at building a portfolio of loyal key accounts by offering them a product/service package in customized form on an ongoing basis. Ojasalo (2001) defines KAM as relationship-oriented marketing management approach in the business-to-business market which focuses on major customers.

As key accounts demand special attention and require organized efforts from the suppliers, thus managing and serving them is much critical. Following this notion, Workman et al. (2003) define KAM as the performance of additional activities and/or designation of special personnel directed at an organization's most important customers. Pardo (1997) mention that key account management (KAM) or national account marketing consists in targeting the major customers of the company, by providing them with special treatment in the field of marketing, sales administration and service. Zupancic (2008) calls it as systematic selection, analysis and management of the most important present and future customers of the company with the set up and maintenance of needed infrastructure. Brehmer and Rehme (2009) relate it with the organizational structure. They define KAM as the organization that caters for the management and the development of the relationship in a more or less formal structure for the largest and most important customers.

Some authors explained it as the organizational process targeted to the global account while others consider these customers as strategic customers. Shi, White, Zou and Cavusgil (2010) define global account management as the organizational form and process in a multinational supplying company by which the worldwide activities serving a given multinational customer are coordinated centrally by one person or team within the supplying company. Montgomery, Yip and Villalonga (1999) define global account management as an organizational form and process in multinational companies by which the worldwide activities serving a given multinational customer are coordinated centrally by one person or team within the supplying company.

Abratt and Kelly (2002) term KAM as a strategy which is used by selling organizations to serve high-potential, multi-location accounts with complex needs requiring individual attention through a carefully established relationship. Similarly, Piercy and Lane (2006) mention

that strategic account management (SAM) strategies, sometimes known as key account management (KAM), have evolved across the world as an approach to handling the issues raised by very large customers who dominate a supplier's sales and profit profile. As a strategy it is also used to create value for the parties involved and Wengler et al. (2006) mention that KAM is an important approach to creating value, by implementing specific processes targeting most important customers. Additionally, key account management is a program introduced by supplier to serve strategically important customers in a more individual manner (Ivens and Pardo, 2008).

### 3. Methodology

The primary objectives of the present paper are to identify the recurrent attributes of key account management that are included in different definition of key account management and propose both diagrammatic and textual definition of key account management.

#### 3.1. Gathering definitions

To find out the definition of KAM given by academics, a thorough literature review of article on key account management were done. We content analyzed 74 articles, published in 23 journals. To select the articles on key account management, we searched academic databases using several key words including 'key account', 'major account', 'national account', 'large account' and 'strategic account' as considered in the literature. In the context of organization studies key journals such as Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, Industrial Marketing Management, IMP Group Journal, Stanford University Report, American Journal of Business, International Business Review, Journal of Business to Business Marketing, Journal of International Business Studies, Journal of International Marketing Review, Journal of Marketing Management, Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management, Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, The Marketing Review, European Journal of Marketing, European Management Journal, Journal of Business Strategy, Journal of Marketing Practice, Journal of Medical Marketing were reviewed.

We went through the title, the abstract, the introduction and the literature review of each preselected article. We came up with 74 articles, which we think adequately represent the academic literature for finding the definition on KAM.

As all article does not contained specific definition on KAM, eventually, some 46 definition on key account management were gathered from 19 journals out of total 23 journals as shown in the following table with their representative percentage.

<Table 1> List of journals and number of definitions gathered

SL. No.	Name of the journal	Number of definition	% of definition
1	Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing (from 1986 to 2011)	10	21%
2	Industrial Marketing Management (From 1980 to 2010)	5	11%
3	IMP Group Journal	4	8%
4	Stanford University Report	3	6%
5	American Journal of Business (From 1986-2010)	2	4%
6	International Business Review	2	4%
7	Journal of Business to Business Marketing	2	4%
8	Journal of International Business Studies	2	4%
9	Journal of International Marketing Review	2	4%
10	Journal of Marketing Management	2	4%
11	Journal of Personal Selling and Sales Management (From 1980-2010)	2	4%
12	Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science (from 1981 to 2006)	2	4%
13	The Marketing Review	2	4%
14	European Journal of Marketing (from 1981-2011)	1	3%
15	European Management Journal	1	3%
16	Harvard Business Review (from 1981 to 2005)	1	3%
17	Journal of Business Strategy	1	3%
18	Journal of Marketing Practice From 1983 to 2010	1	3%
19	Journal of Medical Marketing	1	3%
Total		46	100

Our content analysis consists of theoretical or conceptual as well as empirical paper. In some journals article on key account management is very scant and to find out definition we analyze the text of each article relating to KAM. The following table provides us a picture of authors, the year, the term used whether it is KAM or other and total number of article reviewed.

<Table 2> Total number of articles reviewed according to their name variety with their authors

Authors and year	Termed used	No. of articles
Abratt and Kelly (2002); Backer and Linden (2005); Brady (2004); Brehmer and Rehme (2009); Cahill (1998); Fleischer (2010); Guenzi et al.(2007); Homburg et al.(2000); Ivens and Pardo (2004); Ivens and Pardo (2007); Ivens and Pardo (2008); Jolson (1997); Kientop (2010); McDonald (2000); McDonald et al.(1997); Millman (1996); Millman and Wilson (1995); Millman and Wilson (1999); Ojasalo (2001); Ojasalo (2004); Ojasalo (2002a); Ojasalo (2002b); Pardo (1997); Pardo (1999); Pardo et al. (2006); Pardo (n. d.); Pels (1992); Piercy and Lane (2006); Richards and Jones	Key account management (KAM)	43

(2009); Ryals and Holt (2007); Sanford and Maddox (1999); Sengupta et al. (1997); Sharma (1997); Smith (2009); Spencer (1999); Spencer (2007); Storbacka et al. (2009); Tommi and Olavi (2009); Wengler et al. (2006); Wong (1998); Workman et al. (2003); Zupancic (2008); Zupancic and Müllner (2008)		
Birkinshaw et al. (2001); Harvey et al. (2003); Harvey et al. (2003); Hollensen and Grünbaum (2006); Montgomery and Yip (2000); Montgomery et al. (2001, 2002); Shi et al. (2010); Shi et al. (2005); Shi et al. (2004); Wilson and Weilbaker (2004); Yip and Madsen (1996); Yip and Bink (2007)	Global account management (GAM)	14
Boles et al. (1994); Boles et al. (1999); Dishman and Nitse (1998); Lambe and Spekman (1997); Napolitano (1997); Shapiro and Wyman (1981); Weeks and Stevens (1997); Weilbaker and Weeks (1997); Wotruba and Castleberry (1993)	National account management (NAM)	09
Al-Husan and Brennan (2009); Gosselin and Bauwen (2006); Lane and Piercy (2004); Piercy and Lane (2006a); Piercy and Lane (2006b)	Strategic account management (SAM)	05
Colletti and Tubridy (1987); Turner (1990)	Major account management (MAM)	02
Kempeners and Hart (1999)	Account management (AM)	01
Total		74

### 3.2. Analysis

After collecting the representing pool of definition of KAM, a content analysis was done to isolate the key attributes of KAM definitions and separating different determinants of the identified attributes. Kolbe and Burnett (1991) state content analysis as an observational research method and mention that it is used to systematically evaluate the symbolic contents of all forms of recorded communication. On the other hand, Holsti (1969) defines content analysis as any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages. In our content analysis of KAM definition we consider them as special message used to maintain the communication between key customer and seller in the business-to-business relationship and our purpose of this analysis is to isolate the key characteristics or attributes of the definition of KAM. Here definition of KAM is considered as part of text and although various aspects are related we only analyze the words to accumulate the key attributes. Sekaran and Bougie (2010) mention that analysis of textual information and systematically identify its properties like presence of certain words, concepts, characters, themes or sentences are done through content analysis. Similarly, Bryman (2001) explains that content analysis is an approach to the analysis of

documents and texts. In the qualitative research content analysis measures pervasiveness and that is sometimes an index of the intensity of the force (Good & Douglas, 1954) in the existing documents. This analysis codes text into categories and then analyzes using conceptual analysis or relational analysis (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010).

The existence and frequency of concepts like words, themes or characters are analyzed and interpreted by coding text into different manageable content categories through conceptual analysis and relational analysis examines relationships among concepts in the text (Sekaran and Bougie, 2010). They also mention that outcomes of conceptual and relational analysis are then used to make conclusion about the messages within the text, environmental effects on content, effect of message on receiver and the like. Baregheh et al.(2009) suggest that transparent quantification is required to get the suitable emerging categories of key attributes rather than simply generating them. To ensure the transparent quantification they suggest 9 steps procedure which is used here in a suitable format for the current research paper.

- Classification of definition of key account management according to the different term used.
- Cleaning the text in order to simplify the word frequency count process. To do this, several words are brought under same banner for example, the word approach is used to denote process, strategy and concept. Another example is targeting which includes identification, analysis, selection, targeting of key account.
- Counting of word frequencies- number of times words appear in each definition of KAM. This is done manually.
- Grouping the words with the same stem in the word frequency results (e.g. individualized attention, special attention).
- Elimination of the words, which appeared only once or twice in their set of definitions, or words, which are of no value, such as pronouns.
- Identification of the key account management attributes from the word frequency counts. We started this process by considering the definition of KAM and then global account management (GAM), national account management (NAM), strategic account management (SAM) and account management (AM) respectively. This chronology is followed on the basis of total representative definition available with these terms.
- Clustering of the descriptors used in connection with each attribute for each discipline as shown in Table 3.
- Cross dimensional analysis of the descriptors used for each attribute. For each attribute those words that have been used in common between a numbers of dimensions (suggesting similarity) were selected, and are highlighted in bold in Table 3.
- The proposal of a diagrammatic and text definition of key account management.

Table 3 below summarizes all the key attributes with their determinants. The number beside each determinant indicates their occurrence in each definition.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

A snapshot of the words frequency grouped by attributes is given in the following table 3 that was derived from content analysis of the key account management definition.

<Table 3> Summary of words frequency grouped by attributes

Key attributes	Frequency count
Approach	Approach, 8 Process, 10 Program, 3 Concept, 3 Strategy, 5 Way, 1
Entities/parties	Supplier company, 45 Customer company, 45
Targeting	Identification, 5 Analysis, 3 Selection, 8 Targeting, 5
Focuses/issues	Individual needs, 12 Complex requirements, 3 Environmental change, 1
Means	Special organizational solution, 6 Efficient management, 2 Specific process, 5 Better interaction, 1 Special attention, 11 Special personnel, 5 Centrally coordinated activities, 6
Purpose	Building portfolio of loyal key, 1 customer, 2 Profitability, 3 Long-term relationship, 7 Value creation, 1 Maximize sales, 4 Customer satisfaction, 1 Company objectives, 1 Competitive advantage, 1

Six key attributes are identified from the content analysis and they are forming the foundation for an integrative definition as they are representing the different dimensions. They are approach, entities/parties, targeting, focuses/issues, means and purpose.

A brief definition of each attribute is given below:

**Approach:** refers to a systematic process in key account management to serve them properly.

**Entities/parties :** refer to the parties involved in the key account management relationship.

**Targeting:** carefully identifying, selecting and aiming the suitable

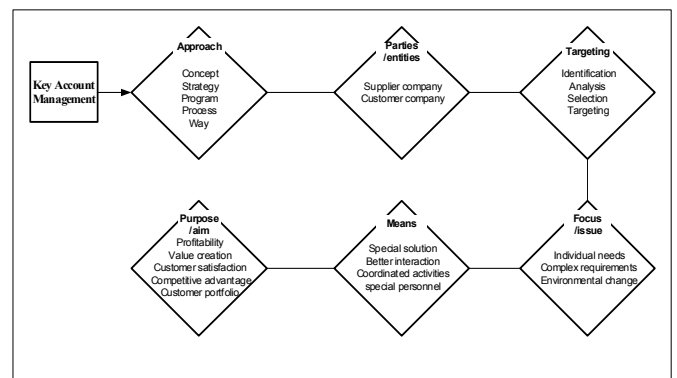
key accounts for the KAM approach.

**Focuses/issues :** paying attention on the most important issues relating to the key account's interest.

**Means :** refers to the necessary resources (both human, non-human, capital resources) that are required to serve the key accounts.

**Purpose :** the overall principles for which key account management approach is undertaken.

On the basis of the key attributes identified and the various descriptors that characterize these attributes, we came up with a proposed diagrammatic definition of key account management that is given in figure 1. This diagrammatic definition consists of six key attributes that are usually available in almost every definition of key account management. Here it is notable to state that it is not a compulsion to start defining KAM with the attribute approach rather it can be started with any attribute depending on the suitability of the individual company context. This pictorial definition of KAM is suggested for only to represent the essential attributes of KAM.



<Figure1> Diagrammatic definition of key account management

In order to capture and articulate the diagrammatic definition of KAM given in the above figure 1 in words through interpretation, we suggest that:

Key account management is a supplier company initiated approach targeted at the most important customers to solve their complex requirements with special treatment that eventually ensures both parties' financial and nonfinancial objectives.

Our definition starts with the approach as previous definition of KAM include this attribute indicating a systematic process which is undertaken by the supplier company. As it is mentioned in various previous definition that key accounts are targeted by the supplier company with a careful identification, analysis and selection, so it is included in the proposed definition where focus is given on their individual complex requirements. Various arrangements are availed by the supplier company to meet the accounts' demand which is termed as means of serving the key account. Finally, aim or purpose of adopting this approach is put in consideration to come up with closing comment. Thus these pictorial and textual definitions of key account management reveals the true that an all-embracing definition of KAM should encompass a number of aspects of the essence of key

account management.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations

In the business-to-business relationship key account management is a burning issue about what it is and how it is managed at the organizational level. It is also the interest of both practitioner and academicians across a range of goods and service industry. Doing a comprehensive content analysis of existing definition of key account management, we have identified how do different dimensions are relevant with the definition of KAM and propose a distinct definition. We hope that this initiative will generate the common meaning and shared understanding on the key account management approach. As divergence is abundant in the definition of KAM, thus confusions and ambiguities are created which reflected in the comments of Ojasalo (2001) who mentions that the meaning of KAM is very unclear, lacks coherence and clearly requires further conceptualization.

To respond to address this, we have gone through an extensive content analysis of key account management definition and extracted some critical attributes that are common and propose an integrative and intuitively textual definition of key account management. This textual definition is supplemented by a pictorial definition with various descriptors that can be used to provide a more realistic definition of KAM. We believe that this attempt will facilitate the transparent sharing and transfer of knowledge(Baregheh et al., 2009) relating to key account management and its processes. Both the diagrammatic and textual definition of key account management can be used as checklist to judge whether or not organizations are approaching the key customers with an all encompassing manner.

However, with our effort there are some limitations. Our paper is a conceptual paper and written on the basis of the existing business literatures containing key account management articles. We observed that the nature and context of key account management and thinking on this evolves over time. Further research can reveal how the key account management does and its understanding has come to the present stat. Future research can validate the definition of key account management across different industry, different culture in relation to its suitability, usefulness and acceptability.

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