

MODELING THE LINK BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCE OF KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE IN BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS CONTEXT

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Abstract

Key account management, 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, is regarded as a vital concern of many companies' sales efforts in business-to-business context. Based on the extant literatures, we introduce a theoretical framework highlighting organizational antecedents and repeat order as the consequence of key account management performance. We theorize the conditions under which organizational factors, including top management emphasis and team effort influence the performance of key account management approach. In addition, moderating effect of length of relationship on the relationship between key account management performance and repeat order is also presented. Theoretical and managerial implications are provided along with several future research directions.

Keywords: Key account management, Team effort, Repeat order

บทคัดย่อ

การจัดการลูกค้าหลักคือ แนวทางการให้บริการพิเศษให้กับลูกค้ากลุ่มที่สำคัญ เพื่อให้ทั้งบริษัทและลูกค้าได้บรรลุถึงวัตถุประสงค์ทั้งทางการเงิน และมีใช้ทางการเงิน ในการขายแบบธุรกิจสู่ธุรกิจ ผู้วิจัยวิเคราะห์กรอบทฤษฎีเกี่ยวกับปัจจัยสำคัญ และการซื้อซ้ำที่เป็นผลมาจากการจัดการลูกค้าหลัก ผู้วิจัยเสนอว่าปัจจัยทางด้านองค์กร ซึ่งรวมถึงการย้ายเดือน โดยผู้บริหารและทีมงาน ส่งผลต่อการจัดการลูกค้าหลัก นอกเหนือจากนั้น ระยะเวลาที่ติดต่อกันมาเป็นปัจจัยที่ส่งผลต่อความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างการจัดการลูกค้าหลัก และการซื้อซ้ำ ผู้วิจัยนำเสนอการประยุกต์ใช้ทางทฤษฎีและการจัดการ ตลอดจนถึงทิศทางในการวิจัยต่อไปในอนาคต

คำสำคัญ: การจัดการลูกค้าหลัก, ความร่วมมือเป็นทีม, การส่งซื้อซ้ำ

INTRODUCTION

Efficient customer management is vital for the organization in today's volatile business environment. Proper management of customers with endless efforts makes the marketer's position enduring in the marketplace, creates its position impregnable and ensures a sustained competitive advantage. The situation is more critical when customers have strategic importance for the organizations. 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 (Pardo, 1997). 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".

According to the Pareto principle, it is a immutable business fact that 80% of revenue comes from 20% of a marketer's customers (Bunkley, 2008). This notion creates the basis for key account management approach where this strategy acts as the best way of ensuring repeat purchase, additional purchases and referral to other customers like them. McDonald (2000) terms the key account management approach as the natural extension and newer discipline of relationship marketing that focuses on fulfilling customer requirements in the business-to-business contexts. Yip and Madsen (1996) explain it as the new frontier in the field of relationship marketing.

It is recognized in the key account management literatures that commitment from senior management is a precondition that facilitates the implementation of key account management processes (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010). In practice top management involvement should be "multifaceted" (Capon, 2001) and "decision-making is but one of several roles assumed by senior leaders" (Carpenter, Geletkanycz, & Sanders, 2004). Thus, to advance our understanding on the field of senior managers' involvement with key account customer management, significant opportunities are presented (Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010).

Wagner (2011) mentions that the nature of buyer-seller relationship is dynamic where stages of relationship might moderate the relationship

between seller development and firm performance. Sharma (2006) opines that key accounts success undergoes change depending upon the stage of the relationship. Wotruba and Castleberry (1993) explore that the length of time the NAM (national account management) program has been in existence appears to impact performance with older programs showing the best performance. Workman, Homburg and Jensen (2003) suggest that future studies should take into account the influence of moderators between key account management performance and its outcomes.

Furthermore, most of the previous studies conducted tend to focus on the impact of key account management success on various outcomes (Ellram, 1991; Harvey, Myers, & Novicevic, 2003; McDonald, 2000; Senn, 2006; Workman et al., 2003) but as long as the key customer behavioral performance such as repeat order is related, no clear understanding exists on the impact of key account management performance on the key customer repeat order behavior. Repeat orders from key account customers impacts profoundly on the survival of industries and greater level of success in businesses. As a western marketing strategy the studies relating to KAM omit the covering of different cultures and environment and provide limited of perspectives of key account management (Al-Husan & Brennan, 2009; Tsai & Chen, 2008). Wengler, Ehret and Saab (2006) mention that progress in the research of key account management is less significant due to the regional focus and its strong connection to the personal selling literature.

These gaps limit our understanding on how organizational variables like top management emphasis and team effort on key account management performance and its resulting impact on repeat order and how the length of relationship moderate this relationship which is the core subjective matter of the study.

The remaining parts of this paper are organized as follows. In the following sections literature review is provided that discusses the theoretical background, followed by theoretical framework. These follow the proposition for the study. Finally, contributions and future research directions are provided under the umbrella of discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background

In general, performance means an efficient completion of something that comes up with expected outcomes. In marketing performance is determined by the sales volume, profit margin and return on investment made by the marketer (Ofek & Sarvary, 2003). For our study we have taken performance in key account management strategy as the attainment of goals for both key buyer and seller over a long-period of time in the key account relationship.

Pegram (1972 in Zupansis, 2008) first introduced the term national account in the conference board meeting and explored its importance through relating part-time or full time jobs with it. Some of the common terms used to describe the management of these customer are global account management (Capon & Senn, 2010; Montgomery & Yip, 2000), strategic account management (Al-Husan & Brennan, 2009), national account management (Dishman & Nitse, 1998; Shapiro & Moriarty, 1982; Stevenson & Page, 1979), international key account management (Zupancic & Mullner, 2008), key clients management (Pels, 1992), major account management (Coletti & Tubrity, 1987), key customers management (Homburg, Workman, & Jensen, 2002) and key account management (Abratt & Kelly, 2002; Guesalaga & Johnston, 2010; Ojasalo, 2001; Pardo, 1999; Sharma, 1997).

Account management directed towards key customers in the business markets can be perceived as a useful execution of durable buyer/seller relationships (Gosselin & Heene, 2005) where perennial interaction takes place between seller and key account. Managing and serving the key customers are critical as they demand special attention and require organized efforts from the suppliers. Workman et al. (2003) define key account management as the execution of added functions and/or designation of special executives aimed at the organization's most significant customers. Zupancic (2008) calls it as systematic choice, examination 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) define key account management as the organization that pro-

vides for the management and the building of the relationship in a more or less formal arrangement. As among academics, the definition of key account management differs significantly on various dimensions and issues, hence researchers for this study have come up with the following multidimensional definition of key account management approach where it is defined as 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 (Ahmmed & Noor, 2012).

In the business-to-business context, at the organizational level, various organizational factors like decision making, managerial issues, account manager's behavior, managerial competences and key account manager role to create values, all affect sales team's ability to recognize key customers needs and requirements properly and serve them successfully (Georges & Eggert, 2003; Guenzi, Georges, & Pardo, 2009; Harvey et al., 2003; Jacobides, 2007; Mahlamäki & Uusitalo, 2009; Weeks & Stevens, 1997). However, theoretical study that exposes the organizational drivers of key account management performance in buyer-supplier relational context is still scant. Abrat and Kelly (2002) suggest that some key account programs are not effective. In describing the necessity of examining the top management role in multiple ways, Guesalaga and Johnston (2010) state that it is necessary to delineate the ways through which senior management will involve with the key account management program for its performance.

Napolitano (1997) mentions that in the key account management program both top management sponsorship and involvement are critical for its performance. Additionally, although key account management performance generates various dyadic outcomes, existing literatures have no clear direction in this regard. As long as repeat order outcome is involved, to the best of knowledge, no research has considered it as the consequence of key account management performance. Wagner (2011) mentions that the nature of buyer-seller relationship is dynamic where stages of relationship might moderate the relationship between seller development and firm performance in the buyer and seller relationship dyad. The existing literatures do not take length of relationship as a moderating variable between key account management perfor-

mance and customer repeat order behavior. Therefore, the specific organizational variables that impact on key account management performance and how key account management performance influences key customer repeat order behavior in the presence of moderating variable of length of relationship are not delineated yet. The purpose of this study is to fill these gaps and advance our understanding on this field.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

On the basis of extant literature on key account management, a framework is developed to incorporate the influence of organizational factors on key account management performance and its resulting impact on key account repeat order behavior. In addition, length of relationship is incorporated in the model to show its moderating effect on the relationship between key account management performance and repeat order.

The basic idea of the proposed framework is that some organizational independent factors act as drivers for key account management performance and at the same time key account management performance is proposed to have a considerable positive impact on the key account's repeat purchase behavior. And length of relationship enhances the key account management performance-repeat order relationship. Figure 1 depicts these relationships and following section provides a brief discussion.

The framework is based on the social exchange theory that views the exchange relationship between key account customers and supplying companies as "actions contingent on rewarding reactions from others" (Blau, 1964). For example, in

the context of key account management relationships, a company makes a contribution to its key account through internal coordination, top management supports and team efforts. In turn, an expectation forms for the return of a contribution at a later time which may include profits, enhanced relationship or development of trust. The key account receiving a valued contribution develops a sense of obligation and reciprocates with appropriate attitudinal and behavioral responses in the form of repeat order or maintaining lengthy relationship.

RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS

Consequence of Key Account Management Performance

In our study we introduce repeat order as the consequence of key account management performance. Repeat order refers to the continuation of purchasing goods and services from an organization (Molinari, Abratt, & Dion, 2008) by key account customers. Through the performance of key account management approach, suppliers can be more aware about the customer's requirements and able to meet those requirements with more customized attention that eventually ensures repeat purchase. To date, the primary emphasis of studies have targeted the impact of key account management performance from the standpoint of organization and customers and these studies find several positive outcomes such as higher revenue, customer referrals, expectation of continuity, transfer of market knowledge and know-how to the suppliers, competitive advantage, shareholder value creation and joint action or cooperation (Gosselin

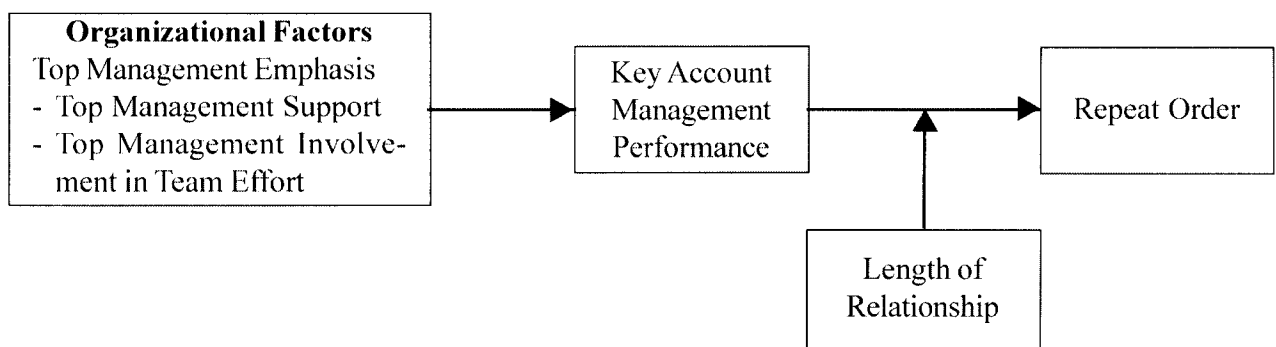


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

& Bauwen, 2006; Montgomery, Yip, & Villalonga, 1999; Pardo, Henneberg, Mouzas, & Naude, 2006; Selnes & Sallis, 1999; Workman et al., 2003).

The theory of reasoned action proposes that when buyers get better services, more attention from sales person to meet their requirements with customized fashion and realize better price dealings, they will show positive behavior to continue doing business with that seller (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It implies that key account management performance impacts on the customer satisfaction levels that are expressed in the form of repeat order from the suppliers and makes the relationship linger, because anticipated levels of performance is expected to have a vital outcome on the remaining or exit decision (Jackson, 1985; Levitt, 1981). Noordewier, John and Nevin (1990) mention that as transactions become more relational, there is a greater expectation of repeat business with the exchange partner.

From the above discussion, it can be summarized that companies can benefit a lot from both financial and relational business outcome perspectives if they can show higher degree of key account management performance. This means that key account management approach leads to higher key account's satisfaction which in turn ensures business continuation in the form of repeat orders. On the other hand, key account customers have no difficulties about switching to other competing countries if they are dissatisfied. Therefore, the study proposes that:

P1: Key account management performance is positively related to repeat order.

Organizational Drivers of Key Account Management Performance

Organizational factors provide key account manager with actionable guidance on how to develop and maintain winning relationship with key account customers. This study focuses on two organizational factors namely top management emphasis in the key account management program and team effort as antecedents of key account management performance.

Top Management Emphasis

In a key account management program, top management emphasis is defined as the degree to which top management participate in the key ac-

count management approach (Homburg et al., 2002). Salojarvi, Sainio and Tarkiainen (2010) mention that in the context of key account management the importance of top management involvement has been extended across functional limits. Top management emphasis is required to authorize the managers adequately and also to reinforce the commitment across the organizational to the program (McDonald, Rogers, & Woodburn, 2003; Workman et al., 2003).

In describing the significance of top management emphasis in a key account management program, the study of Workman et al. (2003) explores that strategies relating to the organization are proposed to replicate the characteristics and interest of senior managers. In the analysis of upper echelons of organization, Hambrick and Mason (1984) explain that organizational results, whether strategic choices or performance levels, are partially anticipated by the characteristics of managerial background and organizations are a manifestation of their senior managers. They also mention that top managers in the organization play a critical role in shaping an organization's values and orientation. Jaworski and Kohli (1993) state that top management's reinforcement encourages the individual in the organization to track changes in the market place, share market information with other internal people, help to be reactive to customer requirements and thus positively impact on the key account management performance.

Thoma (2007) mention that senior management should involve in customer strategy meeting, development of business plan and support the key account managers to access the top executives. Similarly, Francis (2004) describes that top management have a crucial function to perform in the successful key customer management program, not just in reviewing sales account activities, but also in playing an dynamic part inside the team for managing key accounts. In describing the multi functional role of senior management, Capon (2001) suggests that top management involvement should be "multifaceted" and among the multifaceted functions "decision-making" is one of them (Carpenter et al., 2004). Napolitano (1997) mentions that top management sponsorship and their participation are the most vital sign of the performance of key account management program. Therefore, the study proposes the following:

P2a: Top management support is positively re-

lated to key account management performance

P2b: Top management involvement is positively related to key account management performance.

Team Effort

Another organizational variable that exerts influence on key account management performance is team effort. Team effort is defined as the extent to which teams are formed to organize the functions needed to serve the key customers (Workman et al., 2003). Team selling happens in the case of (i) buying complex product for the first time; (ii) greater information is required; (iii) unique attention is needed for key account customer; (iv) collective decision is made for buying the product; (v) sales volume is large for the supplier firm; (vi) nature of the product is new in the portfolio of key account manager's product line and (vii) portfolio of market offering in the supplier firm is complex and exceeds the boundary of individual sales person's cognitive threshold (Jackson, Widmier, Giacobbe, & Keith, 1999).

As customers are becoming more complex and heterogeneous and expect increasing levels of service (Moon & Armstrong, 1994; Workman et al., 2003), it is necessary for the marketer to have some mechanism that includes the needed specialization to serve their increased demands which refers to the team selling situation. Perry, Pearce and Sims (1999) argue that when the selling task is moderately or highly complex, the necessity of having effective sales team is vital. In the industrial buyers and sellers' perspective under certain conditions, Spekman and Johnston (1986) observed that buyer and seller dealings involve a large number of related personnel on both sides of the dyad. A similar view is observed in the study of Cardozo and Shipp (1987) relating to national account management point of view. They assert that a team often exists when large size customers are needed to be served, because it is necessary for the supplier company to make a match with the specific personnel in an account's organization by diversified members of the selling team.

In the personal selling circumstance, team selling situation is natural because the essential point of a key account management strategy to personal selling is that big, multifaceted key accounts are serviced by several individuals whose activities need to be coordinated to gain success as a pre-

ferred supplier (Moon & Armstrong, 1994). Cardozo, Shipp and Roering (1987) characterize national account management as a team approach that unites sales with service or technical individuals to service large customers with complex needs. Marshall, Moncrief and Lask (1999) note that team work is a new concept in managing accounts where salespeople are working in a team format much more today than in the past. Cespedes, Doyle, and Freedman (1989) even argue that selling is no longer an individual activity but rather a coordinated team effort.

In general, the above studies suggest that in the context of business-to-business relationship organizations realize greater performance when they serve their key customers through team effort in a concerted manner. Therefore, this research proposes that:

P3: Team effort is positively related to key account management performance.

Moderating Role of Length of Relationship

Length of relationship means the duration that a relationship exists between buyer and supplier (Palmatier, Dant, Grewal, & Evans, 2006) as well as how the parties regard each other as they pass through various phases (Dwyer, Schurr, & Oh, 1987). Shi, White, Zou and Cavusgil (2010) describe relationship duration as the focal seller's confidence that the relationship with the key account buyer will extend for a lengthy period. In the key account management relationship, Wotruba and Castleberry (1993) argue that the length of time the national account management program has been in existence appears to impact on performance with older programs showing the best performance, because long-term relationship lets them know each other and facilitates both parties interaction frequently on various issues like knowledge exchange, making adjustment as necessary for mutual benefits, and so on.

Social psychology literature clarifies that individual in early periods of a relationship have been found to have minimum reliance in their evaluation of their partners than in later stages of that relationship (Swann & Gill, 1997). This is because at the subsequent stages of relationships the impact of such assessment on behavior increases (Verhoef, Franses & Hoekstral, 2001). In this regard, Bolton (1998) and Rust, Inman, Jia, and

Zahorik (1999) argue that this similar procedure might also hold for customers' reliance in their assessment of satisfaction as an outcome of key account management performance. Gill, Swann and Silvera (1998) noted that parties in the lengthy relationships have higher reliance in their appraisals of their exchange parties in spite of whether or not those confidences are correct. Therefore, even though buyers with long-lasting relationships may have incorrect assessments of the seller, they are likely to be more dependent about these estimations and in the introductory phases of the relationship buyers have minimum reliance in their assessment of the seller (Verhoef, Franses, & Hoekstra, 2002). Therefore, in a lengthy relationship, customer knowledge from exchanges with seller act as more powerful drivers for relationship consequences (Jap, 1999).

Verhoef et al. (2002) mention that duration of relationship is an interesting area of study in the field of relationship marketing that has attracted the attention of many academics over the years. They mention that current researches have taken the age of relationship as moderating variable that impact on the relationship between commitment, trust, satisfaction and consequences of relationship. Wagner (2011) mentions that the nature of buyer-seller relationship is dynamic where stages of relationship might moderate the relationship between seller development and firm performance in the buyer and seller relationship dyad. Verhoef et al. (2002) considered the length of relationship as a moderating variable and examined its effect. Workman et al. (2003) mention that there may be interactions between key account management performance and moderators and subsequent studies should take into account the influence of moderator between key account management performance and its outcomes.

Eventually, this study proposes that:

P4: Length of relationship moderates (enhances) the relationship between key account management performance and repeat order.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the underlying organizational factors that influence key account management performance. Regarding this issue, we see that two organizational factors, namely top man-

agement emphasis and team effort influence the company's key account management performance. These factors provide key account managers with guidance on how to develop and maintain successful relationship with key account customers.

Contributions

From this theoretical framework, several implications can be forwarded the theoretical framework of this study creates a platform for future empirical study. Secondly, the isolation of organizational antecedent variables and discussion on their individual influence on key account management performance and introduction of repeat order as the outcome of key account management performance, increase our knowledge on variables which influence key account management success and show. Thirdly, the introduction of moderating effect of length of relationship on the key account management performance-repeat order relationship provides us a new horizon of thinking in the field of key account management strategy. Fourthly, this study also sheds light on the application of social exchange theory (SET) in the context of key account management approach. As non-governance mechanism is taken as relationship governing means, we have taken 'relationship' as a governing norm in key account management relationship (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987).

Apart from the above theoretical contribution, this study provides us with several managerial implications. Firstly, in applying the key account management approach at the organizational level, management should have knowledge about which factors influence this approach. From the discussion provided here, they can get a clear understanding about the impact of various organizational factors. Although these factors are not all inclusive, management should be vigilant in applying and depending on these variables, because the context in which they are working is different from case to case.

Future Research Direction

Based on the theoretical framework, several future research directions can be advanced. Firstly, it is not known which variables exert more influence than other. Thus, future empirical research can throw light on this phenomenon and provide evidence for influencing variable which are critical

for management decision making. Secondly, a particular phenomenon is influenced by many forces and factors. In our study we were unable to incorporate all probable variables that influence the level of key account management success. So, future research should include more antecedent variables to test their impact on the key account management performance.

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