

EDITORIAL

Key Account Management in Transition: Organizing, Leading, and Rethinking Strategic Customer Relationships

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Key Account Management (KAM) is no longer adequately understood as a structured sales response to strategically important customers. The chapters gathered in this volume show a field that has expanded well beyond its traditional boundaries. Contemporary KAM is increasingly shaped by ecosystem complexity, cross-functional interdependence, globalization, sustainability pressures, and the rapid diffusion of digital and AI-enabled work practices. As a result, KAM is best conceived not merely as a customer program, but as an organizational capability through which firms identify, coordinate, develop, and govern strategically important relationships over time.

This book responds to that transition. Its central claim is that KAM has moved from being primarily a question of account coverage and relationship management to becoming a broader managerial challenge involving organization design, leadership, capability development, value co-creation, and performance governance. That claim is not made from a single vantage point. This volume brings together 26 contributors—academic researchers, field practitioners, doctoral graduates, and DBA candidates—all working at the intersection of KAM scholarship and organizational practice. It has been developed in the context of a Doctor of Business Administration program offered by the Business

Science Institute in collaboration with the Association of Key Account Management (AKAM), and that context shapes both its ambition and its approach.

The timing matters. Several converging pressures have made KAM simultaneously more strategically important and more difficult to execute well. The role of the Key Account Manager has expanded from relationship steward to internal orchestrator, expected to align cross-functional teams, navigate global interfaces, and increasingly work alongside digital tools and AI-assisted processes. At the same time, key customers themselves have grown more demanding, more informed, and more alert to whether the value being offered is genuine or merely packaged. Sustainability expectations have added a further layer: key account relationships are now sites where questions of shared value, responsible sourcing, and long-term impact are openly negotiated. These are not peripheral developments. They are reshaping what KAM competence looks like, what KAM organizations need to design for, and what KAM scholarship needs to explain.

It is precisely these tensions—between short-term and long-term value, local responsiveness and global consistency, automation and human judgment, collaboration and control, commercial performance and sustainability—that make KAM a particularly rich terrain for executive doctoral inquiry. The DBA dissertation process, with its commitment to generating actionable insight from rigorous engagement with real organizational problems, is well suited to a field in which theory and practice are genuinely co-dependent. This volume is addressed accordingly: not only to academics and advanced students, but to DBA candidates, scholar-practitioners, and managers responsible for key account programs who want to engage the field in depth.

The 18 chapters do not simply revisit classic KAM concerns. They extend the discussion into adjacent and increasingly important domains: value-based customer management, customer success, communities of practice, sustainability, cultural difference, diversity, foresight, and artificial intelligence. The editorial structure mirrors a logic of progressive engagement. The volume opens by clarifying the KAM domain itself—its boundaries, its claims, its current state. It then moves to the organizational and orchestration challenges that define how KAM is enacted in practice, before turning to the relational and human tensions that no program

design can fully resolve. The final sections address the capabilities required for a field in rapid evolution, and the governance and performance frameworks through which KAM can be held accountable over time.

The editors' hope is that readers will encounter this volume not as a survey to be consulted but as an argument to be engaged. KAM is at an inflection point. The field has the conceptual resources, the practitioner experience, and the scholarly momentum to meet that moment. The chapters that follow are an attempt to make that case—and to equip those who will carry the work forward.

Understanding the KAM Domain

The opening part of the book establishes the conceptual terrain. Chapter 1 provides the foundation by presenting KAM through four core design fields: selection, governance, capabilities and collaboration, and performance. This is important because it encourages readers to view KAM not as a generic label for large customers, but as a deliberate strategic architecture. In doing so, the chapter reminds us that key accounts are chosen, resourced, and governed differently because they matter differently.

Chapter 2 broadens that foundation by placing KAM in conversation with Value-Based Selling and Customer Success Management. Its contribution lies in conceptual integration. Rather than treating these approaches as competing labels, the chapter clarifies how they relate to distinct, but complementary, stages of value creation. This is particularly useful for DBA readers working in organizations where commercial, service, and strategic account responsibilities overlap in practice.

Chapter 3 completes the opening part by positioning KAM as a strategic and operational response to globalization. It underscores that concentrated customer power, international business structures, and ecosystem complexity have heightened the need for coordinated key account approaches. Together, these three chapters answer the foundational questions of the volume: what KAM is, how it relates to adjacent customer management approaches, and why it remains strategically significant in contemporary business environments.

Organizing and Orchestrating Key Accounts

The second part of the book turns from definition to execution and treats KAM as an organizational orchestration challenge. Chapter 4, centered on the Siemens case, illustrates how KAM increasingly depends on cross-functional account teams, account planning routines, capability development, and digital collaboration infrastructures. Its broader message is that successful KAM does not rest on the efforts of individual account managers alone, but on the extent to which firms empower them through governance, tools, and organizational alignment.

This theme is then deepened from several complementary angles. Chapter 5 foregrounds the internal work of KAM and shows that external customer value creation depends on internal coordination across marketing, R&D, finance, operations, and service. Chapter 6 adds a useful provocation by arguing that silos should not simply be dismantled, but productively connected through well-designed integration mechanisms. Chapter 7 introduces communities of practice as a means of turning dispersed observations and experiences into collective intelligence, reusable artefacts, and stronger organizational learning. Chapter 8 closes the section with a case-based perspective on supplier-retailer relationships, showing how KAM can structure dependence, access, and value creation even under conditions of asymmetry. Collectively, these chapters make a compelling case that KAM is not merely a sales activity, but an enterprise-wide coordination capability.

Managing People, Teams, and Relational Tensions

If the previous section shows that KAM is organizationally demanding, the third part shows that it is equally humanly demanding. Chapter 9 examines the paradoxes that characterize many contemporary KAM organizations, including tensions between growth and profitability, standardization and customization, control and autonomy, and exploitation and exploration. Rather than presenting these as problems that can be eliminated, the chapter argues that they must be managed through more ambidextrous and reflexive forms of leadership.

Chapter 10 shifts the focus to team composition and asks whether and why gender balance matters in key account teams. By treating diversity as a substantive organizational issue rather than a

peripheral human resources concern, the chapter opens important questions about complementary competences, team effectiveness, and inclusive commercial leadership. Chapter 11 extends the people dimension across borders by exploring cultural factors in global account management. Its attention to communication, hierarchy, trust, and temporal orientation shows that global account work is not simply domestic KAM scaled internationally, but a distinct coordination challenge shaped by cultural difference.

Chapter 12 completes this part of the volume by examining sustainability as a lived managerial tension. Its central insight is that sustainability in strategic customer relationships is not only a matter of policy or metrics, but of ongoing equilibrium work performed by managers who must reconcile commercial targets, organizational constraints, and personal commitments. This makes the chapter especially valuable for DBA readers interested in the intersection of strategy, values, and managerial practice.

Building Future-Ready KAM Capabilities

The fourth part of the book looks forward. Chapter 13 introduces a dynamic capability perspective on KAM and identifies the abilities to sense, seize, improve, and reconfigure as critical to account management in volatile environments. Importantly, the chapter links these capabilities to digital and AI-enabled practices, thereby establishing a bridge between classic strategic management ideas and emerging forms of commercial work.

Chapter 14 complements this view by arguing for the integration of corporate foresight into KAM. If key account relationships are genuinely strategic, then they must be managed not only in response to present needs, but with an eye to future customer priorities, market shifts, and opportunities for co-innovation. Chapters 15 and 16 then extend the future-readiness agenda more explicitly into the technological domain. Chapter 15 examines how digital technologies, generative AI, and agentic AI are reshaping work in both customer success and KAM, and it emphasizes the need for role redesign, governance, and thoughtful human oversight. Chapter 16 translates these developments into a competence perspective by identifying the skills that future Key Account Managers will need in order to remain strategically relevant in an AI-rich environment.

Taken together, these chapters show that future-ready KAM is not reducible to technology adoption. It requires new organizational capabilities, stronger anticipatory capacity, and renewed attention to distinctly human forms of judgment, integration, and strategic sensemaking.

Governing and Rewarding KAM Performance

The final part of the book addresses a question that naturally follows from all preceding chapters: how should KAM be assessed, governed, and rewarded? Chapters 17 and 18 argue, in different ways, that traditional short-term sales metrics are poorly aligned with the strategic, relational, and cross-functional character of KAM. Both chapters caution against performance systems that reward what is easy to count rather than what truly matters in key account relationships.

Chapter 17 analyzes the challenges of compensation and reward design, including the balance between behavior-based and outcome-based evaluation, the attribution problem in team-based account management, and the role of monetary and non-monetary recognition. Chapter 18 complements this by focusing on incentive systems for value co-creation and partnership development. Its argument is that if firms expect Key Account Managers to build long-term collaborative value, then their incentive systems must reflect relational health, strategic contribution, and the broader architecture of value creation. Ending the volume with these chapters is deliberate: only after clarifying what KAM is, how it is organized, who performs it, and how it is evolving, can we seriously consider how it should be evaluated.

Overall Contribution of the Volume

As an edited collection, this book makes three contributions. First, it broadens the conceptual understanding of KAM by locating it within a wider architecture of strategic customer management, rather than confining it to narrow sales or account-planning concerns. Second, it surfaces a set of contemporary themes—cross-functional orchestration, globalization, paradoxical leadership, diversity, culture, sustainability, foresight, AI, and incentive design—that expand both the research and practice agenda of KAM. Third, it speaks directly to DBA candidates and scholar-practitioners by connecting conceptual framing with

managerial tensions that are highly suitable for doctoral inquiry grounded in organizational reality.

Several recurring questions run across the chapters and may serve as particularly promising starting points for further research. How should KAM be integrated with adjacent approaches such as Value-Based Selling and Customer Success Management? Which organizational designs best support cross-functional orchestration around key customers? How do diversity, culture, and leadership tensions affect team effectiveness in strategic account settings? In what ways do sustainability pressures reshape the lived work of Key Account Managers? How should AI alter the division of labour between human judgment and digital support? And how can firms design governance and reward systems that capture long-term relational value rather than only short-term commercial outputs? These are not marginal questions. They go to the heart of how KAM is being redefined today. Readers who wish to pursue them will find a structured agenda in the concluding chapter, which maps forty research areas from managerial challenge to research question and expected managerial impact.

If there is a single thread that unites the volume, it is this: strategically important customer relationships cannot be left to chance. They require deliberate choices about whom to prioritize, how to organize around them, which capabilities to develop, how to lead under tension, how to deploy technology responsibly, and how to define success. In that sense, this book is not only about Key Account Management; it is about the evolving nature of strategic customer management in complex, interdependent, and rapidly changing business environments.