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Theorizing Length of Relationship as Moderator of Key Account Management Performance- Repeat Order Link

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Abstract

In today's highly competitive and fast changing business environment, key account management-a supplier company initiated relationship marketing approach targeted at the most important customers to solve their complex requirements with special treatment that eventually ensures both parties' financial and nonfinancial objectives- has regarded as a strategic weapon of many companies' sales efforts to manage their strategically important customers. On the basis of the existing studies, this research introduces a theoretical model highlighting the hypothetical relationship between key account management performance and repeat order. In addition, moderating effect of length of relationship on the relationship between key account management performance and repeat order is also introduced. We theorize the conditions under which key account management performance influences key customer repeat order behavior as well as the influence of moderating variable of length of relationship on key account management performance-repeat order relationship. Theoretical and managerial implications are provided along with suggestions to isolate a platform for future empirical research.

Keywords: Key Account Management Performance, Repeat Order, Length of Relationship, Social Exchange Theory

1. Introduce

This paper describes the hypothesized relationship between key account management (KAM) performance and key customer repeat order behavior in the presence of moderating variable of length of relationship. Efficient customer management with endless efforts makes the marketer's position enduring in the marketplace, creates its position impregnable and ensures the sustained competitive advantage. The managing function is more critical when customers have their 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).

The study of Workman et al. (2003) explores 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. As among academics, the definition of key account management differ significantly on various dimensions and issues, researcher for this study comes up with the following multidimensional definition of key account management approach where it is defined as a supplier company initiated relational 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).

The study of Ivens and Pardo (2007) explains that through key account management program companies initiate the relationship marketing principles into their buyer policy so that they become nearer to important customer. Because, these customers have profound impact on company's profitability and other strategic importance. Barrett (1986) explores that key account management strategy can improve the quality of business relationships and communication with customers, increase the coordination, ensures service quality and eventually maintain a tradeoff on the level of relationship with the passes of time and continuous growth of the account size.

In the business-to-business context the importance of key account management approach performance accentuates the need for greater understanding about how KAM performance impacts on key customer repeat order behavior. Surprisingly, particularly, theoretical works that

can facilitates the greater understanding of KAM performance and repeat order relationship is absent. Beyond this it is apparent that buyer-seller relationship changes over time. Relating to this aspect, although length of relationship has connection with the buyer-seller relationship dynamics, existing literatures do not include length of relationship as moderator between the KAM performance-repeat order relationships. Workman et al. (2003) mention that there may be interactions between key account management performance and moderators and future research should consider the role of moderator between key account management performance and outcomes as the relation between an independent or predictor variable and a dependent or criterion variable is affected by a moderator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). The present study intends to address these theoretical limitations of the literatures.

The paper is divided into sections. Section 2 describes the key account management performance and previous studies relating to this issue. Section 3 describes the tie between key account management performance and repeat order. Discussion on moderating variable of length of relationship is given in section 4. Theoretical framework and propositions for this study are given in section 5. Discussions end with the research contributions and future research directions given in section 6.

2. Key account management performance

In general, performance means an efficient completion of something that comes up with expected outcomes. Webster defines performance or success as a favorable or prosperous outcome of anything or any effort attempted. In marketing performance is determined by the sales volume, profit margin and return on the investment made by the marketer (Ofek & Sarvary, 2003). Sherman et al., (2003) relate key account management performance with the firm-wide initiative where firms systematically and proactively deliver strategic solutions to multiple contacts at targeted accounts with a purpose of capturing a dominant share over time. 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. As the present study introduces key account management performance as independent variable of repeat order and length of relationship as moderator, thus it seems reasonable to provide some literatures review relating to key account management performance and success given in the following table1.

Table 1. Literatures on key account management performance

Sl. No.	Particulars
1	<p>Authors: Birkinshaw, Toulan, & Arnold (2001)</p> <p>Key Account Management Success Measure: Two multi-item measures labeled: (a) efficiency and sales growth, (b) partnership with customer</p> <p>Sample: 106 survey responses from 16 multinational firms using GAM</p> <p>Method used to test: Ordinary least square regression</p> <p>Statistically significant findings: 6 different models presented, in general, strongest effects from customer dependence, communication and scope of account</p>
2	<p>Authors: Abratt & Kelly (2002)</p> <p>Key Account Management Success Measure: Six fundamental success factors suitability of the key account manager, knowledge and understanding of the key account customer's business, commitment to the partnership, delivering value, importance of trust and the proper implementation and understanding of the KAM concept.</p> <p>Sample: 92 suppliers and 98 customers, representing 100 responses relating to suppliers and 98% of customers</p> <p>Method used to test: Descriptive statistics were used, Chronbach's α was used to assess the reliability of the instrument.</p> <p>Statistically significant findings: All the factors are found significant that could assist management in creation of enhanced and sustainable relationships.</p>
3	<p>Authors: Workman, Homburg, & Jensen (2003)</p> <p>Key Account Management Success Measure: Intraorganizational determinants of key account management success</p> <p>Sample: 265 German firms and 121 USA firms</p> <p>Method used to test: Structural equation modeling is used by means of LISREL VIII</p> <p>Statistically significant findings: KAM team esprit de corps, access to marketing and sales resources, activity intensity, activity proactiveness and top management involvement in KAM affect positively on KAM program success.</p>
4	<p>Authors: Wilson & Weilbaker (2004)</p> <p>Key Account Management Measure: Global Account Management: A Literature Based Conceptual Model</p> <p>Sample: Conceptual paper</p> <p>Method used to test: In-depth literature review</p> <p>Statistically significant findings: Several propositions are given in an attempt to stimulate further research in the area.</p>
5	<p>Authors: Sharma (2006)</p> <p>Key Account Management Success Measure: Success factors in key accounts</p>

- Sample:** Within-firm and single-industry focus
Method used to test: Correlation and regression analysis were done
Statistically significant findings: Marketers' relational assets, personal/social bonds, dissatisfaction, and change in environment are the primary drivers of key account success
- 6 **Authors:** Al-Husan & Brennan (2009)
Key Account Management Success Measure: Strategic account management in an emerging economy
Sample: Single-company
Method used to test: In-depth case study
Statistically significant findings: Quick access to top management and authority to communicate with any level in the organization; authority to make decisions; teamwork; and training
- 7 **Authors:** Brehmer and Rehme (2009)
Key Account Management Measure: Proactive and reactive: drivers for key account management programmes
Sample: 50 individuals including corporate managers, key account managers and sales personnel/project Managers were interviewed.
Method used to test: In-depth interviews were taken to isolate the inner views on proactiveness and reactiveness in key account management practice.
Statistically significant findings: The study answer the question of what are the reasons of establishing several KAM programs in the same corporation
- 8 **Authors:** Shi et al. (2010)
Key Account Management Success Measure: Global account Management strategies: drivers and outcomes
Sample: Cross-industry online survey with member companies of the Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA), data collected from 203 global company mangers
Method used to test: Descriptive statistics, non-parametric tests, PLS-based confirmatory factor analysis, correlations, structural equation modeling
Statistically significant findings: Global strategic priority and globalization are significant drivers of four GAM strategies – inter-country coordination, interorganizational coordination, marketing activities standardization, and global integration; (2) inter-country and inter-organizational coordination have significant main effects on GAM performance, while global customer demand positively moderates the effects of marketing activities standardization and global integration on GAM performance; and (3) GAM performance significantly influences relationship continuity.
- 9 **Authors:** Salojãrvi & Saarenketo (2013)
Key Account Management Measure: The effect of teams on customer knowledge processing, esprit de corps and account performance in international key account management
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Sample: 158 firms

Method used to test: t-test and hypotheses test

Statistically significant findings: Customer-knowledge acquisition, dissemination and utilization are higher in team-selling situation rather than non-team group

The studies evaluated in the above table indicate various areas of key account management field. The prime fields covered are drivers and outcomes of KAM, interorganizational determinants of KAM, efficiency and sales growth, team selling situations. The present study reveals the area of impact of key account management performance on key customer repeat order. In addition, moderating role of length of relationship is also introduced that may impact on the key account management performance-repeat order relationship which requires further exploration.

3. Tie between key account management performance and repeat order.

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 et al., 2008) by key account customer. Through 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 ensure the repeat purchase. In this regards Boles, Barksdale and Julie (1997) explore that when a supplier retains a customer it make it easy to ensure more business from buyers and it also allows the seller to serve a buyer better and, possibly, attainment of increased sales to that key customer.

As key account selling is one type of relational selling activity, Foster and Cadogan (2000) showed that successful "relationship selling" is connected with increased level of trust, improved loyalty, superior purchase intention and superior probability that the customer will recommend the seller to other buyers. When buyer gets better services, more attention from sales person to meet its requirements with customized fashion and realize better price dealings, it is natural that that buyer will show positive behavior to continue doing business with that seller (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). It implies that key account management performance impact on the customer satisfaction levels that expressed in the form of repeat order from the suppliers and make 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). From the social commerce operator point of view, Lee, Youn and Kim (2012) explore that concentrated

investment on customer satisfaction aspect of the business impact on greater sales revenue. Hence buyers' likelihood of future repeat order behavior is predicted by the performance of key account management strategy properly.

Psychological investigations show that rewards can be greatly inspiring (Latham & Locke, 1991) that develop a certain behavior like repeat purchase in case of key account buyer-seller relationship. Research also explores that person hold a strong force to behave in such a way which is needed to attain potential rewards (Nicholls, 1989). These views are expressed in the studies of Barrett (1986), McDonald et al. (1997), Workman et al. (2003), Zupancic (2008) where they mentions that in the key account relationship various exclusive facilities like providing key customer special service in the field of marketing, sales, administration and service, offering product/service package in customized form on an ongoing basis, doing extra functions and designation of particular executive to serve them with the set up and maintenance of needed infrastructure are available. These unique services and facilities make them satisfied which in turn ensure repeat purchase behavior. In explaining consumer repurchase behavior Oliver (1980) exerts that satisfaction is the central motivating force behind buyers' repeat buying intentions. Kalwani and Narayandas (1995) mention significant sales growth as one of the result for suppliers who have long-term relationships with customers in B2B context.

Usually key customers who want to realize these benefits from the suppliers are expected to maintain relationship for long time as benefits are supposed to increase in the longer relationship. Noordewier, John and Nevin (1990) mention that as exchanges become more relational, they happen over a long period of time, have less specific expiring dates, and are usually neither sharp in nor sharp out. There is also a greater expectation of repeat business with the exchange partner they exert. Shi et al. (2010) opine that the success of the sellers in organizing the activities of their various operations and subsidiaries, and in organizing their marketing approach with their key buyers, can direct to higher sales quantity to the buyers and their contentment with the global account management relationship. Colletti and Tubridy (1987) mention protecting and retaining large customers, increased sales to current customers and enhanced working relationships with customers as the results of successful major account sales management.

From the above discussion, it can be summarized that companies can benefit a lot from both financial and relational business outcomes perspectives if they adopt key account management approach in their operation. This means that key account management approach leads to

higher key account customer's satisfaction which in turn ensures higher level of repeat order from key account customer.

4. Moderating role of length of relationship

Length of relationship means the duration that a relationship exists between buyer and supplier (Palmatier et al., 2006) as well as how the parties regard each other as they pass through various phases (Dwyer et al., 1987). Length of relationship between buyer and seller in the key account relationship let them to know each other and facilitates both parties to interact frequently on various issues like knowledge exchange, making adjustment as necessary for mutual benefits and so on. The present study uses the length of relationship as moderator that may interact with the relationship between key account management performance and key customer repeat order behavior. In the key account management relationship, Wotruba and Castleberry (1993) explore 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.

Literatures show that longer relationship develops confidence between buyer and seller (Bolton, 1998; Buvik & Haugland, 2005; Rust, Inman, Jia, & Zahorik, 1999; Weiss & Kurland, 1997) that foster the attainment of mutual goals. Social psychology literatures clarify that individual in early periods of a relationship have been explored to have minimum reliance in their evaluation of their partners than in later stages of that relationships (Swann & Gill, 1997). This is because at the subsequent stages of relationships the impact of such assessment on behavior increases (Verhoef, Franses & Hoekstral, 2001).

Verhoef et al. (2002) mention that duration of relationship is an interesting area of study in the field of relationship marketing that attracted the attention of many academics for many years. In this context, they explain 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. But studies that theorized the moderating influence of length of relationship on key account management performance-repeat order relationship is absent. 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. Workman et al. (2003) mention that there may be interactions between KAM effectiveness and moderators and future research should consider

the role of moderator between KAM effectiveness and outcomes as the relation between an independent or predictor variable and a dependent or criterion variable is affected by a moderator (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

According to Baron and Kenny (1986), moderators are often introduced when the relationship between the predictor (here key account management performance) and outcome (here repeat order) is unexpectedly weak or inconsistent. The relationship can be demonstrated as shown in the following Figure.

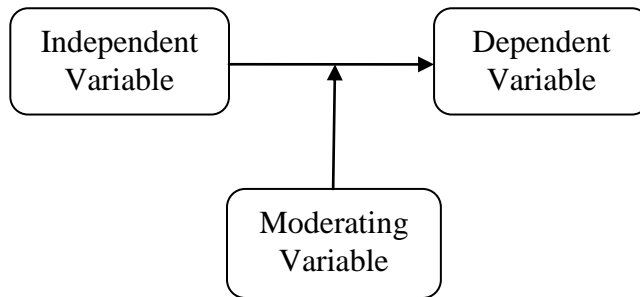


Figure 1. Graphical Representation of Moderating

The figure shows that length of relationship is introduced as a moderating variable in order to examine the form and/or magnitude of the relationship between key account management performance and repeat order behavior of key customer in the readymade garments industry in Bangladesh.

Therefore, present study theorizes the impact of length of relationship as moderating variable on the key account management performance-repeat order link.

5. Theoretical framework and propositions

On the basis of literature review on key account management, following figure 2 is developed to incorporate the influence of key account management performance on the repeat order behavior and length of relationship as moderator on the relationship between key account management performance and repeat order. The basic idea of the proposed framework is that KAM performance is proposed to have a considerable positive impact on the key account's

repeat purchase behavior and at the same time their relationship is moderated (enhanced) in presence of length of relationship.

The conceptual foundation of the present study is derived from the social exchange theory (SET) that views the relationship between key account customers and supplying companies as “actions contingent on rewarding reactions from other” (Blau, 1964). The major proposition behind the social exchange theory is that persons behave in such a way which adds value to the outcomes they treat positively and refrain from showing those behaviors that impact negatively on the outcomes in the relationship (Rodríguez & Wilson, 2002).

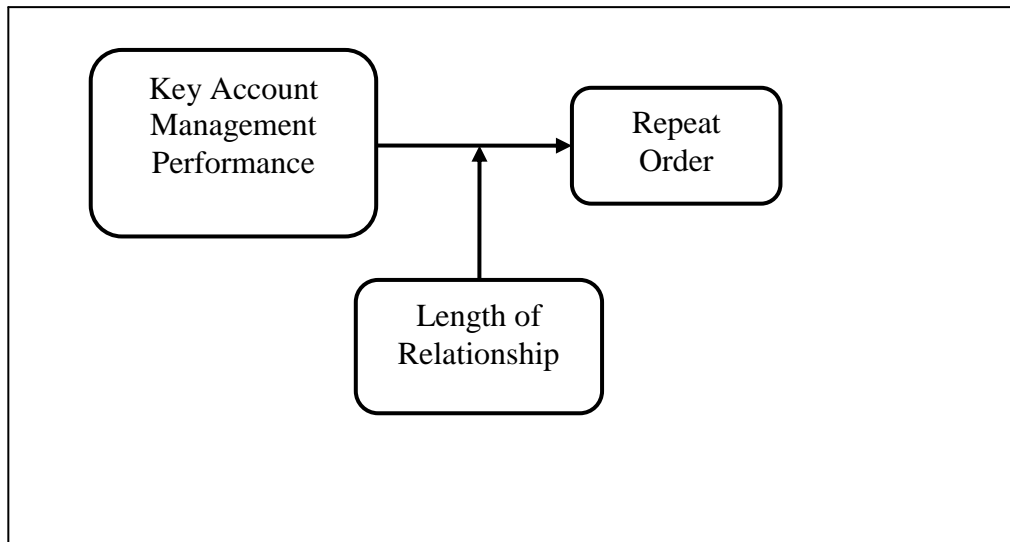


Figure 2. Theoretical Framework

In the key account relationship, supplier company ensure higher degree of KAM performance with an implied expectation that buyer will reciprocate for these benefits with more and higher volume of purchase with the passes of time although it is not assured. If buyer does accordingly; the social exchange will be more prevalent in the long run. Otherwise, supplier will not be motivated to do so. Accordingly, a non-governing mechanism ‘relationship’ is developed that governs the relationship between key account buyer and supplier.

Propositions

Repeat order as the consequence of key account management performance

In the current study repeat order is termed as the continuation of purchasing goods and services from an organization (Molinari et al., 2008) by key account customer. 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 ensure the repeat purchase. In this regards Boles et al. (1997) explore that when a seller keeps a customer it make it easy to ensure more business from buyers and it also lets the seller to serve a buyer better and, possibly, boost sales to that key account. Usually key customers who want to realize these benefits from the suppliers are expected to maintain relationship for long time as benefits are supposed to increase in the longer relationship. Noordewier et al. (1990) mention that as transactions become more relational, in the long-term relationship there is a greater expectation of repeat business with the exchange partner.

Theory of reasoned action proposes that when buyer gets better services, more attention from sales person to meet its requirements with customized fashion and realize better price dealings, it is natural that that buyer will show positive behavior to continue doing business with that seller (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Hence buyers' likelihood of future repeat order behavior is predicted by the performance of key account management strategy properly. To this end from the perspective of sales person, Crosby et al. (1990) mentioned that the best driver of a customer's probability of looking for future business is the excellence of the relationship to date.

From the above discussion, it can be summarized that companies can benefit a lot from both financial and relational business outcomes 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 order. Therefore, the present study proposes that:

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

Length of relationship as moderator

Borrowing from the literatures, length of relationship is defined as the extent of relationship between buyer and seller where they pass through various phases and how the parties regard each other (Dwyer, et al., 1987). 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. Several studies reveal that, relationship duration results in greater buyer profitability (Reinartz & Kumar, 2003), maintenance (Bolton, 1998), quantity of services bought (Verhoef et al., 2002), continuous museum patronization (Bhattacharya, 1998;

Bhattacharya et al., 1995) as well as intention to repeat order and loyalty (Seiders et al., 2005). Bolton (1998) shows how the level of satisfaction becomes stronger in lengthy relationships.

Verhoef et al. (2002) state that, it is evident in the extant literatures that buyer-seller relationship passes through different stages. For example, Dwyer et al. (1987) explored that at the different phases of buyer-seller relationship both parties treat each other differently and within these stages various factors play their key role to influence the relationship. As the relationship established in the key account management dyad, both supplier and customer invest in relational resources which make them mutually dependent on each other (Buvik & Haugland, 2005; Heide & John, 1988; Sharma, 2006; Weiss & Kurland, 1997; Williamson, 1985;) and when the parties are interdependent, lengthy relationship has more clear and better interactions, higher trusts, superior elasticity and better commitment (Anderson & Weitz, 1989; MacNeil, 1978; Ouchi, 1979). Thus, in the long-run relationship supplier experiences from recurrent interactions with customer that exerts powerful influence on relational outcomes (Jap, 1999). Wagner (2011) mentions that the nature of buyer-seller relationship is dynamic where relationship life-cycle might moderate the relationship between seller improvement and organization's effectiveness.

Thus, it indicates that the effect of key account management performance on organizational outcome performance like repeat order is enhanced by the length of relationship between key account customers and suppliers as the link between an exogenous factor and an endogenous factor is affected by a moderator (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Therefore, we propose that:

P2: Length of relationship moderates (enhances) the positive relationship between key account management performance and repeat order outcome performance.

6. Discussion

This study addresses the quarry of how does key account management performance influence key customer repeat order behavior and moderating impact of length of relationship on the relationship between these two. Given the mounting importance of KAM approach, current study

is able to theorize the relationship and provides some actionable guidance given in the following sections.

6.1 Contributions

From this theoretical framework, several implications can be forwarded. Theoretical framework of this study creates a platform for future empirical study. Secondly, introduction of repeat order as the outcome of key account management performance indeed uplift our knowledge. Thirdly, 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 to the application of social exchange theory (SET) in the context of key account management approach. As in SET non-governance mechanism is taken as relationship governing means, we have taken 'relationship' as governing norm in key account management relationship (Anderson & Narus, 1990; Dwyer et al., 1987).

Apart from the above theoretical contribution, this study provides us several managerial implications. The hypothesized relationship between key account management performance and repeat order provides the management a signal that at the organizational level to get the better business increase greater degree of key account management performance should be assured. As relationship duration impact on relationship outcomes, organization should be long-term oriented to ensure higher KAM performance and reap greater level of repeat order from the key account customers.

6.2 Future research direction

Based on the theoretical framework, several limitations are apparent that open up a number of future research directions. Firstly, we don't know to what extent key account management performance influence key customer repeat order. Thus, future empirical research can find out this phenomenon critical for management for decision making in this regard. Secondly, a particular phenomenon is influenced by many forces and

factors. Thus adding more variable and testing them with real world data can facilitate managerial decision making. In addition, whether the length of relationship act as moderator is not empirically explored that revealed another avenue for future investigation.

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