Towards more agile key account management

Some things in business are understandably complex. Think of a global industrial company selling a customised technology solution to a large manufacturer with multiple sites worldwide. Such B2B selling is typically a complex and time-consuming process, requiring the involvement and contribution of several individuals and functions. To successfully manage the sales cycle, sellers typically deploy key account management (KAM). This provides the structure to coordinate people from multiple internal areas (such as tech support, applied technology, engineering, supply and logistics, legal, health and safety, and so on), while navigating the external buyer's network.

Key account management provides the mesh between the buying and selling organisations. The main challenge is to coordinate effectively and efficiently all those functions involved while interfacing with the equally multi-faceted and complicated network of decision makers and influencers on the customer's side. This doesn't always work. Poor alignment and friction frequently result in delays, rigidity, and sub-optimal fulfilment of customer's requests. The current context of a global pandemic, with limited in-person meetings, has exacerbated the issue, making coordination and alignment even more difficult internally and with the customer organisation.

So, what can companies do to maximise their KAM capabilities at this difficult time and into the uncertain future? Our experience from working with organisations worldwide is that to tackle this challenge companies should look at some of the principles and methods of agility to rethink how their key account management can and should work.

Agility is all about multidisciplinary collaboration, frequent alignment, adaptation to changing priorities and demands from the market. Born in IT/software development, agility has gradually been adopted across other functions such as product design, business model design, marketing and communications, and HR, across different industries.

The results are consistent and show increased work productivity, customer focus, reduced cycle times and increased team motivation.

Recently we have helped one of our clients, PlasticCo (we have disguised the name), a global specialty chemicals company serving truck and bus original equipment manufacturers, embrace agility in key account management. The main challenge was to break down the typical silos between the various functions necessary along the commercial cycle. PlasticCo set up agile teams — typically of four to six members with the right mix of skills to ensure autonomous end-to-end execution, with full accountability and without further handovers. In the agile teams, the key account manager sets the backlog of priorities for the next two to three weeks, using a visual board (Kanban) to position the leads along the sales funnel and track progress.

Based on this, the other members align and organise the work. They might, for example, reallocate lab resources for testing given a priority change in customer requests, or tweak the delivery specifications for chemical drums. Every week the team has a short stand-up meeting (replaced by a video call in the pandemic) to stay aligned, present progress or hurdles, so that everyone is aware of the status and can act appropriately. Practical decisions are taken more rapidly because each member does not have to go back to their functional boss for approval in a back-and-forth mode. This reduces delays and makes the team more accountable, engaged and focused on results. It also fosters creativity and innovation, for example, by discussing important client issues and needs from multiple angles and with a problem-solving approach.

Paradoxically, COVID-19 restrictions, like remote work, can help salespeople set up quick video calls with the customer, inviting colleagues with the right expertise from other functions to join (this would have been more difficult in the era of in-person meetings at the client site). The customer feedback is discussed in *review sessions* where the team decides what needs to be changed or improved, triggering a new sprint of work to produce a better iteration of the commercial proposal. At the end of the sprint, the team has a *retrospective session* to look back at what worked well and what did not work well. Rather than pointing fingers and blaming each other, this represents a precious moment for open and constructive feedback and learning capturing on how to do even better as a team focused on a specific account.

PlasticCo's journey towards agility is still in progress. At the beginning there was skepticism, especially among key account managers. But, after the first round of pilots, the improvement in the way of working and the impact on results soon became clear. To embed the new approach, the company has also introduced a shorter planning cycle with a quarterly business review and more focused and transparent objectives and key results (OKRs) for teams and individuals, linking part of the performance to the team objectives and not solely to individual goals.

The case of PlasticCo and other examples suggests that agility has significant potential for improving the way companies sell their solutions, especially in B2B environments where sales are typically more complex and multifaceted. Moreover, today's pandemic context, rather than an obstacle, represents a window of opportunity to accelerate the adoption of more agile commercial approaches in key account management and elsewhere.

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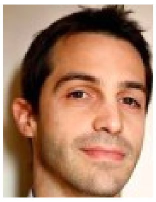

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