

From Selling to Managing Strategic Customers: A Competency Analysis

Sylvie Lacoste, Kedge Business School

Over the past several decades, the emergence and the growth of strategic account management has been one of the major changes in the sales landscape. Strategic account management includes programs and processes that are implemented in companies in order to treat their most important and strategic customers differently from their standard customers. The overall objective is to develop a close and long-term relationship to grow business.

Strategic account management programs are led and executed by strategic account managers (SAMs). Hence, two types of customer-facing positions are often found in companies: salespeople and SAMs. Often, the SAM position is more senior to the salesperson position; it also has a wider scope of responsibilities. To fill SAM positions, companies often promote them as a career move to salespeople, or salespeople perceive such positions as a way to advance in their careers. In this context, we seek to investigate the major competencies required of salespeople to follow the expanding trend of strategic account development and become successful SAMs.

Toward that end, we aim in our review article to better organize and delineate the extant academic literature on the competencies required of salespeople and SAMs (including skills and personality traits). This leads us to propose two distinct competency classifications. We also propose a competency comparative framework that highlights the competencies that are common to both positions (competency alignment), those that are more advanced or new to the SAM position (competency “dis-alignment”), and those that are problematic and could prevent the transition from sales to a SAM position if they are not “unlearned” (competency misalignment).

We suggest that competency alignment between both roles is related to personality traits (e.g., emotional intelligence) and cognitive skills (e.g., customer/product knowledge). Competencies that need to be reinforced are primarily related to cognitive aptitude, such as customer orientation and the ability to build and maintain long-term relationships. New competencies that need to be acquired include the ability to deploy a strategic vision, i.e., anticipation and identification of customers' needs, in conjunction with proposing customized solutions. This requires creativity, "intrapreneurial" ability, interactive networking, etc. Competency "misalignment" refers to the need to move away from short-term sales effectiveness because this can negatively impact the need to provide a long-term orientation to strategic accounts.

People can be trained to achieve most of these competencies; some of the competencies can be strengthened by experience (e.g., negotiation and communication skills). However, a few of them, such as emotional competence, have triggered controversial debate on the effectiveness of training. A person's short-term orientation can be reversed, mostly through personal effort and motivation. If we attempt to prioritize key competencies as strategic account management success factors, the competencies related to strategic vision stand out.

This research has important implications for managers: our comprehensive review can help salespeople assess whether they have the right profile to become a SAM; it can also lead them or their organization to define and develop skills that are either missing or require reinforcement. Our theoretical classification system can be used in parallel to develop SAM competency grids, which can also be applied to create adequate training programs to support salespeople in their potential career transition.