An Approach to Acquiring New Customers with Key Account Potential Using Customer Characteristics: A Case Study of a Dutch SME IT Company

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how customer characteristics that describe key accounts of SME IT companies in the Netherlands can guide the acquisition of new customers with key account potential. For the research design, this study used a case study design combined with a qualitative-quantitative-qualitative method to answer four sub-questions through semi-structured interviews, a dataset of customer information and document analysis. The results show the key account criteria of the researched SME IT company. Furthermore, quantitative firmographic differences between key accounts and non-key accounts were identified. Semi-structured interviews with internal stakeholders directly involved in key account management validated and explained these differences. Additionally, the results were used to build an extensive customer profile of key accounts. This customer profile has been applied to the focal firm's customer acquisition process using natural language processing models and existing customer channels, with specific leads qualified as sales-qualified leads.

Keywords: KAM, CRM, Customer Targeting, Customer Profile, Customer Acquisition

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1 INTRODUCTION

Key Account Management (KAM) can be explained as performing extra personnel and activities to offer greater value to the most important customers, achieve long-term customer relationships and increase profits (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018; Anderson and Narus, 1991). These extra activities are especially important in a business-to-business (B2B) context (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018), where the customer is an organization and relationships are closer because of the higher purchasing activity (Michael D. Hutt, 2010). Key accounts can be selected using quantitative and qualitative section criteria (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018; Guesalaga et al., 2018), which could be seen as a form of customer segmentation (Millman, 1996; Wind and Cardozo, 1974). Wang and Brennan (2014) showed specific key account criteria for Airlines, Corporate sales and Leisure/tour operators and stated that key account criteria of other service sectors are still open to question, indicating a gap of the selection criteria of an SME IT company operating in a B2B context in the Netherlands.

Customer relation management (CRM) is the overarching framework for KAM. It focuses on managing all customer relationships to maximize Customer Lifetime Value (CLV): the total value a customer generates over their lifetime, considering past and future contributions while accounting for costs (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). Loyal customers enhance this value through greater spending, longer relationships and opportunities for cross-selling and up-selling (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). KAM is an expanding view on CRM by performing additional activities, dedicating special personnel to the most valuable customers (key accounts).

Using customer targeting and a customer-focused sales campaign, firms can significantly increase profits and return on investment (ROI) (Kumar et al., 2008). It uses specific information from a customer segment to target the right user with the right CRM decision, such as an acquisition strategy (Alves Gomes and Meisen, 2023). Customer segmentation, which divides a larger customer group into smaller separate groups based on certain attributes (Jenkinson, 1994), is normally done through Recency, Frequency and Monetary value (RFM)(Alves Gomes and Meisen, 2023) and CLV (Peters et al., 2015). KAM can also be used (Wind and Cardozo, 1974; Millman, 1996), taking a more holistic view of the most valuable customers as qualitative factors are taken into account such as technology potential and cultural fit (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Kumar and Reinartz, 2018), indicating a research gap.

Using customer profiles in acquisition strategies can positively affect acquisition likelihood and retention, ultimately leading to higher customer profitability (Kumar, 2008; Reinartz et al., 2005). Firmographics describe these profiles, often selected out of published governmental statistical series so they can be applied in open data sources to find potential valuable customers (Kumar, 2008; Tang and Mantrala, 2024; Kandeil et al., 2014; Mora Cortez et al., 2021). Studies highlight the benefits of using customer profiles for appropriate marketing programs but do not apply them (Kandeil et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2023; Kumar, 2008). This study fills a research gap by applying the customer profile to appropriate marketing programs.

According to Mirwan et al. (2023), it is essential to integrate Artificial Intelligence (AI) into marketing strategies to remain competitive. AI can enhance lead qualification and conversion processes, accelerating customer interactions and reducing acquisition costs by applying it in a customer acquisition strategy(Madanchian, 2024). However, there is a need to understand better how AI can specifically create effective marketing solutions (Kumar et al., 2024). This research develops a natural language processing (NLP) solution in addition to existing customer channels to optimise the customer acquisition process of the focal firm using a key account customer profile, filling in a research gap.

This study is conducted in collaboration with a Dutch IT company. It aims to show how customer characteristics that describe a key account of SME IT companies in the Netherlands guide the acquisition of new customers with key account potential with the use of e.g. AI. The IT company has a list of (key account) customers that will be researched in this study using internal CRM data and interviews with internal stakeholders. This research will be done with the following research question:

"How can customer characteristics that describe a key account of SME IT companies in the Netherlands guide the acquisition of new customers with key account potential?"

This research question will be answered using the following subquestions: (1) What quantitative and qualitative criteria are used to select key accounts? (2) What are the differences and trends in customer characteristics between key and non-key accounts? (3) How do internal stakeholders interpret these

differences and trends in key account characteristics? (4) How can new customers with key account potential be acquired?

This research employs a case study approach combined with a qualitative-qualitative (QQQ)-method approach. A case study is about conducting an empirical investigation of a phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence. In this study, it is a SME IT company (Yin, 2014). To support the multiple sources of evidence, the QQQ method emphasises the importance of a project's qualitative context and the qualitative interpretation of quantitative findings (Trumble et al., 2022). The first three subquestions are investigated through the QQQ approach. In the first qualitative sub-question, an understanding of current key account selection criteria through qualitative interviews is made using semi-structured interviews, giving perspectives and backgrounds to the researcher (Trumble et al., 2022). The second sub-question of this research involves employing quantitative descriptive analysis methods to identify differences in customer characteristics between key and non-key accounts. In the third phase, these quantitative results are investigated by conducting semi-structured interviews with internal stakeholders to provide a better understanding of the characteristics associated with key accounts. Based on the previous findings, the fourth and final sub-question is about building a recommendation to guide customer acquisition strategies using customer profiles.

This research aims to make several theoretical contributions to KAM and CRM. First, it identifies key account selection criteria of B2B SME-IT companies. Second, it uses key accounts as a segmentation method for customer targeting purposes instead of traditional methods, extending the view of CRM. Third, it builds a customer profile of key accounts and applies it to the acquisition strategy of the focal company through e.g. AI, extending existing research. From a practical point of view, sales managers from SME IT companies operating in a B2B setting can use the customer profile of key accounts to enhance their acquisition processes by targeting potential valuable prospects similar to key accounts. Applying this customer profile in acquisition strategies can positively affect acquisition likelihood and retention, ultimately leading to higher customer profilability.

This research is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a literature review, covering the topics KAM, CRM, customer targeting, customer profiling and applying customer profiles in customer acquisition strategies. Section 3 outlines the research methodology. Section 4 discusses the results. Section 5 presents the discussion, including the implication, limitations future research and conclusion.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examines the most important literature regarding Key Account Management, Customer relation management, customer targeting, customer profiling and customer acquisition strategies.

2.1 Key Account Management

Key Account Management (KAM) can be described as performing additional activities, dedicating special personnel and committing to a company's most important customers. The additional activities in KAM are relationship-oriented and aim to create long-term customer relationships (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). The additional activities are critical in a business-to-business (B2B) context (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018), where the customer is an organization and relationships are closer because of the higher purchasing activity (Michael D. Hutt, 2010). By dedicating special personnel to these key accounts, collaborative relationships can be created over time to achieve mutual benefit (Anderson and Narus, 1991). A mutual benefit can provide clear benefits and opportunities for the seller to increase profits while offering greater value to the buyer. The activities are performed by special personnel that provide clear benefits and opportunities for the seller to increase profits while offering greater value to the buyer. In B2B, KAM is a crucial aspect of CRM that cannot be ignored (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018; Friend and Johnson, 2014).

In order to select a company's most important customers, key account criteria are used to segment customers. Millman (1996) acknowledges KAM as both a segmentation strategy and a customer-facing activity. Older literature has shown a targeting strategy of selling towards the most profitable customers (key accounts) within specific industries to optimize targeted selling strategies (Wind and Cardozo, 1974). However, more recent B2B marketing studies consider KAM more as a customer-facing activity (Gupta et al., 2019). Key accounts are selected using quantitative and qualitative criteria. This criterion needs to be prioritized and weighted from the company's point of view so that a sum of all points can be calculated (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). Quantitative criteria include sales volume, market share and/ or revenues. This financial data is often combined with financial rules to decide the key account status

of their customers. Examples of rules are: top 10 customers or key accounts must generate 60% of the sales volume. For qualitative data, criteria generally include image, reference potential, technology potential, know-how and/or inter-organizational and cultural fit. As the buying process in a B2B setting is rather complex, marketers often use quantitative and qualitative measures associated with long-term relationships. Combining both types of measures allows a company to combine the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of the different measures (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018; Guesalaga et al., 2018). A positive image of the buyer might lead to benefits in the form of business expansion opportunities (Gupta et al., 2006) and a positive spillover effect through word of mouth (WOM) (Kumar et al., 2010). In the literature, key account selection has received little attention (Guesalaga et al., 2018). Most empirical literature on KAM is based on observations from large companies with sophisticated, formalized key account programs, excluding SMEs, who often actively manage relationships with key accounts but do not formalize the approach (Homburg et al., 2002). Also, each company has its own selection criteria, depending on its size, sector and overall strategy (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). Wang and Brennan (2014) showed that Airlines, Corporate sales and Leisure/tour operators segments had unique associated variable criteria when valuing key accounts and stated that key account criteria of other service sectors are still open to question. This indicates a potential gap to asses the selection criteria of SME IT companies operating in a B2B context.

In short, KAM can be explained as performing extra personnel and activities to offer greater value to the most important customers, achieve long-term customer relationships, and increase profits. Identifying key accounts can be done using quantitative and qualitative section criteria as a form of customer segmentation, which has only been researched in different contexts. This indicates a gap for SME IT companies operating in a B2B context.

2.2 CRM

Customer relation management (CRM) is the overarching framework for KAM. Kumar and Reinartz (2018) describes CRM as "the strategic process of selecting customers that a firm can most profitably serve and shaping interactions between a company and these customers." CRM is highly relevant due to increasing market competition, more demanding consumers, less effective traditional marketing and the increasing importance of relationships with individual customers, making a successful CRM implementation increasingly important (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). Relative to B2C markets, relationships in a B2B context tend to be closer (Buttle, 2008) and can be classified as transactional (distant) or collaborative (close). Transactional relationships involve exchanging basic products for competitive prices and collaborative relationships are strong customer relationships built over time to achieve mutual benefit (Anderson and Narus, 1991). Kumar and Reinartz (2018) describes B2B CRM as "the strategic process of strengthening relationships with business customers, especially important clients, beyond transactional relationships to manage the value of these buyer-seller relationships better".

Unlike KAM, CRM manages all customer relationships to maximize Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) through data-driven strategies, segmentation and engagement. CLV is the total value a customer generates over their lifetime, considering past and future contributions while accounting for costs. To understand this economic value, companies use a customer-centric approach that looks into the unique contribution of each customer supported by technological solutions and data analysis (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). Loyal customers enhance this value through greater spending, longer relationships and opportunities for cross-selling and up-selling (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). Customers with a higher CLV can be considered as more valuable customers Gupta et al. (2004). The total value a company derives from its entire customer base is called customer equity value (CEV). CEV is positively linked towards the company's overall value (Gupta et al., 2006; Kumar and Reinartz, 2018).

CRM is about managing all customer relationships to maximize CLV, compared to KAM. In contrast, KAM performs additional activities, dedicates special personnel to the most valuable customers (key accounts), and aims to build deep, long-term strategic relationships beyond transactional interactions. This makes KAM an expanding view of CRM.

2.3 Customer targeting

Using customer targeting and a customer-focused sales campaign, firms can significantly increase profits and return on investment (ROI) (Kumar et al., 2008). Customer targeting is about using specific information from a customer segment to target the right user with the right CRM decision. Targeting approaches include recommendations, marketing campaigns and pricing strategies (Alves Gomes and Meisen, 2023).

Target groups can be identified through customer segmentation, which divides a larger customer group into smaller separate groups based on specific attributes (Jenkinson, 1994). In B2B markets, this is done through geographics, firmographics (demographics of a firm) and behavioural variables (Tang and Mantrala, 2024). The most popular method is segmenting using Recency, Frequency and Monetary value (RFM)(Alves Gomes and Meisen, 2023). CLV segmentation is also common (Peters et al., 2015). Different to the popular methods, KAM can also be used as a segmentation method (Wind and Cardozo, 1974; Millman, 1996), taking a more holistic view of the most valuable customers as qualitative factors are taken into account, such as technology potential and cultural fit (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). This research fills a gap by targeting customers through key account segmentation instead of other popular methods.

In short, customer targeting is about targeting a customer segment with the right CRM decision to increase profits. Where RFM or CLV is typically selected as a segmentation method, this research uses key accounts for its holistic view on the most valuable customers, indicating a research gap. Using customer profiles, companies can target customers similar to a key account segment explained in the following paragraph.

2.4 Customer profiling

Kumar (2008) stated that companies should identify customers who are most likely to be profitable by using customer profiles. By applying them in acquisition strategies, customer profiles can positively affect acquisition likelihood and retention, ultimately leading to higher customer profitability. Profiling profitable customers can be done by identifying customers with similar characteristics resembling the group with a high CLV (Kumar, 2008), which are key accounts in this research's case. However, as customer profiling is vulnerable to selection bias, firms need to link customer acquisition with retention and profitability while considering other drivers such as firm actions and customer actions to maximize the acquisition likelihood (Reinartz et al., 2005).

In order to build a customer profile, customer characteristics need to be selected. In a B2B setting, customer characteristics represent firmographics. Firmographics rarely change, especially in the short term, allowing them to identify potential customers in a marketing campaign (Kumar, 2008). Common firmographics include ownership status, location, industry type, firm size (number of employees) and revenue (Tang and Mantrala, 2024; Kandeil et al., 2014). These variables are part of macro-variables, which are easily observable, accessible at low cost and sometimes even published by governmental statistical series (Mora Cortez et al., 2021). Reinartz et al. (2005) has shown that industry type, annual revenue and firm size (number of employees) are all significant predictors of an improved customer relationship of acquisition likelihood and profitability. Data maturity is also a relevant characteristic as it is the service that provides value to the customers by SME IT companies that help customers grow in data maturity by data and AI. The data maturity can be assessed using Swillens (2024)'s data maturity pillars: Strategy, Value, Foundation, Knowledge, and Team.

Limited papers have developed firmographic or demographic customer profiles after segmenting on types of (non) profitable customer groups. Kandeil et al. (2014) developed 7 customer profiles based on LRFM segments using firmographics. Similarly, Ho et al. (2023) made 5 profiles using an extended RFMD model (D-Demographic) with a combination of behavioural and demographic variables. Furthermore, Kumar (2008) conducted a case study where high CLV or a low CLV customers profiles were developed. Previously mentioned papers highlight the usability of the customer profiles to be able to apply it to appropriate marketing programs, but do not put it in practice (Kandeil et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2023; Kumar, 2008). This study goes one step further by applying the customer profile to appropriate marketing programs, extending existing research and filling in a research gap.

In summary, customer profiles in acquisition strategies can positively affect acquisition likelihood and retention, ultimately leading to higher customer profitability. Firmogrpahics describe these profiles, selected out of published governmental statistical series, so they can be applied to open data sources to find potential valuable customers. This study fills in research gaps by creating a key account customer profile, using additional qualitative interviews to explain key account segment differences, and applying customer profiles to open data sources as part of an acquisition strategy.

2.5 Applying customer profiles in customer acquisition strategies

Customer acquisition is about acquiring new customers that buy for the first time. In a B2B setting, this means firms that have not bought from the focal company before (Peters et al., 2015). Customers choose

the product that delivers them the highest perceived value for the lowest perceived costs (Kumar and Reinartz, 2016). Therefore, delivering value to customers can translate to generating value for the firm (Anderson and Mittal, 2000). Customer acquisition must be viewed as a process (Peters et al., 2015). In a B2B domain, sales funnels are often employed to generate and qualify leads until the first purchase. This funnel starts big with all potential customers, then narrowed down to target groups or prospects, further towards responders and ultimately a first-time buyer. After the initial purchase, the customer progresses into a life cycle of retention, cross-buy or win-backs to contiguously receive value. This retention life cycle is influenced by having a good acquisition strategy to receive long-term value. To enhance acquisition performance, firms can refine targeting strategies to acquire the right customers (Peters et al., 2015), which is, in this case, the use of customer profiles.

Targeting the right potential customers can be done through customer channels. A customer channel is "a set of interdependent organizations involved in the process of making a product or service available for use or consumption" (Palmatier et al., 2015). A channel could refer to the flow of organizational offerings, such as physical goods, but also the mode of communication between a firm and its customers. It brings information to the customers to raise awareness about products and services and persuade them to make a purchase. By using direct channels, firms can communicate product or service information directly (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). Companies with a differentiation strategy working in unpredictable and fast-changing environments should choose a multichannel strategy with various primarily direct channels. Ultimately leading to a firm's success (Kabadayi et al., 2008).

One acquisition channel could be Artificial Intelligence (AI). In many industries, marketing has undergone a significant transformation due to the application of AI. Marketing in general and customer targeting have improved because of AI-driven marketing methods. Mirwan et al. (2023) even states that integrating AI into marketing strategies is essential to remain competitive. This transformation has been made with the use of technologies such as machine learning (ML), deep learning (DL), and natural language processing (NLP) (Kumar et al., 2024). One of the main advantages of AI in marketing is its capability to gather data in real time from various sources. It can, for example, gather data from platforms such as social media and websites (Mirwan et al., 2023). AI can enhance lead qualification and conversion processes by applying this in customer acquisition, accelerating customer interactions and reducing acquisition costs (Madanchian, 2024). However, there is a need to understand better how AI-driven insights can create effective marketing solutions (Kumar et al., 2024). This research develops an NLP solution to optimize the customer acquisition process of the focal firm using a key account customer profile, filling in a research gap.

In short, customer acquisition is about acquiring new customers who buy for the first time. Customers can be targeted through customer channels where firms can raise awareness about products and services and persuade them to purchase. One acquisition channel could be AI, which could enhance lead qualification and conversion processes by applying this in customer acquisition, accelerating customer interactions and reducing acquisition costs. As there is a need to understand better how AI-driven insights can create effective marketing solutions, this research uses an NLP solution next to a standard channel to optimize the customer acquisition process of the focal firm using a key account customer profile, filling in a research gap.

2.6 Key account acquisition process

Based on the literature, a framework has been set up in figure 1. It explains how key accounts, which are selected based on key account criteria, can be used for customer targeting purposes using customer profiles and applied in customer acquisition strategies to give and retain customer value, ultimately leading to new key accounts and company value.



Figure 1. Key account acquisition process

3 METHODS

This research used a case study approach and a qualitative-qualitative-qualitative approach (QQQ). A case study focuses on conducting an empirical investigation of a phenomenon within its natural context using multiple sources of evidence. In this study, it is an SME IT company (Yin, 2014). To support multiple sources of evidence, the QQQ method emphasizes the importance of a project's qualitative context and the qualitative interpretation of quantitative findings (Trumble et al., 2022). This study aimed to identify how customer characteristics that describe a key account for SME IT companies in the Netherlands can guide the acquisition of new customers with key account potential using the following four subquestions: (1) What quantitative and qualitative criteria are used to select key accounts? (2) What are the differences and trends in customer characteristics between key accounts and non-key accounts? (3) How do internal stakeholders interpret these differences and trends in key account characteristics? (4) How can new customers with key account potential be acquired? The first three sub-questions are investigated through the QQQ approach. In the first qualitative sub-question, an understanding of current key account selection criteria was made through semi-structured interviews, giving perspectives and background to the researcher (Trumble et al., 2022). The second sub-question of this research involved employing quantitative descriptive analysis methods to identify differences in customer characteristics between key and non-key accounts. In the third phase, these quantitative results were investigated by conducting semi-structured interviews with internal stakeholders to provide a better understanding of the characteristics associated with key accounts. Based on the previous findings, the fourth and final subquestion was about building a recommendation to guide customer acquisition strategies using customer profiles. This process has been summarised in figure 2, which was also applied in figure 1.



Figure 2. Own elaboration based on Trumble et al. (2022)

3.1 Research instruments

This study used three research instruments: qualitative interviews with key internal stakeholders, a quantitative dataset of customer information and document analysis to examine the customer acquisition process. The research instruments are explained in the order of the QQQ method, followed by the fourth research question.

For the first qualitative part of this study, a semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain a detailed picture of the key account criteria of the focal SME IT company. Semi-structured interviews give the flexibility to develop follow-up questions that emerge in the interview so that the respondent can provide a fuller picture of a particular topic (Bryman, 2011). Before the semi-structured interviews were conducted, an interview guide was created. An interview guide is a tool for data collection that uses previous knowledge of structural, logical, and coherent forms. An interview guide can be defined as a list of questions guiding an interview's direction towards the research topic (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide in the first qualitative part of this study is based on key account criteria literature from Kumar and Reinartz (2018). It contains questions about both qualitative and quantitative criteria, the weighting between them, the tools used and changes that happened over the years. The full transcript is presented in Appendix A.1.

The second part of this study used a customer dataset to provide quantitative customer characteristics. It includes firmographic data obtained from internal CRM Google Sheets documents and publicly available data such as LinkedIn profiles, KVK (kamer van koophandel) information and Google Maps data. Customers were labelled as key accounts or non-key accounts to enable comparative analysis.

In the third part of this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the trends in characteristics associated with key accounts better. To better understand trends is, again, possible due to the flexibility to develop follow-up questions, allowing for a fuller picture regarding a particular topic (Bryman, 2011). An interview guide was made after the quantitative part of the study to guide the interview's direction towards the research topic (Kallio et al., 2016). This interview guide is based on customer characteristics that differentiate key accounts from non-key accounts, addressing why specific characteristics appear more common among key accounts. The outcomes were then used to build a customer profile of a key account similar to the studies of (Kandeil et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2023; Kumar, 2008), while also giving the qualitative arguments provided by the interviewees. The full transcript is presented in Appendix A.2.

In the final part, a document analysis was conducted to examine the customer acquisition process of the focal firm. Document analysis is a systematic method for reviewing or evaluating documents. This process involves identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing data found in documents (Bowen, 2009). To ensure triangulation, the researcher consulted internal stakeholders to confirm whether the processes and acquisition channels were still in use and up to date. The focal firm's sales process and acquisition channels were analyzed to develop an approach for applying the key account customer profile to lead generation. The channels examined were LinkedIn Sales Navigator, as part of the existing channels and ChatGPT Deep Search, introduced as a new channel. The generated leads were then internally qualified by sales managers according to the sales process of the focal firm.

3.2 Data collection

The study answered the research questions using three primary sources of data: qualitative interviews with key internal stakeholders, quantitative customer records and a document analysis.

For the first qualitative part, a semi-structured expert interview was conducted with two internal stakeholders responsible for developing key account criteria after signing a written consent. Since these stakeholders are the only persons with full knowledge of the criteria and weighting in the narrow aim of this study, interviewing additional participants would not add significant value (Malterud et al., 2016). The interviewee characteristics are shown in table 1.

The second part of this study began by developing a dataset of 26 customers served by the focal firm. For each customer, firmographic data such as the AVG Data Maturity, Distance Category, Industry, LR Turnover 2024, Number of Offices, Owner Legal Form, Relationship Length (Years), Registration Date, Size and Is Key Account was gathered using internal CRM data and public available data such as LinkedIn profiles, KVK information and Google Maps (Tang and Mantrala, 2024). The sources were chosen according to the availability of the data. For example, KVK has limited information available; therefore, LinkedIn profiles were often used to gather information. This dataset was then used for further

analysis to identify trends and differences between key accounts (10 customers) and non-key accounts (16 customers). Due to the exploratory focus of this research, this sample size of n = 26 is low but sufficient as the research aims to explore new areas, generate new concepts and is part of a broader program of iterative, concatenated research (Stebbins, 2001). The full operationalization of the variables is shown in figure 2.

For the third part, a semi-structured interview guide was made based on the trends in characteristics associated with key accounts. Interviews were conducted with five internal stakeholders directly involved in key account management after signing a written consent (see table 1). These individuals, including the CEO, account managers, operation managers and senior project managers, were purposively selected for their knowledge and decision-making roles. Purposive methods cannot entirely overcome the inherent unreliability of generalizing from small samples but do make an important contribution in a given research strategy by choosing the most appropriate cases, which is, in this case, the most relevant internal stakeholders of key accounts (Seawright and Gerring, 2008).

In the final part, a document analysis was conducted on two internal documents of the focal firm. The first document gave insights about sales process and the other gave insights on the acquisition channels. The researcher consulted internal stakeholders to confirm whether the processes and acquisition channels were still in use and up to date to ensure triangulation. The focal firm's sales process and acquisition channels were analyzed to develop an approach for applying the key account customer profile to lead generation. The channels examined were LinkedIn Sales Navigator, as part of the existing channels and ChatGPT Deep Search, introduced as a new channel. The generated leads were then internally qualified by sales managers according to the sales process of the focal firm.

| Interviewee | KAM Relevance | Date Interview 1 | Date Interview 2 | Interview Dura- tion (minutes) |
|-------------|--|------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Responsible person for KAM | 5/03/2025 15:25 | 18/03/2025 13:03 | 16:40 & 35:58 |
| 2 | Strategic assistance in KAM | 20/03/2025 09:31 | 20/03/2025 09:57 | 26:56 & 31:37 |
| 3 | Long experience with project across all customers | _ | 17/03/2025 13:00 | 42:58 |
| 4 | Translates IT prob- lems to projects, supporting sales and KA's | _ | 24/03/2025 13:53 | 34:00 |
| 5 | Active role in sales and KAM together with account manager | _ | 25/03/2025 11:05 | 32:39 |

Table 1. Characteristics of Interviewees and Interview Details

Note. Some interviewees participated in two interviews; durations are provided per interview where applicable. All interviewees were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

| Variable | Variable Description | Туре | Source | Range | |
|-----------------------------------|--|------------|------------------------|---|--|
| Industry | The Dutch industry a company operates in obtained from their LinkedIn profile. | Nominal | LinkedIn | 400+ possible indus- tries such as "Olie- en gaswinning" | |
| AVG Data Ma- turity | Average data maturity score according to the five pillars of Swillens (2024), assessed by three stakeholders. Obtained from internal documents. | Discrete | CRM data focal firm | 1–5 | |
| Distance Cate- gory | Distance category from focal firm to headquarters of the cus- tomer's firm based on fastest Google Maps route. Catego- rized to maintain confidential- ity. | Ordinal | Google Maps | Local (0–10 km), Re- gional (10–50 km), Na- tional (50–200 km), Cross-border (200–500 km), European, Inter- national (¿2,000 km) | |
| Is Key Ac- count | Dichotomous (dependent) variable that explains whether a customer is a key account (1) or not (0). Obtained from internal documents. | Nominal | CRM data focal firm | 0 or 1 | |
| LR Turnover 2024 | Received turnover from cus- tomers obtained from internal CRM data. Obtained from in- ternal documents. | Continuous | CRM data focal firm | 0–∞ (in euros) | |
| Number of Of- fices | The amount of offices a com- pany has. | Continuous | Company's website | 0 | |
| Owner Legal Form | Dutch legal form of a com- pany, according to KVK. | Nominal | KVK | 32 legal forms (e.g., "Besloten Ven- nootschap") | |
| Relationship Length (Years) | Number of years a company has been a customer of the fo- cal firm. | Continuous | CRM data focal firm | 0–∞ | |
| Registration Date | Year in which a company is registered, obtained from KVK. | Discrete | KVK | Year | |
| Size | Company size category based on employee count, from LinkedIn. | Ordinal | LinkedIn | 2-10 employees, 11-50 employees, 51-200 employees, 201-500 employees, 501-1,000 employees, 1,000- 5,000 employees, 5,001-10,000 em- ployees and 10,001+ employees | |

 Table 2. Operationalization of Variables

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis of the first and third phase began by transcribing the interviews, which were conducted using the recording function in Google Meet. As Google Meet does not have a built-in transcription function, Premiere Pro was used to transcribe the recording locally without sending the data to external databases. However, these sentences were often incorrect and were manually corrected by comparing them to the original recordings. The transcripts were then anonymized with the use of pseudonyms. The pseudonyms were used for interviewees (e.g. interviewee 1), companies of both customers and

non-customers (e.g. company A) and monetary values (e.g. M1). The transcripts were then translated into English using chat ChatGPT and reassessed for quality. The transcripts were analyzed using the Gioia Methodology (GM). The GM is a systematic qualitative approach designed for developing grounded theory, used to identify new, unexplored theoretical insights that allow for creative theoretical development while being systematic enough to meet standards of rigour (Magnani and Gioia, 2023). The transcripts were manually analyzed using Google Sheets. Coding software is not considered feasible when only having to code a few interviews, allowing the researcher to familiarize him with the package to code confidentially (and, 2003). The codes were developed through the GM structure. It begins with an inductive approach where 1st-order concepts are built directly from the interviewees' words. The GM then transitions towards an abductive process to develop 2nd-order themes and aggregate dimensions by combining data with existing theory. A key component of the GM is the creation of a data structure that includes both informant-based (1st-order) codes and researcher-based (2nd-order) interpretations, which helps to show how data supports conclusions(Magnani and Gioia, 2023). The next step involves developing a grounded theoretical model that illustrates the relationships among the emergent concepts and provides a dynamic representation of the theory (Magnani and Gioia, 2023). This grounded theoretical model is created using whimsical.com and presented in figures 3, 4 and 5.

The second analysis involved summarizing and comparing customer characteristics (independent variables) between key and non-key accounts (dependent variables). Using R-studio, descriptive statistics were employed to summarize customer characteristics of key and non-key accounts. Measures such as means and standard deviations provide an initial scientific footing in new areas of inquiry (Vetter, 2017). Comparative analysis was further applied to determine whether specific characteristics are more common among key accounts. P-values were calculated for continuous variables as part of the comparative analysis using Welch's t-test, as unequal variances were expected. The generated table was manually transferred to the results section.

After the analysis of the transcripts of phases one and three, the results were described in the results section and summarized in tables. For the first part of this research, this meant setting up a key account criteria table according to Kumar and Reinartz (2018)'s theory. Furthermore, the customer characteristics were described in a customer profile similar to the studies of (Kandeil et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2023; Kumar, 2008), while also giving the qualitative arguments provided by the interviewees.

In the final part, internal documents about the sales process and acquisition channels were evaluated and synthesized according to Bowen (2009)'s systematic document analysis. A process overview has been made using whimsical.com, combining the sales process with acquisition channels. Additionally, two customer channels were used to apply the key account customer profile to lead generation. The channels examined were LinkedIn Sales Navigator, part of the existing channels, and ChatGPT Deep Search, which was introduced as a new channel. The generated leads were then internally qualified by sales managers according to the sales process of the focal firm. The process overview has been updated with the new approach on whimsical.com. The leads were put on a table to show the lead qualifications of internal sales managers.



Figure 3. Data structure of the focal firm's key account criteria



Figure 4. Data structure of the key account's customer characteristics part 1



Figure 5. Data structure of the key account's customer characteristics part 2

4 RESULTS

This section shows the general results of the QQQ method, followed by a recommendation to guide customer acquisition strategies. The first part will show the qualitative understanding of the current key account selection criteria. In the second part, quantitative descriptive analysis methods will be used to identify differences in customer characteristics between key and non-key accounts. In the third part, qualitative results complement the quantitative findings to provide a better understanding of the characteristics associated with key accounts. The fourth and final part builds a recommendation to guide customer acquisition strategies using customer profiles. Moreover, the validity and reliability will be ensured before the discussion and conclusion chapter.

4.1 Part 1: Key account Criteria

Key account criteria were identified by conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews and analysing data through the GM. The identified themes are quantitative criteria, qualitative criteria, criteria set up, and family business. This order is used to describe the results. To ensure confidentiality, some data were

anonymised. This includes the identities of interviewees (e.g., Interviewee 1), company names (e.g., Company A), and monetary values (e.g., M1).

The participants deemed potential revenue and company size to be important quantitative criteria. Potential revenue is considered "the first criterion" to keep the company financially healthy. It is part of a longer relationship strategy to continue the growth of the customers. A "three-year plan" is made with an account where a customer ideally spends M1 in the first year, expands it to M2 in the second and grows to M3 over three years. The focal firm ideally wants to generate M4 in revenue out of all customers. M5 is expected to come from new businesses and the remaining portion from existing clients, mainly key accounts. The turnover ratio among key accounts should be equal. Once, one company "represented a huge amount of revenue compared to the other clients", leading to a strong "dependency on one client", which was later balanced. For company size, participants give a minimum of "at least around 900 employees" and "start from 200-300 employees". It can go up to thousands, according to the interviewees. This size includes everything at the upper end of SME that's "not a corporate". The reason for this size one interviewee gives is that it is easier to make an impact at more prominent companies, giving the following example:

"Take a construction company we work for. They have a turnover of $\in 1$ to $\in 2$ billion and we were commissioned to reduce their procurement costs by 3% using data and AI solutions. For every 0.1% impact we make, that company earns $\in 400,000$ per year. Yes, that's quite a difference from a small company." - Interviewee 2

Qualitative criteria can be divided into cultural fit and technical problem. According to the interviewees, a cultural fit is about a good match between the core values of both organizations. The focal firm is mainly valued by its "pragmatic" and "no-nonsense" approach. Key accounts ideally have an "innovative character" with an "ambition", one that wants "to look ahead" as the firm is looking for a long-term partner. Relationships start small and are expanded by developing trust and being transparent. It has happened that the firm has ended a partnership because of a bad cultural fit, as one interviewee explained:

"We once worked with company B—it's not about the name—but there was a client contact who was really a jerk. He cursed out his whole team, including our people. Every day, completely. We just ended that relationship. We're just not going to do that. So cultural fit—and that's a big word—but ideally we work with people that our people want to work with." - Interviewee 2

One other qualitative criterion is the technical problem. According to the interviewees, key accounts ideally have yet to make considerable progress on data maturity with complex, custom-made solutions for a long-term potential relationship. The custom solutions should be related to use cases that impact the customers' strategic goals and should not involve standardized solutions, as the firm does not make money from licenses. Custom solutions are standard among companies that use legacy systems: outdated computing systems, hardware or software still in use. One interviewee explained that:

"... the more legacy systems and employees they have, the more potential there is for us to help. It sounds a bit odd, but then there's still so much to digitize and achieve with data. The value we can create for the client is much higher. If the company is already far along in data maturity, we can certainly still help by building or complementing a team ... But then the purely business value we add becomes smaller." - Interviewee 2

When looking at the weighting of the criteria for key accounts, the interviewees state that the focal firm has not assigned a strict weighting factor. Not having a strict weighting factor is because the number of customers is "very manageable". However, the revenue potential is deemed as "the first criterion". One interviewee mentioned that the "80/20 rule" can be applied where the first 80% is the "revenue objective" and the last 20% consists of the "cultural fit", "the tech fit", "the knowledge fit" and "team satisfaction". Furthermore, no tools or frameworks are used to set up key account selection according to the interviewees. The focal firm "roughly agreed" on what a key account is, taking that into account for their acquisition process. The key account customers are currently stored in Google Sheets, but the interviewees highlight the desire to store it in HubSpot to handle them more "centrally".

According to the interviewees, changes in key account criteria mainly happened in the first two years of this company. This change was because the firm was still developing its products and services and was, therefore, still looking for its market fit. The aim shifted from SMEs to larger companies, as this interviewee describes:

"So in those early years, we had more SMEs, mid and small businesses as clients, whereas now you see the profile slowly shifting toward upper-SME and larger. So yes, that's definitely a development. And eventually you'll start organizing your teams around that, and adjust your service offering accordingly. So it also becomes increasingly difficult to work profitably for smaller SME teams. " - Interviewee 2

Interviewees mention that family businesses often meet key account criteria with a "minimum number of employees" who have a "certain healthy ambition" and a "willingness to change". They often have "unique profile" where standard solutions "don't fit". One interviewee describes family businesses as the following:

"So think of a family business. They often have something unique, either in a product or process and are a market leader or leader in a particular niche. And because of that, they've created a kind of unique profile, which means that standard solutions just don't quite fit." - Interviewee 2

Table 3 shows a summary of the key account criteria. The qualitative criteria that were deemed important are company size, starting from 200/300 to 900 employees and potential revenue, starting with M1 in year one, M2 in year 2 and M3 in year 3. For qualitative criteria, culture is important, as it relates to alignment with core values (such as pragmatic and no-nonsense approach), innovation, ambition, and team dynamics. Also, the technical problem is essential, which should be technically complex, demand a custom technological solution related to the strategic goals of a customer and have a long path ahead in data maturity for a long collaboration.

| Criteria Types | Criteria | Values | |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--|--|
| Quantitative criteria | Company size | Starting from 200–300 to 900 employees | |
| | Potential revenue | M1 in Year 1 | |
| | | M2 in Year 2 | |
| | | M3 in Year 3 | |
| Qualitative criteria | Culture | Alignment with core values (pragmatic approach) | |
| | | Innovation and ambition | |
| | | Team dynamics | |
| | Technical problem | Complex technical problem | |
| | | Custom solutions related to strategic goals of customers | |
| | | Long path ahead to data maturity | |

Table 3. Key Account Criteria

4.2 Part 2: Differences and trends in customer characteristics between key accounts and non-key accounts

This part of the research analyses the differences and trends in customer characteristics between key accounts and non-key accounts using descriptive analytics. The unit of analysis is the focal firm's customers, with a total of N=26. The dependent variables are non-key accounts (N=16) and key accounts (N=10). The variables used are Average Data Maturity, Distance Category, LR Turnover, Number of Offices, Owner Legal Form, Relationship Length (years), Registration Date and Size.

Looking at the descriptive results in table 4, Key accounts have a significantly (p = 0.019) higher average data maturity score (M = 2.17, SD = 0.49) than non-key accounts (M = 1.63, SD = 0.58). The scores range from 1.00 to 3.00, with key accounts having a slightly lower bound of 1.50. This finding suggests that key accounts have a higher average data maturity score. Looking at the distance categories,

regional customers (10-50 km) form the largest proportion of key accounts (70.0%), whereas only 25.0%of non-key accounts fall into this category. Local and national customers are primarily common for non-key accounts (37,5% and 25%), but do show some occurrence for key accounts (10% and 10%). Cross-border and international customers make up a very small fraction, suggesting that proximity may play a role in key account selection. Key account deliver more turnover on average (M = 205,430.10, SD = 366,654.05) than non key accounts (M = 10,144.56, SD = 12,887.47. This difference is not significant (p = 0.127). The turnover range generated for the firm is 280.00 - 42,560.00 for non key accounts and 14,240.00 - 1,223,317.00 for key accounts. On average, key accounts have a higher number of offices (M = 12.70, SD = 22.80) than non-key accounts (M = 2.38, SD = 2.78). The difference is insignificant (p = 0.187). The number of offices can be up to 75 for key accounts, while non-key accounts only go up to a maximum of 12 offices. The majority of key accounts (90.0%) and non-key accounts (62.5%) have a legal form of "Besloten Vennootschap", which translates to Private Limited Company. "Stichtingen", which can be translated to foundations, make up 25.0% of non-key accounts but 0% of key accounts, suggesting that they are unlikely to become key accounts. The relationship length is higher on average for key accounts (M = 4.10 years, SD = 6.23) than for non-key accounts (M = 3.60 years, SD = 5.13). However, this relation is insignificant (p = 0.872). Some key accounts range to a relationship length of 21 years, whereas non-key accounts range up to 12 years. The missing data, which is N=11 for non-key accounts, might affect the reliability of this insight. The registration data shows that key accounts tend to be older businesses (M = 1962, SD = 33), whereas non-key accounts are relatively newer (M = 1997, SD = 24), yet this difference is significant (p = 0.011). The oldest key account dates back to 1902 and the oldest non-key account dates back to 1924. Looking at the company sizes, non-key accounts are the only group representing customers with less than 51 employees (50.0%). Most key accounts have between 51-200 employees (40.0%). Larger companies (501+ employees) are more often key accounts, suggesting larger companies are more often key accounts. Industry categories were removed from the table as 24 of 26 companies were from different industries, indicating that the focal firm operates in all industries.

| | Non-Key Accounts (N=16) | Key Accounts (N=10) | Total (N=26) |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|
| Average Data Maturity | | | |
| - Mean (SD) | 1.63 (0.58) | 2.17 (0.49) | 1.84 (0.60) |
| - Range | 1.00 - 3.00 | 1.50 - 3.00 | 1.00 - 3.00 |
| Distance Category | | | |
| - Local (0-10 km) | 6 (37.5%) | 1 (10.0%) | 7 (26.9%) |
| - Regional (10-50 km) | 4 (25.0%) | 7 (70.0%) | 11 (42.3%) |
| - National (50-200 km) | 4 (25.0%) | 1 (10.0%) | 5 (19.2%) |
| - Cross-border (200-500 km) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (10.0%) | 1 (3.8%) |
| - European (500-2.000 km) | 1 (6.2%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (3.8%) |
| - International (¿2.000 km) | 1 (6.2%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (3.8%) |
| LR Turnover 2024 | | | |
| - Mean (SD) | 10,144.56 (12,887.46) | 205,430.10 (366,654.05) | 85,254.38 (240,509.42) |
| - Range | 280.00 - 42,560.00 | 14,240.00 - 1,223,317.00 | 280.00 - 1,223,317.00 |
| Number of Offices | | | |
| - Mean (SD) | 2.38 (2.78) | 12.70 (22.80) | 6.35 (14.77) |
| - Range | 1.00 - 12.00 | 1.00 - 75.00 | 1.00 - 75.00 |
| Owner Legal Form | | | |
| - Besloten Vennootschap | 10 (62.5%) | 9 (90.0%) | 19 (73.1%) |
| - Kapitaalvennootschap binnen EER | 1 (6.2%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (3.8%) |
| - Maatschap | 1 (6.2%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (3.8%) |
| - Publiekrechtelijke Rechtspersoon | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (10.0%) | 1 (3.8%) |
| - Stichting | 4 (25.0%) | 0 (0.0%) | 4 (15.4%) |
| Relationship Length (Years) | | | |
| - N-Miss | 11 | 0 | 11 |
| - Mean (SD) | 3.60 (5.13) | 4.10 (6.23) | 3.93 (5.70) |
| - Range | 0.00 - 12.00 | 1.00 - 21.00 | 0.00 - 21.00 |
| Registration Date | | | |
| - Mean (SD) | 1997 (24) | 1962 (33) | 1983 (32) |
| - Range | 1924 - 2021 | 1902 - 2009 | 1902 - 2021 |
| Size | | | |
| - 2-10 employees | 3 (18.8%) | 0 (0.0%) | 3 (11.5%) |
| - 11-50 employees | 5 (31.2%) | 0 (0.0%) | 5 (19.2%) |
| - 51-200 employees | 2 (12.5%) | 4 (40.0%) | 6 (23.1%) |
| - 201-500 employees | 3 (18.8%) | 0 (0.0%) | 3 (11.5%) |
| - 501-1,000 employees | 0 (0.0%) | 2 (20.0%) | 4 (7.7%) |
| - 1,000-5,000 employees | 2 (12.5%) | 2 (20.0%) | 4 (15.4%) |
| - 5,001-10,000 employees | 1 (6.2%) | 0 (0.0%) | 1 (3.8%) |
| - 10,001+ employees | 0 (0.0%) | 2 (20.0%) | 2 (7.7%) |

Table 4. Firmographic Information of Non-Key Accounts and Key Accounts

Note: P-values were calculated using Welch's *t*-test for continuous variables with unequal variances. Significant differences were found for Average Data Maturity (p = 0.019) and Registration Date (p = 0.011). Other variables showed no significant differences: Number of Offices (p = 0.187), LR turnover 2024 (p = 0.127) and Relationship Length (p = 0.872).

4.3 Part 3: Key account characteristics

In the third phase, quantitative results were investigated by conducting semi-structured interviews with internal stakeholders to understand the characteristics associated with key accounts better. The transcriptions were analyzed data through the GM. The identified themes are size, legal form, industry, registration date, distance category, offices count, data maturity, revenue and family business. This order is used to describe the results. To ensure confidentiality, some data were anonymised. This includes the identities of interviewees (e.g. Interviewee 1), company names (e.g. Company A), and monetary values (e.g. M1).

In the first discussed firmographic, namely company size, all interviewees agree that key accounts are generally bigger than non-key accounts. According to two interviewees, the ideal size falls between SMEs and larger companies around the "900-employee mark". One of the main reasons is that the bigger a company is, the higher its revenue and costs will be about the price of the focal firm's services and the more "impact" can be made. One example of a higher revenue and cost benefits one interviewee gave is "at company H, where you can improve by 0.1% of something, that saved them 400,000 per year" - Interviewee 3. Furthermore, larger organizations have "more interest" and often even the "urgency" to extract insights from data to make decisions. Smaller organizations can often "still manage" their business

without data insights as they regularly have "one location" and a "small group of employees". Also, more prominent companies are already "much more advanced" with data than smaller companies that "still tinker a lot in Excel". This difference means that more prominent companies have a "significant potential" to extract value. Companies should be "too small" to have IT teams in-house without being large enough to "simply buy up entire teams". However, size is not always seen as a "hard rule". Some companies make their money with unmanned production, making a company seem smaller. Three interviewees state that the ambition to become more data-driven is also important. One interviewee even states that key accounts may be "more related" to ambition than the number of employees.

"The larger the company, the higher their revenue and costs, in relation to our price for services, the more impact we can make. For example, that construction company, a quarter of a billion, they spend 300k with us, but earn at least 400k from that in the same year. They probably already make a million. And they do that year after year. And we're going to do even more for them. So we really help them make money and reduce costs. With my small business, we don't have the same impact because we're working with smaller costs." - Interviewee 2

Legal form is the second discussed firmographic. Private companies are according to one interviewee "by far the most common" in the market in general. On the other hand, "most" key accounts are private companies, mentions one interviewee. This legal form could come down to the "size" or "profit motive" where companies have a "certain urgency" to innovate or optimize something, where it sometimes is even "legally necessary" to make specific adjustments. All interviewees bring up that foundations likely will not become key accounts with the main reasons being: reliance on public money and donations, are often "not a large company" and are "slower". Three interviewees stated that larger foundations "could work". Furthermore, sole proprietor or partnership legal forms can be "ruled out" because of their "wallet" and "ambition", one interviewee mentioned. Lastly, public limited companies are "probably too big" as it is in the "corporate world" and therefore undesired. One interviewee summarizes it into one sentence:

"Yes, I think that organizations with a profit motive are the most interesting for us. They often also have a certain urgency to innovate or optimize something, or sometimes it's even legally necessary to make certain adjustments. So there's maybe more urgency to work out these results for a company." - Interviewee 1

When looking at the industry firmographic, all interviewees agree that the focal firm is not focused on a specific industry. One interviewee states that "everyone" deals with data and business processes that could be optimized with something that is not "standard". One industry with a lot of "procurement" is the construction industry, where a lot of analogue documents need to be digitalized. Other preferences come down to employees' "personal interest" and "knowledge". When looking at the market types, one interviewee says that most customers operate in a B2B setting, which might still be "a bit old-fashioned" because of its "business and formal environment". "Complex" industries such as defense, uranium, and gambling are "less suited". Furthermore, sectors such as healthcare and physiotherapy are also less relevant because they often work with small margins, have little room for optimization and are focused on "just getting the job done".

"We don't need to work in a specific industry. It's not necessary to make an impact. What we do is optimize processes. And a procurement process occurs in almost every industry. So, what we need is operational-heavy, meaning a lot of processes, a lot of data, and many departments. Many clients, many locations. That's what's important for us. And if you want to find a shared common denominator in these clients, it's that most of them are family businesses." - Interviewee 2

Four interviewees say that it is "correct" that key accounts are generally older for the registration data. According to them, older customers tend to be "more established" companies that have been around for a few years, have grown their operations, are financially healthy and have more data. Older companies have likely been through scaling and optimization and have created a form of "legacy", meaning they often already have IT systems. However, they are outdated, which is starting to "pinch" them now. This problem is picked up by the "third generation", who is making an entry to digitalize, who could have been registered "around 1961".

For the distance category, key and non-key accounts located regionally could be explained by a "regional network" according to three interviewees. Because the number of potential customers in the regional network is "finite" and more opportunities could "possibly" be found outside the region, the focal firm is now also looking nationally and internationally state 4 interviewees, making the quantitative finding less relevant. Regional customers do have the benefit of more easily working on-site, but this "should not limit" the focal firm compared to other customers in the Netherlands. The cultural alignment could benefit regional customers, specifically being "down-to-earth" mentioned two interviewees. This cultural fit is also valued nationally and even internationally.

Interviewees agree that the office count could be higher among key accounts. More office locations mean "multiple silos of data", which would need to be centralized on a data platform to build a management dashboard, giving management more control without having to travel between office locations. The need for centralization also depends on the distance between the locations and whether they all carry out the primary process or have different departments. Sometimes, offices are not actual locations but are "flexible workspace you could book for the day". Moreover, office count could also correlate with size, explaining that as a firm grows, it gets more office locations. Also, the focal firm can "perfectly have" a customer with one location and 900 employees. One interviewee mentions that more offices could make project communications more difficult, because there are multiple people to deal with, who all "want to have their say". One interviewee explains the need of centralized data in this case:

"And it's very useful that everyone is looking at the same thing. The same applies to the work we're doing with banks. They also have projects running at multiple locations, and, yes, the colleagues aren't in one place, so it's great to be able to see, for example, which suppliers we are working with, which agreements are being made, and how that could benefit the project." - Interviewee 1

Key accounts are mainly more mature for data maturity because they "have shown significant progress". For an ideal customer, all interviewees argue that companies which are at the very beginning, at level one, "aren't interesting". This is because if a customer has not digitalized anything, there is no data to work with. Companies, therefore, need some form of data infrastructure that can be used for analytics and optimization. On the other hand, if a company is already fully mature, it does not need a data and AI partner. This happens when a customer starts taking an IT team in-house. The "sweet spot" is data maturity ideally lies between levels 2 and 3, according to the interviewees, with the "strategy", "value", and "fundament" pillars being the "most relevant". When looking at the relations with other firmographics, two interviewees mention that data maturity grows as a company becomes bigger as smaller organizations do not have the time and resources to build a data platform. One interviewee even states that the data maturity of big companies "can't really be lower than level three". Older companies more often have legacy systems with difficulty extracting data compared to younger companies, who more often work with the newest systems, explains one interviewee.

"I think it depends on the specific client, but generally speaking, a company that has a solid data foundation and is ready to take the next step in terms of analytics and optimization would be ideal. If they already have some data infrastructure and processes in place, we can build on that to help them take it to the next level. But if they have little to no data systems in place, we can still help them, but it may take longer to build the foundation and get them to the point where they're ready to leverage data for optimization." - Interviewee 2

When asked about revenue, four interviewees stated that revenue on itself "doesn't tell everything". "What's left at the end" matters more. A financially healthy organization, with good results and room to invest is "interesting". An organization has a specific volume to make "an impact". According to one interviewee, answers about volume differ but range "between 25 to 75 million". One interviewee mentioned that this depends on how the revenue is distributed. Some companies have a high gross margin with high personnel costs or a low gross margin with procurement costs. The impact would be made faster than if a company has "a lot of procurement" with "very thin" margins. One interviewee explains the role of revenue with the following answer:

"Revenue definitely plays a role, but it's not just about the number. It's about how the revenue translates into a company's ability to invest in solutions and make improvements. A

company with significant revenue but low profitability may not be able to invest in data-driven optimization. It's more about the profit margins and the company's willingness to invest in improvements that matter. That's why I prefer to look at profitability rather than just revenue. A company with high revenue and low margins might not be able to do much with our services." - Interviewee 2

All interviewees highlighted that family businesses work well together with the focal firm. Two interviewees state that family businesses are not there "to keep the shareholders happy", but tend to have a "longer-term vision" because they are interested in passing the business down to the next generation. This longer-term vision involves thinking about sustainability and long-term improvements, which requires investments in data and technology. The desire to become more mature is because family businesses have often been around longer, created some technical depth and still use legacy systems that need updating. All interviewees say that culture is also a reason family businesses are desired. According to one participant, the focal firm adopts a "no-nonsense" and "pragmatic approach", delivering results quickly to meet customers' needs, suiting family businesses. One interviewee explains this paragraph using examples:

"Many family businesses are more solid. In the Netherlands, you have family businesses with a very clear product vision, for example, which makes them more distinctive and more solid. But because they are often family businesses, they do things their way, as the father did and the grandfather did. And sometimes, in terms of digital, and sometimes just in general, they lag a bit behind. Their distinguishing factor isn't that they're technologically innovative, but that they're product-innovative and have a solid foundation and a strong vision for the future, and they also have the desire to maintain that. So that's what aligns, a family business with a long-term vision that's also a bit behind digitally." - Interviewee 5

Ultimately, the customer profile of a key account consists of "a combination of factors", as one interviewee states. Also, the firmographics are interconnected, as the results state. Therefore, table 5 has been set up to summarise all the results and relations between the firmographics, giving a clear overview of the ideal customer as explained in the interviews.

| Firmographics | Value | Arguments (incl. counterarguments) |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Size | SME and larger (300–900 employees) | Sufficient revenues and costs allow for optimization and justify investment. There is an urgency for data-informed managerial decision-making and some form of existing data infrastructure. These companies are typically too small to host full in-house data teams. However, size is not a strict criterion (e.g., unmanned production) and depends on ambition. |
| Legal Form | B.V. | A legal form with larger company size, profit motive, and a drive for innovation (sometimes due to legal requirements). Foun- dations tend to be smaller or slower but could be viable if of sufficient size. ZZP/VOF are typically too small; N.V. may be too large. |
| Industry | All (especially construction) | Not restricted to one industry. Industries that need non-standard solutions due to procurement complexity (construction). Per- sonal interest of employees is important. Complex or low-margin industries such as defense, uranium, gambling, healthcare, or physiotherapy are less attractive. |
| Registration Date | Around 1961 | More established companies, with grown operations, financial stability, legacy systems and potential third-generation leadership with a vision to digitize. |
| Distance Cate- | National and | Originally regional due to regional networks. Current national |
| gory Offices Count | More than one | Multiple office locations imply diverse data silos. The impact depends on whether the offices are physical or flexible, the dis- tance between them and whether they perform core processes or support functions. More offices may complicate communication. Offices count could correlate with company size. |
| Avg. Data Ma- turity | Level 2–3 | Ideally some form of data infrastructue. Strategy, value and funda- ment most relevant pillars. A higher data maturity is a byproduct of larger companies. Smaller companies often still work with excel and are therefore less relevant. Older companies more often have legacy systems whereas newer companies work with the systems of today are less relevant. Companies without any digi- talization can't be helped (mostly being smaller companies). On the other hand, fully mature companies already have data teams in house being less interesting to help |
| Turnover | €25–75 mil- lion | Financial stability implies room for investment. It depends on how revenue is distributed: impact is higher where procurement is large and margins are thin. |

 Table 5. Customer Profile With Arguments

Note. SME = Small and Medium-sized Enterprise; B.V. = Besloten Vennootschap; ZZP = Zelfstandige Zonder Personeel; VOF = Vennootschap Onder Firma; N.V. = Naamloze Vennootschap.

4.4 Part 4: Applying customer profile to customer acquisition strategy

In this results section, the application of the key accounts' customer profiles to the focal firm's customer acquisition strategy is shown. First, the acquisition process is described and explained. Second, the channels "ChatGPT Deep Search" and "LinkedIn Sales Navigator" were updated and used to find customers similar to the key accounts' customer profiles.

The focal firm has internal documentation about the acquisition process and the acquisition channels. The focal firm's acquisition process consists of five sub-processes: Lead, Marketing Qualified Lead (MQL), a Sales Qualified Lead (SQL), Opportunity and Customer. A lead is defined as a person who has shown interest in a product or service but is not necessarily interested in buying. An MQL has shown more interest in an offer and is likelier to become a customer than other leads. An SQL is an MQL that is

qualified for a direct sales approach. An opportunity is an evaluated SQL that has a concrete chance to seal the deal. After signing, a lead becomes a customer. According to the internal documentation, the acquisition channels used in the focal firm are websites (including social media references), LinkedIn Sales Navigator, Email Acquisition, WOM marketing, newsletters, personal network and physical acquisition. A summary of this documentation is shown in figure 6. All documentation was confirmed to be up-to-date and is still in use.



Figure 6. Applying customer profile to customer acquisition channels and processes

For the ChatGPT Deep Search channel, a detailed prompt (approximately one A4 page) was crafted from a sales manager's perspective at a data and AI company searching for valuable leads that could evolve into key accounts. This prompt incorporated the previously established customer profile. The AI-generated search produced 40 leads. The leads were validated by manually reassessing them according to the customer profile. For every criterion that is met, a company receives one point out of a total of 6, as there are six variables. The data maturity was not assessed during this validation, as this information could not be found in publicly available data. A lead is considered "good" when it meets at least 5 out of 6 criteria. By applying these criteria to the dataset, 26 out of 40 leads were valuable. Leads outside this category were either too small or too big in size and revenue, did not exist anymore or worked in an industry that offered similar products to the focal firm. Of all 40 generated leads, 15 were converted to SQLs by sales personnel, meaning the leads were deemed suitable for a direct sales approach. This process is illustrated in figure 6. Further qualification of these leads requires a longer time frame and, therefore, falls outside the scope of this study.

In addition, LinkedIn Sales Navigator was used as a second lead generation channel. Companies were selected based on the following firmographic criteria that resembles the previously made customer profile: annual revenue between C20-100 million, 501–1000 employees, operating in any industry except healthcare-related sectors, and with fewer than 10 employees in the IT department. A total of 134 companies were manually selected using LinkedIn's search functionalities. Of these, 15 companies were qualified as SQLs. This outcome is also visualized in figure 6. As with the ChatGPT leads, further qualification will take several months and is beyond the scope of this research.

| Lead Types | ChatGPT Deep Search | LinkedIn Sales Navigator |
|-------------|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Total | 40 (100%) | 134 (100%) |
| Lead | 25 (62.5%) | 119 (88,9%) |
| MQL | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| SQL | 15 (37.5%) | 15 (11.1%) |
| Opportunity | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Customer | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |

 Table 6. Stages of ChatGPT Deep Search and LinkedIn Sales Navigator leads

Note. The generated leads are still being processed by sales employees. It may take several months to see the full results.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Discussion

This research aims to contribute to the field of KAM. Starting with key account criteria, where semistructured interviews were used to identify quantitative (e.g., company size, revenue potential) and qualitative (e.g., cultural fit, technical problem) criteria of key accounts of an SME IT company operating in the Netherlands. Next to this analysis, quantitative firmographic differences between key accounts and non-key accounts were identified. These differences were then validated and explained by semi-structured interviews with internal stakeholders directly involved in KAM. Additionally, the results were used to build an extensive customer profile of key accounts. This customer profile has also been applied to the focal firm's customer acquisition process using the channels "ChatGPT Deep Search" and "LinkedIn Sales Navigator".

5.1.1 Key account criteria

In the first part of this research, key account criteria of an SME IT company operating in the Netherlands were identified. Within the SME IT company, quantitative criteria included potential revenue and company size. Qualitative criteria included culture and technical problems. The results demonstrated no strict weighing between the criteria within the researched company, although revenue is deemed the most important. Furthermore, no tools are used in the firm. Changes in the criteria have been introduced, increasing the minimum company size.

By comparing the results to other studies, it can be concluded that the key account criteria are relationship-oriented and aim to create long-term customer relationships (Kumar and Reinartz, 2018). The respondents specifically mentioned this orientation, while the criteria itself also acts towards a long-term sustainable relationship. The identified criteria of the SME IT company corresponded with standard criteria mentioned in Kumar and Reinartz (2018)'s paper. Potential revenue, culture and technical problems are all part of the standard criteria, except company size. An explanation for this could be that company size is a criterion that explains the possible impact that could be made, indirectly contributing to potential revenue. Kumar and Reinartz (2018) mentioned that financial data is often combined with financial rules to decide the key account status of customers. The use of financial rules corresponds with what has been found in this case study, as the focal firm uses a three-year plan of potential revenue to decide the key account status. However, the criteria are not standard. By comparing the key account selection criteria of the researched SME IT company to other industries such as airlines, corporate sales and leisure/tour operators segments (Wang and Brennan, 2014), apparent differences related to the industry have been found, complementing that each company has its unique selection criteria based on a company's industry (Guesalaga et al., 2018). Other results highlighted that the focal firm has no documentation regarding key account criteria. Not having any tools ties with Homburg et al. (2002)'s research as it stated that SMEs generally do not have formalized tools or frameworks. Similarly, the weighting criteria are also not documented, as the customers are manageable according to the respondents.

5.1.2 Quantitative differences between key accounts and non-key accounts validated and explained by qualitative interviews

In the second part of this research, quantitative firmographic differences between key and non-key accounts were described, with the characteristics being size, legal form, industry, registration date, distance category, office count, data maturity and other characteristics such as revenue and family-owned companies. Due to

the exploratory nature of this research, with no previous knowledge about these possible differences and a low sample size, the results could not easily be verified. However, the quantitative results were followed up by semi-structured interviews, in which the respondents could validate and explain the results. The results are explained according to the earlier order of characteristics mentioned above.

Quantitative data showed that key accounts tend to be larger regarding employee count than non-key accounts. Interviewees confirmed this trend, noting that larger organizations typically have a higher budget for data and AI solutions, already work with data and are therefore more prominent to make an impact with when not already having a data team. The trend is different to companies with unmanned productions, where an impact can be made, disregarding the size, interviewees say.

According to the quantitative data, key accounts were often structured as private limited liability companies (BVs) or large foundations (stichtingen). Interview participants acknowledged this and explained that this legal structure typically has a larger number of employees, a profit motive and an urgency to innovate. According to the interviewees, other legal structures often have too few or too many employees.

A diverse industry spread was observed among both key and non-key accounts. Qualitative insights explain that most industries deal with processes that need to be digitalized. For this reason, there is no specific industry related to key accounts. The ideal industry comes down to having non-standard procurement, the preference of employees and being in a B2B setting, as mentioned by the interviewees. In contrast, complex industries and industries with small margins do not work, according to the interviewees.

As the quantitative data showed statistically significant difference, it suggests that key accounts tend to have earlier registration dates. Interviewees support this trend, noting that older companies often deal with legacy systems and complex internal structures that lead to the need for external support in data optimization. Moreover, older firms are often taken over by a new generation wanting to digitalize.

Key accounts tended to be located regionally, as shown by quantitative data. However, interviewees stated that the current view is national or even international and that the current regional state could be explained by the regional network.

Although not significant, organizations with multiple office locations were more common among key accounts, as quantitative insights show. Qualitative insights confirmed this difference, explaining that having multiple locations needs a central location of data to make managerial decisions. The impact is dependent on the distribution of departments and whether they carry the primary process, interviewees say.

According to the quantitative data, key accounts typically exhibited a significantly higher level of data maturity. An explanation according to the interviewees is that key accounts have already made significant progress in becoming more mature with the help of the SME IT company as a partner, interviewees say. According to them, a customer ideally has a score between 2 and 3, where there already is some data infrastructure for analytics and optimization. Relations with other firmographics were also mentioned: data maturity grows as a company becomes bigger and older companies have legacy systems more often than newer companies.

The difference in revenue between key and non-key accounts could not be explained with quantitative data due to the unavailability of annual reports for most customers. However, interviewees could explain this by explaining that key accounts are ideally financially healthy and have revenue between 25 and 75 million. This depends on how the revenue is distributed, according to the interviewees.

All interviewees highlighted that family businesses share most of the ideal characteristics and work together well with the focal firm. The main reasons for this were having a long-term vision to pass the business down to the next generation thinking about sustainability, which requires investments in data and AI. According to the interviewees, family businesses have been around for a longer time and have legacy systems. Also, a pragmatic approach, which most family businesses have, suits the working environment of the focal firm.

Taking everything together, the results of the semi-structured interviews produced results similar to those of the quantitative ones. One exception was the firmographic distance category, where quantitative data insisted that key accounts were located regionally, but the interviewees explained that it is nationally. The combination of quantitative and qualitative results was used to build an extensive customer profile of key accounts.

5.1.3 Customer acquisition approach

In the last part of this research, the customer acquisition process and acquisition channels have been identified. The focal firm's acquisition process comprises five sub-processes: Lead, MQL, SQL, Opportunity and Customer. The customer acquisition channels included websites (including social media references), LinkedIn Sales Navigator, Email Acquisition, WOM marketing, newsletters, personal network and physical acquisition. The channels LinkedIn Sales Navigator as part of the existing channels and ChatGPT Deep Search as a new channel were used to gather new leads using the previously made customer profile of a key account. 15 out of 134 LinkedIn Sales Navigator leads and 15 out of 40 ChatGPT Deep Search leads were qualified as SQLs.

The customer acquisition process is similar to the sales funnel explained by Peters et al. (2015) where leads are qualified until the first purchase, starting with all potential customers, then narrowed down to target groups or prospects, further towards responders and ultimately a first-time buyer. The SME IT company has various primary direct channels and customer channels as part of a multichannel strategy, which works well in the firms' unpredictable and fast-changing environment according to Kabadayi et al. (2008)'s study.

Several leads were generated using LinkedIn Sales Navigator and ChatGPT Deep Search. The ChatGPT Deep Search had to be manually validated by reassessing them according to the customer profile, with 26 out of 40 leads being valuable, indicating the value and limitations of the channel. Furthermore, 15 out of 134 LinkedIn Sales Navigator leads and 15 out of 40 ChatGPT Deep Search leads were qualified as SQLs, indicating the quality of the generated leads. This positive indication aligns with (Madanchian, 2024)'s research that AI could lead to the qualification and conversion process (Madanchian, 2024). However, the leads are still being processed. It may take several months to assess the full quality of the lead generation approaches.

5.2 Implications

5.2.1 Theoretical implications

This research makes several theoretical contributions to the literature. The first part of this research contributes to the literature on key account selection criteria. Previous studies were mainly based on observations from larger companies with sophisticated, formalized key account programs, excluding SMEs (Homburg et al., 2002). Also, key account selection criteria differ according to a company's size, sector and overall strategy (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Kumar and Reinartz, 2018).Wang and Brennan (2014) showed that Airlines, Corporate sales and Leisure/tour operators segments had unique associated variable criteria when valuing key accounts and stated that key account criteria of other service sectors are still open to question. This research fills in a gap by giving insights into the key account selection criteria in an unexplored sector: a Dutch SME IT company operating in a B2B context.

The second part of this research contributes to the literature on KAM, CRM and customer targeting by applying a customer profile of key accounts to an acquisition strategy using NLP models. This research first segments customers based on their key account status, taking a holistic view of the most valuable customers as qualitative factors are taken into account, such as technology potential and cultural fit (Guesalaga et al., 2018; Kumar and Reinartz, 2018), therefore being an extension on more common CRM segmentation methods such as RFM and CLV (Alves Gomes and Meisen, 2023; Peters et al., 2015). Furthermore, this research has built a customer profile based on the key account segment. By applying this to appropriate marketing programs, this research extends existing studies (Kandeil et al., 2014; Ho et al., 2023; Kumar, 2008). Using AI as a customer channel fills in a research gap by providing a better understanding of how AI-driven insights can create effective marketing solutions (Kumar et al., 2024).

5.2.2 Practical implications

This study provides key account criteria of an SME-IT company operating in the Netherlands. As key accounts were previously selected using common sense within the researched firm, sales managers can now use the new key account criteria framework to enhance its key account selection process. Other SME-IT companies could also benefit from this research, allowing them to use a similar solution for their key account selection process.

In addition, sales managers from the focal firm can use the customer profile of key accounts to enhance their customer acquisition process. As the use of the customer profile in the customer channels ChatGPT Deep Search and LinkedIn Sales Navigator is already showing promising results, sales managers should continue to use this approach and possibly expand it to other channels. Specifically the use of AI can further enhance the acquisition processes of the focal firm as it can accelerate customer interactions, saving the manager valuable time and reducing acquisition costs. The customer profile and ChatGPT Deep Search prompt can be altered as the ideal customer profile changes, offering a flexibility to the solution, making it usable in the future. Other SME IT companies could also apply a similar method specific to their strategy and key accounts, enhancing their acquisition processes in a similar way.

5.3 Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights into KAM, several limitations should be considered. First, this research is based on a single case study within one organization. Although this case study allowed for an in-depth exploration of the internal processes and structure within KAM, it inherently limits the generalizability of the findings. The key account criteria are specifically centred around the culture and strategy of this specific research organization. This also applies to the customer profile of the key accounts, which is a product of the key account criteria. As a result, the transferability of conclusions to other organizational contexts should be approached with caution.

Second, the sample size of the interview participants (N=5) and quantitative data (N = 26) is relatively low. Specifically, the interview about key account criteria only had two respondents, as there were no other sales employees with relevant knowledge about this topic. Furthermore, for the next part of this research, where a customer profile is built, the research method allowed the quantitative data to be complemented by qualitative interpretations. Although this combination leads to a certain validity of the results, the comprehensiveness of the findings may have been influenced by the small sample size.

Third, this study relies on semi-structured interviews interpreted by the researcher using the Gioia method. Although the Gioia method was carefully followed to ensure systematic coding and theme development, the researcher's biases, background and expectations may have influenced the interview process and interpretation of the data. Also, the lack of intercoder reliability checking, combined with limited formal triangulation due to the limited internal documents, further limits the objectivity of the analysis.

Fourth, another limitation is the influence of a shared context bias among interview participants. Since all respondents were part of the same organization with closely related teams, they operated within a shared environment that shaped the interviewees' frames of reference. This was seen in the similar wording and answers interviewees gave. While this reflects a strong internal culture, as seen in the results, the findings may capture a dominant narrative rather than a broader diversity of thought.

Fifth, the study was limited by a restricted timeframe. This limitation led to the inability to fully qualify the leads generated using the customer channels ChatGPT Deep Search and LinkedIn Sales Navigator. This limits the robustness of conclusions about the quality and strategic value within the account selection process.

5.4 Recommendations for future research

Several areas for future research have been identified. First, as no prior studies have researched the key account criteria of other SME-IT companies, future research could examine whether the criteria identified for this researched SME-IT company are consistent across similar organizations. Conducting comparative studies with other SME-IT firms would help assess the generalizability of these findings and validate the proposed key account selection framework.

Secondly, key account segmentation is underexplored in the literature compared to more widely adopted methods, such as RFM and CLV segmentation. Future research could investigate the effectiveness of key account segmentation by conducting comparative studies with more widely adopted methods. The differences could indicate certain strategic advantages, such as stronger relationship outcomes, which are overlooked in RFM and CLV segmentation.

Thirdly, this research has gathered leads using the NLP ChatGPT Deep Search. However, due to the short time frame in which this research was conducted, the quality of the leads could not be thoroughly tested. Therefore, future research could address this limitation by conducting a longitudinal study that follows the full customer acquisition journey for AI-generated leads. The quality of the leads could confirm the usability of AI, specifically ChatGPT Deep Search, in a customer acquisition process.

5.5 Conclusion

This study has shown how characteristics that describe a key account of SME IT companies in the Netherlands can guide the acquisition of new customers with key account potential. By integrating

qualitative insights and quantitative analysis through the QQQ method, the research developed a key account selection criteria framework, a customer profile based on characteristics such as size, legal form, industry, registration date, distance category, office count and data maturity. Applying this profile to customer acquisition strategies through LinkedIn Sales Navigator and ChatGPT Deep Search can enhance the customer acquisition process, as seen in the first SQL conversion rates. While the findings offer several theoretical and practical implications, this study's limitations include a low sample size, researcher biases, a shared context bias among participants and a restricted timeframe. Future research can explore how key account criteria are set up in other SME IT companies, test the quality of the generated leads and explore ways to fully automate a customer acquisition process with a previously set-up customer profile using AI.

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Appendix

A INTERVIEW GUIDES

A.1 Interview guide 1: Understanding Key Account criteria with its developers Interviewee: Date:

Start time:

A.1.1 Introduction

- Thank you for your time
- Purpose of the interview: describing the characteristics that describe key accounts
- Information will be held confidentially and responses will only be used for research purposes
- Do you give permission for this?

A.1.2 Key Account Context

- 1. Could you describe your role and responsibilities in the organization?
- 2. How long have you been involved in Key Account Management?

A.1.3 Quantitative criteria

- 3. What quantitative criteria is used to measure key accounts?
- 4. Is there a threshold or benchmark your organization uses to determine key accounts? (Such as a minimum combined sales volume of 60
- 5. How often is this quantitative criteria reassessed?

A.1.4 Qualitative criteria

- 6. What qualitative criteria is used to measure key accounts?
- 7. Such as customer image, reputation, technology potential know how and interorganizational and cultural fit.
- 8. How do you assess this criteria?
- 9. How often do you reassess this criteria?

A.1.5 Weighting

- 10. How do you balance quantitative and qualitative criteria when selecting key accounts? What is weighted more heavily?
- 11. Are there any formal tools or frameworks that this company uses to assess and prioritize customers? If so, can you describe them?
- 12. Were there any challenges or changes in the criteria used for key account selection in recent years? If so, what drove those challenges?

A.1.6 Closing

13. Thank you for your time and insights, do you have any additional questions? After the data is analyzed, I will send you an overview of the interview results so you can review them before I implement them in my research.

End-time:

A.2 Interview guide 2: Interpreting Key Account Characteristics with stakeholders directly involved in KAM

Interviewee: Date: Start time:

A.2.1 Introduction

- Thank you for your time
- Purpose of the interview: describing the characteristics that describe key accounts
- Information will be held confidentially and responses will only be used for research purposes
- Do you give permission for this?

A.2.2 Background and context

- 1. Could you describe your role and responsibilities in the organization?
- 2. How long have you been involved in Key Account Management?

A.2.3 Size

- 3. According to the quantitative data, key accounts have relatively more employees compared to non key accounts. In fact, in previous interviews, having a minimum of 900 employees was even considered a key criteria of becoming a key account. Why are bigger companies with 900+ employees preferred in becoming a key account?
- 4. Why do some companies have less than 900 employees and are still considered key accounts?

A.2.4 Legal form

- 5. Most customers, including key accounts, have a legal form of "besloten vennootschap". Is this a legal form this company prefers for key accounts? If so, why? Are there any other legal forms that could work for key accounts?
- 6. Why are "stichting" companies never a key account?

A.2.5 Industry

- 7. This company operates in a wide range of industries, but there doesn't seem to be a specific industry that can be associated with either key accounts or non key accounts. Is this true?
- 8. Even if there does not seem to be a clear industry preference, do you notice certain industries that might work out as key accounts?
- 9. Furthermore, do you think there are certain industries that certainly would NOT work as key accounts?

A.2.6 Registration date

- 10. Looking at the registration dates of this company's customers, key accounts tend to be older than non key accounts. Do you think customers with an earlier registration date are more likely to become key accounts? Why do you think so?
- 11. Can this be explained by other factors/ categories?

A.2.7 Distance Category

12. According to the quantitative data, most key accounts are located regionally. However, based on earlier interviews and quantitative data, this company also encourages working with international businesses. Do you think there is a certain distance that would suit key accounts the best? Why?

A.2.8 Number of Offices

- 13. Although heavily influenced by one customer, key accounts tend to have more offices than non key accounts. Do you think this is a characteristic which could be important for key accounts? Why or why not?
- 14. Is there a certain amount of offices that would work the best as a key account?
- 15. Could this trend possibly be explained by other characteristics?

A.2.9 Data maturity

- 16. The quantitative data shows that key accounts have a slightly higher average data maturity. Do you think this is true? Why or why not?
- 17. Could it possibly be explained by other characteristics? Why or why not?
- 18. What would be a data maturity score that would work the best as a key account?

A.2.10 Other characteristics

- 19. Although revenue is considered an important firmographic, there is no easily accessible public information about it for this company's customers. How do you think revenue plays a role in being a key account? What do you think would be the ideal revenue of a key account? Why?
- 20. Previous interviews and talks within the company suggest that key accounts tend to be family owned. Is this true?
- 21. If so, why are key accounts mostly family owned?
- 22. Are there any other characteristics of key accounts that could describe a key account? Why do you think so?

A.2.11 Closing

23. Thank you for your time and insights, do you have any additional questions?

After the data is analyzed, I will send you an overview of the interview results so you can review them before I implement them in my research.

End-time: