

Championing KAM

Interview with Cyryl Przybyl, Vetoquinol's KAM leader



Vetoquinol is a family-owned and family-run company supplying a wide range of animal health and

welfare medicines for pets and production animals (pigs and cattle) to pet owners, vets and livestock farmers. Founded in France in 1933, its major international expansion occurred over the last 20 years. The company now has a direct presence in 24 countries and 100 distributors across the world. Vetoquinol's key account management journey started around a decade ago, and Cyryl Przybyl took on the role of KAM champion in 2015. What was that like, we asked?

Q. Why did Vetoquinol embark on KAM?

Traditionally, our customers were individual vets and small practice groups, but around 2010 we began to see that they were consolidating in most countries, and it was happening rather fast. In fact, consolidation had already progressed quite far in the USA and UK, and new types of customers, like big pet supplies chains, were becoming significant.

At the same time, we were looking for opportunities in other countries, and we noticed that venture capitalists were becoming involved and driving consolidation there too. We could see that these emerging organizations needed a different kind of service and support from us. Vetoquinol wanted to become a business partner for key accounts, so we developed a customer-centric approach, listening to customers and designing solutions on the basis of their needs.

At the same time, people joined Vetoquinol who had previously worked with great success with key clients in various industries. So we had both external and internal drivers to change, and we then truly embarked on the KAM journey.



Q. What did you do to develop KAM in Vetoquinol? What issues did you meet?

At the beginning it was just me as leader of the mission and a few key account managers (some with that job title, others with something different) to move the initiative forward. We had a great kick-off meeting with all the managers from the main organisations, and that was important to get everybody on the same page. People were open to the idea and keen to understand, and we had some good support from external consultants, who have massively contributed to building our model.

Together with the consultants, we spread the KAM concept through our organization, as it's not just about sales. I could see that we didn't have all the right people in the right positions

and we needed to make a major investment in recruitment and training and of course in consulting, but it was a tough job to gain approval for it. The payoff for an investment like that takes quite a long time to come through, although we are certainly seeing it now.

After the launch, things slowed down as people realised the scale of the change required: it was going to take more time, money and resource than they had ever imagined. This is not a change that can be carried out in just a few years, it is a long-haul! People find it hard to start on long-term initiatives, and even harder to keep going with such a demanding change initiative. But Vetoquinol was committed to a global cultural transformation at the same time and that was really encouraging.

It's important to recognise that you have to start somewhere - in our case in the US and UK - you can't roll out KAM across the whole company simultaneously. I'm not sure any company would invest in enough resource to do that, or that it

Championing KAM: Vetoquinol (cont.)

would be wise. We learned a great deal from the early initiatives and that helped a lot when we moved on to other markets.

I realised that we had to do the work of translating KAM into the situation of each country and every role, that we had to adapt the mission to each subset, every time, and that anything else is counter-productive. 'Copy/paste' wasn't an option anywhere. And, indeed, there were significant differences in every market.

It was important to maintain focus on the company's general objectives for KAM but still, in each case we had to start with formulating specific local KAM objectives, together. Rather than focusing on the present, painting a positive picture of the future was more powerful than seeming to criticise the present.

Q. How did customers respond?

The big organisations were very positive about our changing approach, but we had to be careful. We were not first with the KAM idea in some markets, so we didn't have that novelty. And we had to make sure that we could deliver on our new approach. We set up some nice processes to make sure that we were actually reliable and trustworthy, to make sure we could be seen as reliable and trustworthy.

We involved different people in the customer relationship - various specialists as well as sales- and we got a very positive feedback from our customers that we were providing them with a global approach and support in a very innovative way. That was good result, confirming that we were on the right tracks.

Q. How is KAM positioned in Vetoquinol now?

We started with just a handful of key account managers around the world, and now we have dozens! Maintaining that level is itself an enormous commitment.

I would say that KAM is now fully established in the company. Of course, people change jobs regularly so the



mission to convert people to the KAM concept never ends.

Work on processes is still continuing, as we involve more and more people leading to deeper relationships and more successful cooperation.

We have produced a portfolio of KAM tools for different markets to use. They may want to modify them to some extent, but there is no point in their starting from scratch, so we have instruments we make available to them, like key account manager job descriptions, how to choose your key accounts, various formats, assessing spreadsheets etc.

Q. How would you advise KAM champions at the outset?

Support from senior management is vital. I had very strong support from a particular senior manager at the beginning. He had a good understanding of key account management and was a great help, particularly in converting other senior managers to the idea. And getting other functions on board is critical. Support also needs to translate into substantial resources, of people's time as much as money: in Vetoquinol's case, it's been a massive global commitment from a professional and financial perspective.

Transforming a company to KAM takes time. Pushing too hard, too fast just increases reaction. People don't find it easy to engage in longer term

initiatives and easily resort to arguing that they can fulfil current requirements or work towards the future, but can't do both. That is nonsense, of course, any manager needs to do both, but still it is unwise to provoke the argument.

A good way forward is to establish relevant and appropriate objectives – avoiding sales objectives – and including more soft objectives about change, responsibilities and behaviour. They tend to include more 'soft' metrics, which senior managers often find hard to accept, so there's work to do to convince them that these are still real and important objectives.

It's worth the KAM champion devising metrics to present to senior managers that relate to the proper execution of KAM (not selling, those metrics always already exist). Yes, KAM requires a great deal of patience and even more huge investments, but there's no reason why we can't come up with metrics that show progress against the plan agreed.

Q. What is it like to be a KAM champion?

For the 6 years that I have been Vetoquinol's KAM mission leader, I have also had the responsibility for area teams in some of our largest markets, but I think being a KAM champion is a full-time job. There's a lot to do: learning and analysing situations; fixing meetings; developing tools, specifications and presentations; recruiting people; arranging appropriate training; and, most particularly, educating and socialising the KAM approach, person by person.

It's a difficult but exciting role that touches almost every part of a company, so it's great for your own professional development. KAM champions need to be open-minded, respect differences and focus on the people. It feels a bit like being a spider on a web, connecting needs with resources. The most exciting thing is when people start to connect by themselves, without needing the mediation of the KAM champion. That counts as success for me!