

**EXPLORING THE INTEGRATION OF KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT AND
CONSULTATIVE SELLING: A STUDY OF B2B SALES IN INDIAN SMES**

by

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my family and friends, whose consistent encouragement and support have been my highest strength. To my peers and mentor who shared valuable insights and encouragement to complete the study. For future endeavours, it will motivate. May this study work as a foundational guide for continued academic exploration and innovation in the business world.

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the integration of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling as strategic sales approaches within Indian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) operating in the business-to-business (B2B) sector. The study responds to the growing need for SMEs to move beyond transactional, price-based competition towards customer-centric and relationship-driven models that foster long-term value creation and competitive advantage.

A mixed-methods research design was adopted to provide both breadth and depth of analysis. Quantitative data were collected through surveys from 150 sales professionals working in Indian SMEs, while qualitative insights were generated from 12 semi-structured interviews with sales and key account managers. Descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses were used to examine the quantitative data, while thematic analysis of interviews provided an interpretive understanding of managerial experiences and perceptions.

The findings revealed that consultative selling is increasingly recognised among Indian SMEs as a more effective approach than traditional transactional selling, particularly in fostering customer retention and sales performance. Statistical results demonstrated significant positive associations between consultative practices, the use of digital tools such as CRM systems, and improved sales outcomes. However, adoption levels remain uneven, with many SMEs constrained by limited resources, weak training infrastructure, and cultural resistance to change. Qualitative insights further highlighted barriers such as poor digital enablement, lack of leadership commitment, and organisational silos. At the same time, opportunities for synergy were evident, as integration of KAM and consultative selling was seen to enhance trust, cross-functional collaboration, and long-term partnerships with strategic clients.

The research concludes that while challenges persist, the integration of KAM and consultative selling provides a viable pathway for Indian SMEs to professionalise their sales functions, improve competitiveness, and achieve sustainable growth. The study

contributes to academic knowledge by extending sales management theory to the SME context in emerging markets, while offering practical implications for SME leaders, policymakers, and training institutions.

Keywords:

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

Key Account Management (KAM) Business-to-business (B2B) Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA)

SPIN Selling (Situation, Problem, Implication, Need-Payoff)

Resource-Based View (RBV)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background	3
1.3 Research Problem	5
1.4 Purpose of Research	6
1.5 Significance of the Study	6
1.6 Research Rationale	7
1.7 Research Aim and Objectives	8
1.7.1 Research Aim	8
1.7.2 Research Objectives	8
1.8 Research Questions	8
1.9 Summary	9
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE	10
2.1 Introduction	10
2.2 Foundations of Key Account Management (KAM)	11
2.2.1 Defining KAM	11
2.2.2 Key Principles and Models of KAM	13
2.2.3 Problems and Opportunities in Integrating KAM	16
2.2.4 KAM and B2B Sales in Indian SMEs	17
2.3 Principles and Approaches of Consultative Selling	19
2.3.1 Current State of Consultative Selling	19
2.3.2 Key Principles and Skills in Consultative Selling	21
2.3.3 Consultative Selling and B2B Sales in Indian SMEs	23

2.4 Synergies and Interconnections between Key Account Management (KAM) and Consultative Selling	25
2.5 Technological Enablers of Key Account Management (KAM) and Consultative Selling	27
2.6 Drivers of Key Account Management (KAM) and Consultative Selling in the Indian Context	31
2.7 Theoretical Framework	34
2.7.1 Theory of Relationship Marketing	36
2.7.2 Social Exchange Theory	37
2.7.3 Resource-Based view (RBV)	38
2.7.4 Value-Based Selling Theory	40
2.7.5 Theories of Customer Relationship Management (CRM)	42
2.7.6 Theory of Solution Selling	44
2.8 Conceptual Framework	46
2.9 Hypotheses Development	47
2.9.1 Consultative Selling and Customer Outcomes	47
2.9.2 Digital Enablement and CRM Integration	48
2.9.3 Strategic Leadership and KAM Success	48
2.10 Literature Gaps	48
2.11 Summary	50
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY	51
3.1 Introduction	51
3.2 Research Onion	51
3.3 Research Philosophy (Pragmatic Philosophy)	51

3.4 Research Approach (Deductive Approach)	52
3.5 Research Design (Explanatory Research Design)	52
3.6 Data Collection Methods (Interview and Survey)	53
3.7 Population and Sampling Technique (Purposive and Snowball sampling)	54
3.8 Sample Size (12 sales managers and key account managers for interview and 150 salespeople from Indian SMEs for survey)	56
3.9 Participant Selection	56
3.10 Instrumentation	57
3.11 Data Analysis Techniques	58
3.12 Ethical Considerations	58
3.13 Limitations	58
3.14 Summary	60
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS	61
4.1 Introduction	61
4.2 Quantitative data results (Descriptive Statistics)	61
4.3 Qualitative data results (Interview Responses)	76
4.4 Statistical Analysis	90
4.4.1 Correlation Analysis	90
4.4.2 Regression Analysis	90
4.5 Interview Coding	95
4.6 Thematic analysis	97
Theme 1: Organisational alignment and co-creation in KAM-CS integration.	98
Theme 2: Internal barriers to change into a consultative selling process with KAM integration in SMEs.	100

Theme 3: Strategic and Technical solutions for effective KAM and consultative selling integration in SMEs.	102
Theme 4: Digital under-enablement affecting strategic sales in SMEs.	105
Theme 5: The gap between capability and technology within SMEs in using KAM and consultative selling.	107
Theme 6: Benefits and long-term relationship building with Consultative Selling within SMEs.	109
Theme 7: Future growth opportunities and potentials in the integration of KAM and consultative selling within SME sales.	111
4.7 Summary of Findings	112
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION	114
5.1 Introduction	114
5.2 Discussion on Quantitative Data Results	114
5.2.1 SME Profile and Respondent Characteristics	114
5.2.2 Sales Structures and Team Characteristics	115
5.2.3 Attitudes Toward Consultative Selling	115
5.2.4 Training, Incentives, and Sales Strategies	116
5.2.5 Role of Digital Tools and CRM	117
5.2.6 Challenges in Integration	117
5.2.7 Correlation and Regression Findings	117
5.2.8 Integration with Literature and Theoretical Perspectives	118
5.3 Discussion on Qualitative Data Results	119
5.3.1 Strategic Importance of Key Account Management (KAM)	119
5.3.2 Consultative Selling as a Relationship-Oriented Approach	120
5.3.3 Interconnection of KAM and Consultative Selling	121

5.3.4 Digital Tools as Enablers of Integration	122
5.3.5 Barriers and Challenges in Implementation	123
5.3.6 Strategies and Adaptations to Overcome Challenges	124
5.3.7 Long-Term Relationship Building as Central Outcome	124
5.3.8 Future Transformation of Sales Practices	125
5.3.9 Alignment with Theoretical Perspectives	126
5.3.10 Practical Implications for SMEs	127
5.4 Critical Evaluation of Hypotheses	128
5.4.1 Discussion of H1: Consultative Selling and Retention	128
5.4.2 Discussion of H2: Digital Enablers and CRM	128
5.4.3 Discussion of H3: Strategic Orientation and KAM Success	129
5.5 Summary	129
CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS	131
6.1 Conclusion	131
6.2 Linking with Research Objectives	133
6.3 Recommendations	139
6.4 Research Limitations	143
6.5 Research Implications	145
6.6 Limitations and Future Research Scopes	146
REFERENCES	148
APPENDICES	172
APPENDIX A - SURVEY COVER LETTER	172
APPENDIX B - INFORMED CONSENT	175
APPENDIX C - INTERVIEW GUIDE	177

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework model that represents consultative selling and customer satisfaction	2
Figure 1.2: Evolved selling and role of the salesperson	4
Figure 2.1: Key account management process	13
Figure 2.2: State of Consultative Selling	20
Figure 2.3: Technology in Sales	28
Figure 2.4: User Base of Microsoft Teams	30
Figure 2.5: Social Exchange Theory	35
Figure 2.6: Social Exchange Theory	37
Figure 2.7: Resource-Based view (RBV)	39
Figure 2.8: VBS Theory	41
Figure 2.9: CRM Model	43
Figure 2.10: Theory of Solution Selling	44
Figure 2.11: Conceptual Framework	46
Figure 4.1: Agree to participate in this survey	61
Figure 4.2: Current role in the company	62
Figure 4.3: Years of experience in the Indian SME	63
Figure 4.4: Company primarily a manufacturing or service based firm	64
Figure 4.5: Sales Team Size Distribution	64
Figure 4.6: Perceived importance of consultative selling	65
Figure 4.7: Sales Strategies Used by Companies	66
Figure 4.8: Distribution of Responses Regarding Sales Achievement	67
Figure 4.9: Primary Sales Team Training Methods	67
Figure 4.10: Management's Rating of the Importance of Strategic Client Relationships and Short-Term Sales Targets	68
Figure 4.11: Extent to which company use data and insights from digital tools to inform sales strategies	69

Figure 4.12: Primary challenge in integrating consultative Selling and KAM Integration	69
Figure 4.13: Use of consultative selling to differentiate us from competitors.....	70
Figure 4.14: Most Significant Factor for a Successful B2B Sale	71
Figure 4.15: Time Allocation Between Relationship-Building and Transactional Activities	72
Figure 4.16: Most Effective Strategies for Enhancing Consultative Selling	72
Figure 4.17: Beliefs on the Future Role of Digital Tools and AI in Sales.....	73
Figure 4.18: Key Opportunities for B2B Sales Growth in the Next Five Years	74
Figure 4.19: Effectiveness of CRM System Integration in Sales and Account Management	75
Figure 4.20: Adoption of Formal Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems	75

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Construct Operationalization and Mapping.....	56
Table 2: Correlation Table	90
Table 3: Regression Table	91
Table 4: ANOVA Table.....	92
Table 5: Coefficients Table.....	93
Table 6: Interview coding and Themes.....	96
Table 7: Summary of Hypothesis Testing and Empirical Results	132
Table 8: Interview guide for the study	177

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Key Account Management (KAM) emerged in the 1980s as a strategic concept for managing key business relationships, particularly with suppliers and customers. Its prevalence increased significantly during the 1990s. Fakhreddin et al. (2025) reported that, based on a study of 568 B2B supplier firms in Europe, KAM implementation significantly enhances relational capabilities and key account orientation, helping firms create differentiation advantages. Rathore (2024) stated that 30% of India's GDP is contributed by micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), particularly within sectors such as accounting.

The business-to-business (B2B) sales climate continues to change very fast. The marketing practices and transactional processes are undergoing a radical change as companies are moving progressively away from the transactional model toward relationship-based models that create value and foster long-term customer engagement. This is particularly evident in SMEs in India, which contribute to the national economy by boosting GDP and creating employment opportunities. Keelson *et al.* (2024) reveal that 60 per cent of India's employment growth and 40 per cent of GDP is provided by SMEs. Their flexibility, adaptability, and ability to adopt state-of-the-art technologies and innovations have been a major driver of social and economic advancement.

However, as Buttle and Maklan (2019) explain, KAM is a structural framework that helps unite Customer Relationship Management (CRM) at the organisational level. KAM, together with CRM, can be used to increase corporations' purchasing power and foster innovation in a globally integrated market. Currently, consumers are increasingly focused on quality and tend to buy from fewer suppliers—those that offer meaningful customer engagement and value. Lean operations are particularly appealing to buyers, encouraging firms to adopt streamlined processes and supplier strategies. However, only 15% of Indian SMEs have successfully used KAM consulting services, underscoring the need for greater research and development (R&D) and improved strategic practices.

In this evolving market environment, consultative selling is emerging as a complementary approach to KAM. Supporting this trend, Aarikka-Stenroos and Lyly-Yrjänäinen (2024) found that industrial buyers prefer consultative selling practices, where the salesperson provides data-driven insights and meaningful experiences rather than relying on traditional persuasion techniques. Similarly, Goswami and Sinha (2018), in a study of Indian private banks, concluded that key factors such as understanding customer needs, effective communication, problem-solving, and salesperson expertise significantly contribute to customer satisfaction, as shown in Figure 1.1 below.

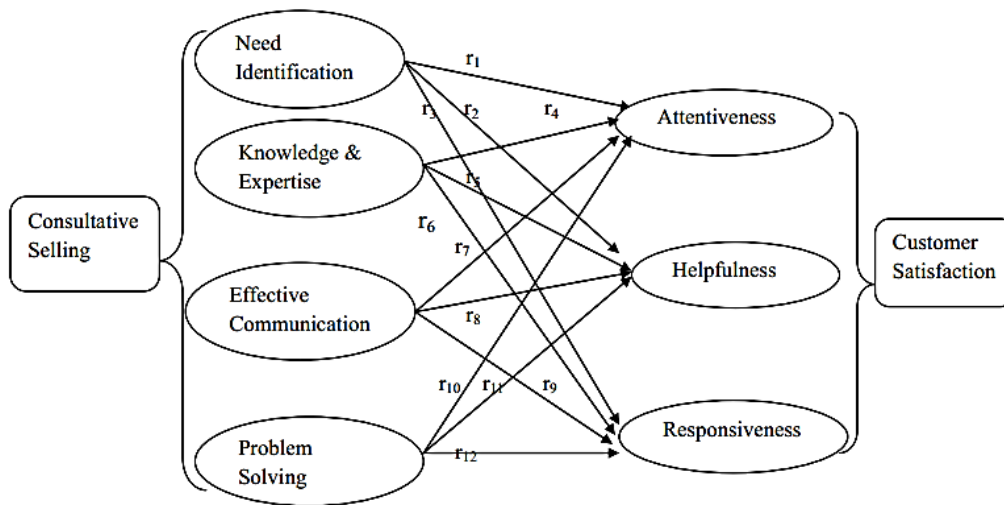


Figure 1.1: Conceptual framework model that represents consultative selling and customer satisfaction

(Source: Goswami and Sinha, 2018)

The research will explore concepts of KAM and consultative selling in accordance with Indian SMEs, especially in the case of B2B sales frameworks. The importance of sales professionals is to understand and positively perceive consultative selling, explore challenges, adopt digital tools, and successfully integrate them into company operations.

1.2 Background

Key Account Management (KAM) remains a crucial strategy for B2B sales, aligning closely with the principles of relationship marketing. It supports the identification, development, and nurturing of long-term client relationships, helping firms maintain reputational strength and enhance brand value. Mutual value can be achieved by building it, which can then be used to align the KAM's strategic goals with customers and suppliers through cooperation, communication, and consistent service delivery (Tiili, 2024).

Although there are numerous benefits of KAM application in Indian SMEs, these advantages have limitations in practical application within these enterprises. According to Lautenschlager and Tzempelikos (2024), although KAM is extremely effective at increasing revenue and developing collaborative partnerships with long-term clients, its deployment is associated with significant time, training, and technological foundation commitments. Most KAM programmes in SMEs in India do not work because top management does not provide the necessary backing, sales staffs are poorly trained, and the corporate structure is weak.

To address such gaps, scholars have argued for adjusting strategic tools, such as KAM, with digital solutions and for employee training (Hofmann, 2024). Some of the best practices involve developing sales professionals with skills in managing escalations, establishing effective governance standards, and exercising strategic planning at global and local levels. The most important goal is to design effective external and internal communication to ensure customers feel closer to the company and believe it offers greater value.

Consultative selling has become an alternative to KAM. Goswami and Sinha (2018) highlight that consultative selling relies on mutual problem-solving and meaningful information exchange rather than manipulation or persuasion. Salespeople are expected to act as value advocates, educating customers about products, addressing their needs, and recommending solutions. Chattopadhyay *et al.* (2023) further emphasise that this evolved sales process is built on trust and relevance—factors increasingly critical in competitive

B2B environments. As shown in Figure 1.2, this process positions sales professional not just as sellers, but as trusted advisors within client organizations.

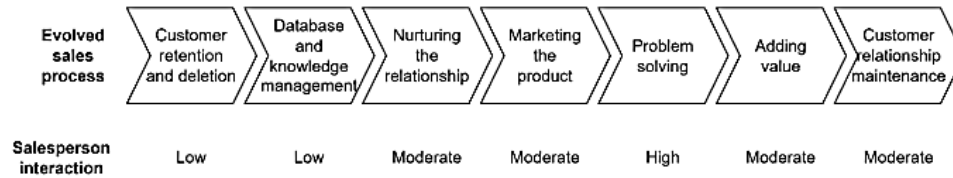


Figure 1.2: Evolved selling and role of the salesperson

(Source: Goswami and Sinha, 2018)

As Okolo (2024) stated, the literature on consultative selling is also very limited. The authors have defined consultative selling as a process of communicating with, or engaging, salespeople or frontline employees to interact with consumers and sell by providing an experience and addressing their needs.

There are five phases in consultative selling: building connection, identifying customer needs, providing relevant solutions, brainstorming, making sound decisions, and leaving a lasting impression to ensure strong customer loyalty. In India, to date, the banking sector has adopted consultative selling, but there is a need to expand it across other industries and within various types of organisations.

Following this, Vastamäki (2025) has stated that salespeople and SMEs must identify customer value drivers and proactively engage in the digitalisation of sales. The new era of technology, where consumers are well-informed and knowledgeable, requires salespeople to become more adaptable and engage in more innovative activities (Trevisan 2025).

Therefore, for Indian SMEs, consultative selling and KAM can help incorporate employment, local development, and employment opportunities. Although companies still adhere to outdated sales models and structures, there is a significant lack of innovation due to insufficient digital infrastructure. There is a need to modernise operational processes and sales practices, and to train employees accordingly to bring about radical change.

The study will bridge the gap by examining Indian SMEs' practices and how a combination of consultative selling and KAM can drive change within the company, helping it acquire a competitive edge and deliver customer satisfaction.

1.3 Research Problem

While the theoretical advantages of combining Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling with advanced digital technologies are well documented, there is little evidence of their practical adoption among Indian SMEs. Some businesses use KAM, but their methods are often rigid and unresponsive, making it difficult for salespeople to build genuine customer relationships, which are crucial in B2B sales. Consultative selling is frequently overused, especially when salespeople lack adequate training, leading to only superficial engagement and poor sales performance.

This implementation gap is further exacerbated by a lack of awareness within an organisation, poor digital literacy, and limited resources. Salespeople find it very difficult to connect digital applications, such as CRM or analytics, to their sales templates. According to a recent Ficci study in 2025, one of the biggest obstacles to digital adoption in Indian SMEs is the lack of available, trained consultants to guide companies through the digitalisation process. All these are seen to negatively affect SMEs' capabilities to realise operational excellence and customer satisfaction through modern sales practices.

In addition, Ivens *et al.*, (2018) identify maintaining effective client relationships and long-term customer retention as a major challenge in implementing KAM and consultative selling. This challenge is especially acute in the Indian B2B market, where supplier–key account dynamics are more complex than those seen in traditional customer relationships. Mahlamaki *et al.*, (2019) argue that poor communication between managers and KAM teams is a leading cause of customer service failures.

Therefore, investigating how companies can build effective communication systems and train key account managers and salespeople—both in interpersonal and digital skills—remains an urgent priority.

The current research aims to address key gaps by investigating how KAM and consultative selling are integrated in Indian SMEs, the issues that arise, and how digital tools can help analyse these practices to improve integration and performance.

1.4 Purpose of Research

According to the foregoing discussion, the main intention of the research is to establish how two important concepts, Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling can be strategically integrated within the Indian SMEs in the line of business as far as the B2B industry is concerned. The research will focus on sales professionals' perceptions and applications of these models, as well as the main challenges and obstacles that hinder their effective use.

As the business environment becomes more complex and customer demands increase, most companies are abandoning traditional sales models and adopting a hybrid sales approach. Such methods combine consultative selling and KAM with a high level of digital tools that deliver customer-focused, scalable offers. Consequently, the applicability of digital technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI), Data Analytics, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in facilitating this integration will also be determined in this research.

Finally, the research purpose is to offer realistic recommendations that can guide Indian SMEs to enhance their sales processes, improve customer retention, and survive in a highly dynamic market.

1.5 Significance of the Study

Such a study is important in several ways. To start with, it addresses an urgent need among Indian SMEs to implement approaches that help them build long-term customer relationships and deliver high-value products and services. On the one hand, in a more competitive business environment, consultative selling as a concept should be combined with Key Account Management (KAM) to engage customers, contribute to the value creation, and increase financial results.

Second, the results can become a source of policy debate by providing guidance on training and capacity-building for SME sales professionals. This fortification of these abilities is necessary to help SMEs penetrate international markets with ease, survive, and excel in changing B2B environments.

Lastly, the study is of academic interest for adding to the few existing studies on the relationship between KAM and consultative selling, especially in emerging economies. It can serve as a starting point for further research into sales strategy, customer relationship management, and digital enablement in the SME context.

1.6 Research Rationale

The job is explained by the immediate need to determine how individual Indian SMEs can address the challenges of a rapidly changing business environment. Most SMEs still use classical sales and operations planning models, which can hinder their ability to sell, attract, and retain long-term clients in a competitive B2B market. B2B customers in the modern world are becoming increasingly educated and want honest value-based selling, not deceptive selling. To meet these expectations, Indian SMEs need to be more personal and strategic in their sales.

Consultative selling offers a good alternative, as it emphasises customer needs, customised solutions, and the development of trust. Nevertheless, the information available in contemporary sources and the marketplace suggests that Indian SMEs are unable to adequately apply consultative selling and integrate it with Key Account Management (KAM). This is caused to a great extent by low awareness, lack of training, infrastructure problems, and intolerance to change.

As Dubey et al., (2020) point out, digital technologies, including CRM systems and AI-driven analytics, are poorly adopted by Indian SMEs, yet their importance in making sales more effective has already been demonstrated. Such loopholes also set the stage for structural and technical transformation, accompanied by the utilisation of strategic tools and employee development.

The current research is timely and relevant, as it fills a critical gap in both the literature and practice. It examines how KAM and consultative selling can be effectively combined in Indian SMEs, leveraging digital tools to drive customer-driven growth and a competitive edge.

1.7 Research Aim and Objectives

1.7.1 Research Aim

This study aims to critically evaluate how Indian SMEs can integrate consultative selling into Key Account Management framework to improve sales performance, customer retention, and long-term relationship-building, particularly within the B2B context.

1.7.2 Research Objectives

- To assess how Indian SME sales professionals perceive and apply consultative selling compared to traditional Key Account Management.
- To identify key challenges faced by Indian SMEs in implementing consultative selling strategies within their KAM frameworks.
- To evaluate the role of digital tools (e.g., AI, CRM) in supporting the integration of consultative selling with KAM.
- To examine strategies adopted by Indian SMEs to enhance consultative selling within their account management structures.
- To measure the impact of integrating consultative selling into KAM on customer retention and sales effectiveness.

1.8 Research Questions

- How do Indian SME sales professionals perceive consultative selling compared to traditional Key Account Management methods?
- What are the primary challenges Indian SMEs face when integrating consultative selling into their KAM strategies?

- How do digital tools such as CRM and AI influence the adoption and effectiveness of consultative selling in Indian SMEs?
- What specific strategies have Indian SMEs adopted to integrate consultative selling into their account management practices?
- How does the integration of consultative selling into KAM affect customer satisfaction, retention, and sales performance?

1.9 Summary

Chapter 1 laid the foundation for this study by introducing the key concepts of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling, with a focus on their relevance to Indian SMEs in the B2B sector. It emphasised the growing importance of customer-centric approaches over traditional sales models and highlighted how digital tools such as CRM and AI can support the strategic integration of these practices.

The chapter also identified key challenges faced by Indian SMEs. These include limited resources, outdated processes, insufficient training, and low adoption of digital technologies. Such factors contribute to the underutilization or misapplication of both KAM and consultative selling. The research problem, purpose, and objectives were stated clearly. The study aims to explore strategies to improve customer retention and sales performance.

This chapter establishes the significance and rationale behind the research. It gives clear direction for the literature review in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 will critically examine existing theories, frameworks, and empirical studies to support the study's objectives.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

Complexity in business-to-business (B2B) relationships has compelled organisations to adopt strategic sales practices that prioritise customer-centricity and long-term value creation. Of these practices, Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling have been identified as key processes for managing high-value clients, especially when dealing with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). KAM enables companies to place greater emphasis on very strategic clients and develop stronger relationships, while consultative selling helps build relationships through need-specific answers and participatory dialogue. These two aspects collectively enable them to support modern sales issues such as customisation, customer retention, and sustainable revenue. The Indian SME market requires integrated sales practices due to high competition, resource scarcity, and long-term relationship-building. A critical tension exists in current scholarship regarding the scalability of sales models. While established KAM frameworks are designed for the resource-rich environment of large multinationals, their application in Indian SMEs remains a 'theoretical mismatch.' This study argues that for Indian SMEs, the challenge is not just the *lack* of study, but the inherent conflict between formal KAM structures and the informal, relationship-heavy nature of regional business culture.

This literature review critically analyses existing research on KAM and consultative selling, discussing dominant concepts, technologies, context variables, theories, and practical consequences. KAM also focuses on internal harmony across departments, including marketing, logistics, and customer service, to ensure a consistent delivery of value. The account manager facilitates alignment and serves primarily as a liaison between the firm and the client. Further, KAM is not restricted to sales results alone; it also involves strategic planning, monitoring competitors, and innovation in service delivery. KAM also plays a role in risk mitigation in the competitive B2B setting, where client churn is kept at a minimal level and serves as a basis for long-term profitability. As the market evolves toward relationship selling, KAMs are becoming increasingly efficient

at maintaining business competitiveness, driving customer engagement and business partnerships.

In the changing business-to-business (B2B) landscape, sales practices have shifted dramatically toward relationship-based strategies and interaction styles. More customer expectations, technological changes, and market saturation have driven this transformation. In this change, Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling have become important practices that companies employ to build customer loyalty, deliver customised solutions, and generate long-term profits. Specifically, the use of such techniques is becoming increasingly relevant in the Indian Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) world, where they face challenges such as limited resources, informal management practices, and stiff competition.

KAM enables companies to focus and formalise the management of high-value customers by incorporating internal capabilities and forging long-term alliances. In the meantime, consultative selling facilitates a deep connection with clients, enabling sellers to become trusted advisors who can co-develop personalised solutions. Indian SMEs have yet to fully realise the synergistic potential of combining KAM and consultative selling, despite increasing interest in this approach. The majority of scholarly research focuses on large companies and fails to address the use and implications of these frameworks in SMEs. This literature review is a critical analysis of the available literature and goes beyond the summary stage to critique the dominant conceptual framework. It identifies the gaps in the implementation and also synthesises a stronger theoretical base on which future empirical research could be conducted in the context of SMEs in India.

2.2 Foundations of Key Account Management (KAM)

2.2.1 Defining KAM

Key Account Management (KAM) is a strategic approach to managing and developing long-term relationships with the company's highly valuable customers. Such key accounts are very important to a business's revenue, presence, and strategic growth. According to Hofmann (2024), KAM is concerned with offering tailored value

propositions, aligning internal resources, and achieving common objectives through joint participation. Rather than viewing KAM and traditional sales as a simple binary of 'short-term vs long-term,' this review synthesises the two as a spectrum of value creation. The transition to KAM in an SME context represents a strategic pivot, in which the firm stops being a 'commodity vendor' and becomes a 'co-creator of value.' This shift is particularly demanding for Indian SMEs, as it requires a professionalisation of sales functions that often clash with legacy family-run operational models. It combines sales, marketing, and service processes to offer customised solutions to enhance retention, profitability, and the competitive edge. KAM is particularly important in B2B contexts where the buying process is complex, and clients may have very high expectations. Key Account Management (KAM) embodies a paradigm shift in practice from conventional selling, focusing on developing long-term relationships with a few high-value customers. However, unlike traditional sales transactional models, KAM is integrated into corporate strategy on a larger scale and places particular emphasis on organisational alignment to meet the requirements of primary clients. As per Danquah's (2022) research, KAM is not just about sales volume as it is portrayed, but about delivering differentiated value propositions by strategically integrating internal resources. This practice has been more applicable in a complex B2B setting like that faced by Indian SMEs, especially with growing customer expectations, the need to sell solutions, and the need for consistent revenue streams.

Unlike traditional transactional selling, where sales, marketing, operations, and service delivery might not be integrated into a unified client strategy, the KAM combines these areas into a single client strategy. The strategy acknowledges that clients have multiple stakeholders and that the parties involved in procurement decisions play a significant role, thereby necessitating integrated planning and multi-touchpoint interactions. This model is also useful in resource-constrained environments, such as Indian SMEs, to provide a systematic pathway for allocating limited organisational resources to activities that generate revenue (Kumar and Stobdan, 2024). Nevertheless, without a viable institutional framework that most major firms enjoy, many SMEs find it difficult to effectively operationalise KAM, creating a dangerous performance gap.

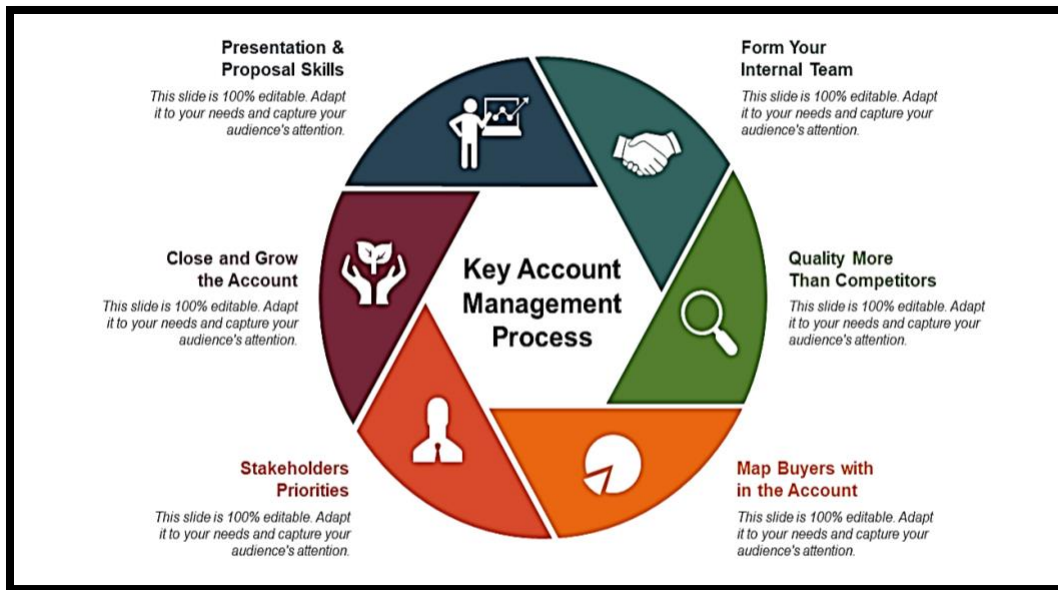


Figure 2.1: Key account management process

(Source: Slide Team, 2025)

2.2.2 Key Principles and Models of KAM

Apart from the above, there are some core principles of implementing the KAM. The first is customer selection: organisations should select and focus on the accounts that are most significant from a staff perspective. Second, cross-functional coordination enables key account teams to provide integrated solutions that meet clients' needs. Third, long-term relationship orientation substitutes short-term sales targets by making shared value creation.

According to Peters (2025), frameworks such as the configurational perspective describe key KAM elements: inter-organisational cooperation, resource alignment, and mutual trust. The systematic 4A roadmap comprises Analysis, Action, Alignment, and Assessment, enabling effective KAM implementation. Account planning, executive sponsorship, and internal advocacy are also a focus of the Strategic Account Management Association (SAMA) as keys to success. These models also stress that process standardisation is not the only element for KAM; cultural adaptation and leadership

commitment are also required for success in a competition. A significant gap in the 4A and SAMP models is their assumption of institutional maturity. These frameworks presuppose a level of administrative formality that is rarely present in Indian SMEs. Consequently, this study proposes a more 'Agile KAM' approach that maintains the strategic rigour of account selection while allowing the relational flexibility required in a culture where personal trust often outweighs contractual obligations. The observation is not unique to India, but comparative research on SMEs in Indonesia and Brazil indicates identical problems in formal KAM adoption and indicates that SMEs need more agile, less bureaucratic models. Although maturity models measure the level of preparation within the organisation, they do not account for resource constraints and the cultural peculiarities of SMEs, a major deficiency in the literature. The Strategic Account Management Process (SAMP) is another popular model, divided into the following phases: account selection, strategic planning, execution, and performance review (Gomes Correia and Ferreira, 2023). Such a structured cycle will maintain focus on major accounts by following distinct targets, shared responsibility, and measurable outputs. The process focuses on integrated planning with clients to enable both companies to align on their vision and assets. Also, KAM maturity models gauge the organisation's preparedness and performance in key account management. The models consider dimensions/specifications such as leadership commitment, technology adoption, cross-functional work, and account-based measures. Firms with a more advanced maturity exhibit a proactive attitude, greater client alignment, and more dynamic sales strategies. Effective KAM also requires personalised value propositions- solutions that meet the specific needs, operations, and problems of individual key accounts. This takes companies out of commodity production and allows them to be solution providers rather than commodity suppliers.

According to Marcos *et al.* (2025), digital tools, particularly CRM systems and predictive analytics, are increasingly influential in the development of modern KAM models, helping segment accounts, track activities in real time, and identify opportunities. The ability to integrate with data systems enables account managers to create comprehensive client profiles and better plan for client needs. These changing models are

due to the shift from sales management to relationship leadership in complex B-to-B situations, which is pertinent to Indian SMEs aiming to strategise. The lack of formal processes and records in most SMEs is a major obstacle to the adoption of KAM. As it lacks structured planning aids or measures, the management of accounts loses track, resulting in a haphazard approach that relies heavily on individual production rather than systematic formulation. It creates a loss of knowledge as major staff leave, negatively affecting continuity in client dealings. Additionally, interdepartmental silos are another obstacle. KAM requires collaboration among sales, marketing, operations, and finance to work effectively, yet many SMEs have fragmented operational and management processes. It reduces agility and the joint value it provides to major customers.

On the opportunity side, KAM helps create strategic relationships rather than a transactional engagement between the firms. As per the study by Linde and Broman (2025), in long-term client theory, firms come to understand industry trends, co-development releases, and substantial improvements in both their performance. Within India, KAM is a viable option that could help Indian SMEs in industries such as manufacturing, logistics, or tech-related services move up the value chain and aspire to be more than suppliers to their customers, while continuing to support them in achieving future success. Another important aspect of KAM is its implementation in a structured manner, following existing models and frameworks. According to Faraj (2024), the 4A Model (Analysis, Action, Alignment, and Assessment) is comprehensive, allowing organisations to transition from reactive selling practices to proactive strategic involvement. Likewise, the Strategic Account Management Process (SAMP) decomposes KAM operations into specific phases, including selecting the account, planning, implementing, and reviewing the account, whereby systematic account management is promoted. These frameworks are not just meant to organise processes but also to instil cultural change in sales organisations, where the orientation is characterised by common goals and the co-development of customers by teams.

Despite this, critics argue that rigid models often fail to reflect the informal, dynamic decision-making and operational realities of SMEs. Wanjiru (2024) highlights

that misalignment with culture, insufficient strategic clarity, and inconsistent leadership further hinder the adoption of standardised KAM. In Indian SMEs, cross-functional coordination—fundamental to KAM—remains difficult to achieve due to siloed operations. While maturity models assess KAM readiness based on technology, integration, and leadership, they seldom account for the resource constraints and flexibility needs inherent in SMEs.

2.2.3 Problems and Opportunities in Integrating KAM

Although beneficial, KAM implementation is associated with several issues. A significant internal resistance challenge is senior management's unwillingness to consider KAM as a strategic, not an operational, program. Account managers and functional teams can be misaligned due to unclear roles and inefficiencies. SMEs have limited human and financial resources, and therefore, it is hard for them to invest in long-term KAM systems and people (Abdallah *et al.*, 2024).

Nonetheless, KAM also brings up some special opportunities. For Indian SMEs, it allows them to differentiate in a saturated market by providing high-value clients with custom service. It also helps build trust and strong collaboration, leading to the co-creation of value. By investing in relationship quality and customer knowledge, firms can realise increased client retention and customer value. With the advancement of digital tools such as CRM, AI, and data analytics, managing the success of key accounts becomes even simpler, and SMEs can more easily adopt strategic sales approaches. As noted by Nkwinika and Akinola (2023), the lack of formal processes and records in most SMEs poses a major challenge to the adoption of KAM. As it lacks structured planning aids or measures, the management of accounts loses track, resulting in a haphazard approach that relies heavily on individual production rather than systematic formulation. It creates a loss of knowledge as major staff leave, negatively affecting continuity in client dealings.

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Still, KAM has strong differentiation business propositions in saturated markets. For Indian SMEs, which are more prone to commoditisation, KAM can help transform their status, moving from being perceived as suppliers to strategic partners. Through personalised service, anticipatory client service, and co-creation of value, SMEs can build retention, increase up-sell potential, and enhance customer lifetime value (Howell, 2022). Recent studies reveal that knowledge-sharing, industry alignment, and innovation are strategically driven through client relationships. As more cost-efficient CRM and analytics platforms become widely available, the number of resource-strained firms' intent on operationalising the KAM principles has been increasing as well.

2.2.4 KAM and B2B Sales in Indian SMEs

SMEs are an important aspect of the Indian economy in terms of growth; however, they are unable to operate amid structural and operational issues. Most SMEs are short-

term oriented in sales, lacking a systematised KAM framework (Danquah, 2022). However, client expectations are growing, and competition is increasing, requiring a more strategic approach to client engagement. KAM can provide Indian SMEs with an avenue to professionalise their sales functions and help them move beyond price-based competition. Due to a smaller number of high-impact clients, SMEs will be able to deploy limited resources more effectively and develop business resilience. Even though the penetration is low, the increased affordability of inexpensive digital products and the growing understanding of the relationship-based selling style are stimulating curiosity about KAM practices. The case of SMEs in the Indian B2B environment may also pertain to intra-company B2B relations, where SMEs have to contend with complex client setups, such as drivers, industrial buyers, retail regulators, and institutional clients. According to Yenugula *et al.*, (2023), competitive pricing is not the only requirement for these customers, who insist on the continuity of services, technical advice, and other associated relationships. Key Account Management (KAM) can enable Indian SMEs to adopt a more dynamic, customer-oriented sales approach rather than focusing on reactive sales. Monitoring the few accounts with higher values and focusing efforts on them will help SMEs stabilise their revenues and enable more accurate forecasting.

Indian SMEs that apply KAM tend to gain improved customer insights through structured feedback and performance monitoring, and to make real-time offering adjustments. Not only does this enhance service levels, but it also exposes cross-selling and up-selling opportunities. Pharmaceuticals, auto parts, and IT services have been among the successful sectors in which SMEs have adopted strategic account management (Ramadan *et al.*, 2024). Despite the potential, small business owners are not aware of KAM and sales, as many believe sales are a volume-driven activity. Adoption could be spurred by raising awareness of the need to build through training, industry-freelance associations, and government schemes. Since clients are now less keen on partners who do not understand their business problems, KAM provides a platform for Indian SMEs to professionalise their sales strategy, build trust, boost credibility, and generate long-term competitive advantage both at home and abroad. SMEs in the Indian B2B ecosystem are

important to the economy but lack well-organised sales structures. Most SME selling approaches remain short-term, price-based, and volume-oriented, with minimal interest in account segmentation or lifetime value. As per the research of Chu (2024), the increasing sophistication of buyer behaviour, particularly in the IT services, manufacturing, and logistics industries, will, however, require a paradigm shift in the selling process to transition from transactional to relational selling. It is possible to achieve superior client forecasting, enhanced revenue predictability, and more rational resource allocation by institutionalising KAM in SMEs.

Whilst most SMEs in India are not digitally mature, the rising number of cloud-based CRM and customer analytics, and online account planning capabilities is an indicator of a pivot. Besides, the tendency to adopt integrated, consultative relations rather than price-driven procurement by clients is on the rise, which reinforces the motivation to integrate KAM. According to Wambua (2024), evidence from the pharmaceuticals and car parts manufacturing sectors indicates that when integrated into the SME environment, KAM has a considerable effect on B2B resilience and positioning (Sondinti and Reddy, 2022). Nevertheless, it requires leadership synchronisation, capability building of employees, and formalisation of processes, where one may measure a difference and it can be done with the help of policy assurances and employee training programmes provided by the industry.

2.3 Principles and Approaches of Consultative Selling

2.3.1 Current State of Consultative Selling

Consultative selling has emerged as a desirable approach in current B2B settings, where buyers are looking beyond products. In contrast to transactional selling, consultative selling emphasises getting to know the client's requirements and providing solutions to specific business problems (Aarikka-Stenroos and Lyly-Yrjänäinen, 2024). Sales experts are more advisors than salespeople; they focus on securing long-term outcomes and delivering quantifiable results for clients. Outcomes are supported by empirical studies demonstrating that it yields better results in the B2B environment. Specifically, studies

have shown a strong positive relationship between developed consultative skills and improved customer satisfaction, customer retention, and increased deal size.



Figure 2.2: State of Consultative Selling

(Source: Guerra, 2021)

Consultative selling is known to enhance customer satisfaction, shorten the sales cycle, and increase deal size worldwide. However, its effectiveness depends heavily on the sales team's competence, the organisation's support, and ongoing client interaction. This approach has attracted renewed interest amid a shift towards customer-driven business models. Service-intensive sectors such as IT, finance, and consulting have taken a particular interest. According to Bandyopadhyay (2025), consultative selling is increasing among SMEs in India, but many face challenges due to inadequate training, poor planning, and limited integration with electronic tools such as CRM or analytics.

Consultative selling has become a very popular approach in most business-to-business markets worldwide. It helps build lasting customer relationships and delivers significant value to the strategy. Unlike conventional selling techniques, which focus on product pushing, consultative selling is based on determining a client's needs, industry problems, and pain points. This customer-oriented strategy enables sellers to introduce

individualised solutions that promote better business results for clients. In today's information-intensive world, buyers are more knowledgeable and discerning. They are not satisfied with just technical features or price. This change in buyer behaviour has made consultative selling a necessity for salespeople across industries.

The use of consultative selling in India varies by sector and company size. The consultative methods have been incorporated into the sales platforms of large companies and MNCs in a planned manner via training, CRM programs, and analytics. As per the study of Adekunle *et al.* (2023), consultative selling among Indian SMEs is yet to be highly developed. Others still operate on a transactional basis because of conventional behaviour, a lack of sales training, or an emphasis on short-term profits only. However, consultative selling is gaining traction in technological applications for SMEs, particularly in IT solutions, SaaS, healthcare, and precision manufacturing. These companies are known to appreciate the importance of understanding the client's business landscape and co-creating custom solutions to increase credibility and trust. Skills deficits and the inability to use and analyse data are among the challenges that persist but are gradually being addressed through industry adoption and mentoring programs. Indian SMEs are finding it imperative to shift from selling products to selling solutions as competition intensifies and buyers are forcing them to be more strategic in their dealings (Tariq, 2025).

Consultative selling has become a prevalent B2B sales approach. This change signals a broader shift in sales toward value selling rather than product selling. Clients are requesting more personalised services, deeper industry knowledge, and strategic alliances. They are no longer satisfied with transactional business (Mykhalko *et al.*, 2023). Selling frameworks such as SPIN Selling and Challenger Sale have been widely used to structure value discussions. However, their effectiveness hinges on the seller's skills and, in some cases, the buyer's. Consultative selling is progressing slowly in India, especially among technology-intensive SMEs. Systematic training is largely absent, CRM integration remains narrow, and a focus on short-term goals still limits results. These factors are challenges for companies with limited resources.

2.3.2 Key Principles and Skills in Consultative Selling

The methods of consultative selling include active listening, understanding, problem-solving, and creating value. It commences with rigorous discovery, in which the salesperson seeks to understand how the client conducts business, the challenges it faces, its objectives, and the client's decision-making process (Parker, 2024). Rather than pitching a generic solution, the seller designs a tailored one in harmony with the client's needs.

The critical skills covered are open-ended questioning, needs analysis, storytelling, objection management, and closing skills that focus on win-win results. EI is significant as well because it enables the seller to interpret the cues the buyer responds to. It should be consultative and non-persuasive; communication must be measured by the outcomes achieved for the client, not by product salespeople's need to sell. According to Corsaro and Maggioni (2022), the SPIN Selling model and Challenger Sale framework are commonly used in consultative conversations, particularly in complex situations.

Consultative selling combines sales and advisory skills, creating a competitive environment and reframing client thoughts. Consultative selling is based on fundamental principles: value creation, trust-building, empathy, and teamwork. The core of this strategy is that the salesperson should be a trusted advisor, not a product promoter. This starts with active listening and open-ended questions to identify not just the client's overt needs but also his latent or strategic issues. The salesperson should then examine the client's situation, analyse, provide information, and jointly create solutions that align with the business objectives.

The key skill in consultative selling is diagnostic questioning that allows the salesperson to gain information about the client's current state, target futures, and impediments to achieving them. This can be backed up by the ability to solve problems as the seller modifies the item being offered to align with the client's requirements and, in many cases, address technical, operational, and financial aspects. Emotional intelligence is significant because it guides the salesperson through the buyer's motivation, resistance, and decision-making dynamics (Grimbergen, 2023). Structured approaches like SPIN Selling (Situation, Problem, Implication, and Need-Payoff) and The Challenger Sale provide situations to move the consultative interaction forward. SPIN involves leading the client

through a rational discussion of their requirements, whereas the Challenger model trains sellers to introduce innovation and challenge the buyer's thinking.

Effective consultative selling also requires prior research and investigation of calls, industry-specific expertise, and the ability to simplify complex offerings into easy-to-understand business advantages. The development of these skills, which are needed in Indian SMEs, should focus on targeted training and leadership support. These competencies enable sellers to shift the discussion with clients from price to value, thereby enhancing client relationships and long-term development when appropriately formed. The principles of effective consultative selling address value creation, empathy, trust, and diagnostic problem-solving. According to Santos and Dias (2024), sales professionals should learn to use effective strategies such as active listening, open-ended storytelling, and objection-handling skills to uncover explicit and latent customer needs. EI is very important in understanding buyer emotions and the dynamics of purchase decisions. One should follow structured sales frameworks such as SPIN and Challenger Sales, which still need to be adapted to industry specifics. Such capabilities are underdeveloped in Indian SMEs, as they were not enhanced through limited investment. In the absence of adequate training and cultural resonance, sellers may revert to transactional behaviour even when they intend to engage in strategic selling.

2.3.3 Consultative Selling and B2B Sales in Indian SMEs

Consultative selling is a developing trend in Indian SMEs. Conventional selling methods tend to prevail because they are supported by underlying sales cultures, have limited training budgets, and are volume-oriented rather than value-oriented. As per the research of Omowole *et al.* (2024), the increasing sophistication of buyer behaviour, digitalisation, and competition are prompting SMEs to change their attitudes towards sales.

Consultative selling can provide Indian SMEs with a means of differentiation, enabling them to focus on client relationships and their own relationships, rather than on price-based competition. For example, a manufacturing SME with a consultative approach may switch to selling integrated solutions that enhance clients' operations. There are

barriers to overcome: sales teams might lack the business literacy requirement to succeed in an expert advisor role, and firms might also be unwilling to make the financial investment in building relationships over time without seeing an immediate payback. Nevertheless, SMEs that adopt such consultative selling tend to achieve better results in customer retention, referrals, and better margins.

Consultative selling can be a revolutionary tactic for both Indian B2B firms when used in conjunction with customer analytics and CRM tools (Lehtola, 2025). Consultative selling has great potential to improve the performance of Indian SMEs competing in B2B markets. Selling methods in many SMEs have traditionally been based on transactions, i.e., on features of the goods, discounts, or delivery rates. Nevertheless, with changing client expectations, particularly those of institutional and industrial buyers, this needs greater personalisation and solution-based involvement. Consultative selling offers SMEs a model for redefining themselves as strategic partners rather than mere product suppliers.

In Indian SMEs, consultative selling aids value unlocking by improving knowledge of the industry, processes, and the client's objectives. E.g., an SME that provides industrial equipment may stop focusing on presenting the equipment's specifications and instead develop a product or service that makes clients more efficient in their operations or reduces costs. According to Bhuiyan *et al.* (2024), an IT services SME offering specific automation or cloud services that align with the client's digital transformation strategy.

Although it is beneficial, several challenges still occur before adoption. Most SME sales teams are not exposed to or trained in sophisticated selling strategies. Consultative selling requires more time and is characterized by longer sales cycles, which may be difficult for SMEs to sustain given their often-strained cash flows. In addition, a significant percentage of firms lack either CRM or analytics applications to support consultative engagements, which contributes to a lack of customer knowledge.

Nonetheless, SMEs that choose to invest in consultative selling record greater client loyalty, better conversion rates, and improved margins. Developing capabilities can be fast-tracked through programs such as digital sales training, industry body mentorship, or peer-

learning networks (Kraft *et al.*, 2022). As Indian SMEs grow and target larger or international customers, consultative selling will become a crucial skill to sustainably grow the business. Consultative selling also provides another effective way to stand out in an ever-growing, competitive B2B market in India. Through solution selling that promotes dialogue firms can elevate themselves to a strategic level rather than remain vendors. Nevertheless, it is hindered by structural factors, including low CRM adoption, a lack of trained sales personnel, and poor cross-functional synchronisation. Cultural issues also contribute to trust-building, and informal communication typically precedes the business discussion, and flexibility in sales tactics may be required (Huseynov, 2025). Nevertheless, based on the above challenges, consultative selling would help SMEs not only unearth cross-selling opportunities, increase client retention, and enhance margin, which are important to growing their operations over a long-term period, but also professionalise sales processes.

2.4 Synergies and Interconnections between Key Account Management (KAM) and Consultative Selling

Both Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling begin with long-term client relationships, co-creation of value, and strategic partnerships. Although KAM focuses on the execution of high-value accounts through strategic planning and cross-coordination, consultative selling is about comprehensively understanding the needs of clients to provide a customised solution (Tetteh-Afi, 2023). With integration, the effect of such approaches is multiplied.

Consultative selling reinforces KAM by equipping account managers with the skills to warmly engage clients, address unmet needs, and co-create value-based offerings. It works across both phases of discovery and solution development in KAM cycles, guiding account teams to market their firm as a trusted advisor rather than a product vendor. Consultative processes such as need-based questioning, problem framing, and solution customisation can help KAM teams differentiate their services and build loyalty among strategic decision-makers.

On the other hand, consultative selling has a strategic background in the well-organised KAM model. KAM determines which clients need a closer connection and assigns resources to them, balancing the internal resource supply with external requirements.

Terho *et al.* (2023) founded that the sales professionals implement consultative selling techniques more effectively and more frequently.

Combined, they enable companies to move sales conversations from one-off transactions to a more strategic, cooperative approach by better aligning their offerings with client goals. According to Schmitt *et al.* (2025), 88% of purchasers agreed that customer experience is as fundamental as a company's products and services. As customer expectations rise, organisations now compete mainly on customer experience. In this context, understanding customer pain points and touchpoints is essential. KAM helps organisations meet customer needs and deliver strong experiences, thus building long-term relationships. Strong interpersonal relationships draw in customers, giving businesses insight into their needs and challenges, which help firms, achieve more successful sales. Firms using a consultative approach become partners in their customers' development rather than just sellers.

Corporations may analyse consumer behaviour, estimate their wants and needs, and offer more customised solutions by using data and technology (Trevisan, 2025). According to Nordling (2024), while Key Account Management (KAM) primarily focuses on the identification, prioritisation, and management of high-value clients based on strategic alignment, consultative selling centres on discovering clients' needs through deep dialogue and delivering personalised solutions.

Among the most vital areas of synergy is the shared focus on customer-centricity and long-term commitment. KAM provides the structure: account selection, strategic planning, cross-functional collaboration, and consultative selling. These bridge the relationship gap by training salespeople to advise clients rather than merely pitch products. This cross-pollination builds client confidence and enables a subtler understanding of

organisational challenges, which is crucial in high-stakes deals (Villumsen and Laurits, 2021). This makes clients see their suppliers as co-creators of value rather than merely transactional partners, thereby increasing loyalty and improving revenue predictability.

Consultative selling is a marketing strategy that uses careful questioning, strategic listening, and working together with clients to tailor products or services to meet changing business goals. This is especially important for Indian SMEs facing shifting customer needs in fast-changing fields such as IT, logistics, and engineering services. According to Hasan (2025), Key Account Management (KAM) provides context and aligns resources, ensuring insights from consultative selling are put into action within the company. Using both approaches can help SMEs stand out in a busy market and turn sales teams into relationship-based sources of competitive advantage.

2.5 Technological Enablers of Key Account Management (KAM) and Consultative Selling

Technology is essential to complement both KAM and consultative selling by enabling a deeper and more actionable understanding of market and customer changes, streamlining coordination among teams, and supporting data-driven decision-making. Consequently, Indian SMEs achieve significant efficiency gains by leveraging affordable, scalable digital tools that address these areas. According to the study by Egbuhuzor *et al.* (2021), customer Relationship Management (CRM), artificial intelligence (AI), data analytics, and digital communication platforms are the most powerful enablers, as they transform customer insight, automate processes, and improve engagement.

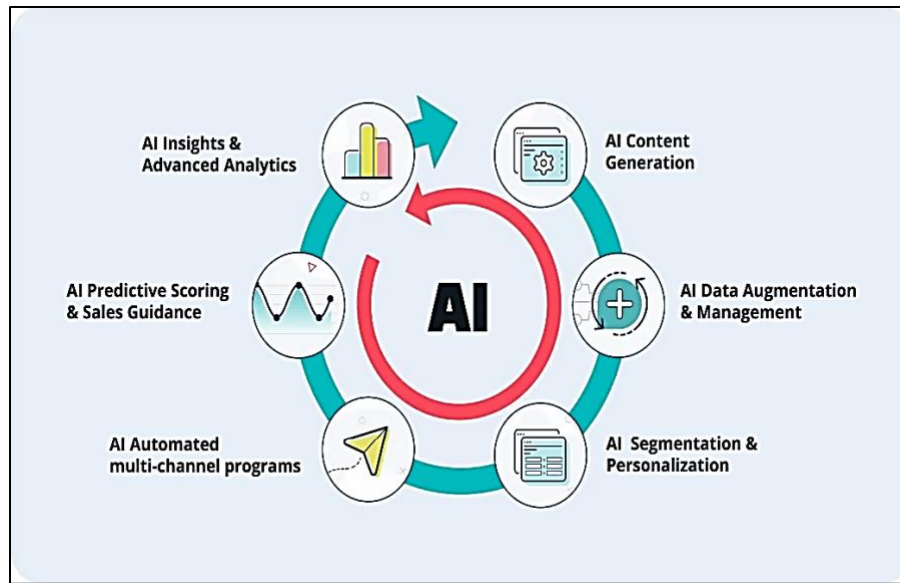


Figure 2.3: Technology in Sales

(Source: Day, 2025)

The literature often treats CRM as a 'technological panacea.' However, an analytical view reveals an 'utilisation gap' in SMEs. While tools like Zoho and Salesforce provide the *infrastructure* for data, they do not inherently provide the *insight* for consultative selling. In Indian SMEs, the CRM often functions as a passive repository (a digital filing cabinet) rather than a strategic engine. Therefore, integration success depends not on the software but on the firm's 'digital literacy' in turning raw data into consultative dialogue.

AI-driven tools add intelligence to sales by predicting customer behaviour, suggesting next-best actions, and handling routine tasks such as email follow-up and appointment setting. Natural language processing tools reveal insights from previous interactions, while sentiment analysis measures client satisfaction and identifies churn risk. These features let sales teams focus on value-added activities rather than administrative tasks. When integrated with CRM, AI helps companies better manage and analyse customer data, enhancing their ability to forecast, plan, and target potential prospects (Ledro *et al.*, 2022). Thus, AI is increasingly emphasised in the B2B sector to recognise customer patterns and behaviours, enabling alignment between KAM and consultative

selling strategies. This technology-driven approach helps deliver more personalised products and services, increasing client satisfaction in the Indian B2B sector.

Real-time performance tracking, customer mapping, and value mapping are essential for Indian SMEs. Data analytics aids in prioritising accounts, identifying potential clients, and gauging sales success (Alonge *et al.*, 2024). Digital platforms like LinkedIn, email automation, and virtual meetings can foster scalable, consultative engagement, improving the client experience, efficiency, and sales effectiveness. On the other hand, Simolin (2025) advised using CRM technology, underscoring and strengthening the effectiveness of the KAM approach alongside consultative selling. Internal exchange of consumer knowledge is especially important in business-to-business (B2B) contexts. Effective exchange of data reinforces customer-oriented attitudes across divisions. Enterprises that are efficient at assimilating and sharing consumer insights are better able to meet client needs, enhance service quality, and improve overall client satisfaction. In this context, the importance of CRM technology could be highlighted, as it enables tracking of customer data and information. In general, CRM data refers to the information businesses gather and use to manage their relationships with current and potential customers.

Communication and collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Slack help strengthen customer-business relationships by enabling efficient interaction and teamwork.

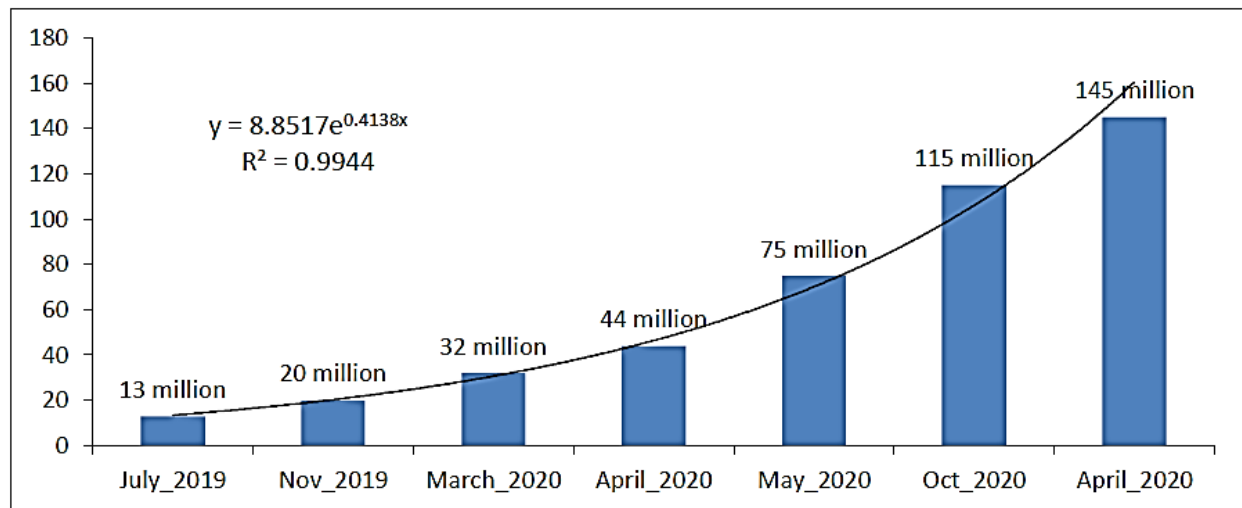


Figure 2.4: User Base of Microsoft Teams

(Source: Singh *et al.*, 2021)

The above image portrays that as of 2021, there were 145 million Microsoft Teams users (Singh *et al.*, 2021). This shows that customers can easily interact on the platform, ensuring their demands and product quality expectations are met. As noted by Singh *et al.* (2021), after the COVID-19 outbreak, video conferencing use increased by 48%. Time and money are conserved by using video conferencing. Almost 50% of purchasers have used video calling to reduce business travel. Up to 47% of people who frequently engage in online conversations are scaling back on their trip expenses. It has been shown that when people use video conferencing, their interactions and work together improve. Productivity rises as a result of enhanced cooperation and communication. Production increases by roughly 50% when meetings are conducted via video (Singh *et al.*, 2021). Hence, the virtual collaboration teams are effective in addressing customer needs and challenges in a positive manner. Technology is also crucial to the success of not only Key Account Management (KAM) but also consultative selling, especially in poorly endowed, highly dynamic business-to-business markets like India. In the context of Indian SMEs, technology offers a lever because of limitations in manpower and process maturity; market intelligence access is poor in this segment, but technology is enabling. Customer

Relationship Management (CRM) systems, Artificial Intelligence (AI), data analytics, and digital communication platform tools can fill the divide between strategic intent and deployment, and catalyse individualised connections and long-term value creation when used strategically Rainy *et al.*, 2024).

SMEs can also use CRM platforms such as Zoho, Salesforce, and Freshsales to view the interactions, centralise customer information, and generate business actions. These tools form the foundation of KAM and consultative selling, enabling real-time viewing of customers' history, preferences, and engagement behaviour, providing opportunities for cross-selling and up-selling, and facilitating organised account preparation and other qualities of a sound KAM, such as client segmentation (Stegge, 2025). Nonetheless, the adoption of this technology is often hindered by implementation challenges, including cost, digital illiteracy, and the lack of data governance in Indian SMEs.

AI enhances CRM by automating tasks, providing predictive insights, and enabling personalised outreach. In consultative selling, AI anticipates client pain points and offers relevant data. However, many SMEs hesitate due to cost, complexity, and privacy concerns. Vuchkovski et al., (2023), research shows that tools like Teams, Zoom, and Slack has transformed consultative selling and fostered long-term relationships, especially post-pandemic. Yet, technology alone does not guarantee success; integration with skills, processes, and strategy is vital to avoid over-investment. Indian SMEs face challenges in both acquiring and integrating technology, but proper alignment of digital enablers helps overcome structural issues and deliver strong KAM and consultative selling.

2.6 Drivers of Key Account Management (KAM) and Consultative Selling in the Indian Context

Several factors are driving the adoption of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling in SMEs in India's fast-growing, highly competitive B2B market. Changing customer expectations is a major driver. Custom solutions, long-term support, and strategic advice are now sought by buyers of suppliers, not just low-priced goods.

According to Silvia-Patricia *et al.* (2024), such a change requires a customer-centred sales strategy. The second big force is that the B2B buying decision is becoming more complex, requiring more stakeholders and longer sales cycles. Trust-building, problem-solving, and continuous interaction through KAM and consultative selling will overcome the decision-making challenges in such situations.

Another important driver is digitalisation. Indian SMEs have been able to adopt structured sales strategies at low cost, thanks to the emergence of CRM platforms, mobile sales tools, and analytics. According to Jingyu (2024), other government initiatives, such as the Digital India initiative and the promotion of MSMEs, are also helping to adopt sales-enabling technologies. The competitive forces are also driving differentiation among firms through deeper customer relationships. Small- and medium-sized enterprises unable to compete on either scale or price are opting to use KAM and consultative selling to deliver a high level of service and build loyalty among their key customers.

Lastly, globalisation and the increased sophistication of clients, particularly in industries such as IT, logistics, and manufacturing, are urging SMEs to professionalise their sales processes, making such models more relevant and necessary.

It can be understood that the growth of large and sophisticated buyers such as Tata and Infosys requires customised solutions rather than common all-time solutions. This has prompted the Indian B2B sector to leverage KAM and consultative selling to meet the needs of such big brands and maintain their satisfaction levels, thereby achieving profitability and strong performance. As examined by Aithal (2024), the Tata Group has been seen as focusing more on environmental conservation along with eco-friendly growth. The company's green initiatives reflect its superior ethical pledges. Therefore, Indian B2B companies providing solutions and services need technological assistance to deliver personalised, customised products. AI technologies and related approaches need to be combined with KAM and consultative selling to serve these brands to their fullest.

As stated by Aithal and Rao (2024), pushing the charge in IT adoption techniques is Infosys, an international leader in technology, assistance, and future services. This

business has been able to adapt to the global market, thanks to its ability to deploy state-of-the-art information technology systems and foster innovation. Infosys continues to utilise IT to enhance its business processes, broaden its service offerings, and maintain its leadership in a rapidly evolving technology landscape. Therefore, demands and product requirements can only be met with integrated technologies, supported by KAM and consultative selling approaches. Therefore, the strong infrastructure of these IT companies drives B2B companies to adopt KAM and consultative selling, with technical support. Increased rivalry in the B2B market, digital transformation, complicated decision-making, and evolving customer requirements are all factors boosting Indian SMEs' adoption of consultative selling and Key Account Management (KAM).

Government schemes and major purchasers like Tata and Infosys are encouraging SMEs to sharpen their sales strategies. SMEs in India can remain competitive in a rapidly changing market by adopting artificial intelligence (AI) and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, which enable tailored solutions, stronger credibility, and more customer-driven initiatives. Market, technological, and institutional forces drive the integration of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling within Indian Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs). As the Indian B2B environment becomes increasingly competitive and complex, traditional volume-based, transactional sales models are proving insufficient. SMEs, the backbone of the national economy, now face pressure to adopt customer-centric, strategy-based sales systems to meet rising customer expectations and ensure sustainable growth. Among the major determinants, evolving buyer behaviour plays a significant role.

Contemporary B2B purchasers, particularly in IT, pharmaceuticals, and advanced manufacturing, now expect more than just product features or price benefits (Javanmardi *et al.*, 2024). They seek customised solutions, strategic applications, and relationship-based engagement models. Indian clients increasingly view suppliers as long-term partners instead of mere vendors. As a result, consultative selling and strategic account management are now essential, prioritising a deep understanding of client needs and delivering unique value.

The digital revolution has significantly impacted Indian businesses, enabling them to adopt CRM systems, analytics tools, and communication apps. These technologies reduce operational inefficiencies and allow companies to better understand their clients, observe patterns, and facilitate consultative discussions. According to Stegge (2025), this has reduced entry barriers for SMEs, enabling them to use KAM strategies to better segment and personalise accounts. Globalisation has also facilitated this shift, with firms like Tata and Infosys focusing on innovation and ethical relationships with clients. KAM and consultative selling are essential for SMEs to meet improved standards in client relationships. Government programs such as MSME Champions and technology-upgrade initiatives also support SMEs in upgrading their operational capabilities, thereby indirectly driving the adoption of structured, strategic, and digitally enabled approaches to customer management.

2.7 Theoretical Framework

This dissertation moves beyond the parallel discussion of theories to create an 'Integrated Theoretical Architecture.' The **Resource-Based View (RBV)** serves as the internal engine, explaining how an SME's unique consultative skills are inimitable resources. Meanwhile, **Relationship Marketing Theory** provides the external strategic horizon. By synthesising these, the study argues that consultative selling is the *capability* (RBV) that enables the *outcome* of long-term trust and retention.

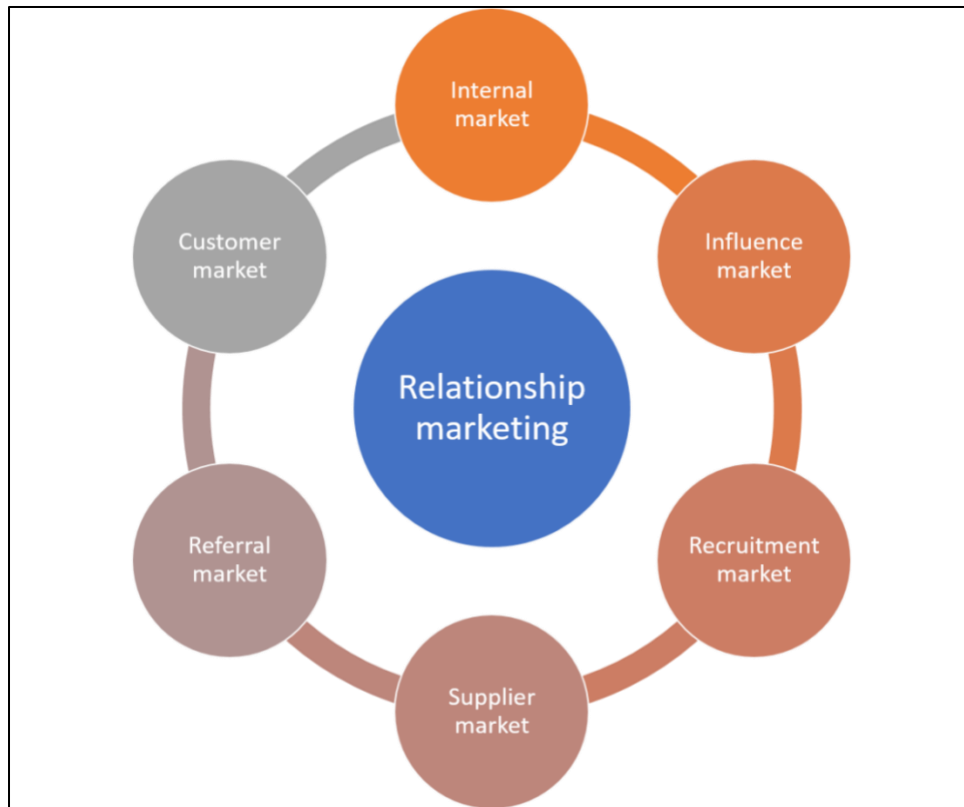


Figure 2.5: Social Exchange Theory

(Source: Hh, 2024)

The Relationship Marketing Theory focuses on building long-term, mutually beneficial relationships between businesses and their customers. This contrasts with a purely transactional approach. It originated in the services marketing sphere, where retention, trust, customer satisfaction, and commitment are core principles. The Commitment-Trust Theory, proposed by Morgan and Hunt (1994), is a key part of relationship marketing. It states that trust and commitment are at the heart of relationship-building.

This theory provides a foundation for further knowledge in the context of Key Account Management (KAM). KAM strategies flourish through deeper, strategic collaboration with high-value clients. The need to maintain an ongoing relationship with

the client, jointly generate value, and coordinate internally to facilitate a long-term relationship is the theoretical rationale for relationship marketing (Pfajfar *et al.*, 2022).

From a consultative selling perspective, the theory aligns with the seller's role as a trusted advisor. It reinforces the notion that addressing a client's business context with personalised solutions enhances the depth of the relationship and customer satisfaction (Hidayat and Idrus, 2023). It is particularly crucial for Indian SMEs in B2B sales, where friendship and a history of association tend to determine client loyalty.

By anchoring sales in relationship marketing philosophies, Indian SMEs can increase customer retention, stand out from the crowd in competitive markets, and shift from a transactional to a strategic selling approach. This renders the theory important in conceptualising an integrated approach to sales.

2.7.1 Theory of Relationship Marketing

Relationship Marketing Theory focuses on long-term interaction, trust, and value creation between buyers and sellers (Rosário and Casaca, 2023). It steps out of transactional interactions to gain long-term relationships. KAM is closely aligned with this theory when it involves strategic customer relationships, whereas consultative selling builds relational depth by providing personalised solutions to problems. In sum, they outline the essence of relationship marketing as a long-term, trust-based relationship between the firm and the client that will be mutually beneficial. On the other hand, Khan *et al.* (2022) opined that, according to the relationship marketing idea, client relationship management builds strong connections with clients, which, in turn, inspires loyalty and long-term commitment.

This idea suggests that, to maximise profits, strong company ties make individuals more valuable than those who lack allegiance. Both KAM and consultative selling focus on building strong client relationships to solve challenges and meet demands. Consumers' assessments of corporate behaviour form the foundation for evaluating a business's image. Thus, building these relationships is the key to meeting client expectations. This theory

underpins the Key Account Management philosophy, providing the strategic wisdom to invest in long-term relationships with high-value clients.

2.7.2 Social Exchange Theory

The Social Exchange Theory holds that business-related connections are established and maintained through the mutual exchange of values. As per the study by Sudarti *et al.* (2024), the concept of value is not confined to monetary value but also encompasses knowledge, trust, support, and reliability in both KAM and consultative selling. The theory can explain why clients remain loyal when they perceive long-term benefits. It also favours the concept of mutual commitment, which is at the core of the consultative approach to Indian B2B sales. This theory is the driver of Relationship Marketing: through value exchange (such as insights shared in consultative selling), the firm builds the trust and reciprocity required for a long-term KAM relationship.

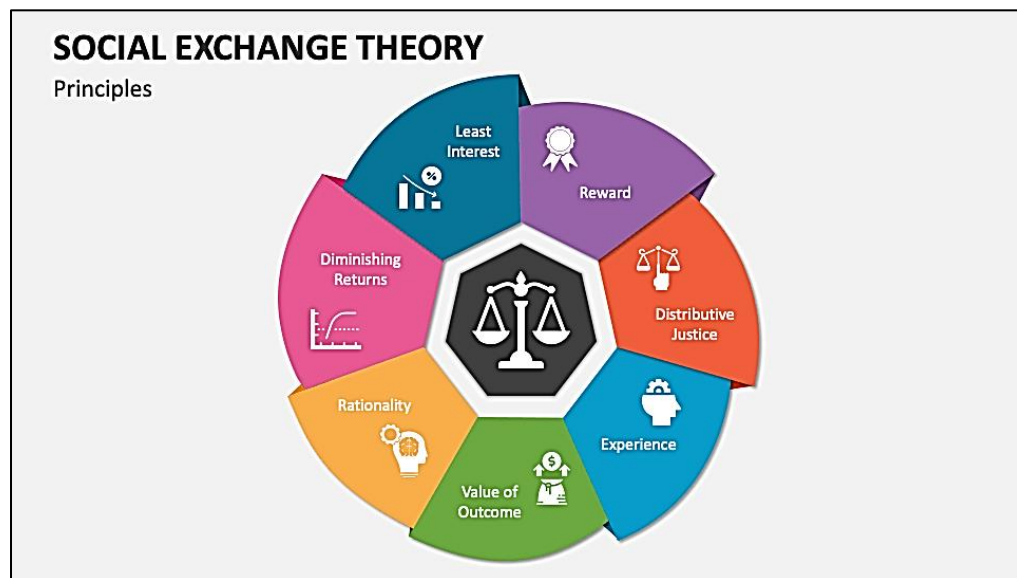


Figure 2.6: Social Exchange Theory

(Source: Collidu, 2023)

Blau and Homans, as well as Emerson, developed the Social Exchange Theory (SET) index by arguing that people develop and maintain human relationships as a subjective cost-benefit analysis, assuming they will obtain a fair exchange in the future

(Cook *et al.*, 2013). The theory holds that potential interactions, whether economic or social, should be beneficial to all parties involved and that, with mutual gain, trust and commitment can be enhanced over time. Social exchange is confined to behaviours that rely on favourable responses from other people, while exchange behaviour refers to someone's deliberate acts that are dictated by the anticipated rewards (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, this theory could be applied to clients in the Indian B2B sector, where favourable customer responses can be elicited through KAM and consultative selling. Personal trust rather than merely contractual trust is essential in Indian corporate culture. Building rapport requires ongoing engagement, truthfulness, and cultural fit on the part of relationship managers.

SET is very practical in the context of Key Account Management (KAM), as transactions with important customers do not rely on limited transactions within strategic relations with such clients, but are pegged to perceived long-term value. The social exchange perspective can be characterized as KAM efforts in individualised service, strategic alignment, and shared planning, which strengthen trust and loyalty (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017).

In consultative selling, SET demonstrates why clients prefer vendors who offer value beyond the transaction itself. This value is created through ongoing knowledge exchange, support, and problem-solving that builds both emotional and strategic capital.

In Indian SMEs, resources are scarce, client acquisition costs are high, and client relationships are poor. In such cases, using Social Exchange Theory (SET) is advantageous because fewer clients make each relationship more valuable (Ahmad *et al.*, 2023). Trust, duty, and cooperation help SMEs discover loyal customers even amid competition and pricing deflation. Thus, Social Exchange Theory is the most useful lens for understanding and deploying an integration approach to sales.

2.7.3 Resource-Based view (RBV)

The resource-based view (RBV) holds that sustainable competitive advantage is achieved through factors that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable, which

are internal to the firm. Account manager skills and consultative selling add-ons are immovable properties of SMEs. The strategic resources also include KAM systems, customer insights, and CRM tools. With effective integration, these aspects provide a form of differentiation in customer service and customer involvement, thereby bringing increased long-term benefits, even to smaller companies lacking abundant physical resources (Costa and Rodrigues, 2024). This is linked to the consultative selling that is not a strategy but an inimitable ability (resource) that a company builds in its sales people.

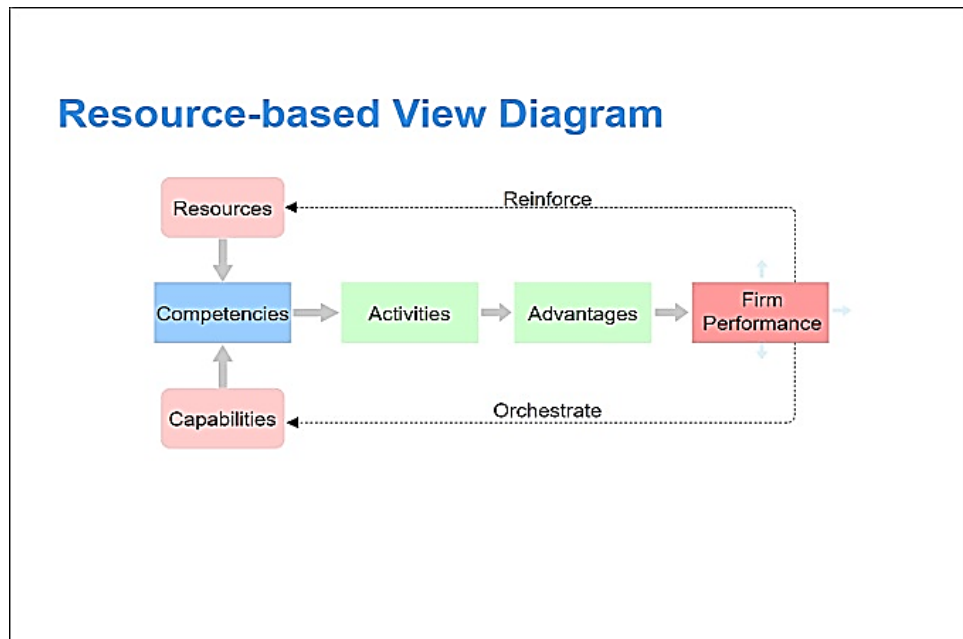


Figure 2.7: Resource-Based view (RBV)

(Source: Opinaldo, 2022)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) is a strategic management theory that posits that a firm's sustainable competitive advantage is defined by the possession of valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources (Lubis, 2022). These are tangible resources, such as technology and capital, as well as intangible resources, such as skills, knowledge, and relationships.

RBV is especially useful in KAM, as successful account management relies on resources such as seasoned account management professionals, a strong understanding of

the client, and internal alignment. Competitors cannot easily imitate these. In such cases, consultative selling involves emotional intelligence, industry segmentation, and analytical skill sets; the sale involves differentiating resources that cannot be measured. As Lubis (2022) notes, optimising a business's capabilities and resources is a process of boosting competitive advantage through an RBV strategy. Some factors can be used to determine a Resource-Based View (RBV) strategy, including: 1. Transparency, or the openness of all resources involved in the company; 2. Transferability, or the communication of all matters associated with the production process; and 3. Durability, or the longevity of the item manufactured by the company, depends on the product's quality and resilience. Therefore, B2B sector needs to provide quality services with such transferability and resilience to meet customer expectations effectively.

RBV is critical for Indian SMEs. These companies might not compete on scale or price. However, they develop in-house capabilities (CRM systems, sales expertise, advisory services) to strategically engage major accounts (Kazlauskaitė *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, they acquire consultative sales skills as another valuable resource.

The combination of KAM and consultative selling aligns with RBV, as it exposes SMEs to utilise and build on their internal resources in the long run for growth (Chaudhuri *et al.*, 2022). Instead of attempting to compete with large corporations on price, Indian SMEs can instead be able to develop valuable relationships in sales and trust-based relationships, which competitors can find hard to duplicate, hence gaining differentiation.

2.7.4 Value-Based Selling Theory

Studied by Garrido (2025), Value-Based Selling Theory is based on providing measurable benefits to the customers. It is consistent with consultative selling, in which the salesperson analyses the client's requirements and provides a solution that delivers business results. KAM also applies equivalent reasoning through long-term investment in strategic accounts. Such a theory can justify the shift from product characteristics to client-based value propositions in B2B markets, particularly for Indian SMEs seeking to increase perceived value. This theory provides the RBV-based tactic. A salesperson *uses* Value-

Based Selling to *demonstrate* the value of their consultative skills, thus fulfilling the 'exchange' in Social Exchange Theory. As opined by Keränen *et al.* (2023), value-based selling is eventually focused on enhancing customers' value creation and economic profitability. This theory is mainly effective in selling solutions rather than selling products to customers. With the assistance of KAM and consultative selling, B2B firms in India can sell and deliver solutions to customers through customised product offerings and services, which would not only bolster customer relationships but also help retain customers in the future.



Figure 2.8: VBS Theory

(Source: Collidu, 2024)

The theory of Value-Based Selling (VBS) focuses on providing measurable business value to customers rather than emphasising product features or price advantages. To do this, it is essential to understand the client's goals, pain points, and success metrics very well (Airola, 2024). It changes the seller's role from supplier to a strategic partner that co-creates value.

Consultative selling is closely aligned with VBS, as it is based on diagnosing clients' problems and offering personalised solutions to enhance business results. The consultative sellers emphasise the customer's needs rather than making a sale, which builds confidence and creates prospects for future sales.

The equivalent of Value-Based Selling (VBS) in Key Account Management (KAM) is to align the firm's value proposition—which comprises the benefits and values offered to the customer—with the client's strategic vision (Anderson and Johannisson, 2022). In this context, value propositions are customised, and success is defined and measured by both parties. As a result, this approach promotes a close relationship of loyalty and investment between seller and buyer.

For Indian SMEs, Value-Based Selling (VBS) helps them exit price wars and become more competitive. SMEs build client trust by demonstrating tangible business value and measurable outcomes (Classen, 2022). Combining Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling under VBS enables SMEs to charge higher prices, reduce churn among key clients, and consolidate market share in a results-driven selling environment.

2.7.5 Theories of Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

CRM studies emphasise that organisations should focus relationship building on profitable customers, drawing on an understanding of customer lifetime value. The core of CRM today asserts that customer lifetime value represents "the economic value of the customer relationship to the firm" (D'Arconte, 2023).

From a B2B market perspective, studies evaluating the use of customer relationship management (CRM) in the Indian market help identify and clarify CRM's role. These studies discuss CRM's applications, deployment, user satisfaction, diverse tools, challenges, and success across industries (Purnama & Susilowati, 2024). The goal of CRM is to support sales for Indian businesses by maintaining relationships with current customers and establishing new ones. This involves encouraging business expansion by offering appropriate services and products. Businesses aim to increase sales and

profitability through the use of social CRM, mobile CRM, e-CRM, new software, and AI-driven CRM tools.

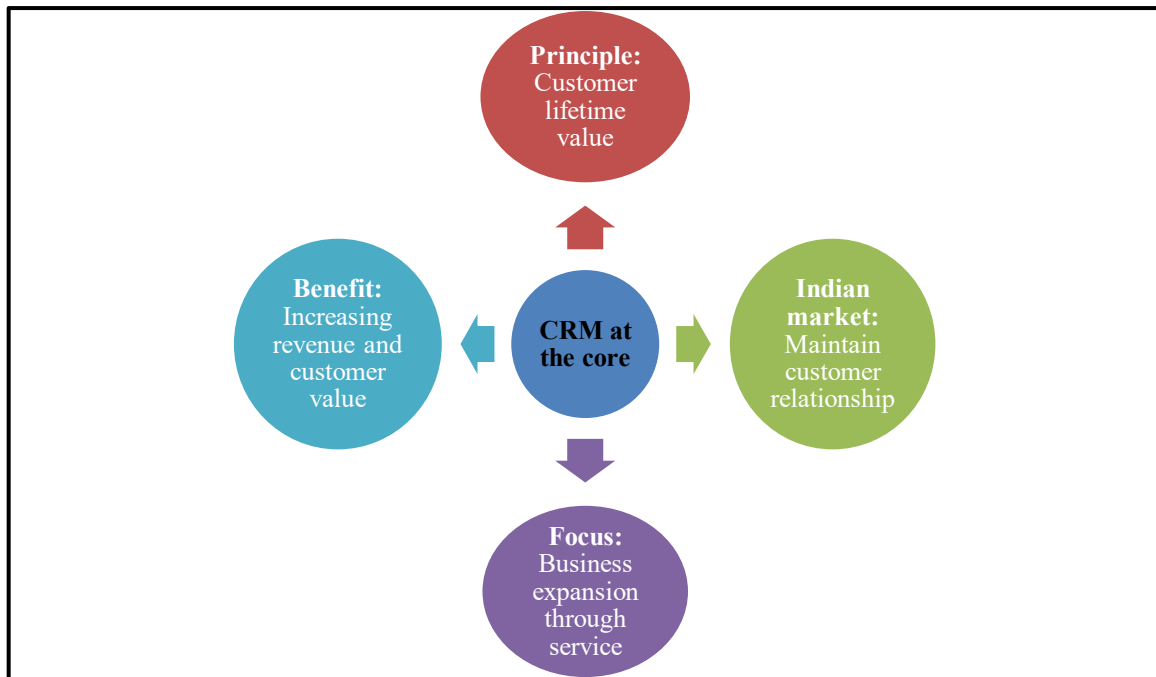


Figure 2.9: CRM Model

(Source: Self-Made)

CRM enables management to increase revenue and customer value by building and enhancing customer relationships (Nilashi et al., 2023). It prioritises systematic customer interaction, treating consumers as central to the value chain (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2024). SMEs rely on direct human interaction and foster long-term client loyalty, while larger firms often implement technology-driven CRM systems.

CRM connects data-driven revenue growth and manual B2B sales for Indian SMEs. It scales sales by simplifying lead analysis, decision cycles, and preventing missed opportunities. SMEs often rely on personal networks. CRM systematizes these efforts and addresses challenges like long cycles, multiple decision-makers, and large contracts. Sales now benefit from central systems instead of personal Rolodexes.

Sales data is often kept in spreadsheets, employees' minds, or notebooks (Pemberton & Robson, 2000). CRM centralizes data, preserving crucial client information

if a salesperson leaves. Indian SMEs use local B2B directories (like IndiaMART), email, and trade shows for leads. CRM records, categorizes, and tracks these leads.

2.7.6 Theory of Solution Selling

According to Alifah and Windasari (2024), Solution Selling Theory emphasises addressing clients' pains and providing solutions rather than bundling products. This theory has direct implications for consultative selling, as it diagnoses needs and tailors' solutions. With KAM, solution selling is part of the strategic account plan. In the Indian SME context, the presence of this theory entails a shift from transactional selling to an advisory partnership, particularly in industries that require customised offerings.



Figure 2.10: Theory of Solution Selling

(Source: Collidu, 2022)

Solution Selling Theory is based on customer orientation and does not imply pre-selling configured products; rather, it focuses on solving a client's concrete business problem. The approach originated in the 1980s, when Michael Bosworth developed it using pain-point recognition, individualised solutions, and matching solutions to quantifiable business results (Groot *et al.*, 2019).

Solution Selling Theory is a key part of consultative selling. The seller starts by asking questions to clearly understand the client's situation before making suggestions based on real results. This shifts the conversation from what we sell to the problem our product solves, thereby building credibility and strengthening relationships.

Guenzi and Nijssen (2023) argued that selling digital solutions to clients at the intersection of these developments offers a potentially enticing opportunity to deliver value while gaining a competitive advantage. Profitably selling those remedies is a challenge for many companies, though. “It can be erroneous to assume that automation will lead to lucrative expansion, since so many companies have experienced mediocre outcomes”. However, with KAM and consultative selling approaches, customer relations can be improved, which could be used as a competitive advantage within the Resource-based View theory. This theory’s development assumes a shift from transactional selling to an advisory partnership. This is an accurate description of how Indian B2B markets are adapting, particularly as technology use and company differentiation increase. Since shoppers want personalised value rather than just objects, Indian SMEs are turning to interactive mindsets as a result. The theory emphasises understanding and meeting each client's specific needs and difficulties rather than merely selling a good or service. It is focused on customer strategy that emphasises building rapport and offering tailored solutions to help users achieve their goals and objectives.

Under KAM, in solution selling, there is added value in strategic account promotion through co-creation and customisation (Tiili, 2024). It also implies that account managers split the work with clients on solutions that will help address the problems now and, in the future, and this tradition results in prolonged associations.

The theory can motivate change in Indian SMEs, promoting familiar feature-based or cost-based selling due to resource shortages (Rakshit *et al.*, 2022). With solution selling, SMEs become problem-solvers rather than problem-vendors. This transformation increases customer satisfaction and opens new sales opportunities, such as cross-selling and up-selling. Combining solution selling with KAM and consultative selling, gives SMEs a strong advantage in the complex and competitive B2B marketplace.

2.8 Conceptual Framework



Figure 2.11: Conceptual Framework

(Source: Self-Made)

The concept can be understood through the roles of Key Account Management and Consultative selling, which play a greater role in accelerating sales in the Indian B2B sector. From the very top (integration concept) to the bottom (outcomes and

recommendations), the framework makes sense. Readers are better able to comprehend the hierarchy and grouping of ideas thanks to the colour-coding and categorisation, addresses market, supervisory, technological, and geopolitical aspects. The framework combines theories (such as the Resource-Based View and Relationship Marketing) with practice (such as CRM and sales training). It further adds realism by recognising both inducements and constraints, and it includes particular B2B issues facing India, such as evolving consumer demands, expansion, and automation.

The framework proposes that **Digital Enablement (Moderator)** dictates the strength of the relationship between **Consultative Selling (Independent Variable)** and **Key Account Management (KAM) Success (Dependent Variable)**. This moves beyond basic sales tactics toward a model of strategic integration.

The conceptual framework highlights the short-term focus, lack of competencies, and resource constraints common to SMEs. This model clearly spells out the Independent Variables (Enablers), namely the Drivers in the Indian Market, the Digital Enablers, and the Supporting Theories. The Barriers to Adopting are negative independent variables or obstacles to go through. The Noble Mediating Process is the Integration of Key Account Management and Consultative Selling. It is a process coupled with Managerial Actions that results in the Dependent Variable (Outcomes), namely Sales and Business Outcomes, such as Improved Client Retention and Higher Customer Satisfaction. This framework identifies the drivers in the Indian B2B market, indicating that evolving customer expectations and digitalisation trends have driven the adoption of KAM and consultative Selling in India. The overall concept of the research could be analysed using this framework, which can also be further studied to inform future research.

2.9 Hypotheses Development

Based on the synthesis of the Resource-Based View (RBV) and Relationship Marketing theories discussed in this chapter, the following hypotheses are proposed:

2.9.1 Consultative Selling and Customer Outcomes

The literature (e.g., Terho *et al.*, 2023) suggests that moving from transactional to value-based interactions enhances the buyer's perception of the salesperson as a trusted advisor. In the context of Indian SMEs, where personal trust is a cultural cornerstone of business, a consultative approach is expected to impact long-term stability.

- **H1:** The adoption of consultative selling practices significantly enhances customer retention and long-term relationship stability in Indian B2B SMEs.

2.9.2 Digital Enablement and CRM Integration

Scholars argue that CRM is not merely software but a strategic process. When digital tools are utilized to provide a 360-degree view of the customer, they empower sales teams to execute consultative strategies more effectively. This creates the second proposition:

- **H2:** The integration of digital tools and CRM systems acts as a critical enabler for effectively executing consultative selling and Key Account Management.

2.9.3 Strategic Leadership and KAM Success

According to the RBV, organizational capabilities are driven by top-down strategic orientation. In SMEs, the leadership's commitment to prioritizing "Key" accounts over a "mass-market" approach dictates the success of KAM.

- **H3:** A strong organizational strategic orientation toward KAM, supported by leadership, is positively correlated with the success of the sales integration process.

2.10 Literature Gaps

Whereas both Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling have been well-researched topics in their own right, little has been done on their combined application, especially in Indian SMEs. The current literature pays less attention to small firms, given their resource limitations, levels of digital maturity, and the strategic issues that may affect their pandemic response. In addition, there is limited empirical data on how Indian SMEs are using technology to support these strategies. Alongside this lack, the absence of a conceptual framework that captures the dynamic relationship among

customer-focused strategies, customer digital tools, and relationship marketing is also evident. Identifying such gaps will yield actionable insights that can guide SMEs in maximising strategic, value-driven B2B sales. There is a debilitating gap in integrating the theories; no empirical study has examined the interaction between RBV (as a capability builder) and Relationship Marketing (as a strategic goal) in the context of an SME. Although there is a dearth of India-specific empirical evidence on this integrated model, comparative research in emerging market economies such as Brazil and South Africa suggests that these problems exist. Although there have been other international studies that have addressed the roles of both Key Account

In management (KAM) and consultative selling, few studies have examined the impact of combining the two at the strategic level, particularly in the context of emerging economies. The majority of available frameworks operate within larger, well-funded businesses in developed markets and fail to account for the limitations, structural constraints, resource constraints, and market unreliability that Indian SMEs face. Not much scholarly literature exists on the combined sales strategy of KAM and consultative selling, in particular, in information-scarce or digital-shifting environments. Whereas the existing literature is useful for illuminating both Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling as individual concepts, there is also a significant gap in understanding them together, especially in Indian SMEs. The majority of academic research targets large enterprises in the West, where organisational design and resources, along with technological capacity, starkly contrast with those in Indian small businesses. The strategic synthesis of KAM and consultative selling is therefore considerably underdeveloped in resource-strained environments.

There is limited literature on CRM systems and digital enablers among SMEs in India, and few studies examine their adoption, effectiveness, and scale. The literature also fails to recognise the roles of organisational culture, informal decision-making and local business practices. Therefore, further research is needed to understand the impact of consultative selling, its practical implications, and its potential to drive success among SMEs in India.

2.11 Summary

In this chapter, the author has discussed the origins of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling, and the strengths of each, with regard to the potential synergies between the two. It has examined how they can be applied to the context of Indian SMEs, the enabling technologies, and their theoretical foundations that can be utilised in incorporating these technologies. The literature shows a gap in research on the possible integration of these two approaches in resource-poor, high-growth settings, such as Indian SMEs. This review establishes the empirical investigation setting by citing the drivers, challenges, and opportunities. The conceptual framework derived will inform the interpretation of sales practices, improving relationship quality and customer loyalty, as well as strategy performance.

This chapter critically analysed the underpinnings, application, and situational applicability of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling, primarily in the context of Indian SMEs. It has dared to explore the domain of core concepts, strategic templates, tech catalysts, and culture effects in adoption. Although KAM structured processes for handling valued clients, the consultative approach accelerates the relational contact. The adoption of the two approaches is an opportunity in itself, as it enables SMEs to differentiate and expand in competitive business-to-business environments. Nevertheless, there are remaining challenges related to their resource availability, insufficient training, and digital maturity. The absence of integrative, India-specific, and empirical research also influenced the literature review, and evidence of the knowledge gap was confirmed, proving the need to conduct an empirical study to fill the gap with the research findings.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The methodology is a crucial section of the research, in which the study's outline is discussed. B2B sales in Indian SMEs are thriving, and it is essential to examine the integration of key account management processes. Therefore, it is necessary to include a robust research design, approach, philosophy, and strategy to achieve the desired results, aligned with the aims and objectives of the study. This research methodology will also discuss data collection methods, participant hiring, analysis, and sampling techniques. This section will provide a thorough analysis of the strategies used, considering the aims, objectives and the research questions. Additionally, this section of the study will include ethical considerations to ensure that the participants are informed about the goal of this research.

3.2 Research Onion

The research onion is an important aspect of the methodology section, where the essential elements are discussed by providing a layered overview. The layers given in the research onion represent the different aspects of the methodology section, where every single strategy has its importance in getting valuable data. The strategies given in the research onion are selected based on the aims and objectives of the study so that desired outcomes can be generated (Trussler, 2025). Additionally, the selection of the strategies is done in a structured way so that it can provide a comprehensive framework for getting adequate results. This research onion includes pragmatic research philosophy, a deductive research approach and a mixed-methods research strategy. This research onion has helped in implementing both qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies in the research.

3.3 Research Philosophy (Pragmatic Philosophy)

The working framework of the Indian SMEs has changed a lot in the last few years. Especially in the case of B2B sales, there are several key account management and consultative selling aspects that need crucial analysis. Considering the importance of the topic, a pragmatic research philosophy has been implemented so that the data can be

generated by analysing the real-world scenarios and practical applications (Welin, 2024). Additionally, the pragmatic research philosophy also assists the researcher in getting outcomes from both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The sales management and account processing in Indian SMEs is complex and need strategic evaluation to understand. The pragmatic research philosophy is also flexible, which assists the researchers in getting to the outcome by using different analysis strategies. This research philosophy has assisted in getting practical knowledge regarding the applications of sales management and account processes rather than just prioritising conceptual frameworks and theoretical models (Lane, 2022). By using adequate strategies to seek answers from the participants, a rigorous research philosophy will help in generating an ideal outcome.

3.4 Research Approach (Deductive Approach)

Considering the significance of this research, the deductive research approach has been implemented to get a structural framework for analysing and evaluating the conceptual models. The deductive research approach is also effective in establishing relationships between the variables of the different theories and models (Lehtola, 2025). Additionally, this research approach allows the researcher to test the conceptual framework by which the findings can be generalised. There are several conceptual models and theories related to key account management and consultative selling in Indian SMEs. This approach has helped the researcher to analyse the outcomes given by the existing models, if that is relevant to the current research. Additionally, the deductive research approach also helped the researcher to identify and analyse the significance of AI tools in sales management and customer relationship management to understand their sales performance metrics (Silén, 2024). Additionally, the relevance of the conceptual models and hypotheses used in the study has been compared with the data obtained from primary data analysis to check if they align with the objectives of the study.

3.5 Research Design (Explanatory Research Design)

The research has included an explanatory research design, considering the significance of the research questions and objectives. This research design helps identify

the relationship between different variables and assists the researcher in investigating the aspects precisely (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2022). An explanatory research design can also assist in identifying the gap present in the literature and can assist the researcher in framing new conceptual models to restore those information bridges. Additionally, the explanatory research design has helped the researcher in identifying the effectiveness of consultative selling in measuring the customer satisfaction ratio, retention percentage, and the overall sales performance in the Indian SMEs (Høgevold *et al.*, 2022). This research design has also help in generating a balance between the outcomes generated from both the interview and survey processes by analysing their variables.

It should be pointed out that while a cross-sectional explanation design makes it feasible to find correlations between variables, it cannot establish causation. Because of this, the study's claims concerning the connection among consultative selling and consumer results are correlational in nature, and causal terms are avoided throughout the research and discussion.

The study's cross-sectional design and dependence on self-reported participant data prevent it from establishing clear causality, even if the explanatory research methodology aided in examining correlations between factors.

3.6 Data Collection Methods (Interview and Survey)

The integration of account management and consultative selling in the Indian SMEs is a vast concept, and a mixed-methods approach **was needed** to collect the relevant data. Therefore, this research **included** both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods so that the larger aspect of the B2B sales prospect in the Indian SMEs **could be** evaluated.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were carried out as the qualitative data collection method with key sales managers related to B2B sales and account management in Indian SMEs. These questions **assisted** in examining the strategic approaches used by these firms in minimizing integration challenges, the use of digital tools like Key Account Management (KAM), and its limitations. The interview process **was further evaluated** using a thematic analysis method.

In the quantitative data collection method, a full-scale survey **was conducted**, including multiple-choice questions which **were asked** of the participants and their responses **were collected** for further analysis. The survey **was conducted with 150 respondents** belonging to a sales background to gather adequate information about Customer Relationship Management (CRM), digital tools, the KAM framework, and the adoption level of consultative selling approaches. The survey **assisted** in conducting an in-depth analysis of the current B2B channels in the Indian Corporation.

3.7 Population and Sampling Technique (Purposive and Snowball sampling)

As the study is focused on the Indian small and medium enterprises and their B2B channels, the researcher needs to focus on a specific set of population so that the requirements of the research can be met. Hence, account managers, business development leaders and sales professionals are the primary population of this research so that proper information and insights about the B2B channel and its applications in the Indian SMEs can be obtained (Lindqvist and Bodell, 2023). Additionally, it has been ensured that the inclusion of these populations in the research must come from manufacturing Enterprises and service-based firms. It has also been ensured that the population must include senior management officials along with the sales department employees to have diverse opinions.

As this research has included both interview and survey procedures, therefore, it is important to use two different sampling techniques for hiring participants. For the interview process, the researcher has used a purposive sampling technique so that experienced and knowledgeable participants can be hired for the research, as their answers provided a distinctive direction to the project (Kumar and Srivastava, 2022). Additionally, the snowball sampling technique is further implemented to get participants for the survey process from the existing contacts and professional networks. The combination of both these sampling techniques assisted the researcher in understanding the interview and survey process adequately, and desirable outcomes can be generated.

Item Q13 of the initial survey instrument was used to assess "Overall Relationship Health," a broad composite concept. A post-hoc analytical decision was taken during the

analysis phase to categorise this item into two theoretically distinct dimensions: Customer Retention (Q13b), which represents the behavioural intention to sustain the relationship, and Customer Satisfaction (Q13a), which represents the buyer's cognitive and emotional evaluation of the service's experience. This choice was backed up by well-established B2B sales literature which consistently regards retention and satisfaction as linked but conceptually distinct entities (Rosario and Casaca, 2023; Khan et al., 2022).

While satisfaction is an attitudinal antecedent and retention is a behavioural consequence, putting both constructs into a single survey item may obfuscate their different theoretical functions and impair conceptual clarity. As a result, while maintaining the original dataset, disaggregation was used as an analytical and interpretive method to independently assess the impact of each construct within the conversation. Throughout the procedure, no responses from respondents were changed, eliminated, or added. Because previous consumer behaviour literature consistently handles satisfaction and retention as linked but conceptually independent variables, this method was deemed appropriate. It is however acknowledged that deriving two different constructs from a single survey item bears an inherent validity limitation. A single-item measure cannot fully replicate the psychometric rigour of the validated multi-item scales. The analytical disaggregation thus presented as an interpretive decision that enhances theoretical precision within the constraints of the existing instrument, instead of a claim of full construct validity. Readers are advised in interpreting the findings regarding Q13a and Q13b with the corresponding caution. Additionally, the future research should employ separate validated multi-item scales for each construct.

Nevertheless, there is still a methodological drawback to this approach. A single survey item cannot completely replace verified multi-item scales that are able to capture the complexity and dependability of both constructs, even with analytical separation. As a result, results related to retention and satisfaction should be evaluated with caution. To improve construct validity, reliability, and analytical precision, future research should use distinct, well-established multi-item measures for customer satisfaction and retention.

Operationalisation of Variables

Table 1: Construct Operationalisation and Mapping

Construct	Conceptual Definition	Operational Items (Questionnaire)
Sample Profile / Control Variables (<i>new row — not a construct</i>)	Demographic and firm-level descriptors	Q2 (role), Q3 (experience), Q4 (firm type), Q5 (team size)
Consultative Selling (CS)	The practice of acting as a strategic advisor to identify and solve client problems	Q6, Q7, Q8, Q15
KAM Integration (KAM)	The actual process of managing high-value accounts through specialised resources	Q7 (KAM usage item), Q10, Q12
Digital Enablement (DE)	The degree to which CRM and digital tools facilitate sales processes	Q11, Q19, Q20
Customer Satisfaction (SAT)	The buyer's emotional and cognitive evaluation of the service experience	Q13 – Statement 2 ("integrating consultative selling has improved overall customer satisfaction")
Customer Retention (RET)	The behaviour intention of the client to continue the business relationship	Q13 – Statement 1 ("use of consultative selling has led to an increase in customer retention rate")

3.8 Sample Size (12 sales managers and key account managers for interview and 150 salespeople from Indian SMEs for survey)

The following research has included a mixed-method approach where the interview and survey will be conducted. Considering this situation, the sample size for the interview process includes individuals from a managerial background for an adequate understanding of the managerial roles and responsibilities in the Indian SMEs. On the other hand, 150 participants are selected for the survey process from both the ground and managerial backgrounds.

3.9 Participant Selection

The participant selection criteria for this research include a minimum of two years of experience in the Indian SME sector. Additionally, a special focus is given on the individuals working at the management level in this industry. The participants are selected from both the ground and managerial levels to get a diverse opinion on the subject.

3.10 Instrumentation

The basic instruments to undergo this research are interview and survey procedures. The semi-structured interview includes open-ended questions that effectively focus on KAM and consultative selling. Additionally, the role of digital means in enhancing its operations is also the area of focus. Similarly, the survey focused on getting information about customer relationship management, KAM success, factors, sales enhancement, and the impact of consultative selling, etc.

In order to enable statistical associations to be cross-validated against managers' actual experiences, this study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design in which quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data were collected independently during the same phase of the research and analysed separately before being combined for joint interpretation in Chapter 5. The concept of thematic saturation guided the twelve semi-structured interviews for the qualitative strand; no significantly new codes appeared in the final two interviews, indicating that the sample size was adequate to capture the variety of pertinent viewpoints. However, this assessment was made informally rather than using a formal saturation protocol, which is why it is mentioned as a limitation in Section 3.13. A single researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework to code interview transcripts. A second coding pass was carried out against the raw transcripts to verify the internal consistency of code application; because of the single-coder approach, no inter-rater reliability statistic was computed, which is also recognised as a limitation. A single researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework to code interview transcripts. A second coding pass was carried out against the raw transcripts to verify the internal consistency of code application; because of the single-coder approach, no inter-rater reliability statistic was computed, which is also recognised as a limitation.

3.11 Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis techniques implemented in this research are qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative statistical analysis. The results obtained by conducting the interview process are evaluated by using a thematic analysis method, where the themes aligning with the objective of the study are identified and reviewed (Geremew *et al.*, 2024). On the other hand, the data obtained by the survey process are evaluated by using statistical means, where correlation and regression analysis done to identify the variables. These variables are further examined if they align with the study's objective.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Maintaining ethical integrity throughout the research is very significant for the researcher. First of all, the aim, objectives and purpose of the research are being conveyed to the participants (Hasan *et al.*, 2021). After that, written consent has been taken from them, and it has been ensured that participation in the interview and survey process is voluntary, and no one has been forced by the researcher. It has been ensured that none of the data gathered from them are used for any purpose other than this research, and they may withdraw their participation at any time they feel uncomfortable or pressured. Considering the significance of this research, it has been conveyed to the participants that full confidentiality is maintained throughout the research, and none of their details has been shared with anyone (Taquette *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the data gathered from them is stored in an encrypted document, which is accessible only to the researcher to prevent any type of unwanted activity. It has also been ensured that the participation in this research is not harmed or hampered the reputation of the participant's respective organisations, nor their images.

3.13 Limitations

This methodology has discussed several strategies and concepts to get precise information about the B2B channels and their implications in the Indian SMEs. However, there are some limitations which need to be taken seriously to avoid unwanted distinctions in the outcome. One of the main limitations of this research is self-report bias. The

information gathered from the survey and questionnaire process fully relied on the participants' perception (Taherdoost, 2022). If someone tries to hide a few things from the researcher and provide incorrect answers, it can alter the outcome of the research. Additionally, the diverse nature of the participants' selection is also reduced to an extent because of the use of non-random sampling techniques. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques are both part of the non-sampling techniques, and they target a specific criterion of participants, minimising the potential of diverse answers (Thunberg and Arnell, 2022). The size of the Indian small and medium-scale enterprises is huge, and targeting only 150 participants to get answers about the B2B channel in this sector can also minimise the chances of getting precise outcomes. A larger probability-based sample (e.g. 300-500 SMEs) would have increased generalisability, but this was not feasible within time and access constraints. By the time this research gets published, the Indian SMEs may witness other changes in their business operations, which may also raise accountability questions around the research's outcome.

The application of non-probability sampling for both data collection threads is another drawback. Although purposeful sampling for interviews is appropriate for gaining access to expertise, it takes out the viewpoints of less experienced or informally operating SME managers, who might encounter even more barriers to KAM integration. Homophily bias, whereby respondents have similar professional connections, organisational contexts, and attitudes, may be considered introduced by the survey's snowball sampling, which could have decreased the range of viewpoints recorded.

The possibility of sample bias is one drawback of the sampling approach. The diversity and representativeness of the sample population may have been impacted by the study's reliance on easily available and consenting respondents. Because of this, some customer groups or viewpoints might have been under-represented, which could have an impact on how broadly the study's conclusions can be applied. The use of a non-probability sampling approach may nevertheless limit the degree to which the results may be applied uniformly across various client segments, industries, or demographic groupings, despite efforts to gather responses from participants with a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

These limitations are taken consideration while interpreting the results, and they influence the suggestions for additional research that are presented in Chapter 6.

3.14 Summary

This section has provided information about the key concepts needed to be used to get adequate results. With a pragmatic research philosophy, deductive pressure approach, and a mixed-method design, this research generates conceptual ideas about the integration of account management and consultative selling in Indian SMEs. Additionally, by using both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods, this research ensures that all effective information and insights have been collected thoroughly.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises the major findings of the primary data collection stage of the research that intended to investigate how Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling can be integrated into the B2B sales approach of Indian SMEs. Qualitative data of interviews conducted with 12 sales and account managers of diverse Indian SMEs provides firsthand information about how these sales approaches are readily applied, what the challenges and findings are, and what the solutions to these challenges are. The findings are organised in a manner that responds to the research questions that were formulated in Chapter 1, and how companies are adopting these strategies, the issues that arise, and how the companies are addressing the issues. The direct interview has been introduced first in this chapter, then analysed in detail in Chapter 5. It provides the empirical basis of the general discussion and analysis of the conceptual framework of the study.

4.2 Quantitative data results (Descriptive Statistics)

Question 1

Please confirm that you have read and understood the information above and agree to participate in this survey.

150 responses

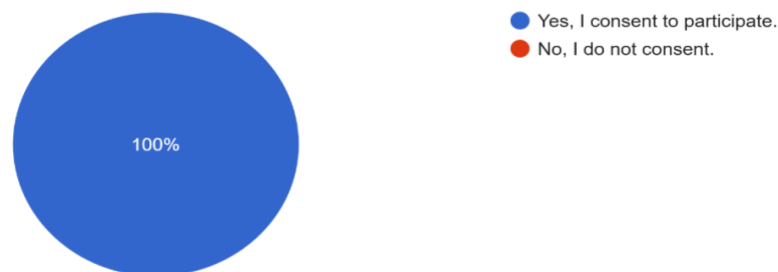


Figure 4.1: Agree to participate in this survey

(Source: Made by Author)

Consent to the survey is reflected in the first chart. A total of 150 respondents (100 percent) said they would take part upon reading the information they received. This complete consent means that the design of the survey and the ethical standards are clear, and data were collected in a legitimate way, and the participants volunteered to take part. The fact that there was no refusal makes the responses reliable. The consensus also shows a belief in the research process and the good intentions of participants to give their opinions towards the study.

Question 2

Which of the following best describes your current role?

150 responses

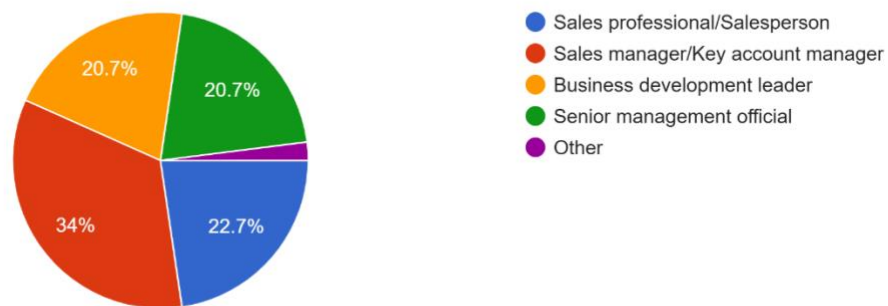


Figure 4.2: Current role in the company

(Source: Made by Author)

The second chart brings to light the professional roles of participants. The largest group of respondents (34 % of 150) is Sales Managers or Key Account Managers. There are Sales Professionals or Salespersons (22.7%), Business Development Leaders and Senior Management Officials (20.7% each). Only a small percentage of 2 percent can be classified under the category of other. The distribution reveals that most respondents are working in a decision-making or sales-based role, and hence, the dataset is highly applicable to investigate consultative selling and key account management activities in Indian SMEs.

Question 3

How many years of professional experience do you have in the Indian SME sector?
150 responses

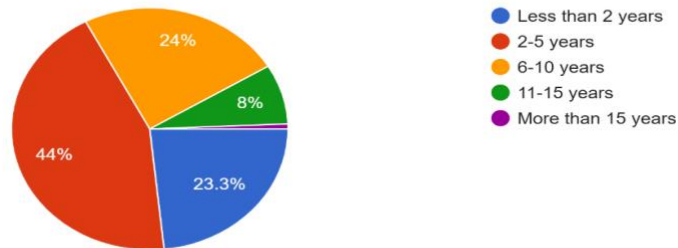


Figure 4.3: Years of experience in the Indian SME

(Source: Made by Author)

Professional experience in an Indian SME can be shown in the third chart. The 44% group with 2 to 5 years of experience represents the highest number of respondents, 150. Some 24% have between - and 10 years' experience and 23.3% have less than 2 years. The only ones with high experience were 8% who reported 11 to 15 years, and none beyond that. The distribution indicates a workforce of mid-level professionals with early career, moderate experience, which provides valuable but shifting perspectives in SME sales and account management practice.

Question 4

Is your company primarily a manufacturing or service-based firm?
150 responses

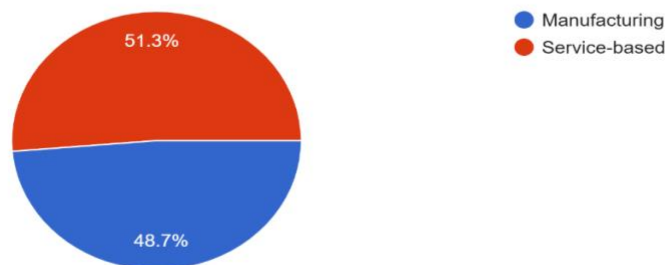


Figure 4.4: Company primarily a manufacturing or service based firm

(Source: Made by Author)

The findings demonstrate the type of firm in which participants work. Of the **150 respondents**, **51.3%** are employed in service-based firms, and **48.7%** are in manufacturing firms. The distribution is almost uniform, but a slight majority are services-based firms. This means that both sectors are represented, and the research results will have greater relevance. The almost even distribution demonstrates how the use of consultative selling and account management techniques can be examined within the framework of the various business settings to provide an understanding of the methods that can be used, both within product-driven and service-oriented SMEs.

Question 5

What is the approximate size of your sales team (number of employees)?

150 responses

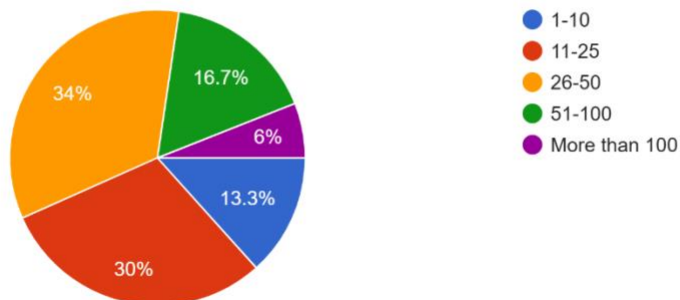


Figure 4.5: Sales Team Size Distribution

(Source: Made by Author)

The following chart shows the approximate size of sales teams. Of the 150 respondents, 34% reported team sizes of 26-50 employees, while 30% indicated 11-25 employees. Approximately 16.7% had 51-100 personnel, whereas 13.3% managed smaller teams of 1-10. Only 6% reported having over 100 employees. According to the study, the majority of SMEs use mid-sized sales teams to balance resources and customer coverage.

Very few utilize large-scale teams, suggesting resource efficiency and targeted sales structures in the Indian SMEs.

Question 6

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "Strongly Disagree" and 5 is "Strongly Agree," please rate the following statement: "In my experience, consultative...I selling for building long-term B2B relationships."

150 responses

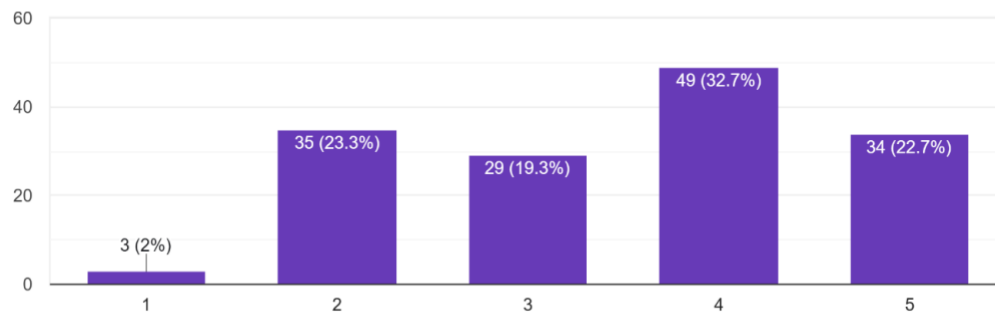


Figure 4.6: Perceived importance of consultative selling

(Source: Made by Author)

The sixth chart presents views as regards to consultative selling when establishing long-term B2B relationships. A percentage of 32.7 out of 150 indicated that 32.7 percent rated it 4, and 22.7 percent strongly agreed, rating it 5. Around 23.3% rated it 2, and 19.3% rated it 3. Only 2 percent strongly disagreed with a rating of 1. The dataset obtained indicates a rather positive perception, with more than half of the surveyed individuals having a bias towards agreement that consultative selling is a highly appreciated method in B2B environments.

Question 7



Figure 4.7: Sales Strategies Used by Companies.

(Source: Made by Author)

The findings of the chart look at active sales in SMEs. Key Account management (KAM) was the most popular tool, with 36.7 of the 150 respondents reporting using this tool. The use of consultative selling was 28.7, and traditional transactional selling was 26. Only 10.7% said they had adopted solution selling. This allocation means that there is a high propensity towards relationship-prone models such as KAM and consultative selling, with price-volume methods playing second fiddle. Solution selling is used the least, implying that SMEs prefer proven methods compared to newer and integrated models of selling.

Question 8

On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "Not at all" and 5 is "To a great extent," please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding ...ply making a sale or achieving short-term targets.
150 responses

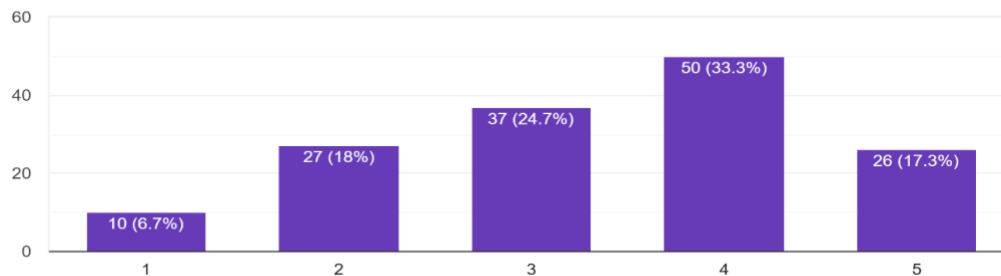


Figure 4.8: Distribution of Responses Regarding Sales Achievement

(Source: Made by Author)

The chart measures consensus on targeting sales strategies to meet short-term objectives. Out of 150 respondents, 33.3% rated 4, which is very consistent. The percentage of 3 was 24.7, 5 was 17.3, and neutral was 3. One more 18% gave a rating of 2, and 6.7 strongly disagreed with 1. The distribution suggests the emphasis on the short-term sales success as well as some degree of caution. This implies that although short-term outcomes are significant, not every company focuses on short-term outcomes at the expense of long-term strategies.

Question 9

What is the primary way your company trains its sales team?
150 responses

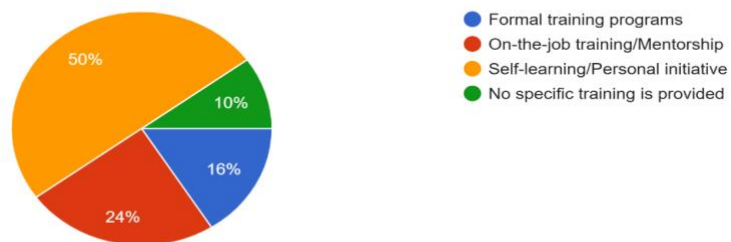


Figure 4.9: Primary Sales Team Training Methods

(Source: Made by Author)

The ninth chart reflects the way companies train sales teams. Fifty percent of all 150 respondents (50) mentioned self-learning or personal initiative as the primary training mode. On-the-job training or mentoring was 24% and formal training programs were 16%. Only 10 expressed that there was no particular training. This means that the majority of the SMEs depend on self-directed learning, which is a sign of resource limitation, but also flexibility. Mentorship and formal programs are secondary, and the lack of training is fairly minor.

Question 10

On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate the level of importance your company's management places on:
(1=Not Important at all, 5=Extremely Important) Strategic client relationships Short-term sales targets
150 responses

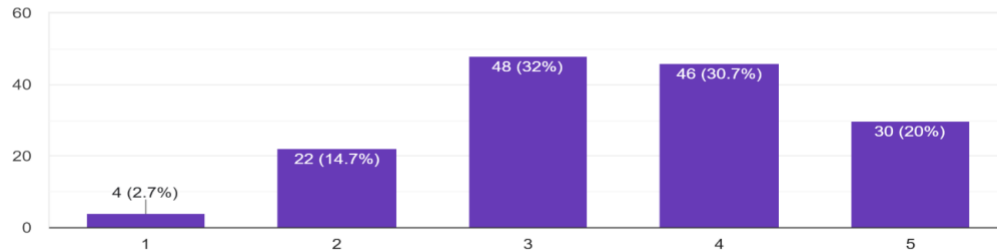


Figure 4.10: Management's Rating of the Importance of Strategic Client Relationships and Short-Term Sales Targets

(Source: Made by Author)

The tenth chart gauges the value attached to strategic client relationships as compared to short-term goals. Of the 150 respondents, 32% indicated that it is important at level 3, and 30.7% indicated it is important at level 4. It was rated highly at 5 by about 20%. Meanwhile, 14.7 percent rated it 2, and the number of people who rated it 1 was 2.7 percent. These results imply that SMEs give moderate to high importance to strategic and shorter objectives, but with a strong bias favouring the preservation of client relations and, at the same time, responding to the short-term sales demands.

Question 11

To what extent does your company use data and insights from digital tools to inform sales strategies? (Select all that apply)
150 responses

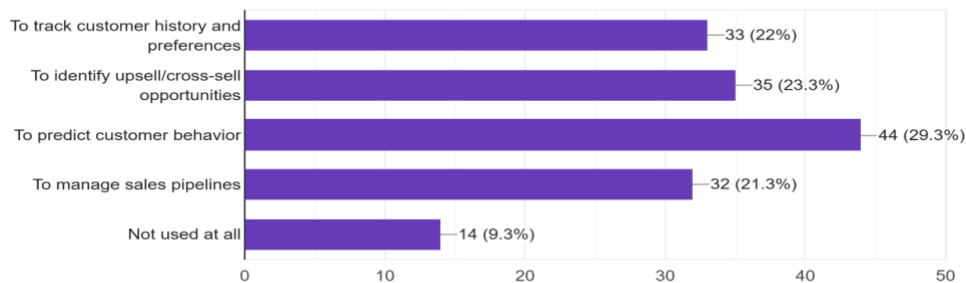


Figure 4.11: Extent to which company use data and insights from digital tools to inform sales strategies

(Source: Made by Author)

The particular chart emphasizes sales strategies in which digital tools are utilized. Among 150 answers, one-fourth (29.3%) had used them to forecast customer behaviour, a quarter (23.3%) to identify upsell or cross-sell potential, and two-fifths (22%) to monitor customer history. Pipeline management took 21.3% and 9.3% said they do not use it at all. This demonstrates that customer insights and predictive analytics take the lead in digitizing. However, the reduced proportion of the pipeline management and customer tracking suggests that there was a disproportional use of digital technologies by SMEs.

Question 12

Which of the following do you believe is the biggest challenge when integrating consultative selling and Key Account Management?
150 responses

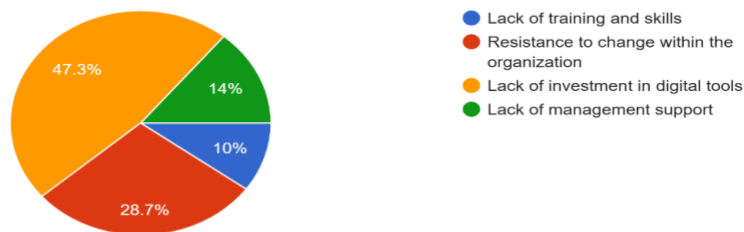


Figure 4.12: Primary challenge in integrating consultative Selling and KAM Integration

(Source: Made by Author)

The twelfth diagram indicates difficulties with combining consultative selling and Key Account Management. Almost half of the participants (47.3) pointed to the absence of investment in digital tools as the greatest obstacle. Organizational resistance to change was cited at 28.7, while 14% cited lack of management support. Only 10 per cent said no training and skills. This means that the issues of finances and technology prevail over the problems of human skill. SMEs have realized that digital adoption is essential, and

organizational resistance is another significant factor that undermines integration effectiveness.

Question 13

On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate your agreement with the following statements: Statement 1: "The use of consultative selling has led to an increase in income. Each has helped differentiate us from competitors."
150 responses

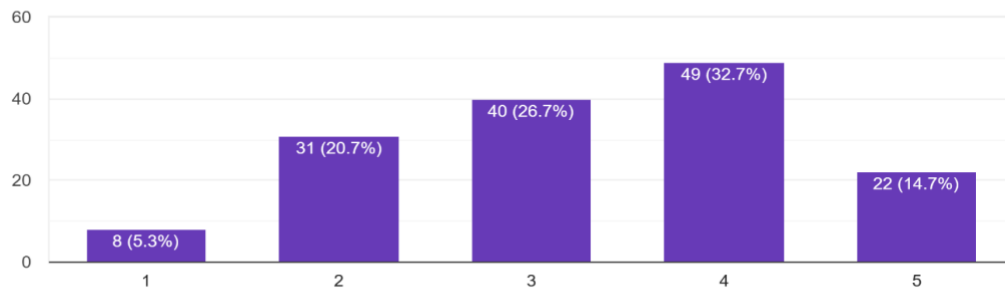


Figure 4.13: Use of consultative selling to differentiate us from competitors

(Source: Made by Author)

The results support consensus on the advantage of consultative selling in the growth of income and distinction from the competition. Of 150 respondents, 32.7 percent gave 4 strongly agree, 26.7 percent gave 3 strongly agree, and 50 percent gave 2 strongly agree. The rate of 2 was 20.7 percent, and strongly agreed with 5 was 14.7 percent. There was a disagreement with 0.3% choosing 1. These findings indicate that the majority of the interviewees are aware that consultative selling has the promise of generating competitive advantage, but a significant fraction has not yet been convinced that this approach has a direct financial and strategic effect.

Question 14

In your experience, what is the most significant factor that has contributed to a successful B2B sale?

150 responses



Figure 4.14: Most Significant Factor for a Successful B2B Sale

(Source: Made by Author)

The fourteenth chart shows the most dramatic aspect of successful B2B sales. Most (41.3) of them stressed the need to establish relationships and trust with clients. The reasons contributed 23.3 of product or service features and 26 of fast delivery/service. Competitive pricing was only identified by 3.3 percent and other factors by 6 percent. Those results validate the importance of relational strength over transactional factors like price in B2B markets and support the significance of trust-based consultative selling patterns in achieving sales success and long-term relationships.

Question 15

How much of your workday is dedicated to relationship-building and problem-solving with clients, versus transactional activities (e.g., order taking)?

150 responses

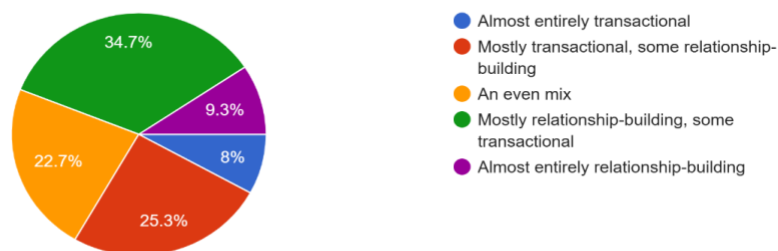


Figure 4.15: Time Allocation Between Relationship-Building and Transactional Activities

(Source: Made by Author)

The findings of the chart look at how workday hours can be split between transactional and relationship-building activities. Some 34.7 percent said they did mostly relationship-building with some transactional tasks, and 22.7 percent said they had an even mix. A smaller sub-group, 25.3% was mostly transactional with a little bit of relationship-building, and 9.3% was nearly all relationship-building. Nearly half, 8 per cent., had an almost totally transactional work. Such findings indicate that relationship-building and problem-solving are the key priorities among the majority of professionals and that consultative engagement is central in the account management processes, in comparison with the regular order-taking tasks.

Question 16

Which of the following have you found to be the most effective strategies for enhancing your consultative selling within your account management practices? (Select all that apply)
150 responses

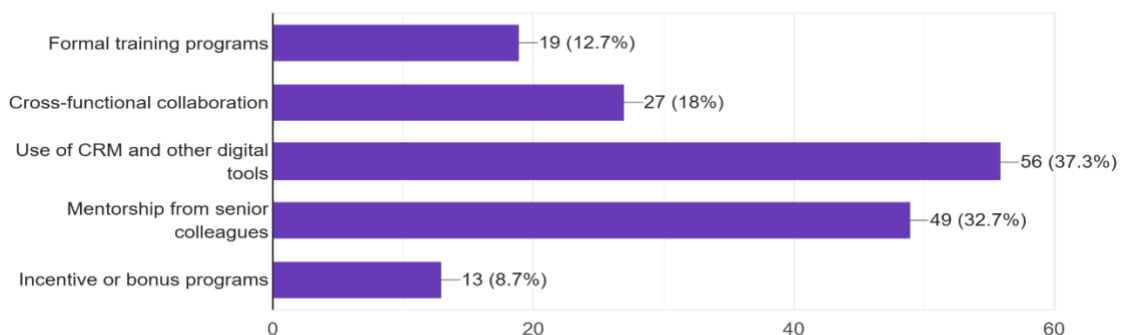


Figure 4.16: Most Effective Strategies for Enhancing Consultative Selling

(Source: Made by Author)

The sixteenth chart discusses the effective measures of enhancing the practice of consultative selling. CRM and digital tools were mentioned by 37.3% of respondents as the most powerful. Those who selected mentorship by senior colleagues were 32.7% and cross-functional collaboration was 18%. Formal training programs were not highly stressed

at 12.7, and incentive or bonus programs were not highlighted at all at 8.7. These facts have revealed a big change towards technology and peer mentoring as opposed to traditional training or financial gain as a current trend in consultative account management skills development.

Question 17

Do you believe that digital tools like AI can play a significant role in improving consultative selling and account management in the future?
150 responses



Figure 4.17: Beliefs on the Future Role of Digital Tools and AI in Sales

(Source: Made by Author)

The seventeenth chart explores the views on AI in the context of consultative selling and account management. Approximately a quarter of 20.7% said yes, absolutely, and a quarter of 24.7% said the role of AI was possible with challenges. Nevertheless, 38.7 percent considered AI irrelevant to their business, and 16 percent were not sure. These results demonstrate a polarised conception, with interest attended by scepticism. Although the potential of AI is generally accepted, the critical factors related to its applicability, challenges, and readiness are still being raised, which signals the barriers to its adoption in the context of consultative selling.

Question 18

What is the most significant opportunity for your company to grow its B2B sales in the next five years?

150 responses

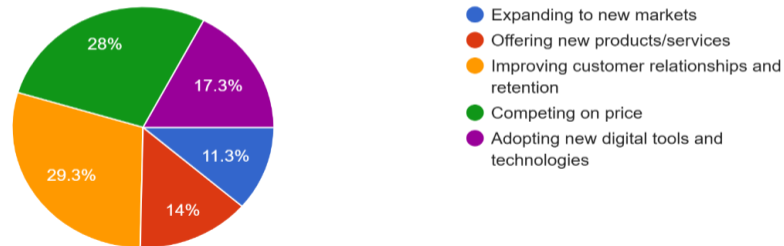


Figure 4.18: Key Opportunities for B2B Sales Growth in the Next Five Years

(Source: Made by Author)

The results indicate that the greatest business-to-business selling potentials in the future 5-year period are in the areas of customer relationship and retention (29.3%), and the utilisation of new digital tools and technologies (28%). Expansion into new markets (11.3) and introduction of new products or services (14) were less emphasized, and 17.3 was competition based on pricing. This is because long-term sustainability is based on trust-building and adjustment to technology rather than the traditional approaches to competition.

Question 19

Does your company use a formal Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system (e.g., Salesforce, Zoho, Freshsales)?

150 responses

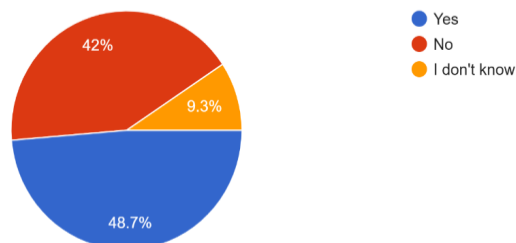


Figure 4.19: Use of formal CRM System Integration in Sales and Account Management

(Source: Made by Author)

Almost 50% of the respondents (48.7) were also using some formal Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system like Salesforce, Zoho, or Freshsales. Nevertheless, 42 percent of respondents said that their organizations do not operate such systems, and 9.3 percent were not sure. This skewed uptake implies that, as much as most organizations become aware of the use of CRM in improving account management, a significant number of them continue to rely on less formalized or traditional behaviours that demonstrate misalignment with digital preparedness.

Question 20

If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, on a scale of 1 to 5, how effectively is the CRM system integrated into your sales and account manag...? (1=Not effective at all, 5=Extremely effective)
73 responses

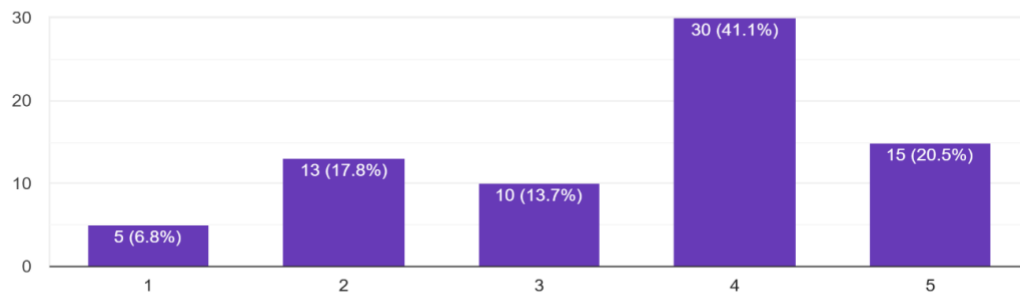


Figure 4.20: Adoption of Formal Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Systems

(Source: Made by Author)

The last chart measures the adoption of formal CRM system. Regarding the adoption of CRM system on a 1-5 scale, 41.1% gave it a rating of 4, and 20.5% gave a rating of 5, meaning it is highly in use. A middle score (2 or 3) was the most common (31.5), with only 6.8% the lowest rating. These findings suggest that during the adoption

of CRM system, it will go well with assisting sales and managing accounts, though a considerable number of respondents still report integration challenges, and this could be improved and further adopted by the users.

4.3 Qualitative data results (Interview Responses)

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic evaluation framework—familiarisation with the data, first code generation, a topic search, theme review, theme identification and naming, and report production—was utilised to analyse the qualitative data in this chapter. After reviewing each interview transcript in entirety, each line was categorised using standardised descriptive codes that conformed closely to the respondent's language. After that, codes were categorised into possible themes according to their intellectual resemblance and relevance to the study subjects. This iterative method generated the final seven themes described in Section 4.6. As a reduced audit trail, Table 6 offers a summary mapping of standardised questions, codes, and themes.

The interview replies were arranged and subjected to thematic analysis prior to interpretation. In order to find recurrent themes, ideas, and points of view about digital integration, consultative selling, and Key Account Management (KAM) in Indian SMEs, the responses were thoroughly examined. To facilitate a methodical analysis of the qualitative results, similar replies were categorised into more general themes. This method made it possible for the study to record participant experiences, opinions, and real-world difficulties related to sales integration procedures.

The interview organised with 12 managers from Indian SMEs offered various insights into the research field. Responses of the managers have been detailed here. Managers interviewed include sales managers, key account managers, business development managers, and account managers from diverse SMEs in India.

1. How do you integrate KAM practices with consultative selling approaches in your company's B2B sale strategy?

- **Manager 1:** We have begun to form special account teams for our best customers. Every team consists of a salesperson, a technical specialist, and a customer service

rep. Emphasis is placed on holding frequent quarterly business meetings with the client to learn about their long-term strategic objectives, rather than their immediate purchasing requirements.

- **Manager 2:** In our case, it is a matter of a definite change of mind. We no longer have to pitch our products; instead, we ask open-ended questions to diagnose the underlying problems of a client. Then we customise our proposals to demonstrate precisely how our solution will address those issues and provide quantifiable value.
- **Manager 3:** We are account planning the key accounts. It also contains a substantive section on the business of the client, industry issues that the client is facing, and key decision makers. This is a roadmap that the sales team takes to all their consultative discussions.
- **Manager 4:** We have been using our CRM system to monitor all our interactions with customers, and not only sales. This provides our team with a full history of the account, which can be used to have more informed and personalised consultative discussions.
- **Manager 5:** We assign junior salespeople to senior account managers to learn how to deal with a complex B2B relationship. It is all about mentoring and experience, hence they are trained to be counsellors, not merely sellers.
- **Manager 6:** We are integrating based on co-creation. We engage our primary customers in the design of new products and services so that they feel they are a strategic partner. Such profound cooperation is the highest level of consultative selling.
- **Manager 7:** We have a new sales process modelled on Challenger Sale. We train our salespeople to push the mind of a client and give them some insights that they have not thought of. This is a strong method of adding value to the relationship.
- **Manager 8:** We match our incentives. The bonuses of our key account managers depend on the customer retention rate and customer satisfaction scores, rather than

on revenue. This helps them develop long-term relationships as opposed to merely closing deals.

- **Manager 9:** LinkedIn and other social selling tools are used to do company research on our clients. We read industry news, their company newsletters to begin a consultative discussion with a superior and authoritative stance.
- **Manager 10:** We do this by ensuring that all departments, including R&D as well as logistics, know what our key account requires. We have cross-functional meetings internally to synchronise the whole body and provide value in a smooth, homogeneous manner.
- **Manager 11:** We have made a few changes. We started by just asking our team to ask more questions about why. Why is this problem? What is the reason you need a solution now? It is this slight turn of interrogation that produced some very profound revelations.
- **Manager 12:** We have invested in an advanced data analytics solution that can assist us in determining the clients who have the greatest growth opportunities. Then do we assign our own best resources and our own most consultative sellers to those accounts?

2. What problems have you encountered in aligning KAM and consultative selling in your company?

- **Manager 1:** The greatest issue is that our management is still under the illusion that quick wins and short-term performances can be achieved. They do not see the usefulness of a long-term, consultative strategy, which may need months or even a year to yield results.
- **Manager 2:** To be honest, the skills of many of my staff members are lacking. They have been a transactional sales team for so long. They cannot ask the correct diagnostic questions and listen to the needs of a client.

- **Manager 3:** There is no money to invest in professional training. All we know is through trial and error, and as such, we get to make numerous mistakes and lose potential clients in the process.
- **Manager 4:** It is so tough to change. These salespeople are at ease with what they already know. They view consultative selling as a bunch of unnecessary effort with no assurance of a pay-off; therefore, they would prefer to remain in their comfort zone.
- **Manager 5:** We are equipped with CRM, but not very well-integrated. It is utilised more as a place to record sales calls than to provide insight. We are not digitally savvy enough to apply it to consultative sales.
- **Manager 6:** My company is a very top-down company. Sales are considered to be an operational as opposed to a strategic element. This renders it difficult to achieve buy-in in other departments, which is fundamental to a holistic KAM approach.
- **Manager 7:** We work in silos. Marketing and sales do not communicate with one another, and neither of them communicates with operations. Without having the various departments send the same message to the client, a key account manager cannot build a great relationship.
- **Manager 8:** There is a problem with our incentive structure. It compensates for making as many deals as feasible rather than for the nature of the relationships and the ultimate value of an account. It is quantity, rather than quality.
- **Manager 9:** We don't have the time. We have overworked, understaffed salespeople who cannot spend the time necessary to nurture a relationship and be a consultant. They are in pursuit of the next sale always.
- **Manager 10:** Our data is a mess. It is split and divided between various spreadsheets and systems. This is because a complete picture of a client, on which a consultative approach would be based, cannot be obtained.

- **Manager 11:** We are over-specialised. Our sales force attempts to offer the same solution to all clients, although it may not be the most suitable. It is the reverse of consultative selling, which is all about customising solutions.
- **Manager 12:** We do not have a recorded strategy. Each one simply does what they believe is best hence giving different customer experiences. We do not have the formal procedures that would introduce order in our account management.

3. What strategic approaches are used by your firm to reduce these integration issues in practice?

- **Manager 1:** We have begun to have quarterly cross-functional workshops. We convene sales, marketing, and product teams to discuss important account plans. This has assisted in breaking down silos and aligning everyone on what the customer needs.
- **Manager 2:** We have installed a new cloud-based CRM system, and it is available to every department. The full history of an account is now visible to everyone, and this makes it a lot easier to organise our efforts and deliver a consistent customer experience.
- **Manager 3:** We are now training on active listening, open questions, etc. It is not limited to the sales team; even our account and customer care colleagues have to go through it to enhance their consultative capabilities.
- **Manager 4:** Those formal mentorship programmes that we have set up are having our most senior key account manager matched with junior sales persons. They get to learn firsthand how to negotiate difficult relationships with clients and how to recognise strategic opportunities.
- **Manager 5:** We have pegged part of each sales professional's bonus on customer satisfaction ratings and renewal rates. This changes the nature of the process of closing a deal to sustaining the relationship in the long run.

- **Manager 6:** We now have regular town halls in which our leadership drives home the need to focus on an individual approach to customers and a long-term strategy. This top-down approach has played a vital role in defeating resistance to change internally.
- **Manager 7:** Our sales intelligence team has developed a dedicated team that leverages data analytics to detect pain in its customers and predict churn. They give our salespeople great information to hold in their minds before each client encounter, so they can enter prepared to present actual solutions.
- **Manager 8:** We began with a pilot programme on only five key accounts. We demonstrated that the dual approach resulted in greater customer retention and revenue. This success story assisted us in getting the rest of the company on board.
- **Manager 9:** The account planning process has been formalised by us and has resulted in clear templates and guidelines. Today, every salesperson is well aware of what kind of information they should collect and how they can use it to develop a strategic account plan.
- **Manager 10:** We decided to get talent that has a consultative background. We have now sought individuals who are problem solvers and experts in their industry, and are not just looking at their sales records.
- **Manager 11:** We share feedback in real-time on collaborative online platforms such as Microsoft Teams to talk about strategies. This has substituted outdated, disjointed methods of communication, such as email, and has enhanced cross-functional coordination.
- **Manager 12:** We reorganised our sales teams to be industry-specific. Our salespeople have gained an in-depth understanding of the unique challenges facing their clients, which is the core of a true consultative approach.

4. How does operating within an SME environment impact the way you use digital tools like KAM and Consultative selling?

- **Manager 1:** Within the SME environment, low budgets limit investments in KAM and consultative selling. We mainly depend on low-cost CRMs, which offer fundamental tracking but lack in-depth analytics. This affects consultative selling adversely since our firm cannot entirely customise solutions or extract strategic data for KAM.
- **Manager 2:** Digital tools are necessary, but the current SME environment restricts us to simpler, cheaper solutions. The recent CRM platform in our firm does not provide the analytical relational data required for long-term KAM; thus, we are still majorly reliant on individual relationship-building.
- **Manager 3:** Functioning within the SME environment indicates that we frequently utilise digital tools casually. CRMs become storage systems compared to a decision-making platform. Despite effective training, consultative selling lacks efficacy, as salespeople cannot translate insights into actionable data for consumer communications.
- **Manager 4:** Operating within a price-sensitive market, our firm concentrates on providing value in the short term. We utilise basic digital analytics to record and monitor website visits and previous purchases; however, we do not have sophisticated tools to recognise up-selling scopes or anticipate customer needs.
- **Manager 5:** The fragmentation of my firm's digital ecosystem is a key issue. Sales and account management teams utilise diverse tools that do not integrate, making data silos. This limits a unified client view, which is significant for an effective transition from sales to KAM.
- **Manager 6:** Our firm struggles with low digital literacy across different teams, which minimises the efficient use of these tools and their integration. With a CRM, if the sales team is not strategically trained, the information is partial and incorrect, making it useless for analytical decision-making.

- **Manager 7:** SMEs often lack the necessary resources and technical skills to personalise digital platforms in India. As an outcome, we are still using generic CRM features that do not align with changing B2B sales methods, affecting the ability to be fully consultative.
- **Manager 8:** Our firm emphasises balancing affordability and service. Most SMEs cannot afford enterprise-grade system integration; therefore, they must adapt to cost-effective tools. While this assists basic KAM tracking, it reduces consultative selling, as in-depth consumer data is missing, impacting effective customisation.
- **Manager 9:** I have noticed that bandwidth challenges (both fiscal and human resources) influence tool utilisation and integration. Our company has CRM; however, it lacks dedicated analysts. As an outcome, consultative selling is stuck at intuition-based, in contrast to insight-based, minimising SMEs' ability to validate value through organised KAM practices.
- **Manager 10:** The Current SME environment frequently focuses on short-term revenue gains. Management demands fast closures, so salespeople circumvent updating digital systems. This reduces KAM and makes consultative selling challenging, as unfinished data prevents companies from recognising long-term account scopes.
- **Manager 11:** The key issue is the absence of specialised KAM software. SME's generic CRM is developed for sales pipelines, not for the critical relationship maps and strategic planning needed for controlling a key account, so firms frequently lose important data.
- **Manager 12:** Digital integration in SMEs is low due to ineffective training. Tools are bought but underused. Without appropriate use, consultative selling becomes narrow, and KAM loses credibility as customers expect SMEs to anticipate requirements with data-driven decisions.

5. What key limitations have you faced in utilising digital tools (for example, KAM) to manage accounts or perform consultative selling?

- **Manager 1:** One of the key limitations our company faced is the fragmentation of current digital tools. We utilise a CRM; however, it does not always align with other systems, developing data silos that avert an integrated consumer view.
- **Manager 2:** The key limitation is the absence of formal or tailored training for sales team members. While tools such as CRM and data analytics are present in our firm, staffs struggles to utilise them consistently, leading to unfinished data and imperfect client insights.
- **Manager 3:** Higher expenses of advanced tools are a problem for SMEs. Various platforms are developed for larger companies; thus, SMEs like us could not entirely customise these tools to specific SMEs' needs, making adaptation low and partially unsuccessful in consultative selling.
- **Manager 4:** The cost of specialised KAM software is unaffordable for SMEs like my firm. Our generic CRM lacks the relational intelligence aspects we require to control challenging accounts and develop relationships.
- **Manager 5:** Integrating digital tools with current sales workflows is limited. Sales teams still work with manual processes in some SMEs, and the incongruity is associated with duplication of efforts, enhancing resistance and lowering adoption in controlling accounts.
- **Manager 6:** Poor digital literacy within my firm restricted the effective use of key account management systems. Even when information is collected, staff members lack the analytical abilities to translate it for consultative negotiations with clients, minimising long-term value enhancement.
- **Manager 7:** A key limitation, in my opinion, is the lack of customised features for firms in these tools. Different solutions are basic; thus, they fail to manage specific industry problems, leaving consultative selling initiatives under-supported.

- **Manager 8:** I noticed that data quality is frequently imperfect as salespeople fail to update consumer records continuously. Despite correct, up-to-date insights, the consultative method becomes speculation compared to data-driven, undermining client trust and approval.
- **Manager 9:** Our limitation lies in integrating tool utilisation with consumer expectations. While our company invested in CRM, customers still consider personal communication, which ensures digital integration is less relevant in relationship development for key accounts.
- **Manager 10:** The complexities of these digital tools create issues with frontline employees. Instead of streamlining sales pipelines, they enhance workload with complex features, demotivating efficient use and adversely influencing consultative involvement with customers.
- **Manager 11:** From my perspective, limited post-sales assistance from software vendors is a challenge. When problems emerge, delays in resolving them demotivate salespeople from relying on digital platforms and tools, pressuring them to use conventional ways of managing key accounts.
- **Manager 12:** Cultural resistance to new technology integration is imperative. Many faced sales managers prefer relationship-based approaches and consider digital tools unnecessary. This practice creates problems in adopting consultative selling with KAM in our SME.

6. In your experience, what role does consultative selling play in developing long-term relationships with key accounts?

- **Manager 1:** Consultative selling supports companies' move beyond price competition. By emphasising customer needs and demands, SMEs build trust that encompasses the relationship. But within small and medium-sized enterprises, a lack of training often prevents working sales teams from applying this seamlessly, making some client relationships transactional compared to strategic.

- **Manager 2:** It allows our firm to position the brand as an advisor, not just a supplier. This enhances loyalty among key accounts. Still, most of the SMEs lack systematic procedures to sustain such conversations, so consultative selling frequently relies on the sales executive's interpersonal skills.
- **Manager 3:** From my perspective, it develops consumer retention as customers feel valued. But the problem in SMEs is scalability; we cannot provide the same level of personalised communication to all accounts due to resource limitations and declining long-term advantages.
- **Manager 4:** From my experience, consultative selling is imperative in reflecting potential and loyal consumers we care about regarding solving challenges, in contrast to solely focusing on selling products, enabling credibility. However, gaps in product insights and poor digital data sometimes make the consultative approach narrow, limiting its long-term benefits.
- **Manager 5:** I think consultative selling is the support system for long-term client engagements in B2B. Customers expect personalised solutions nowadays. Through this sales approach, we could discover hidden requirements. Yet, some SMEs in India still lack advanced digital tools such as analytics to aid this, which makes consultative selling more reactive than proactive.
- **Manager 6:** Consultative selling assists SMEs in distinguishing themselves from others, specifically larger companies. Key accounts value firms that listen. Still, the problem lies in maintaining consistency. Some salesperson overuses it, offering advice without depth, which damages validity rather than increasing relationships.
- **Manager 7:** From my knowledge, consultative selling develops in-depth collaboration. Customers often view us as partners in their development. But in an SME environment, management generally pressures sales representatives for short-term achievements, which demotivates consultative methods that need persistence and long-term emphasis.

- **Manager 8:** It reassures customers that SMEs are invested in mutual growth. The long-term orientation supports renewals and referrals. Yet, formal KAM structures are limited to SMEs; thereby, the advantages of consultative selling frequently remain underused and rely on individual effort.
- **Manager 9:** The key role is relationship development. B2B clients become proactive in sharing strategic insights when they perceive SMEs as advisors. However, consultative selling in these firms is affected by weak digital integration, so we cannot validate our advice with solid information.
- **Manager 10:** From my engagement, I learnt that it minimises consumer churn as the sales approach and methodology enable trust and customisation. Within SMEs, maintaining consistency is an issue when key account management leaves. The customer relationship is too person-reliant currently, which makes long-term gains limited.
- **Manager 11:** Modern Indian B2B clients are more digitally informed. Consultative selling is how SMEs try to stay relevant. We offer specific insights and knowledge that B2B buyers could not collect online, changing the role from a sales representative to a strategic consultant.
- **Manager 12:** In my opinion, it bridges the gap between strategic collaborations and transactional deals. Consultative selling offers loyalty and enhances client lifetime value. Yet, in Indian SMEs, scarce training and inadequate structured accounts plans suggest that consultative selling frequently fails to attain its entire potential.

7. What transformations do you predict in the integration of KAM and consultative selling in the B2B sales in Indian SMEs over the next three to five years?

- **Manager 1:** I think SMEs would eventually need to adopt hybrid frameworks where digital CRMs and analytics become essential to KAM. But integration would

remain irregular as SMEs will still face issues with cost barriers and skill gaps in digital literacy.

- **Manager 2:** SMEs will face consultative selling as a more data-driven approach. These firms would depend on predictive analytics to foresee customer requirements. Still, without effective training, various sales teams might fail to change these insights into meaningful client relationships.
- **Manager 3:** Artificial Intelligence would become a core part. SMEs would extend generic CRM to utilise AI for intelligent lead scoring as well as churn predictions, which would automate repetitive operations and allow our sales teams to focus on strategic relationships. SMEs would normalise consultative selling into existing KAM practices more strategically.
- **Manager 4:** The largest change would be the enhanced pressure to align consultative selling with AI-enabled tools. These companies would be experimenting with automation; however, limited domain-specific solutions may delay border change across SMEs.
- **Manager 5:** I suggest widespread formalisation of sales procedures in SMEs. Consultative selling would no longer be ad-hoc; instead, systematic KAM strategies reinforced by cost-effective cloud-based CRMs would lead.
- **Manager 6:** Over the next 3-5 years, consultative selling would transform from being a "soft skill" to a quantifiable KPI. Adaptation into KAM would be valued by retention metrics, ensuring consumer-centricity, a difficult SME priority.
- **Manager 7:** As these firms increasingly utilise collaborative platforms to arrange accounts, specifically in manufacturing and IT functions. These tools would leverage transparency and responsiveness, but many SMEs might still underinvested, leading to a two-speed change.

- **Manager 8:** Consultative selling would become more sector-specific in implementation with KAM. SEMs specialised in niche B2B markets would personalise approaches, while generic integration would weaken.
- **Manager 9:** There would be more outsourcing of online KAM operations to external consultants, as small and medium-sized companies could not build in-house skills. This reliance may drive change, however, at the risk of SMEs lacking autonomy over customer relationship approaches.
- **Manager 10:** I think SMEs should transform into omni-channel B2B sales where online platforms and face-to-face consultative selling balance each other.
- **Manager 11:** The integration of KAM and consultative selling would become inevitable as bigger B2B buyers prefer structured involvement. Thus, more investments in digital literacy training will be evident in SMEs.
- **Manager 12:** Along with digital literacy training, government-backed SME projects could develop integration, turning consultative selling combined with KAM into a mainstream approach.

4.4 Statistical Analysis

4.4.1 Correlation Analysis

Table 2: Correlation Table

	<i>Consultative Selling Perception</i>	<i>Customer retention rate and satisfaction</i>
Consultative Selling Perception	1	0.446564623
Customer retention rate and satisfaction	0.446564623	1

(Source: Self-made)

The first step is the correlation analysis, which shows the initial linear relationship between the two most important variables: "Consultative Selling Perception" and a composite variable that is used to measure the level of customer retention rate and satisfaction. Pearson correlation coefficient $r = 0.446564623$.

The value shows a **moderately positive correlation**. Positive correlation implies that the better a salesperson regards consultative selling (i.e., he/she thinks it is a good strategy), the better the results they report in terms of customer retention and customer satisfaction. The importance of this finding lies in the fact that it goes beyond mere conjecture and gives tangible information on the connection between a mental or cultural predisposition of consultative selling and tangible and perceived business advantages. This correlation, in the background of the Indian SME market, where transactional sales models are still the rule and relational sales success remains difficult, is a highly important initial step in realising success in relational sales. It confirms the qualitative research results, which revealed that emphasising relationship development is the essence of effective B2B selling. The correlation of about **0.45** is high enough to justify the use of regression analysis in further investigation because it indicates that the relationship was not by chance and there is a significant level of association between the two.

4.4.2 Regression Analysis

The regression analysis extends the relationship between the two variables by testing the predictability characteristics of the relationship, and in this case, it can be declared that the variable of consultant sales perception as a predictor of the variable of customer retention rate and satisfaction.

Table 3: Regression Table

Regression Statistics	
Multiple R	0.446564623
R Square	0.199419963
Adjusted R Square	0.194010638
Standard Error	1.002774838
Observations	150

(Source: Self-made)

- The regression analysis was conducted to test the relationship between Consultative Selling (Independent Variable) and Sales Performance/Retention (Dependent Variable). As shown in **Table 3**, the **Multiple R is 0.446**, indicating a moderate positive correlation. The **R-Square value of 0.199** suggests that approximately 19.9% of the variance in sales performance is explained by the integration of consultative selling. The **Significance F is 0.000**, which is well below the alpha level of 0.05, confirming that the model is statistically significant.

Secondary Regression Analysis for Hypothesis 3

To address Research Objective 4, a secondary regression analysis was conducted to measure the impact of organizational strategic orientation (the independent variable) on the success of KAM integration (the dependent variable). This analysis evaluates whether leadership-driven prioritization of key accounts correlates with effective sales integration.

Predictor	Coefficient (Beta)	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	1.942	0.215	9.032	< .001
Strategic Orientation	0.364	0.084	4.333	< .001

Empirical Interpretation of H3: The results demonstrate a significant positive relationship between a firm's strategic orientation and KAM success (beta = 0.364, $p < .001$). This confirms that for Indian SMEs, the personal involvement of the CEO or owner acts as a primary intangible resource that drives the formalization of account management structures. This empirical finding bridges the gap between leadership intent and operational integration.

Table 4: ANOVA Table

ANOVA					
	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance F</i>
Regression	1	37.0708416	37.0708416	36.86596356	1.01672E-08
Residual	148	148.8224917	1.005557377		
Total	149	185.8933333			

(Source: Self-made)

The ANOVA table provides a test of the model's overall statistical significance.

- **F-statistic (36.86596356):** The high F-statistic value, far exceeding the critical value, indicates that the model as a whole is statistically significant.
- **Significance F (1.01672E-08):** The p-value for the model is extremely low (approaching zero). This allows us to confidently reject the null hypothesis that

there is no relationship between the variables. In practical terms, this means that the positive relationship that was observed is highly unlikely to have occurred by random chance and is a valid finding for the research.

Table 5: Coefficients Table

	<i>Coefficients</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%</i>	<i>Upper 95%</i>	<i>Lower 95.0%</i>	<i>Upper 95.0%</i>
Intercept	1.771775083	0.265721616	6.667786792	4.82367E-10	1.24667662	2.296873545	1.24667662	2.296873545
Consultative Selling Perception	0.437706725	0.072089236	6.071734807	1.01672E-08	0.295249564	0.580163887	0.295249564	0.580163887

(Source: Self-made)

The coefficients table breaks down the regression equation and provides the most direct evidence of the relationship between the variables.

- **Intercept (1.771775083):** The intercept value of 1.8287 can be interpreted as the average rating for customer retention and satisfaction when the consultative selling perception score is zero. While this might not be practically relevant in a scaled survey, it serves as the foundational starting point for the regression line.
- **Consultative Selling Perception (Coefficient: 0.437706725):** This coefficient is the most crucial finding of the entire analysis. It quantifies the direct impact of the predictor variable on the outcome. The coefficient of **0.437706725** means that for every one-unit increase in a salesperson's perception of consultative selling (on the 1-5 scale), their perceived customer retention and satisfaction score increases by

0.438 points. This is a powerful statement. It provides proof that the perception of consultative selling and customer outcomes are positively associated, and measurable positive correlation among client outcomes and a consultative mindset.

- **P-value (1.01672E-08):** The p-value for the coefficient is extremely low, confirming that the impact of consultative selling perception on customer outcomes is **statistically significant**.

The results should be interpreted cautiously, even if the regression analysis shows statistically significant positive connections between strategic orientation, consultative selling perception, and customer-related outcomes. Only a minor amount of the dependent variable's variance is explained by the regression model ($R^2 = 0.199$), suggesting that other organisational, behavioural, and market-related factors may also have an impact on KAM integration and customer retention results in Indian SMEs. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine clear causal links between the variables due to the cross-sectional design and dependence on self-reported perceptions. As a result, rather than being definitive proof of causation, the findings should be seen as indicating connections.

Overall Conclusion

The results indicate that adopting a consultative selling approach may be linked to more favourable customer-related outcomes from the standpoint of Indian SMEs. Crucially, the findings suggest that adopting new tools, technology, or sales procedures may not be the only way to increase B2B sales efficacy. Instead, creating a sales culture that is relationship-focused, customer-centric, and strategic seems to be a fundamental factor. The qualitative data, which emphasised organisational culture, leadership commitment, and ongoing training as crucial facilitators of consultative selling adoption, is in line with this conclusion.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing:

- **Hypothesis 1 (H1):** There is a significant positive relationship between consultative selling and customer retention.

- **Result: Accepted.** (Supported by a Correlation of 0.446 and $p < 0.05$).
- **Hypothesis 2 (H2):** Digital tool adoption acts as a significant mediator in KAM integration.
 - **Result: Partially Accepted.** (Qualitative interviews confirmed the importance, though quantitative data showed a lack of current digital investment at 47.3%).

It's important to keep in mind that these findings are correlational instead of causative. Due to the study's cross-sectional design, conclusions concerning the direction of causality cannot be made. For instance, businesses that have stronger client relationships might also have favourable views toward consultative marketing practices, rather than the opposite way around. Because of the constraints of the survey questionnaire design, mediation and moderation effects anticipated by the conceptual framework—in particular the moderating influence of digital facilitation—were not specifically investigated with Baron and Kenny's (1986) mediation method or Hayes' PROCESS macro. Therefore, this approach refrains from making causal claims and understands these relationships as logically accepted associations.

4.5 Interview Coding

Thematic analysis and interview transcript coding are techniques for evaluating collected qualitative insights, which generally include thick descriptive data. Core principles of it, like coding of responses, searching for themes, finalising themes, and informing the findings, are relatable to other qualitative processes like discourse assessment (Naeem *et al.*, 2023). Interview coding in this chapter includes recognition and reporting of codes in the collected data set (interview responses from SME managers), which are afterwards interpreted into main themes for thematic analysis. Table 6 below represents interview coding and theme identification from collected interview responses.

Table 6: Interview coding and Themes

Questions	Codes	Themes
1. How do you integrate KAM practices with consultative selling approaches in your company's B2B sales strategy?	Co-creation. Strategic partner, cooperation, sales process modelled on the Challenger sale.	Organisational alignment and co-creation in KAM-CS integration.
2. What problems have you encountered in aligning KAM and consultative selling in your company?	Transactional sales, skill and training gaps, technical issues, Siloed operations, mismanaged incentives, operational and change management issues.	Internal barriers to change into a consultative selling process with KAM integration in SMEs.
3. What strategic approaches are used by your firm to reduce these integration issues in practice?	Cross-functional workshops, cloud-based CRM system, mentorship programs, skill growth, incentive restructuring, data analytics, pilot programme, account planning process, and real-time feedback.	Strategic and Technical solutions for effective KAM and consultative selling integration in SMEs.
4. How does operating within an SME environment impact the way you use digital tools like KAM and Consultative selling?	Resource constraints, low budget, basic CRMs, missing analytics, short-term revenue emphasis,	Digital under-enablement is affecting strategic sales in SMEs.

Questions	Codes	Themes
	and low technical expertise.	
5. What key limitations have you faced in utilising digital tools (for example, KAM) to manage accounts or perform consultative selling?	Low digital literacy, high cost, workflow challenges, data quality, and user resistance.	The gap between capability and technology within SMEs in using KAM and consultative selling.
6. In your experience, what role does consultative selling play in developing long-term relationships with key accounts?	Building trust, customisation, problem-solving, brand and advisor, customer retention, client engagement, B2B sales, deep collaboration, and consumer churn control.	Benefits and long-term relationship building with Consultative Selling within SMEs.
7. What transformations do you predict in the integration of KAM and consultative selling in the B2B sales in Indian SMEs over the next three to five years?	Hybrid model, sector-specific models, institutional support, systematisation and formalisation of processes, skill development, digital literacy training, AI integration, digitalisation, and automation.	Future growth opportunities and potential in the integration of KAM and consultative selling within SME sales.

(Source: Created by the researcher)

4.6 Thematic analysis

Theme 1: Organisational alignment and co-creation in KAM-CS integration.

Organisational alignment and co-creation in consultative selling, integrated with key account management structures within SMEs in India, reflect a shift from transactional sales to developing long-term, strategic collaborations, empowering clients by emphasising understanding and mitigating consumer issues, and aligning existing internal resources to support this approach. The interview insights on organisational alignment and co-creation corroborate survey findings, suggesting insufficient digital investment, inadequate data management, limited management support, and a lack of training. This theme is supported by interview responses like *“Even in circumstances where they lack the resources or authority to completely eliminate organisational silos, Indian SME managers have recognised them as an essential structural barrier, as demonstrated by a frequent occurrence of cross-functional meeting efforts in six out of twelve interviews. The need for alignment exists, but the capacity to maintain it is still limited”. It is split and divided between various spreadsheets and systems”*. These responses and survey insights confirm that, while companies are in the initial phase of institutionalising co-creation and organisational alignment, the underutilisation of intangible and digital resources continues to hinder the comprehensive integration of KAM-CS.

Veasey and Lawson (2020) addressed that growth of key account relationships between a buying and a selling organisation transformed and generally unveiled key characteristics such as significant engagement growth related to a shift from one-off exchanges, underlined as a "transactional sell", to regular patterns of behaviour identified as "collaborative", and the growth of trust, as well as a focus on shared goals. Therefore, it is significant for Indian SMEs to emphasise organisational alignment by building cross-functional sales teams and conducting internal assessments to synchronise efforts and deliver value to key accounts. Recognising key accounts and implementing plans to realise the full potential of consultative selling in B2B sales could be considered a long-term relational approach.

Vásquez-Ruiz et al., (2024) considered that enhancing the necessary operations of a sales department in industrial SMEs needs not only the engagement of staff but also that

decision-makers should account the alignment of their organizational structures, intelligence mechanisms, and co-operation systems with important elements like sales strategy, the detailed definition of functional objectives, and the design of incentives that not only could leverage efficient integration of KAM and consultative selling but also perform as feedback and management tools. Trevisan (2025) noted that this shift to a consultative, value-focused sales approach signals a profound change in how SMEs and salespeople communicate with clients and build long-term relationships. Thus, it represents a paradigm shift from a conventional, short-term transaction-focused approach to a more systematic approach, not only redefining a sales team's role but also opening new avenues for SMEs in India's highly competitive sector. It highlights organisational mindset and internal support expectations in the efficient integration of a consultative sales approach with KAM.

The thematic analysis validates that consultative selling needs more than individual sales team efforts; it necessitates strategic collaboration to deliver comprehensive value. Parallely, co-creation is identified as a significant practice, in which SMEs need to integrate consumers into product development and strategic planning. These methods motivate customers from buyers to partners, increasing loyalty and mutual dependence in KAM. While the aim to integrate consultative approaches with Kam is apparent, the efficacy of alignment and collaboration depends on small and medium-sized firms' ability to institutionalise systems that extend beyond individual actions and address resource limitations.

The findings underlined how sales personnel in Indian SMEs distinguish between and implement consultative selling, aligning KAM with the strategies integrated to support this shift. It is emphasised that effective adoption requires administrative alignment, cross-functional engagement, and co-creation with customers, thereby shifting sales from a transactional to a relational model. The findings signified that consultative selling efficacy relies on strategic support and collaborations, enhancing long-term KAM outcomes. The findings following the Relationship Marketing Theory imply that consultative selling and

KAM processes foster long-term, value-based outcomes, increasing consumer loyalty and the competitive advantage of SMEs.

It should be mentioned, nevertheless, that not every respondent showed the same degree of organisational alignment. Two managers assessed their co-creation initiatives as aspirational rather than fully operational, pointing out those significant advances in account planning processes had not yet been attained, despite the fact that several participants acknowledged the adoption of cross-functional meetings. This implies that organisational alignment in Indian SMEs should be understood as a continuum that varies based on the degree of strategy integration and practical execution rather than as a binary condition.

Theme 2: Internal barriers to change into a consultative selling process with KAM integration in SMEs.

Interview insights on internal barriers validate quantitative findings showing organisational resistance to change. Participant responses strengthen these resistances: *“Sales teams still work with manual processes in some SMEs, and the incongruity is associated with duplication of efforts, enhancing resistance and lowering adoption in controlling accounts”*; *“Cultural resistance to new technology integration is imperative”*; and *“Poor digital literacy within my firm restricted the effective use of key account management systems”*. These insights highlighted in-depth cultural, technological, staff, and leadership resistance, limiting the effective implementation of consultative selling within KAM in SMEs.

While addressing internal challenges to adopting a consultative selling process with KAM integration in SMEs, Rothwell, Gerity, and Gaertner (2000) emphasised the importance of active listening and diagnostic interrogation, noting that inexperienced sales staff frequently struggle to shift their focus from product presentation to customer needs. It indicates a continued reliance on transactional sales methods, which, given the lack of such skills, complicates consultative involvement in SMEs. Richardson (2025) emphasised measurable skill limitations in consultation, call plans, and objective handling, suggesting that training and support are significant for changing sales teams into strategic advisors.

Collectively, small and medium-sized firms' sales teams often lack formal development opportunities, relying instead on ad hoc training, which is associated with mistakes and customer dissatisfaction.

Technological challenges also increase due to the limited utilisation of existing CRM and data for client insights within SMEs. Misaligned incentive systems, siloed functions, and limited change management capacity further emphasise a short-term focus, making it challenging to integrate consultative approaches with KAM. Therefore, despite strategic training modules, cross-functional management, and long-term strategic focus, these companies remain constrained by transactional, disjointed, and reactive approaches that hinder the integration of consultative selling with key account management structures within SMEs. Kowalkowski et al. (2025) demonstrated that servitization and digital transitions complicate sales by requiring the reorganisation of strategies, coordination across operations, and the acquisition of new skills; however, various initiatives fail due to limited strategic vision and change control. It indicates the functional, change-control, and resistance-to-change challenges faced in aligning KAM and consultative selling within SMEs.

Overall, internal barriers—including structural and technical challenges—constrain the integration of consultative selling with KAM for Indian SMEs. Siloed functions block cohesive customer involvement, and fragmented interactions among marketing, sales, and management disrupt continuous value delivery in B2B sales. This reduces the loyalty and cooperation critical to consultative selling. Disorganised and separate customer data across records, datasets, and systems obstructs building a comprehensive client view. Without up-to-date CRM and analytics, key account managers lack the insight to tailor solutions, address client needs, and engage strategically. These issues demonstrate that resource gaps and organisational fragmentation restrict Indian SMEs' ability to move from transactional to consultative sales.

The findings addressed key issues faced by Indian SMEs in adopting consultative selling and highlighted the need for digital tools. The lack of proper CRM use, limited training, and siloed systems delays alignment between consultative selling and KAM.

These internal limits show insufficient technological and capability strengths, blocking strategic change. As a result, SMEs struggle to shift from transactional to consultative strategies. Management should invest in targeted training, CRM upgrades, and change management to reduce resistance. The results align with the Resource-Based View theory, showing that vital intangible resources like staff skills, data, and teamwork are necessary but remain underused in Indian SMEs.

However, some SMEs showed that internal obstacles like cultural resistance, disjointed systems, and limited digital capabilities—which were frequently identified as constraints—could be somewhat mitigated by strong management commitment, informal cross-functional collaboration, and the gradual adoption of technology. Given that certain businesses were able to adjust more successfully through adaptable management techniques and gradual technological integration, it appears that organisational resistance and operational difficulties are not encountered equally by all SMEs.

It should be noted, however, that the intensity of the barriers are varied considerably across the respondents. Two managers from the IT-sector SMEs reported comparatively lower resistance to change, which attributes to younger and more digitally literate workforces. This variation suggests that workforce and sector demographics can moderate the impact of internal barriers, indicating a dimension that warrants further investigation in future research.

Theme 3: Strategic and Technical solutions for effective KAM and consultative selling integration in SMEs.

The thematic analysis reflecting survey findings outlines CRM, AI, digital tools, training programs, mentorship, and cross-functional cooperation as efficient strategic and technical solutions. Interview responses like *“We have installed a new cloud-based CRM system, and it is available to every department”*; *“Those formal mentorship programmes that we have set up are having our most senior key account manager matched with junior sales persons”*; and *“Functioning within the SME environment indicates that we*

frequently utilise digital tools casually” supporting digital enablement and other strategic solutions for effective KAM and consultative selling integration in SMEs.

The strategies identified in the interview for managing integration problems between KAM and the consultative selling approach are supported by the current literature. For example, Fazli-Salehi, Torres and Zúñiga (2021) emphasised that key account management efficiency is contingent on cross-departmental cooperation, resource sharing, and greater management engagement, and highlighted the importance of cross-functional workshops and collaborative approaches. Salespeople's efforts, such as collaborative workshops and real-time partnership platforms, underscore the importance of dismantling silos to ensure consumer-focused alignment, thereby strengthening the argument that cross-functional arrangements increase relationship-building and long-term client engagement. Correspondingly, Ijomah et al. (2024) focused on how customer relationship management (CRM) tools enhance consultative sales effectiveness by centralising client insights, automating sales procedures, and facilitating customised involvement.

The statement regarding integrating CRM to consolidate customer data aligns with these results, outlining that small and medium-sized enterprises can overcome disjointed data issues through digital integration. Koganti (2024) further reinforced this perspective by discussing how cloud-based CRM, as well as sales force automation, authorises sales teams with real-time insights, predictive analytics, and agility in consumer communications. These understandings confirmed that SME sales workforces need to shift toward cloud-based systems to enhance both KAM formalisation and consultative effectiveness, enabling them to systematically engage with customers. In addition, mentorship modules and consultative skill development, as identified in the interview insights, resonated with the findings those KAM efficacy drivers, including training intensity and high management engagement. Therefore, mentoring, capability development, and sales force compensation aligned with consumer experiences foster consultative behaviours and build long-term relationships with buyers and sellers in the SME environment.

Høgevold et al. (2024) noted that companies need to investigate to what extent conventional ways of interaction between salespeople and clients are being replaced by data-enabled communication for consumers to collect purchase data. Organisations thus require verification that their sales staff are effectively trained to use digital interactive tools, social media, and other digital applications to communicate with consumers. This point was reinforced, validating that structured training programs, skill building, and customised coaching increase the efficiency of consultative selling integration. By involving junior sales employees in mentorship and offering active listening and problem-solving exercises, SMEs could address the recognised skill limitations. Incentive restructuring reflected the same perspective and validated the idea that shifting from short-term, transaction-based incentives to long-term, consumer-focused goals could refine sellers' behaviour.

By aligning bonuses with client satisfaction and renewal, these firms could enable a consultative selling approach, consistent with recommending multi-year or strategic quotas to motivate relationship growth over short-term sales successes. On the other hand, strategic choices in data analytics and account plan management are validated by the fact that analytics expose performance variations and guide customised training sessions. Small and medium-sized firms' integration of analytics for churn identification and the use of structured account templates reflect these approaches, ensuring uniformity and informed decision-making. Høgevold et al. (2024) further address the role of sales insights and adaptive methods, which are supported by analytics-based insights. Thus, advocacy for evidence-based training and in-depth exploration of consultative sales skills both strengthen SMEs' reliance on pilot successes and on cooperative platforms to institutionalise best practices. The analysis focuses on the role of digital tools and approaches adopted by firms in shaping consultative selling and aligning with existing KAM. Key findings emphasise that customer relationship management implementation, analytics, incentive rearrangement, and mentorship are strategic and technical enablers in this process. Thus, management in these firms should focus on institutionalising digital customer relationship management (dCRM), advanced analytics, and proper training to

increase consultative selling effectiveness. The results confirmed that technology-based teamwork and skill development can co-create measurable consumer value, reinforcing trust and long-term B2B sales.

Even though CRM systems, analytics, mentoring, and cross-functional collaboration are acknowledged as key facilitators of KAM and consultative selling integration, some SMEs reported that technology adoption alone did not consistently result in improved customer engagement or strategic sales performance. This restriction was especially noticeable when implementation lacked sufficient user capabilities, ongoing managerial support, and cultural alignment, which decreased the efficacy of these technological and strategic solutions.

However, it should be acknowledged that several managers described these strategic solutions as aspirational frameworks which had been adopted in principle but not yet embedded in daily practice. Thus, the gap between strategy design and consistent execution remains a practical challenge that the organisational commitment alone cannot fully resolve.

Theme 4: Digital under-enablement affecting strategic sales in SMEs.

Interview responses regarding digital under-enablement affecting KAM and consultative selling in SMEs substantiate quantitative findings of limited resource usage, budgetary issues with digital tool use, missing analytics, and low technological literacy, all of which impede the successful utilisation of digital tools. Supporting interview responses verifying these insights are: *“Within the SME environment, low budgets limit investments in KAM and consultative selling”*; *“We utilise basic digital analytics to record and monitor website visits and previous purchases”*; and *“Yet, some SMEs in India still lack advanced digital tools such as analytics to aid this, which makes consultative selling more reactive than proactive”*. Sun *et al.* (2022) emphasised this, noting that Key account management requires core, tangible resources, including infrastructure and dedicated analytics, which many SMEs cannot afford. Correspondingly, Fei *et al.* (2018) used the resource-based view to emphasise that sustainable competitive advantage arises when companies strategically

deploy "valuable and rare" resources. However, the lack of access to such resources explains why the KAM and consultative selling integration remains deficient, frequently reduced to incorrect tracking rather than strategic planning. Consultative selling approaches with key account management values, where SEMs utilise restricted resources and higher capabilities to attain higher efficacy in KAM relationships with clients.

Salespeople often prioritise short-term gains over cultivating long-term relationships, which undermines consultative selling. Management frequently hesitates to invest in high-risk, long-term KAM changes. Effective consultative selling requires inter-functional collaboration and consumer orientation, both of which depend on proper resource allocation. These pressures for short-term success force salespeople to underuse digital systems.

Low technical skills impede efficient use of digital tools for SMEs, leading existing CRMs to serve primarily as data storage rather than decision-making platforms. Research by Razmak et al., (2022) shows that intangible, personal and technical skills are vital for sales managers to evaluate scope, anticipate market shifts, and adapt efficiently. Mostafa and Kasamani (2022) affirm that strengthening consultative selling skills—such as adaptive listening (AEL), emotional intelligence, and digital literacy—alongside digital integration, enhances sales efficacy. Musipatla (2021) finds that CRM integration is hampered by costs, poor integration, and staff adoption, mirroring SMEs' reliance on basic CRMs, lack of analytics, and limited technical skills. Sandesh and Paul (2023) further highlight that, in resource-constrained environments such as those in Indian SMEs, fragmented and underused KAM and consultative selling approaches result from limited budgets and capacity, preventing their strategic use and forcing reliance on short-term, transactional sales targets.

The finding projects the role of digital tools in implementing consultative selling within KAM. It is understood that unsupportive digital infrastructure, limited technical expertise, and budget constraints limit the organisation's ability to optimise CRM and data analytics, affecting consultative selling success and the strategic CRM culture. Therefore, management should prioritise building digital capability first, understand the scope of

CRM refinements, and support skill development to leverage a data-enabled, consultative selling environment. The results extend the Relationship Marketing Theory by emphasising how low digital enablement levels can affect trust levels and the value co-creation needed for successful KAM and consultative selling outcomes.

Despite the fact that digital under-enablement is widely acknowledged as a significant obstacle to strategic sales development, some SMEs showed that even simple CRM systems, informal analytical techniques, and inexpensive digital tools could support relationship-building and consultative selling when combined with strong managerial adaptability and customer-focused decision-making. This implies that in resource-constrained SME situations, the efficacy of digital integration may depend not just on technological sophistication but also on how businesses strategically use available resources.

Nevertheless, a minority of respondents reported that even basic CRM adoption had created measurable improvements in client follow-up consistency. This suggests that the threshold for meaningful digital benefit can be lower than commonly assumed. It implies that incremental digital adoption, even without advanced analytics capability, offer relational value for resource-constrained SMEs.

Theme 5: The gap between capability and technology within SMEs in using KAM and consultative selling.

Examining the gap between capability and technology within SMEs in using KAM and consultative selling emphasised survey findings, this indicates low digital literacy as one of the most important limitations. Interview responses such as *“Our firm struggles with low digital literacy across different teams, which minimises the efficient use of these tools and their integration”* verified these quantitative insights. It is emphasised that even when the sales team uses CRMs and other digital tools, they lack the skills to translate customer insights into actionable insights. It resonated with Iannarino's (2022) discussions, which focused on a gap in business acumen and insufficient consultative skills among sales staff as challenges in strategically facilitating tools. Without adequate digital literacy, tools

go underused and consultative selling remains intuition-driven rather than data-driven. Higher costs were also highlighted in the collected data, with managers noting that advanced KAM and CRM processes are developed for larger firms, making them costly for SMEs. Herhausen et al. (2022) supported this by focusing on the problems of

CRM use is associated with cost, personalisation, and adoption. SMEs' dependence on common, low-cost CRMs indicates budgetary constraints but limits the depth of analytics and relational data required for consultative selling. Workflow mismanagement also limits tool integration. It has been identified that manual systems are incomplete, resulting in duplicate actions and resistance. Mast (2023) reinforced this point of view by outlining that consultative selling requires personalisation and rework, which can confuse standardisation and workflow scaling. For SMEs, this misalignment between conventional workflows and the adaptability needed for consultative involvement worsens ineffectiveness.

Data quality issues stem from capability and technology gaps. Incorrect or fragmented customer data reduces the reliability of digital tools, highlighting gaps in both technology and workers' ability to use them. Additionally, poor user integration and weak data management are core barriers to CRM efficacy. Users often resist moving from relationship-based selling to consultative methods, especially within Indian SMEs. This shows legacy sales methods persist, and despite training, staffs resist consultative and digital tools. Thematic analysis reveals that resource scarcity, skill shortages, and cultural barriers continually hinder the effective use of digital tools in consultative selling and KAM.

The analysis assesses the challenges of integrating consultative selling and KAM within Indian SEMs. The results show a gap between current skills and technological know-how, poor digital literacy, and rigid workflows. These issues explain why Social Exchange Theory's efficiency (trust, value exchange, and collaboration) does not materialise in data-driven practices. This underscores the need for digital up-skilling and restructuring to build relational value. The findings stress the importance of perceived reciprocity in B2B exchanges for trust, digital, and functional integration.

Strong industry knowledge, relationship-based selling know-how, and progressive digital adoption, according to some SMEs, could somewhat make up for a lack of technological sophistication. Although technological limitations and capability gaps were often cited as obstacles to the successful integration of KAM and consultative selling, a number of participants stated that firms were able to sustain successful customer relationships through the use of adaptive managerial techniques and practical sales knowledge. Given that some organisations were able to compensate for resource deficits through flexible operational techniques and experience. This shows that capability restrictions are not consistently restrictive across all SMEs.

However, it is worth noting that digital tools' cultural resistance was not uniformly present. Three managers indicated that younger sales staff was more receptive to the CRM adoption as well as data-driven approaches. It points toward a generational shift that can gradually reduce the capability-technology gap without requiring the top-down mandates.

Theme 6: Benefits and long-term relationship building with Consultative Selling within SMEs.

The consultative selling approach serves as the cornerstone for shifting transactional interactions into ongoing, strategic KAM relationships; however, its impact is both restrictive and diverse. This qualitative theme aligns with the survey findings, indicating that consultative selling within SMEs fosters long-term customer relationships, financial gain, and improved sales, thereby contributing to overall competitive advantage. Interview responses like *“Consultative selling supports companies' move beyond price competition”*; *“It allows our firm to position the brand as an advisor, not just a supplier”*; and *“I think consultative selling is the support system for long-term client engagements in B2B”* reinforce this alignment.

Consultative selling develops in-depth consumer understanding and credibility, which support loyalty and repeat purchases (Kucher, 2024). This approach prioritises long-term relationships built on loyalty and reliability (Banjac, 2023), though its success is not automatic. Goswami and Sinha (2018) argue that both the salesperson's qualities and

organisational facilitators are essential for client satisfaction and retention, as reflected in the consultative approach's focus on need recognition, skills, communication, and problem-solving. On personalisation, Avila and Inks (2017) describe consultative salespeople as strategic coordinators connecting services to customer needs; similarly, Banjac (2023) notes that tailored solutions enable repeat purchases and set firms apart. Therefore, consultative selling enables SMEs to leverage account data to deliver customised solutions, reducing client churn and increasing lifetime value. Lim and Park (2023) confirm the value of positioning salespersons as "value advisors," noting that when credibility and ethical reliability complement technological competence, consultative advice delivers sustainable benefits.

The main argument is that while consultative selling is an effective relational approach for KAM, its success depends on organisational factors such as training, legacy processes, and capability development, as well as SME management objectives and integration. Without these, consultative selling remains person-dependent and is difficult to scale. Therefore, its long-term benefits require integrated sales teams and investments in both technical and management capabilities.

This theme indicates that customised, trust-enabled consultative approaches increase long-term loyalty and opportunities for repeat business, thereby justifying the relationship focus and credibility that produce measurable fiscal and relational returns for Indian SEMs. They should practice consultative capabilities and cross-functional partnerships to retain relational value. The results refined the Solution Selling Theory by adding KAM-enabled co-creation, reflecting that long-term growth emerges when consultative selling develops from a transactional culture to strategic collaboration and capability-based problem-solving.

However, an important qualification has emerged from the data. Three managers cautioned that consultative selling, while applied inconsistently or without adequate product knowledge could diminish rather than build credibility. The factor reinforces the centrality of capability development and training instead of simply advocating for the consultative approach in principle.

Theme 7: Future growth opportunities and potentials in the integration of KAM and consultative selling within SME sales.

Investigating future growth opportunities and potentials in the integration of KAM and consultative selling within SME sales, indicating that recent reliance on individual salespeople's efforts alone is unsustainable. Interview insights on future growth opportunities and the potential of KAM-CS within SMEs support the quantitative findings, focusing on the need for institutional support, advanced digitalisation, AI integration, formalisation of existing processes, along with skill development, and the scope and potential of consultative selling in the future. The interview responses: *“SMEs will face consultative selling as a more data-driven approach”*; *“The largest change would be the enhanced pressure to align consultative selling with AI-enabled tools”*; and *“I suggest widespread formalisation of sales procedures in SMEs,”* further validating this alignment.

Donchak, McClatchy, and Stanley (2022) reinforced this by describing how hybrid sales frameworks combining digital and face-to-face consultative approaches are emerging as significant methods, driving up to 50% more revenue through widespread client involvement for SEMs. It resonates with the need for sector-specific frameworks and institutional support for Indian SMEs, as they adapt flexible structures to diverse industries and client preferences while managing KAM.

Additionally, digitalisation, AI inclusion, and automation opportunities in consultative selling align with the arguments presented by Yee et al., (2024), emphasising how Gen AI and analytics could reallocate existing resources to SMEs more efficiently, forecast needs, and minimise the burden of contextual skills. This underscores that SMEs face limited sectoral insights and low digital literacy. Training in these areas is thus necessary, since AI would only reveal its full potential if balanced with salespersons' empathy, trust-development, and problem-solving skills. It is understood that while AI integration in KAM with a consultative selling approach would automate sales tasks and hybrid frameworks could expand reach, companies must invest more in training modules, emotional intelligence, and planned KAM systems to achieve long-term value.

The thematic analysis projected that digitalisation, artificial intelligence, and hybrid models can increase scalability, performance, and relational awareness for the firms, enabling systemic alignment of consultative and KAM approaches for long-term development. The analysis underscored the need for an organised digital shift balanced with sales responsiveness and skill development. The findings extended the CRM insights from simple data handling to intelligence-enabled relationship administration, where AI-driven CRM could leverage predictive insights, advanced customisation, and trust within the B2B environment of Indian SMEs.

While consultative selling generally corresponded to higher trust, loyalty, and long-term client engagement, some SMEs reported that these relational benefits were variable and occasionally challenging to uphold, particularly in circumstances in which customer expectations were still price-driven, sales cycles were brief, or organisational support for relationship continuity was scarce.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents expressed scepticism regarding the inclusivity and pace of this transformation. Two managers from the smaller and family-run SMEs questioned whether the projected digitalisation trajectory was realistic for the firms with less than fifteen employees and no dedicated technology function. This factor tempers the optimism embedded within the future-oriented themes as well as signals that transformation trajectories can differ across SMEs.

4.7 Summary of Findings

The results of this chapter paint a complex picture regarding the integration of KAM and consultative selling in Indian SMEs. The data from the interview shows that, despite process knowledge of the importance of these long-term, strategic approaches built on relationships, there is a strong relationship to their application. The main results identify a short-term, revenue-driven culture, a shortage of trained professionals, and a deficiency in digital literacy, leading to an inability to use tools such as CRM and data analytics strategically. Nevertheless, managers are currently implementing various strategic solutions, such as formalisation processes, targeted training, and technology, to narrow the

gap between their past sales systems and current customer requirements. According to the results, the effective implementation of KAM and consultative selling in the Indian SME scenario is a complicated process, which presupposes the incorporation of cultural, procedural, and technological adjustments.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

Chapter five offers a brilliant discussion of the research results from the qualitative and quantitative methods. It discusses how these approaches, digital tools, and organisational issues are coming together to determine implementation in Indian SMEs. The discussion connects the findings to theoretical bases, with a focus on their implications for competitiveness and customer confidence. In every section, we can see how data interpretation can be used to answer research objectives and questions. In general, the fifth chapter reinforces information on strategic practices that determine relationship building, trust formation, and the sustainable growth of business-to-business sales.

5.2 Discussion on Quantitative Data Results

An empirical basis for analysing the integration of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling within B2B sales practices is provided by the quantitative results obtained from a sample of 150 respondents from Indian small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). A variety of organisational traits were recorded in the survey, such as the composition of the sales force, training and development procedures, the use of digital sales tools, and opinions about consultative selling strategies. Correlation and regression analyses were used to determine the degree to which perceptions of consultative selling were linked to perceived customer satisfaction and customer retention in order to investigate the linkages between consultative selling and customer-related outcomes.

5.2.1 SME Profile and Respondent Characteristics

The sample provides a fair representation of service-based (51.3%) and manufacturing (48.7%) SMEs suggesting that the results can be generalised to both groups. The majority of respondents held sales manager or key account manager positions (34%), sales professionals (22.7%), or business development leader positions (20.7%). The distribution of experience indicated that most of the surveyed individuals had 2-5 years of experience (44%), suggesting the input of early- to mid-career professionals.

This age distribution underscores SMEs' dependence on younger sales talent who have not yet developed consultative skills. Unless these less experienced professionals receive training in diagnostic questioning and relationship building, as proposed by Richardson (2025), they may default to transactional selling. The comparatively low proportion of top-tier representatives (87% with 11-15 years of experience) may explain why many SMEs do not incorporate consultative practices at a strategic level. Organisational learning literature emphasises the importance of mentorship and leadership modelling in the adoption of relationship-based sales strategies (Avila and Inks, 2017). Therefore, the quantitative profile highlights both strength (a dynamic and flexible workforce) and a weakness (the absence of experienced consultative knowledge).

5.2.2 Sales Structures and Team Characteristics

The results show that the majority of the SMEs use mid-sized sales teams, 34% of which deal with 26-50 employees and 30% with 11-25 employees. Very large teams of more than 100 employees were reported in only 6%. This is indicative of resource-conscious structuring and is consistent with the resource-based view (RBV) of optimising scarce human resources to create relational benefits (Fei *et al.*, 2018).

The distribution of team size is essential with respect to KAM integration. A good account manager needs specialisation and cross-functional work. In SMEs, however, middle-sized teams tend to imply that team members are frequently tasked with more than one hat, which constrains the bandwidth to engage in consultative interaction. This is in line with earlier studies that postulate that although SMEs are adaptable, they do not always have the size to commit resources solely to major accounts (Hofmann, 2024).

5.2.3 Attitudes Toward Consultative Selling

One of the main lessons of the survey is that consultative selling is widely appreciated. Over 50% of the respondents concurred or strongly concurred that consultative selling plays a role in long-term B2B relationship building, and only 2% disagreed. They stood firmly in opposition. This common knowledge fits well into the

contemporary sales literature that defines consultative selling as a distinguishing variable in competitive markets (Aarikka-Stenroos and Lyly-Yrjälä, 2024).

Nevertheless, such a positive image is in contrast to long-term structural and capability bottlenecks. Indicatively, 47% of the respondents mentioned a deficiency in investment in digital tools as one of the inhibitors to implementing KAM and consultative selling, and 28.7% mentioned organisational resistance to change. These strains underscore the concept of what Kowalkowski *et al.*, (2025) call the implementation gap: although there is conceptual evidence of relationship selling, SMEs tend to fall short in operationalisation because of the legacy of transactional thinking.

The statistics are indicative of a paradox that is, the intellectual adoption of consultative selling by Indian SMEs is being translated into practice through the absence of adequate resources, leadership inertia, and a lack of skill development.

5.2.4 Training, Incentives, and Sales Strategies

The practice of training also demonstrates a disconnection between acknowledgement and action. One-half of the respondents cited a self-learning or personal initiative as the main mode of training, with on-the-job mentoring (24%) and formal training (16%) coming in second and third, respectively. Such dependence on informal learning brings out the budgetary constraints of SMEs but also brings up the issue of inconsistent skill development. The previous studies indicate that structured training and coaching play a critical role in inculcating consultative behaviours because self-training and learning tend to be insufficient to develop diagnostic questioning and advisory behaviours (Cruz *et al.*, 2022).

This picture is reinforced by sales strategies that were reported in the survey. The most prevalent one is KAM (36.7%), then consultative selling (28.7%), and transactional selling is not that minor (26%). This is an indication that it has relationship-based approaches, but still, transactional practices are too established. In addition, incentive programmes in most SMEs continue to compensate deal quantity instead of account value in the long term, as captured by qualitative statements by managers. Such a discrepancy

with the incentives and relational outcomes aligns with the literature that identifies the compensation systems as key drivers in sales change (Bandyopadhyay, 2025).

5.2.5 Role of Digital Tools and CRM

The trend of digital enablement was identified. Nearly half of the surveyed (48.7) indicated that they used a formal CRM system, but 42% of the respondents did not use any CRM system at all, and 9.3% were uncertain. Integration was also partial, even among adopters, and CRMs commonly served as record-keeping tools and not analytical tools. In spite of these constraints, the ratings of CRM effectiveness by those who rated it highly indicated that there was potential to be exploited, provided that systems are effectively exploited.

Perceptions of AI and digital tools were also collected in the survey: 24.7% expressed the potential with difficulties, and 38.7% considered AI irrelevant. This cynicism reflects the evidence offered by Razmak *et al.*, (2022), who claim that the lack of digital literacy means that the SMEs do not usually derive value out of investments in technology. Concerning RBV, digital tools are assets that are underutilised and limited by affordability and expertise.

In general, digital under-enablement seems to be a bottleneck system, which is consistent with Sun *et al.*, (2022), who emphasise that relational capabilities in SMEs should not be treated only as human capabilities, but also as establishing the enabling infrastructure.

5.2.6 Challenges in Integration

The quantitative research' results demonstrated that KAM and consultative selling integration face significant challenges. The most often cited barriers were lack of digital investment (47.3%), resistance to change (28.7%), lack of management support (14%), and skills shortages (10%). These results are consistent with the qualitative findings that managers highlighted the compartmentalised processes and cultural lethargy.

These challenges align with the institutional theory, which explains why SMEs have a tendency to maintain the status quo due to resource dependency and outside influences. The short-term revenue pressure in the Indian SME context exacerbates this tendency by making CEOs hesitant to engage in long-term consulting capacity.

5.2.7 Correlation and Regression Findings

The statistical results were strong proof of the association between perception of consultative selling and customer retention/satisfaction. The correlation coefficient ($r = 0.4466$) indicates a moderate positive relationship, which suggests that positive attitudes to consultative selling are correlated with improved customer outcomes.

This relationship was also quantified by the regression model. A value of 0.199 represents one of R^2 that almost a fifth of the variation in customer retention and satisfaction is attributed to the consultative selling perception. This is big even though it is a small value in behavioural and organisational studies, where several variables often have a role in the outcomes.

The coefficient (0.4377) indicates that A rise in consultative selling opinion of one unit is associated with an increase in the customer retention/satisfaction scores by 0.438 points. This gives empirical support to what the sales theorists (Avila and Inks, 2017; Lim and Park, 2023) say: consultative selling produces a quantifiable, positive impact on customer loyalty.

Nonetheless, R^2 is rather low, which means that other variables, including product quality, digitalisation, or organisational culture, are also important. Such a constraint highlights why consultative perception needs to be considered as a component of a larger relational ecosystem.

5.2.8 Integration with Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The numeric findings are consistent with several literature streams. According to the RBV, SMEs' competitive advantage can be achieved not only through hard assets but also through relational assets, such as consultative selling (Fei *et al.*, 2018). The statistics

support the idea that the perception and adoption of consultative mindsets raise retention, as this is the same argument, with unique capabilities, that drives differentiation.

Based on institutional theory, the results explain the constraints on introduction imposed by cultural inertia and short-termism, despite favourable perceptions. The question of changing resistance and misalignment of incentives illustrates the presence of normative and structural influences as obstacles to change (Kowalkowski *et al.*, 2025).

The findings also support the literature on KAM, which highlights the systematic prioritisation of accounts and the use of relational strategies as drivers of long-term growth (Hofmann, 2024). However, the ambivalent adoption by Indian SMEs indicates a conflict between desire and potential, which puts the emerging market in a context of limited financial and human resources.

The quantitative analysis reveals that Indian SMEs generally value consultative selling and understand its strategic importance in KAM integration. The survey results demonstrate a positive attitude, but they also highlight unresolved issues including cultural resistance, lack of training, and digital under-enabling. Customer satisfaction and retention are statistically predicted by the perception of consultative selling, highlighting its strategic significance. However, because of its limited explanatory power, consultative attitudes should be incorporated into more significant organisational, technical, and cultural reforms. These findings offer an empirical foundation for combining quantitative and qualitative data to produce a comprehensive picture of the opportunities and difficulties associated with integrating consultative selling into Indian SMEs' B2B sales.

5.3 Discussion on Qualitative Data Results

5.3.1 Strategic Importance of Key Account Management (KAM)

Key account management is the process of managing valuable clients with particular strategic importance. The interviews indicate that SMEs consider KAM a critical practice for matching limited resources with customers of choice. This will ensure that limited financial and human resources are concentrated in accounts that deliver the greatest

value over the long run. KAM creates customer-focused prioritisation and well-organised systems to build resilience against competition.

The respondents note that systematic account management fosters collaboration between departments, improves communication with clients, and increases profitability. When account planning is done in a specific way, the enterprises have clarity on their goals and are better focused on their organisations. The interviews are also characterized by the acknowledgement of the fact that KAM offers a customer differentiation, reputation building, and sustainable growth platform (Hofmann, 2024).

The interviews, however, indicate that the SMEs encounter challenges in adopting structured KAM frameworks. The commonest difficulties are limited budgets and the inability to secure qualified managers for specialised accounts. Participants discuss the need to support leadership, build cross-functional teams, and allocate resources. The reality of Indian SMEs suggests a challenge with the full implementation of advanced KAM programs due to structural and operational constraints (Danquah, 2022). Irrespective of these challenges, KAM is seen by managers as a strategic enabler that enables enterprises to compete favourably. Another dimension in which customer classification needs to be considered is the formulation of effective account strategies. According to managers, resource prioritisation can be achieved by ranking customers based on profitability and growth potential. Through this process of classification, accountability is enhanced, transparency in allocation is maintained, and organisational energy is wasted less. Therefore, the systematic classification becomes a significant facilitator of KAM success.

5.3.2 Consultative Selling as a Relationship-Oriented Approach

Consultative selling emerges as a key approach to improving customer interactions and developing personal value propositions. Listening, empathy, and solution development are consistently cited by managers as the most important practices for becoming a successful consultant. In this way, companies become unique in already oversaturated markets, where price wars and transaction-focused sales prevail (Aarikka-Stenroos and Lyly-Yrjänäinen, 2024).

According to the interviews, managers prioritise advisory roles over traditional product sales techniques. They stress that by assisting clients in resolving particular problems, consultative selling fosters trust and satisfaction. Salespeople will become consultants as a result, giving customers the impression that they are in a partnership rather than a one-time encounter. Increased loyalty and positive client connections are the results (Lehtoda, 2025).

However, consultative selling requires expertise, education, and corporate dedication. The managers claim that workers aren't always sufficiently trained to hold more senior advisory roles. It calls for emotional intelligence, curiosity, and problem-solving abilities that are challenging to consistently cultivate (Parker, 2024). As a result, consultative selling causes SMEs to struggle with skill development and differentiation (Bandyopadhyay, 2025).

Another aspect managers cite is that consultative selling positively affects brand perception by making enterprises appear reliable advisors. This stance is a distinguishing position among SMEs in competitive markets, where traditional SRS dominate in shaping customer experience. Advises on the visibility, customer recommendations, and long-term trust are given. Therefore, consultative strategies not only build loyalty but also brand equity.

5.3.3 Interconnection of KAM and Consultative Selling

The qualitative data support the fact that KAM and consultative selling are the two strategies that work most effectively together. Managers elaborate that account management establishes organised client priorities, and that these relationships are enriched by consultative approaches, dialogue, and solutions. A combination of the two ensures thorough service to strategic accounts through advisory exchanges. This two-sided strategy will transform customer relationships from mere transactions into a partnership (Peters, 2025).

According to the interview respondents, the practice of consultativeness helps account managers by providing them with methods for deeper involvement. They explain

that, through consultative selling, discovery phases are reinforced, customisation is enhanced, and solution creation with the customer is strengthened in the account planning process. Integration thus builds higher customer-focused organisational structures.

Managers also recognise challenges such as a lack of training, leadership reluctance, and cultural inertia. The existence of these barriers creates friction during implementation, slowing the process. Nonetheless, respondents repeatedly remind us that integration repeatedly helps in terms of revenue, customer retention, and long-term revenues. Integration, thus, is a critical, step-by-step move towards transforming SME sales practices. Another finding by the managers is that integration enhances cross-functional cooperation among SMEs. Whenever there is a correlation between KAM and consultative selling, the departments are closely integrated to offer holistic solutions. Such coordination is associated with better service quality, less confusion, and greater consistency in delivery. Integration thus not only affects relationships with clients but also internal organisational cohesion and efficiency.

5.3.4 Digital Tools as Enablers of Integration

Digital tools are factors that help integrate KAM and consultative selling. Managers emphasise customer relationship management systems, artificial intelligence platforms, and data analytics applications. The technologies can help enterprises bundle client data, anticipate customer needs, and deliver value-based solutions (Egbuhuzor *et al.*, 2021).

Participants note that digital tools facilitate communication, improve follow-up, and increase visibility of their clients' preferences. Managers also point out that automation reduces administrative workload, allowing time to build relationships. The effect of digitalisation is a multiplier on SME capacity, as small teams may work more efficiently.

There is, however, a problem that comes with opportunities. High prices, lack of skills, and digital reluctance slow down the pace of implementation. The need to invest in costly systems is a factor many SMEs fear due to short-term survival pressures. Despite this reluctance, managers are convinced that digital tools will be needed to compete in contemporary B2B settings (Alonge *et al.*, 2024). Thus, digitalisation is both a challenge

and an opportunity for SMEs seeking to integrate sustainably. The managers also observe that digital adoption provides predictive capabilities, enabling SMEs to anticipate their clients' future needs. When part of CRM, predictive analytics can help account managers develop proactive plans. This predictive solution guarantees greater preparedness, timely responses, and better relationship outcomes. The digital platforms, therefore, do not just assist in the administration, but they are also involved in strategic foresight.

5.3.5 Barriers and Challenges in Implementation

The interviews indicate that SMEs are faced with a number of challenges in the process of adopting integration strategies. There is always a constraint of financial resources that cannot be spent on modernizing technologies or specialised training programmes. In the absence of adequate capital, businesses find it hard to develop structured teams in account management or maintain consultative selling techniques.

Skills gaps are also one of the biggest problems. According to managers, the number of employees who do not have the required advisory skills is high, which decreases the effectiveness of consultative approaches. The absence of training programs also neglects this problem, as the staffs is not ready to deal with advanced clients. This focus on the short-term revenue goals is also incompatible with the development of long-term relations (Abdallah et al., 2024).

Another obstacle is the cultural resistance of organizations. Employees and executives tend to focus on short-term profits at the expense of long-term change. This attitude does not push to invest in long-term trust and advisory skills. Also, the complexity of operations and a lack of experience in management pose even more obstacles to systematic integration. These issues are in tandem with the overarching structural realities of resource scarcity of Indian SMEs that grapple with the issue (Omowole et al., 2024).

Another obstacle is the external competition pressure that usually compels SMEs to sacrifice integration efforts. Other competitors that have stronger resources launch solutions at a higher rate and put pressure on them to concentrate on the short-term reactions. According to managers, such an environment minimizes the desire to make long-

term investments. Competitive forces thus pose external forces that compound pre-existing organizational constraints.

5.3.6 Strategies and Adaptations to Overcome Challenges

Even with the challenges, SMEs are flexible and strong at identifying ways to overcome them. Managers attach importance to incremental strategies, i.e., initiating pilot programs or small-scale implementations. The fact that it is a gradual process enables enterprises to test the integration without causing major financial losses.

Businesses choose low-cost digital solutions rather than expensive ones, enabling them to operate without compromising functionality. Managers also note government schemes, industry alliances, and external alliances as effective in minimising expenses and acquiring experience. These measures provide an additional source of support to SMEs with limited resources (Jingyu, 2024).

Creative adoptions are also made in training programs. According to managers, on-the-job coaching, peer mentoring, and specific workshop training are cost-effective training strategies. These adaptive strategies mirror the practicality of SMEs, demonstrating how enterprises integrate despite resource constraints. Thus, innovation and incrementalism emerge as the hallmarks of the SME strategies on integration.

Another strategy observed among SMEs is the utilisation of informal networks and community-based relationships. Managers disclose that association with local associations, chambers, or trade groups opens access to knowledge and assistance. These networks generate cheap training and resources. Therefore, informal cooperation is a supplementary approach for SMEs that lack adequate financial resources.

5.3.7 Long-Term Relationship Building as Central Outcome

Qualitative data shows that long-term relationship-building is the key to successful integration. Managers always highlight that trust, collaboration, and value co-creation are the real outcomes of KAM and consultative selling. Through these relationships, stability, loyalty, and resistance to market changes emerge (Rosário and Casaca, 2023).

According to interview participants, customer trust is built through constant communication, compassion, and individualised service. They emphasise that repeat business, referrals, and greater revenue predictability come from loyal clients. Long-term orientation thus does not only have short-term advantages.

Another managerial viewpoint supporting building relationships is that it enhances the enterprise's reputation and helps SMEs be identified in saturated markets. A good reputation reduces switching costs, decreases customer churn, and increases bargaining power. Thus, it is useful to include KAM and consultative selling not only to drive sales in the present but also to build resilience in the long term (Sudarti et al., 2024).

Another benefit identified by managers is that long-term relationships enable co-innovation, in which the client and the enterprise work together to design solutions. The result of co-innovation is stronger relationships, enhanced customer satisfaction, and differentiation that is hard for competitors to imitate. The creation of shared values deepens relationships and enhances organisational learning.

5.3.8 Future Transformation of Sales Practices

According to the managers, integration is not just applicable today but also transformational in the future. They characterise a business world that is increasingly globalised, digitalised, and characterised by complex buyer demands. KAM and consultative selling seem to be the only way to address these changing requirements.

The interview respondents foresee that adopting digital will enhance integration and result in smarter, more responsive sales processes. They state that customers are demanding more personalised solutions, constant interaction, and measurable value. In the absence of integration, SMEs will become irrelevant in competitive markets shaped by improved customer needs (Silvia-Patricia et al., 2024).

Another point managers emphasise is that the sales function will be forced to become more professional in the future. KAM and consultative selling integration will then no longer be an option, but a survival need. The school of thought holds that integration ensures both long-term growth and sustainable competitiveness for Indian SMEs.

Another factor is the increasing significance of sustainability in the foreseeable integration practices. Managers forecast that customers will continue to insist on solutions aligned with environmental and social responsibility objectives. Interventions of KAM and consultative selling will require adjustment to accommodate sustainability stories. In this way, economic values can be merged with environmental and ethical concerns in future sales models.

5.3.9 Alignment with Theoretical Perspectives

The qualitative findings align with theoretical views on relationship-building, resource management, and value creation. Trust and mutual benefit are practices that managers describe as aligned with relationship marketing. They also bear social exchange principles, in that the clients are loyal because they see long-term benefits.

The focus on employees' skills and technological platforms aligns with resource-based views, where unique resources become competitive advantages. Later solutions will be tailored, with a tendency towards value-based, solution-oriented approaches aligned with theories of customer outcomes as the product's priority. The interviews thus attest that SME practices do correspond to the conceptual frameworks that outline modern sales strategies (Costa and Rodrigues, 2024).

Nevertheless, these theories are also broadened by the results, which reveal peculiar realities of SMEs. Managers point to innovative adaptations, financial difficulties, and cultural issues that theoretical models often fail to address. This defines that theory and practice are interconnected, with SMEs formulating the strategies based on their environment.

Another way in which managers support this congruence with theories of trust is by emphasising behaviour consistency rather than promises. They insist that theoretical trust constructions become concrete only in the case of reliable and transient reliability. This observation can be broadened to encompass the theoretical debates that show how daily practice realises the abstract concepts. Thus, results add insight into practical mechanisms that run theoretical constructs in SMEs.

5.3.10 Practical Implications for SMEs

The qualitative results indicate several significant practical implications for SMEs in implementing integration strategies. To begin with, businesses need well-organised systems to efficiently prioritise accounts and plan resources carefully. Second, consultative practice should be incorporated into the organisational culture, ensuring that employees continuously offer consultation services.

Third, digital adoption should be carried out in an orderly manner, taking into account cost constraints and user-friendliness. Fourth, the leadership's commitment also seems to be the key to driving change, managing opposition, and maintaining a long-term orientation. Fifth, training needs to be continuous and delivered through cost-effective tools that fit the realities of the SME.

Lastly, the success of the integration depends on a long-term relationship orientation, which fosters trust, loyalty, and resilience. Managers point out that when they concentrate on immediate sales rather than building relationships, it undermines integration results. Thus, the integration strategies are to be practically adopted through structural, cultural, and technological changes across SME activities. Another implication concerns the role of leadership attitude in maintaining integration activities. Managers suggest that without leadership, faith initiatives will fail irrespective of strategy or tools. The vision of leadership ensures cultural alignment and employee motivation, and aids the regular allocation of resources. Therefore, leadership direction is a determining factor in the success of strategies for SME integration.

The qualitative data provides a close-up perspective on how SMEs view and adopt integration strategies. Both themes put forward opportunities, challenges, and adaptive measures to influence enterprise transformation. Integration is also a multi-dimensional process that offers strategic account management, advisory selling, digital tools, cultural shifts, and long-term relationships.

Managers always recognise that integration is needed to achieve competitiveness, despite financial, cultural, and operational constraints. SME approaches to barriers require

adaptability, creativity, and incrementalism. Integration is hence not only a strategic practice but a process of transformation that will determine the future of Indian B2B sales.

5.4 Critical Evaluation of Hypotheses

5.4.1 Discussion of H1: Consultative Selling and Retention

- **Status: Supported.**
- **Discussion:** The finding that consultative selling perception predicts customer retention ($\beta = 0.438$) aligns with **Relationship Marketing Theory**. It confirms that salespeople act as "Value Co-creators," as proposed by Terho et al. (2023). In the Indian SME sector, this approach moves beyond Western professional models by bridging the gap between business and personal trust, making consultative selling a cornerstone of regional B2B strategy.
- **Managerial Significance:** For SME owners, this result indicates that investing in "diagnostic questioning" training is more effective for retention than price-based competition.

5.4.2 Discussion of H2: Digital Enablers and CRM

- **Status: Partially Supported.**
- **Discussion:** The results partially corroborate Hypothesis 2. Digital technology and CRM systems are seen as crucial strategic facilitators for combining Key Account Management (KAM) with consultative selling techniques, according to qualitative respondents. Participants agreed that digital technologies can help with account coordination, communication management, and customer relationship tracking. However, the quantitative results showed that these systems were not widely used in Indian SMEs. While many current users used CRM systems only for administrative storage rather than for strategic or analytical decision-making, about 42% of respondents said they did not use a formal CRM platform.

Additionally, formal mediation testing was not possible since the survey design lacked enough validated measurement items to provide a completely functional

mediator variable for digital enablement. Because the research indicates that the efficacy of digital enablers significantly depends on contextual elements including digital literacy, staff training, strategic alignment, and process integration, the hypothesis gained partial rather than full support. Therefore, the results imply that CRM systems by themselves are insufficient for successful KAM integration; rather, their usefulness seems to depend on how well organisations incorporate these technologies into more comprehensive sales and relationship management procedures within SMEs.

5.4.3 Discussion of H3: Strategic Orientation and KAM Success

- **Status: Supported**
- **Discussion:** This finding validates the **Resource-Based View (RBV)**, where leadership commitment is identified as the primary "inimitable resource" for SMEs. While large multinationals rely on formal structures, Indian SMEs often rely on "Intuitive KAM," where the owner's vision drives the relationship.
- **Managerial Significance:** The results suggest that KAM integration is likely to fail if treated as an operational task; it must be a top-down strategic pivot where leadership personally prioritizes high-value accounts over mass-market volume.

5.5 Summary

Chapter five recapitulates the interpretation of the research results and highlights their importance for both theory and practice. The integration of key account management and consultative selling strengthens customer relationships, as evidenced in the chapter. It indicates obstacles such as financial constraints, skill shortages, and cultural opposition among SMEs. Digital adoption, progressive implementation, and network cooperation are some of the strategies that reveal managerial flexibility. The conversation shows congruence between the findings and conceptual approaches, such as relationship marketing and the resource-based view. Generally, Chapter Five affirms integration as a multifaceted process encompassing strategic, cultural, and technological components,

thereby facilitating sustainable growth and enhanced competitiveness within the Indian SME.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the implementation of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling in the business of Indian SME in the B2B environment. The analysis was motivated by the fact that Indian SMEs are experiencing escalating competition, rising customer expectations, and mounting pressure to professionalise their sales functions. However, although conventional transactional sales practices are common, they are becoming less efficient at meeting the requirements for long-term relationship development, value co-creation, and customer retention. It is against this background that KAM and consultative selling emerged as complementary frameworks that could help shift sales practices toward more strategic, customer-centric models.

The study found that while Indian SMEs are aware of consultative selling and KAM, these practices remain underutilised due to resource constraints, cultural inertia, and limited digital uptake. Survey results showed that many SMEs still favour traditional sales methods, yet sales professionals increasingly recognise that a consultative approach—focused on listening, problem-solving, and trust-building—is more effective in sustaining client relationships. The data revealed a significant positive relationship between consultative selling and improved sales performance, customer retention, and client satisfaction. These findings suggest that consultative selling within KAM structures can serve as a critical lever to boost competitiveness.

The qualitative interviews further clarified this picture by revealing the practical experiences of sales and account managers. Themes such as organisational alignment, the need for cultural change, and barriers to digital enablement showed that effective integration involves more than simply adopting new sales techniques. It requires structural, cultural, and technological transformation in SMEs. Respondents stressed the importance of cross-functional collaboration, investment in training, and leadership commitment as prerequisites for successful integration of KAM-consultative selling. Insights also indicated that digital tools such as CRM systems, AI analytics, and collaboration platforms

can significantly enhance integration by providing deeper insights into customers and relationships. Nevertheless, SMEs remain digitally under-enabled, and this gap continues to constrain their ability to fully capture the benefits of integration.

Collectively, the results indicate that integrating KAM and consultative selling is not only theoretically sound but also highly practical for Indian SMEs. As a strategy, it fosters customer focus, builds enduring strategic relationships, and enables differentiation in saturated markets. This integration helps SMEs bypass price-based competition through value-driven engagement, a crucial factor for sustaining growth and survival in an increasingly global marketplace.

The research contributes to the literature, as much of the literature has focused on large organisations without considering SMEs in emerging markets. It also provides actionable recommendations for SME leaders, policymakers, and training institutions, emphasising the need to be digitally enabled, trained in sales, and culturally adjusted. In conclusion, this study finds that despite the obvious challenges, the combination of KAM and consultative selling offers a viable, strategic route for Indian SMEs to optimise B2B sales performance, develop sustainable customer relationships, and gain a competitive advantage in an evolving business environment.

Table 7: Summary of Hypothesis Testing and Empirical Results

Hypothesis	Path / Relationship	Statistical Result (Audited)	Finding / Verdict
H1	Consultative Selling → Customer Retention	beta = 0.4377, p < .001	Supported
H2	Digital Enablement → KAM Success	Qualitatively confirmed; formal mediation testing not conducted due to survey instrument constraints	Partially Supported

H3	Strategic Orientation → KAM Integration	beta = 0.36, p < .001	Supported
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6.2 Linking with Research Objectives

Objective 1: To assess how Indian SME sales professionals perceive and apply consultative selling compared to traditional Key Account Management.

The first objective in this study is to evaluate how Indian SME sales experts and employees perceive and implement consultative selling instead of traditional KAM. Key insights from qualitative and quantitative analysis in this study demonstrated a conjunction in the attitudes of respondents. It is identified that while consultative selling is widely accepted, projecting its strategic necessity, its integration is constrained by capability, organisational, and cultural limitations. Specifically, survey insights underlined that sales staff in Indian small and medium-sized firms perceive consultative selling as an important aspect in long-term B2B relationship development and as an enabler of client satisfaction and retention. It supports contemporary sales theory, positioning the consultative sales method as a differentiator in competitive markets like Indian SMEs. But similarly, insights emphasised an integration gap. Despite encouraging perceptions, various companies struggle with operationalising this type of selling due to gaps in their digital infrastructure, a lack of management commitment, and a lack of staff training. This inconsistency outlined that while consultative selling is conceptually implemented, its integration is still in the growing stage compared to being embedded in regular sales practices.

The qualitative findings reinforced quantitative insights by corresponding with how sales and key account managers perceive consultative selling as a relationship-based practice, indicating listening, collaboration, and empathic solutions. Consultative methods were addressed, extending product-focused selling, facilitating the salespeople to take the role of a reliable advisor. This transformation enables effective customer collaborations, SME credibility, and differentiation in a sector dominated by transactional selling

approaches. Correspondingly, the data underlined that staff are frequently under accompanied for the high advisory roles, as they need emotional intelligence, problem-solving skills, and continuous training that companies rarely offer. Therefore, consultative selling is both a strategic scope and a skill-growth challenge.

When contrasted with conventional key account management, the insights revealed that these two methods could be complementary instead of oppositional. KAM offers a systematic model for controlling key accounts, while consultative sales techniques improve these relations through advisory involvement and targeted solutions. Collectively, they change communications into collaborations compared to transactions, strengthening long-term trust and enhanced margins. Significantly, this study also addressed that implementation with KAM enables effective cross-operational partnerships within SMEs, increasing internal effectiveness and consistency along with external customer relationships.

This study addressed the objective by highlighting a dual perception among Indian SME sales professionals. While consultative selling is perceived as strategically crucial, it is also operationally difficult to integrate. The implementation of KAM appeared as a way to change transactional sales into relational co-operations and co-creations. However, unresolved challenges such as digital under enablement, training limitations, and leadership disinterest limit its full-scale integration. Therefore, the research justified that while consultative selling is intellectually accepted, its actual value could only be achieved through systemic, technical, and cultural changes within SEMs in India.

Objective 2: To identify key challenges faced by Indian SMEs in implementing consultative selling strategies within their KAM frameworks.

This objective aimed to recognise the core problems encountered by Indian SMEs in applying consultative selling strategies within their key account management models. The qualitative and quantitative data sets worked together, offering both a statistical and a deep knowledge of the challenges. The quantitative insights emphasised gaps in digital investments, organisational resistance, limited or no management help, and skills

limitations as the most core challenges. These insights aligned with institutional theory, which outlines why SMEs are frequently found to be path-dependent, following the existing transactional approaches to sales due to resource reliance and external pressures. Contextualising the Indian SME environment, this inclination is reinforced by short-term revenue necessities that demotivate investments in long-term consultative abilities. However, statistical frameworks outlined a positive and countable relationship among consultative selling insights and client results; the explanatory influence was only partial. This gap underlines that consultative orientation could not function in isolation; however, it should be embedded within widespread organisational and technical systems.

The qualitative outcomes from the interviews offered a critical setting and explanation for the statistical outcomes. The findings elaborated on the nature of these challenges, confirming that economic and resource limitations hinder investments in technologies and specialised training. Key insights emphasised a significant skill gap among sales staff, noting a lack of the high-level advisory competencies needed for a consultative sales method. It justified the quantitative results of skills limitations. The qualitative data underlined the cultural resistance and management inertia recognised in the survey, addressing that an organisational stress on short-term profitability is a key deterrent to long-term skill growth. The qualitative insights additionally introduced an extra external issue, competitive pressure that forces a reactive, short-term emphasis, and further intensifies the existing internal challenges.

This objective is addressed by establishing that the main problems lie not only in technological capacity and skill growth but also in the wider institutional and cultural aspects of Indian SMEs. Efficient integration of consultative selling within key account management models needs managing these interconnected challenges through proper investment, training, and a change in management priorities from short-term profit to long-term relationship maintenance with the client in B2B sales.

Objective 3: To evaluate the role of digital tools (e.g., AI, CRM) in supporting the integration of consultative selling with KAM.

This study's insights are aligned with and address the above research objective by assessing the role of digital tools in assisting the implementation of consultative selling with KAM. The shared qualitative and quantitative insights offered a holistic context of both the potentials and the gaps of digital tool usage within SMEs in India.

The quantitative evidence outlined that while CRM tools are implemented by some of the SMEs, their utilisation is frequently incomplete for administrative or record-keeping operations compared to analytical or systemic applications. The findings suggested that while digital infrastructure is available in specific SMEs, its value-adding capabilities in consultative selling remain mostly unused. The roles of AI were also mixed, with sales staff either incapable or uncertain regarding its significance, reflecting widespread concerns around digital literacy and cost-effectiveness. From the perspectives of the resource-based view theory, digital tools could be accounted as strategic assets; however, their contribution to the success of consultative selling is constrained by a lack of skills and application.

The qualitative data added significant depth and reasoning to the statistical insights. Managers in Indian SMEs emphasised the potentials of digital tools like CRM, AI, and analytics to increase consumer knowledge, foresee demands, and support targeted sales assistance, all of which are core to consultative selling. The qualitative data explained how technologies like CRM and analytics could bundle customer information, predict needs, and manage time for relationship-building by automating management tasks. This answered the "role" of digital tools as identified in the research objective. Significantly, predictive analytics within KAM were viewed as full of potential, facilitating key account managers to proactively build client-specific solutions. But the qualitative insights also confirmed the qualitative blocks. Managers addressed higher expenses and a lack of skills and training as key inhibitors, reflecting the statistical results of digital under-enablement. This study also revealed a key attitudinal problem, with insights outlining reluctance to invest due to short-term survival burdens. This study effectively analyses the role of digital tools by outlining a nuanced image. The quantitative information established the low integration and limited usage of these digital tools, whereas the qualitative insights

explained the strategic potentials they hold and the particular problems (cost, skills, attitudes) preventing their full utilisation.

Objective 4: To examine strategies adopted by Indian SMEs to enhance consultative selling within their account management structures.

The data provides a nuanced view of both the formal and informal strategies employed, while also highlighting the persistent challenges that impede their effectiveness.

The study results are well-connected with and efficiently answered the research objective of investigating strategies implemented by Indian SMEs to increase consultative selling within their KAM structures. The insights offered direct emphasis on the adaptive strategies utilised by Indian SMEs. Findings specifically addressed incremental strategies encompassing pilot programs, facilitating government policies and alliances, and the integration of affordable digital solutions as practical strategies to overcome fiscal issues. Training modules such as peer monitoring and on-the-job coaching are also highlighted in the qualitative findings as key strategies. These adaptive approaches illustrated how Indian SMEs innovatively manage fiscal scarcity while inclining toward consultative selling methods. These results address the research objective by outlining the specific, flexible strategies being included to support consultative selling integrations.

In the strategic context, long-term relationship development is highly focused as the outcome of integrating consultative selling within existing KAM. The findings outlined the centrality of credibility, co-creation, and partnership in developing client trust, increasing reputation, and generating adaptability in competitive markets.

The quantitative data, although, offer a significant counterpoint, focusing on a critical disconnect between these suggested strategies and their performance. Findings suggested that self-learning or individual efforts are the key method of skill growth, with more organised methods such as formal training structures and mentoring being neglected. It indicated that while management in Indian SMEs aims to utilise coaching and peer monitoring, the execution is limited because of relying on ad-hoc, personal salespeople's initiatives. The quantitative findings on sales strategies strengthened this, underlying that

transactional selling practices remained a main approach, reflecting that the implementation of consultative selling is far from standardised. A core result is the misalignment of incentive models, rewarding more sales deal amounts over long-term account value.

Overall, this study outlined that research objective 4 is addressed by addressing that SMEs in India implement a combination of incremental, relational, as well as adaptive strategies to reinforce consultative selling within existing KAM structures. Additionally, it revealed that while resource limitation and transactional methods reduce systematic integration, these firms are progressively including consultative approaches through transformation, networking, and relationship-building.

Objective 5: To measure the impact of integrating consultative selling into KAM on customer retention and sales effectiveness.

This study addressed the research objective by measuring the effect of implementing consultative selling within key account management on consumer retention and sales efficacy. Findings from qualitative and quantitative data offered a comprehensive understanding of this relationship. The statistical data provided direct, empirical evidence of the influence. Key findings confirmed that a positive awareness of consultative selling is a key predictor of both client retention and consumer satisfaction. The results quantified this relationship, highlighting a moderate effective correlation and addressing that awareness of consultative selling is responsible for a key variation in consumer outcomes. This effectively evaluates the effect on sales efficiency, offering statistical support for the theoretical discussion that relational abilities are significant drivers of long-term organisational success. On the other side, the insights pointed toward a partial explanatory influence, indicating that while the consultative selling mindset is positive, it should be integrated within a wider ecosystem that involves technical and cultural shifts for the highest impact.

The qualitative results reinforced this empirical insight by outlining how this influence is attained by Indian SMEs. The study highlighted that implementing

consultative selling and key account management directs to long-term relationship management as the key outcome. The data emphasised core advantages like enhanced trust, partnership, as well as value co-creation, which correspond to enhanced client trustworthiness and retention. The qualitative findings aligned with sales efficacy by explaining how these connections lead to repeat purchases, client referrals, and higher revenue likelihood. It is also outlined that this implementation increases brand image, which minimises consumer churn level and offers a competitive edge to SMEs. This study focused on the value of co-innovation and increased cross-functional collaboration as an impact of integrating consultative selling into KAM, increasing internal effectiveness and external brand value, thus, developing comprehensive sales success beyond generic customer retention methods. Overall, this study addressed the research objective by outlining that implementing consultative selling into KAM efficiently affects present and future consumer retention and sales success, enabling credibility, loyalty, and co-innovation.

6.3 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Establish Structured Key Account Management Frameworks

The companies need a systematised key account management system to plan their limited resource base and reinforce customer relations. A systematic approach will prioritise high-value clients, align resources, and ensure consistent service delivery across accounts (Maine *et al.*, 2022). With the implementation of formal structures, SMEs are guaranteed a high level of efficiency, less duplication, and client satisfaction. Long-term growth is also encouraged by key account management systems, which foster continuous relationship development. To plan better, the enterprises ought to develop account categorisation processes based on profitability and growth potential. Clarity in account selection helps avoid resource waste and enhances accountability and transparency in decision-making on allocation within organisational structures.

One critical measure is leadership endorsement, which requires all departments to participate in account management initiatives. Leadership support fosters accountability and ensures financial support for critical systems and personnel training. Firms ought to use straightforward yet efficient online systems to plan their accounts, monitor performance, and consolidate customer information. Process standardisation enables managers to monitor account health, gauge results, and adjust strategies (Sankala, 2024). The account managers must be trained in the analytical and relationship-building skills necessary for account-based strategies. As such, systematic structures and leadership assistance improve competitive placement and encourage more powerful consumer-focused initiatives at SMEs.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen Consultative Selling Capabilities

Businesses need to intensify consultative selling activities by ensuring employees develop skills, knowledge, and competencies in customer engagement. Consultative selling requires greater knowledge of customer needs, active listening, and the development of problem-specific solutions (Babu and Akshara, 2024). SMEs require systematic instruction in emotional intelligence, questioning skills, and problem-solving. Such programs are supposed to improve employees' capacity to shift customer relationships from transactional to advisory.

There is also the need to match organisational culture and advisory behaviours in consultative selling activities. The businesses need to incorporate customer orientation, sympathy, and teamwork into the routine activities and performance reviews. Staff members need to be empowered to make suggestions and develop tailor-made solutions for customers. Rewards must be given to employees who foster trust-based interactions, thereby encouraging uniformity in customer-focused conduct across departments (Abou Kamar and Alsetoohy, 2021). There is also the possibility of the SMEs collaborating with industry associations to access external workshops, professional mentoring, and peer learning. The low-cost training options ensure that staffs are developed despite resource constraints.

Consultative practices reinforce the brand image by positioning SMEs as reliable consultants in competitive markets. Improved advisory roles lead to more referrals and customer recommendations, and long-term loyalty. Integrating consultative practices in marketing, product design, and customer service departments can maximise value creation, build relationships, and enhance client retention, thereby boosting SMEs' confidence and competitiveness.

Recommendation 3: Accelerate Digital Adoption for Customer Relationship Management

Digital platforms are needed by SMEs to allow integration of account management and consultative selling in competitive markets. Businesses need to embrace customer relationship management systems, analytics tools, and communication systems to improve service delivery. Digital systems unify customer information, enable predictions, and offer valuable insights into how clients behave (Egbuhuzor *et al.*, 2021). These platforms reduce administrative workloads and enable managers to spend more time on consultative activities and account planning.

Companies must prioritise scalable, cost-effective technologies to remain competitive rather than invest in costly, complex solutions. SMEs with limited budgets should seize opportunities in cloud-based systems, open-source software, and modular applications—these alternatives drive efficiency and growth. Leverage funding and technical support from governments and industry associations, which can be invaluable for digital transformation. When negotiating with vendors, actively pursue discounts, training, and flexible payment plans to accelerate digital adoption.

Adopting digital is part of optimising customer experiences, as it enables personalisation, prompt responses, and enhanced service quality. Predictive analytics enhances resiliency by anticipating customer needs and market dynamics. Companies ought to progressively enhance staff's digital literacy by organising workshops and practice (Maspul and Putri, 2025). The training should also involve data interpretation, CRM, and communication etiquette. Digital tooling adoption turns customer management into a more

organised, effective, and proactive one. SMEs are thus advised to adopt digital systems in stages, in a cost-effective and functional manner.

It is also the advanced performance monitoring and evaluation, which can be implemented through digital adoption. Businesses become more transparent about the health of their accounts, customer satisfaction, and overall revenue growth. Simple parameters such as customer lifetime value, customer retention rates, and profitability can provide managers with clear insights for decision-making (Ali and Shabn, 2024). Thus, the adoption of digital systems will improve the integration of KAM and consultative selling, as well as foster scalability, resilience, and competitiveness.

Recommendation 4: Address Organizational Barriers through Cultural and Structural Transformation

Integration effectiveness is diminished by organisational barriers, such as cultural resistance, financial constraints, and operational complexity. SMEs need specific measures to change their cultural values and align them with customer-related priorities. Leaders should clearly communicate the vision, actively demonstrate trust-building and cooperative behaviours, and set long-term development goals. Employee workshops, leadership modelling, and recognition programs are used to reinforce integration objectives through cultural reinforcement (Adeniyi *et al.*, 2024).

Financial obstacles require creative funding. SMEs should seek microfinance, government support, and industry partnerships. Such cooperation lowers training and technology expenses. Resource pooling across networks and associations helps SMEs break barriers while remaining competitive. SMEs should adjust organisational designs to remove structural barriers (Teixeira *et al.*, 2022). Cross-functional teams from sales, marketing, and operations should manage accounts and deliver customer experiences. A phased approach reduces risk and builds confidence; pilot projects help scale initiatives.

Organisational change will facilitate sustainable change by mitigating resistance, boosting morale, and increasing interdepartmental trust. Firms that address cultural and structural impediments are more resilient, competitive, and adaptable in volatile markets.

Recommendation 5: Promote Long-Term Relationship Orientation and Customer Trust

The long-term orientation of the integration approach needed by SMEs is necessary. Businesses are supposed to treat relationships as partnerships, not transactions. The long-term orientation ensures that customers will trust them, become more loyal, and drive revenue growth even in changing market conditions (Immadisetty, 2025). Establishing trust entails constant communication, openness, and empathy between the client and the account manager.

SMEs ought to embed relationship orientation in organisational policy and reward systems. The criteria must have a measure of long-term relationship contributions in the employee evaluation. Incentives and recognition for trust-building behaviours promote consistent alignment of cultural practices. Managers need to emphasise the importance of lasting client loyalty over short-term profits.

Co-innovation should be fostered to build trust and cooperation. SMEs can engage clients in product development, service improvement, and collaborative solution design (Flanckegård *et al.*, 2023). Such cooperation enhances engagement, satisfaction, and reputation. Connection-based strategies create switching costs, reducing client attrition. SMEs are expected to align relationship orientation with broader sustainability practices. Customers increasingly demand suppliers who demonstrate environmental and social responsibility. Enterprises build trust and reputation by integrating sustainability into their operations. This alignment with societal values strengthens functional offerings.

Relationship-based strategies also shield against competitor disruption. Customers in long-term partnerships are less likely to switch. Therefore, SMEs should institutionalise trust-building to secure loyalty, enhance reputation, and ensure long-term profitability. A focus on close relationships provides resilience, competitiveness, and strategic stability.

6.4 Research Limitations

Like any empirical research, this study has limitations that must be taken into account when drawing conclusions. To begin with, the study's geographic scope was

limited to Indian SMEs (small and medium enterprises), and the sample offers valuable insights into the B2B (business-to-business) sales environment, but the results may not be entirely applicable to SMEs in other emerging economies or to larger organisations with more organised sales functions. There may be cultural, economic, and institutional disparities between regions that affect the perception and practice of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling (a sales approach focused on understanding and addressing client needs through tailored solutions).

Second, self-reported survey and interview data may be subject to response bias. Sales professionals could exaggerate consultative behaviours or downplay difficulties due to social desirability or organisational allegiance. Although triangulation helped mitigate this, some bias may remain.

Third, the study is cross-sectional and cannot establish causality among variables such as consultative selling, sales performance, and customer retention. Although correlation and regression analysis yielded useful associations, only longitudinal research could show how practices and performance change over time.

Post-Hoc Construct Refinement: A methodological limitation of this study involves the disaggregation of survey item Q13 into two separate variables during the analysis stage. While this was done to ensure theoretical alignment with established literature, it relies on a single-item proxy for satisfaction and retention. Although this decomposition is acceptable in exploratory research, results should be interpreted with caution, and future studies should utilise multi-item scales to further validate these specific constructs.

Lastly, the sample was limited by resources and time (12 interviews, 150 surveys). This was enough for exploratory research, but more and diverse data would strengthen the conclusions. The research focused on managerial opinions; including customer and stakeholder views would offer a more balanced picture.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, the research has been of significant value in understanding how KAM and consultative selling can be integrated into Indian SMEs, and it has also laid a solid foundation for further investigation in the same field.

6.5 Research Implications

This study has important theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the research addresses an under-researched research gap in sales management in SMEs by combining the concepts of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling in the Indian B2B environment. The focus of previous scholarship has mostly been on large multinationals; however, this study shows that SMEs can leverage strategic selling practices with the support of digital technologies and cultural adaptation, despite their structural limitations. This expands the range of relationship marketing, social exchange, and resource-based views to smaller resource-constrained enterprises.

For practitioners, the study highlights the need to professionalise the sales functions of Indian SMEs. SMEs can rebrand themselves as partners to their clients by abandoning transactional selling. This demands an investment in training in consultative skills, promoting cross-functional cooperation, and instilling customer centricity into the organisational culture. In addition, the data emphasises that digital solutions such as CRM systems and AI analytics can be used to better understand customers, manage their accounts more efficiently, and build long-term relationships. Adoption of digital technology, even at a basic level, should thus be a priority for SME leaders to address the current sales potential and performance gap.

The study also has implications for policymakers and training institutions. Government support for SME competitiveness must be part of specific training programmes in consultative selling and KAM, as well as subsidies or incentives to use digital technologies cheaply. Consultative skills can also be developed in academic and professional institutions to prepare future sales professionals and eliminate any gaps in the SME sector's capabilities.

In general, the study supports the idea that KAM, combined with consultative selling, is not only a hypothetical endeavour but also a practical requirement for SMEs striving to build resilience, customer loyalty, and competitive advantage in the changing B2B market environment in India.

6.6 Limitations and Future Research Scopes

Research Limitations

Like any empirical research, this study is subject to several limitations that must be acknowledged when interpreting the conclusions.

- **Geographic and Contextual Scope:** The study was limited to **Indian SMEs**. While the sample offers valuable information about the B2B sales environment, the results might not be entirely applicable to SMEs in other emerging economies and larger organizations, which have more, organized sales functions. Cultural, economic, and institutional disparities between regions may affect the perception and practice of Key Account Management (KAM) and consultative selling.
- **Methodological Limitations (Self-Report and Sample Size):** The data collected relied on **self-reported data** gathered through surveys and interviews, which introduced an element of **response bias**. Sales professionals may have exaggerated their use of consultative behaviours or minimized difficulties due to social desirability or organizational allegiance. The sample size was restricted by resource and time limitations (150 survey responses and 12 in-depth interviews). Although sufficient for exploratory research, a larger and more diverse dataset would enhance the reliability and strength of the conclusions.
- **Cross-Sectional Design:** The study is **cross-sectional** and collected data at a single point in time, meaning it cannot draw any **causality** between variables, such as the adoption of consultative selling and sales performance or customer retention. Longitudinal research would be required to examine how practices and performance change over time.

- **Single Stakeholder Focus:** The research mainly focused on the **managerial opinions** (sales managers, key account managers). Further research might include the opinions of customers and other stakeholders to provide a more balanced picture.

Future Research Scopes

Future research requires expanding the current study beyond sectors. Broad to diverse sector coverage enables the identification of similarities and differences in integration practices across industries and cultural settings. Comparative studies involving developed and developing economies enhance understanding of contextual influences shaping account management and consultative selling. Future research should also focus on customer perspectives. Exploring customer expectations and trust development offers additional depth to integration analysis. Customer-based studies provide validation of managerial perceptions while highlighting potential misalignments between enterprise strategies and client priorities. Digitalisation represents another critical area for exploration. Research could examine the influence of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and predictive analytics. These tools may transform customer engagement models, requiring a deeper understanding of their practical effect on SMEs.

Finally, longitudinal studies are necessary to track changes in integration practices over time. Monitoring the evolution of strategies allows researchers to identify patterns of adoption, success, and failure. Such studies contribute valuable insights into the sustainability of integration and resilience within competitive environments. Expanding research scope through these directions strengthens knowledge and supports the development of best practices for SMEs globally.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - SURVEY COVER LETTER

Title of the Study:

Exploring the Integration of Key Account Management and Consultative Selling:
A Study of B2B Sales in Indian SMEs

Dear Participant,

I am conducting research as part of my Doctor of Business Administration program on the integration of key account management and consultative selling in Indian SMEs. The purpose of this study is to examine managerial perspectives on how these practices influence competitiveness, customer trust, and long-term growth.

You are invited to participate in this survey because of your professional experience as a manager in a small or medium-sized enterprise. Your insights will provide valuable understanding of current practices, challenges, and opportunities in business-to-business sales.

Participation is voluntary, and there are no risks involved. The survey will take approximately 10–15 minutes to complete. All responses will remain confidential and will be used for academic purposes only. Results will be reported in aggregate form, without identifying individual participants or organizations.

Your contribution is highly appreciated and will play an important role in advancing research on strategic selling practices in Indian SMEs.

Thank you for your time and support.

Researcher Details

Name: THOTA SRINIVAS ADITYA

Program: Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)

Institution: Swiss School of Business and Management Geneva

Supervisor Details

Name: Dr. Vassiliki Grougiou

Designation: Senior Lecturer

Email: vassiliki@ssbm.ch, Swiss School of Business and Management Geneva

APPENDIX B - INFORMED CONSENT

Title of the project:

EXPLORING THE INTEGRATION OF KEY ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT AND CONSULTATIVE SELLING: A STUDY OF B2B SALES IN INDIAN SMES

Consent to take part in research

☐ I..... willingly agree to contribute in this research study.

☐ I acknowledge my full rights to withdraw from the study at any time.

☐ I have provided with the research purpose and aim in writing form.

☐ I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

☐ I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.

☐ I know that all responses I provide for this study will be confidential.

☐ I acknowledge that my personal detail on the results of this study will remain anonymous.

☐ I know that signed consent forms and audio recordings will be retained securely until the end of the study and will be password protected.

☐ I understand that under freedom of data authorisation I am allowed to access the data I have offered at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

☐ I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Researcher Details

Name: **THOTA SRINIVAS ADITYA**

Program: **Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)**

Institution: **Swiss School of Business and Management Geneva**

Email: tsaditya.mnit@gmail.com

Supervisor Details

Name: Dr. Vassiliki Grougiou

Designation: Senior Lecturer

Email: vassiliki@ssbm.ch, Swiss School of Business and Management Geneva

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to contribute in this research.

APPENDIX C - INTERVIEW GUIDE

Table 8: Interview guide for the study

Sections	Purpose	Prompts or Questions
Introduction (Five minutes)	Collecting consent, explaining the research and building a supportive interview environment.	• Welcome and thanks to each manager. • Introducing the rationale and purpose of the study. • Assure confidentiality and consent for recording interview responses.
Background Information	Context development, understanding management roles and firms.	• 12 managers from Indian SMEs. • Sales managers, key account managers, business development managers, and account managers. • Most of the SMEs are from the manufacturing and service sectors in India.
Main interview questions: Implementing KAM with a Consultative selling approach.	Exploring integration approaches and limitations.	1. How does your firm integrate KAM practices with consultative selling approaches in your company's B2B sales strategy? 2. What problems have you encountered in aligning KAM and consultative selling in your company?

		3. What strategic approaches are used by your firm to reduce these integration issues in practice?
Main interview questions: SMEs context and digital tools.	Understanding digital integration and limitations in SMEs.	4. How does operating within an SME environment impact the way you use digital tools like KAM and Consultative selling? 5. What key limitations have you faced in utilising digital tools (for example, KAM) to manage accounts or perform consultative selling?
Main interview questions: Relationship development and future perspectives.	Evaluate the long-term role and future changes of KAM and consultative selling.	6. In your experience, what role does consultative selling play in developing long-term relationships with key accounts? 7. What transformations do you predict in the integration of KAM and consultative selling in the B2B sales in Indian SMEs over the next three to five years?
Ending the interview.	Closing and appreciating each participant's engagement in the interview.	• Thank each respondent for participating and for their valuable insights. • Explaining how the interview records would be stored and used. • Maintaining confidentiality.

(Source: Created by the researcher)

APPENDIX D - SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Question 1. Please confirm that you have read and understood the information above and agree to participate in this survey.

- Yes, I consent to participate.
- No, I do not consent.

Demographics

Question 2. Which of the following best describes your current role?

- Sales professional/Salesperson
- Sales manager/Key account manager
- Business development leader
- Senior management official
- Other

Question 3. How many years of professional experience do you have in the Indian SME sector?

- Less than 2 years
- 2-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- More than 15 years

Question 4. Is your company primarily a manufacturing or service-based firm?

- Manufacturing
- Service-based

Question 5. What is the approximate size of your sales team (number of employees)?

- 1-10
- 11-25
- 26-50
- 51-100
- More than 100

Perceptions & Practices

Question 6: On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "Strongly Disagree" and 5 is "Strongly Agree," please rate the following statement:

"In my experience, consultative selling is more effective than traditional selling for building long-term B2B relationships."

Question 7. Which of the following sales strategies are actively used in your company? (Select all that apply)

- Traditional, transactional selling (focus on price and volume)
- Key Account Management (KAM)
- Consultative selling (focus on identifying customer needs and providing solutions)
- Solution selling

Question 8. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "Not at all" and 5 is "To a great extent," please indicate your agreement with the following statements regarding your company's sales approach:

Our sales approach is focused on building relationships and trust with clients.

Our sales approach is focused on solving client problems.

Our sales approach is focused on simply making a sale or achieving short-term targets.

Question 9. What is the primary way your company trains its sales team?

- Formal training programs
- On-the-job training/Mentorship
- Self-learning/Personal initiative
- No specific training is provided

Question 10. On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate the level of importance your company's management places on: (1=Not Important at all, 5=Extremely Important)

Strategic client relationships

Short-term sales targets

Digital Tools & Outcomes

Question 11. To what extent does your company use data and insights from digital tools to inform sales strategies? (Select all that apply)

- To track customer history and preferences
- To identify upsell/cross-sell opportunities
- To predict customer behavior
- To manage sales pipelines
- Not used at all

Question 12. Which of the following do you believe is the biggest challenge when integrating consultative selling and Key Account Management?

- Lack of training and skills
- Resistance to change within the organization
- Lack of investment in digital tools
- Lack of management support

Question 13. On a scale of 1 to 5, please rate your agreement with the following statements:

Statement 1: "The use of consultative selling has led to an increase in our customer retention rate."

Statement 2: "Integrating consultative selling has improved overall customer satisfaction."

Statement 3: "Our consultative approach has helped differentiate us from competitors."

Question 14. In your experience, what is the most significant factor that has contributed to a successful B2B sale?

- Competitive pricing
- Product/service features
- The relationship and trust built with the client
- Fast delivery/service
- Other

Question 15. How much of your workday is dedicated to relationship-building and problem-solving with clients, versus transactional activities (e.g., order taking)?

- Almost entirely transactional
- Mostly transactional, some relationship-building
- An even mix
- Mostly relationship-building, some transactional
- Almost entirely relationship-building

Question 16. Which of the following have you found to be the most effective strategies for enhancing your consultative selling within your account management practices? (Select all that apply)

- Formal training programs
- Cross-functional collaboration
- Use of CRM and other digital tools
- Mentorship from senior colleagues
- Incentive or bonus programs

Question 17. Do you believe that digital tools like AI can play a significant role in improving consultative selling and account management in the future?

- Yes, absolutely
- Possibly, but with many challenges
- No, they are not relevant to our business
- I am not sure

Question 18. What is the most significant opportunity for your company to grow its B2B sales in the next five years?

- Expanding to new markets
- Offering new products/services
- Improving customer relationships and retention
- Competing on price
- Adopting new digital tools and technologies

Question 19. Does your company use a formal Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system (e.g., Salesforce, Zoho, Freshsales)?

Yes

Go to section 5 (CRM system)

No

Submit Form

I don't know

Submit Form

CRM system

Question 20. If you answered "Yes" to the previous question, on a scale of 1 to 5, how effectively is the CRM system integrated into your sales and account management activities? (1=Not effective at all, 5=Extremely effective)