

**UTILISING MARKETING AUTOMATION TO
SUPPORT SALES IN DIGITAL BUSINESS-TO-
BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT**

**Jyväskylä University
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Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract <p>Past decades business-to-business companies have witnessed major changes in their operating environment, which have been caused by digitalisation, the Internet and changed purchase behaviour. Business companies today have to manage not only with new technology and huge quantities of data, but also with customers who are more demanding than ever before and actively searching needed services and products from the Internet. Marketing automation is one of the technologies that can help companies to cope with the new digital environment.</p> <p>The goal of this study is to enhance understanding on marketing automation and to increase knowledge on how business-to-business companies could utilise it in sales and lead generation. The target is achieved by clarifying different aspects concerning marketing automation and its potential benefits along with challenges for business-to-business companies. The perspective of the study is focused on marketing automation as a tool for marketing and sales actions excluding the technical side such as implementation of marketing automation software.</p> <p>The study was conducted as a case study by using semi-structured interviews. As for the theoretical background, it is build around the themes of marketing and sales in digital business-to-business environment. Furthermore, the research model developed for this study joins the customer journey and sales funnel models with content marketing and marketing automation, which all are important subjects in the theoretical base of this study.</p> <p>The study mainly supports the previous research and confirms that marketing automation is beneficial for business-to-business companies. It also suggests that marketing automation should be considered more as a concept that has strategic and operative aspects. Moreover, the results of the study also highlight that in order to improve customer experience, which in turn eventually enhances lead generation and sales, companies have to deliver tailored and targeted communication that is distributed timely and according to customer's purchase journey. The study results also reveal that not all companies utilise gathered data even though they have learned to gather it. Therefore this study advises companies to invest in data analysing and testing marketing and sales actions, since they are the key to effective marketing automation.</p>	
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Tiivistelmä <p>Muutaman viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana business-to-business -yritykset ovat havainneet merkittäviä muutoksia toimintaympäristössään, jotka ovat seurausta digitalisaatiosta, internetistä sekä ostokäyttäytymisen muutoksesta. Nykyään yritysten tuleekin hallita uutta teknologiaa ja valtavia määriä tietoa sekä osata palvella entistä vaativampia asiakkaita, jotka itse aktiivisesti etsivät tarvittavia palveluita ja tuotteita verkosta. Yksi tämän päivän teknologioista, joka auttaa yrityksiä selviytymään tästä uudesta digitaalisesta toimintaympäristöstä, on markkinointiautomaatio.</p> <p>Tämä tutkimus pyrkii kasvattamaan ymmärrystä markkinoinnin automaatiosta ja lisäämään tietoa siitä miten business-to-business -yritykset voivat hyödyntää markkinoinnin automaatiota myynnissä sekä liidien hankinnassa. Tämä tavoite saavutetaan kirkastamalla markkinoinnin automaatioon liittyviä osa-alueita ja selvittämällä sen mahdollisia etuja ja haasteita yrityksille. Tutkimus keskittyy markkinoinnin automaatioon työkaluna, jolla toteutetaan markkinoinnin ja myynnin toimenpiteitä ja siksi tekninen puoli, kuten järjestelmän käyttöönotto, on rajattu pois.</p> <p>Tutkimus toteutettiin tapaustutkimuksena käyttäen puolistrukturoituja haastatteluja. Työn teoreettinen perusta on puolestaan rakennettu markkinoinnin ja myynnin teemoihin digitaalisessa ympäristössä. Lisäksi työn tutkimusmalli liittyy asiakkaan ostopolkumallin ja yrityksen myyntisuppilomallin yhteen markkinoinnin automaatiolla ja sisältömarkkinoinnilla, jotka ovat myös keskeisiä aihe-alueita työn teoreettisessa viitekehksessä.</p> <p>Tämän tutkimuksen tulokset ovat pitkälti linjassa aikaisemman tutkimustiedon kanssa ja ne vahvistavat markkinoinnin automaation hyödyllisyyden business-to-business -yrityksille. Tutkimuksen mukaan markkinoinnin automaatio tulee nähdä enemmänkin konseptina, jossa on strategisia ja operatiivisia puolia. Lisäksi tulokset osoittavat, että yritysten on tuotettava personoitua ja kohdennettua viestintää asiakkaan ostopolun mukaisesti. Tämä puolestaan parantaa asiakaskokemusta ja sitä kautta liidigenerointia ja myyntiä. Tutkimustulokset myös paljastavat, että yritykset keräävät tietoa, mutta kaikki eivät silti hyödynnä sitä. Siksi tämä tutkimus kehottaakin yrityksiä investoimaan markkinointi- ja myyntitoimenpiteiden analysointiin ja testaamiseen, sillä ne ovat avain onnistuneeseen markkinoinnin automaatioon.</p>	
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the topic

The Internet and digitalisation have inevitably changed the world during the past decades. We live in a digital era where technology and hyperconnectivity are part of our everyday life. Business-to-business (B2B) marketing is one of the fields that digitalisation has changed radically. New digital communication channels are evolved and customers are not only using multiple devices to consume media, but also creating and sharing it. Stieglitz, Dang-Xuan, Burns and Neuberger (2014) agree by saying that paradigm shift in consumption, communication, collaboration and creation of information has been caused by the mainstream adoption of social media applications. This in turn has caused the media landscape fragmentation and exponential growth of data in the world. Therefore according to Hall (2017, 1), companies today need to understand and capitalise on digital technologies as well as to cope with increased data and information.

A fundamental shift in the B2B buying customs has also occurred. Halligan and Dharmesh (2010, 14) talk about the revolution of buying habits where customers are no longer passively waiting for the call from a salesperson but instead using the Internet by themselves to find needed products and services and to choose companies they want to do business with. Today B2B buyers are actively searching information from the Internet and social media and interacting in different networks as a result of replacing or supplementing activities of company's sales force (Zahay, Schultz & Kumar 2014). This is also acknowledged by Angelos, Davis and Gaylard (2017) at the Accenture report, who reveal that 61 per cent of B2B transactions begin in online environment and social media is used as a research channel by 58 per cent of B2B customers. For that reason, the decision for buying is often formed prior contacting the sales department. Consistent with this, Adamson, Dixon and Toman (2012) state that nearly 60 per cent of the purchase decision process in B2B field is already done before involving the sales people. Furthermore, customers today are more demanding and guarded than before. According to Angelos et al. (2017), B2B customers today are expecting to receive hyper-personalised service as provided in business-to-customer (B2C) channels and less than 10 per cent of decision makers are responding to cold outreach. Cuevas (2018) also adds by

stating that in consequence of an easy access to the information, customers today have more powerful and demanding positions than ever before.

Due to the change of media consumption habits and buying customs, the marketing and sales tactics of the companies have to change as well. To stand out and entice new B2B customers, companies need to map out all the buying cycle stages potential customer undergoes and to cover all different questions the customer might need (Isohookana 2007, 291). Since the decision for buying is quite often formed prior involving a potential supplier, companies have to engage with the audience before they are in a process of buying (Rowles 2014, 5). The key is to be present in all different buying cycle stages and to provide customers with the right content at the right time of the buying journey (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Holliman and Rowley (2014) also agree by saying that B2B customers value the availability of suitable information in different buying process stages. This is one of the reasons why digital content marketing has become a very significant and promising marketing approach for the businesses. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) also support the above by saying that digital content marketing has grown to be a new marketing paradigm in B2B sector due to the active roles of business buyers who search for and evaluate information online. Zahay et al. (2014) add to this by mentioning that effectively placed content functions as an electronic salesperson that answers questions and educates through the customer's buying cycle.

The marketing automation technologies have also emerged strongly during past couple of years to help companies to manage with changed B2B operating environment. Marketing automation offers great new opportunities for B2B companies due its ability to exploit data and manage customised and truly customer-centric communication in multichannel digital environment for today's empowered customers (Keens & Barker, 2008). Marketing automation enables companies to provide not only the right content or message to the right customers, but also at the right phase of the buying journey (Wolny & Charoensuksai, 2014). Therefore, marketing automation is able to create value for the company by helping to acquire new suitable customers and value for the customer as well by providing personalised and useful information.

1.2 Justification, objectives and study questions

Marketing automation is a very current and interesting subject to research due to the changed B2B marketing and sales environment described at the previous introduction to the topic section. Furthermore, the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) came into effect on May 2018 brought major changes also for B2B marketing and sales actions. The new regulation forces many companies to change their outbound tactics to inbound marketing and sales tactics, which reinforces the need for technologies supporting permission and opt-in marketing such as marketing automation software.

Moreover, marketing automation is still quite new phenomenon in academic research even though a wide range of commercially conducted studies and articles can be found of the topic from the Internet. The academic literature has focused more to the technical and software implementation side of marketing automation (Heimbach, Kostyra & Hinz 2015; Keens & Barker 2008) or automation of sales force in general (Marcos 2018; D'Haen & Van den Poel 2013; Sharma 2007; Sheth & Sharma 2007). Fortunately, new research papers are gradually covering the marketing side as well. The study by Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) is the first academic research focusing on B2B content marketing, sales and marketing automation. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) also underline the lack of academic research regarding marketing automation and content marketing, which emphasises the relevance of this study as well.

This research studies marketing automation as a tool, which is supporting B2B companies at their marketing and sales actions in today's digital business environment. The study concentrates on the lead generation and utilises the sales funnel model. The technical side of marketing automation such as the deployment of software and different systems are excluded in the study. Furthermore, the maintenance of customer relationships and for instance e-farming methods are excluded in the study as well.

The main goal of this study is to enhance understanding on marketing automation and how it could be utilised to support sales and lead generation in B2B companies. The goal is reinforced by an attempt to clarify all the aspects concerning marketing automation and its potential benefits and challenges for B2B companies. From managerial perspective, the target is to shed light on the changed B2B operating environment and to provide information for practitioners on marketing automation. To achieve study objectives, the research questions are formed. The main research question is as follows:

- *How can marketing automation be utilised to support lead generation in B2B companies?*

Study objectives are approached also with three sub-questions. The target of these questions is to support the main research question and to reach study objectives by gaining knowledge on the marketing automation. Three sub-questions are as follows:

- *What are the core functionalities of the marketing automation system?*
- *What benefits marketing automation is able to provide for B2B companies?*
- *What challenges marketing automation might produce in B2B companies?*

1.3 Concept definitions

The key concepts are presented to provide an understanding about the subjects discussed in the study. These include marketing automation, content marketing,

social media marketing, permission marketing, sales funnel, CRM, data and lead generation.

Marketing automation

Automation is a very broad concept. In marketing terms, it could mean for example different advertising software where advertising and targeting are at least partly automated such as Google AdWords, Adform, LinkedIn and Facebook advertising. It can also mean a landing page or a website optimisation where the content of the site is tailored by the user. Automation could also be about service delivery where automated tools such as frequently asked questions and chat bots are used to answers routine queries minimising human support. Lastly, it can be marketing automation for e-communications, which utilises behavioural data to trigger relevant e-mails automatically. (Chaffey & Smith 2017, 541-542.) Buttle and Maklan (2015, 232) describe marketing automation as the application of computerized technologies, which support marketing management and marketing to achieve their work-related objectives. As for Grossberg (2016), he explains marketing automation to be a practice, where artificial intelligence is used for optimizing the search of potential prospects and to win customers. Rowley (2014, 152) defines marketing automation as a process of communications, which is triggered according to customer behaviour, contextual condition or the scoring system.

Digital content marketing

Pulizzi (2014, 5) defines content marketing as *“marketing and business process for creating and distributing valuable content to attract, acquire, and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience – with the objective of driving profitable customer action”*. As for Holliman and Rowley (2014), their definition of digital content marketing acknowledges also customer purchase stages and timing *“B2B digital content marketing involves creating, distributing and sharing relevant, compelling and timely content to engage customers at the appropriate point in their buying consideration processes, such that it encourages them to convert to a business building outcome”*. According to Rowles (2014, 25) the objective of digital content marketing is to attract and retain customers by providing engaging and useful content such as white papers, blog writings or case studies, which is suited to the user’s journey. Johnson and Sparks (2013) also specify, that content marketing is a strategic and intentional action for a company, which builds credibility, trust and awareness.

Social media marketing

Social media marketing and content marketing are quite similar. Social media marketing can be described as a marketing, which is distributed in social media

environment. Buttle and Maklan (2015, 246) define social media marketing as the practice where social media is used for customer management purposes. As for CIPRM (2013, 3), it describes social media as a term used for the Internet and mobile-based tools and channels that allow user interaction, content and opinion sharing. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) describe social media as platforms or a set of different channels where content can be delivered and shared whereas Chaffey and Smith (2017, 225) summarizes that social media is a digital media, which encourages audience interaction, sharing, engagement and participation.

Permission marketing

Godin (1999, 23) describes permission marketing with three dimensions: anticipated, personal and relevant - consumers anticipate to hear from you and to receive personal messages, which are directly related to them from the areas they are interested in. Permission marketers do not use resources in talking to all strangers. The aim is to target strangers who “opt-in” to a series of communications and to turn these strangers into prospects. (Godin 1999, 46.) The key in permission marketing is to get permission to send marketing communication and to gather the information of the customer. This way marketer is able to provide more personalised content. The ultimate object in permission marketing is to influence customers and to change their behaviour. (Godin 1999, 47.)

Data

Data can be described as pieces of information. The technological development is the reason behind the exponential growth of data in the world. Pictures, videos and text are created and shared in the Internet and in different social platforms. People are creating, publishing and using data more than ever. All activity in the Internet leaves digital footprint, which can be collected. Data amount in the world will increase tenfold in following ten years. (Salo 2013, 11, 20.) Harnessing this data could offer unique insights and better customer understanding. Businesses could transform data into knowledge and usable intelligence with the help of technological and analytical tools. (Debruyne 2014, 32.)

Sales funnel

The sales funnel model illustrates the stages of purchasing stages for company's potential customers. Several authors (D'Haen & Van den Poel 2013; Kotler, Rackham & Krishnaswamy 2006) have stated that there are many different variations of sales funnel stages and forms in literature and academic research, yet the conceptualization of the sales funnel is widely accepted. Järvinen and

Taiminen (2016) divide the sales funnel into four different stages: suspects, prospects, leads and deals as seen in a figure 1. The funnel acknowledges existing customers as well since they are good potential for upselling, repurchasing and cross-selling. Therefore, the sales funnel is seen as a loop where company's existing customers can re-enter. (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016.)

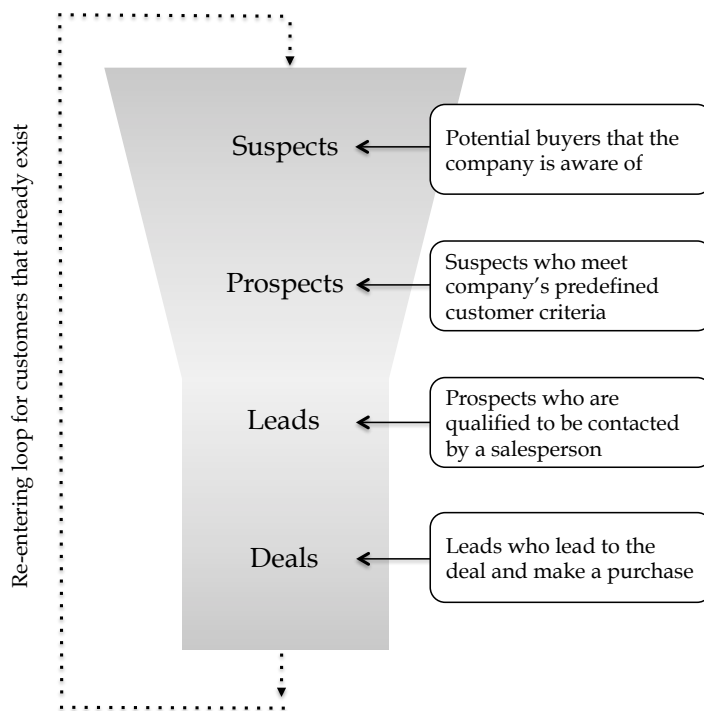


Figure 1 Sales funnel (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016)

Leads

There are many different definitions for leads since businesses describe them differently. Leads are considered companies or people worth approaching by the organisation. Leads are coming from the variety of sources such as from satisfied customers, promotional activities or online sources, which are search engines, company websites, social media and different portals. (Buttle & Maklan 2015, 64.) Lead is also someone demonstrating interest in something that a business has to offer, for instance requesting a sales consultation, a piece of educational content or a product demonstration. To be considered as a lead, a person has to provide some requested information such as a name, company phone number and e-mail address. (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 13.) When company encourages visitors to identify themselves, they need to offer something in return such as benefits, convenience, some form of monetary compensation or discount (Peppers, Rogers & Dorf 1999, 309).

Customer relationship management

CRM is not only a software system for managing customer relationships but rather as a multidimensional concept or phenomenon. Customer relationship management (CRM) has many definitions since it has diverse meanings for different people (Richards & Jones, 2008). According to Buttle and Maklan (2015, 4) CRM has three main aspects: strategic, operational and analytical. Strategic CRM aims to win and keep profitable customers and is a core of customer-centric business strategy. As for operational CRM, it focuses on sales, marketing and customer service processes by automating them. In other words, all processes are facing customers. Analytical CRM is an organisational process for strategic or tactical purposes that transforms customer-related data into actionable form. As for Payne and Frow (2005), they present an idea of the CRM continuum where CRM can be defined narrowly and tactically as implementing a technological solution or then broadly and strategically as managing a customer relationship that created value for shareholder. Nguyen and Mutum (2012) again revitalise the definition and describe CRM as *“The purposive use of customer knowledge and technologies to help firms generate customized offerings on an individual basis based on fairness and trust in order to enhance and maintain quality relationships with all the involved parties.”*

1.4 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework shows the theoretical outlook of this study and it is presented in a figure 2. The theoretical base is built around two upper level themes, B2B marketing and B2B sales in digital environment, which are vital elements of marketing automation. The sales theme consists of following concepts: a paradigm shift in sales, CRM, data and customer journey. The marketing theme consists of following concepts: a paradigm shift in marketing, content marketing, social media marketing and permission marketing. Moreover, marketing automation, lead generation and marketing and sales funnel concepts are examined as well.

Earlier studies and literature of the concepts described in a framework are examined to gain understanding about the study topic and to create interview questions. Printed publications and Internet materials are also used due to a scarce amount of the academic research papers. Qualitative research is conducted to advance the comprehension of marketing automation and lead generation in B2B environment.

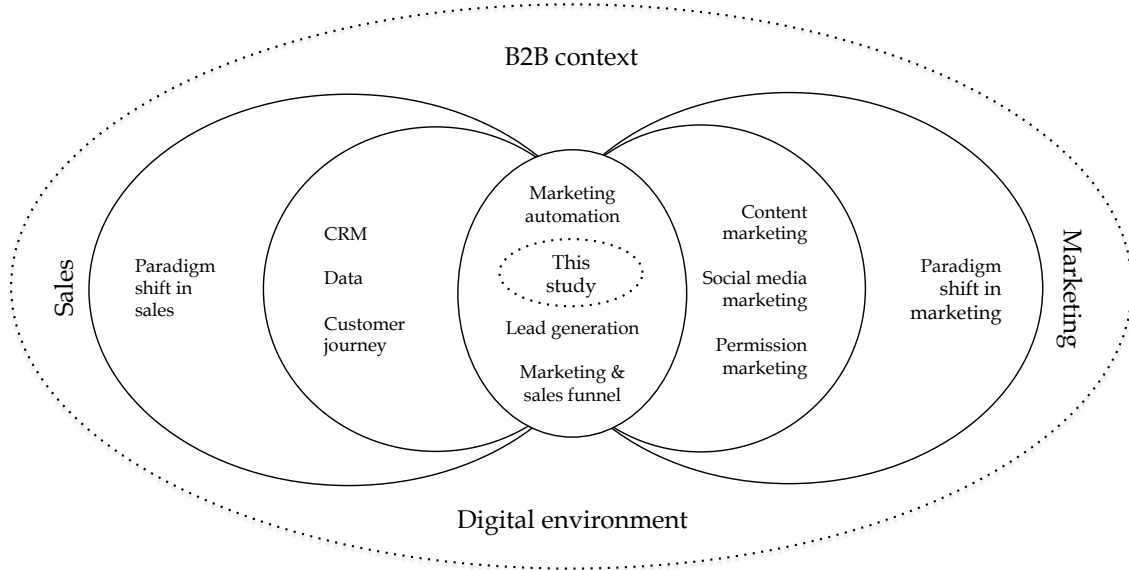


Figure 2 Conceptual framework of the study

1.5 Structure of the study

The study is formed with five chapters as shown in a figure 3 and it is divided into theoretical and empirical parts. The abstract and the table of contents are at the beginning of the study whereas references and appendixes are presented in the end. The first chapter, introduction, sets the theme for the master's thesis by giving an overview for today's B2B marketing and sales environment. In addition, study objectives and questions with key concepts are presented at the introduction chapter as well.

The second chapter creates theoretical part of the study. The chapter focus on presenting the theoretical framework for the study, which is mainly based on the academic literature related to B2B sales, B2B marketing and marketing automation. The aim is to gain understanding about these entities to describe changes in B2B operating environment.

The third and fourth chapters create empirical part of the study. The third chapter, methodology, concentrates on explaining how the study was conducted. The chapter covers the data collection method and data analysis. The fourth chapter reveals the results of the study by exposing findings from interviews. Furthermore, this empirical material is compared with the theory and research model is modified on the basis of the findings. The fifth and final chapter concludes the study with theoretical and managerial contributions. The last chapter also includes suggestions for the future research.

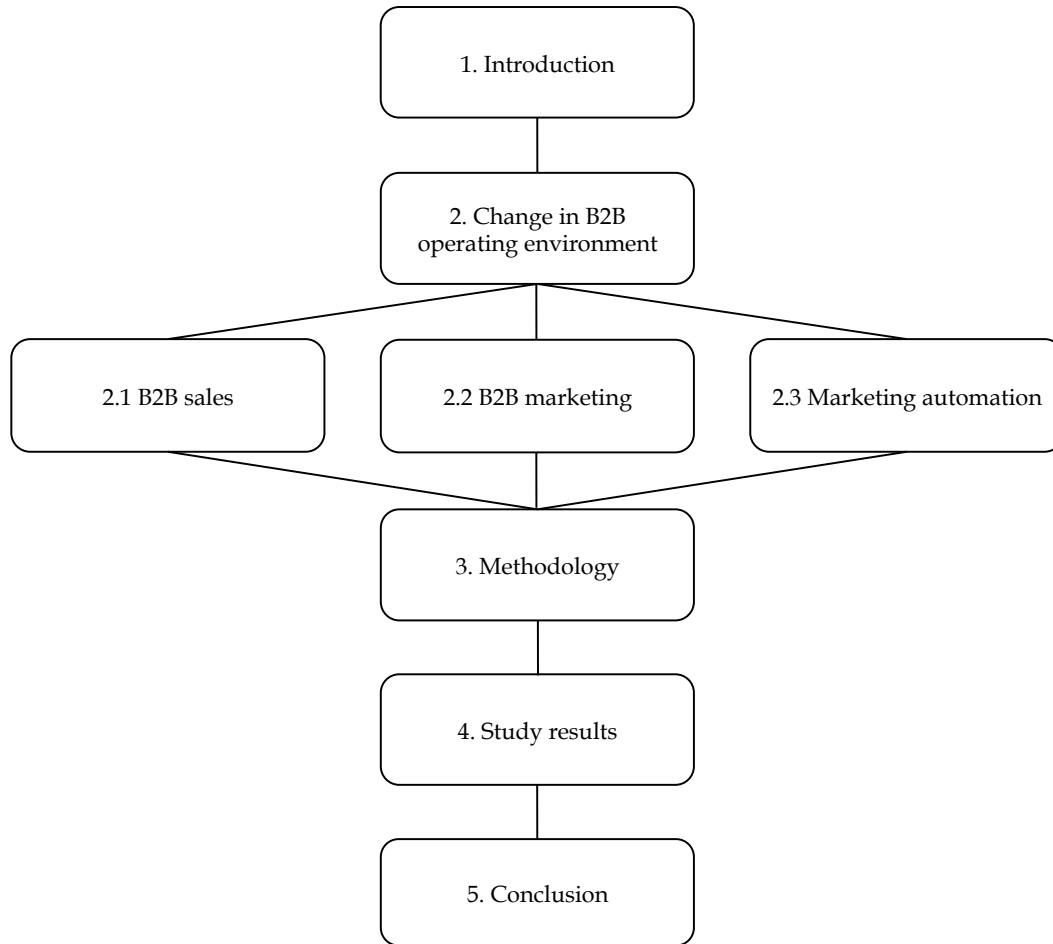


Figure 3 Study structure

2 CHANGES IN B2B OPERATING ENVIRONMENT

2.1 B2B sales

Today B2B buyers are socially connected, mobile, empowered and digitally driven. They also have practically unlimited access to people and information. (Hall 2017, 228.) In other words, buyers are different than before. Therefore, Zahay et al. (2014) talk about the new breed of B2B buyers. Accomplishing a buying decision in business environment can be time consuming, since it contains information gathering from many different sources and channels. Lingqvist, Plotkin and Stanley (2015) support the above statement and specify that B2B customer is typically using six different interaction channels during a decision journey. However, Toman, Adamson and Gomez (2017) remind that even though customers have access to information and are better informed than before, they can be overwhelmed by the choices and overload of information. Furthermore, it is worth noting that since B2B customers today are more active, they have many times started their buying journey long before engaging with sales people. Hall (2017, 107) adds to this by mentioning that B2B customers have become more selective, vocal and demanding on the practices they want to be engaged by suppliers. Technologies and digital marketing have also increased customer expectations from organisations (Hall 2017, 108). Available information has not only given a greater service and products knowledge for buyers but more transparency for sales situations, which gives leverage to buyers (Cuevas 2018; Wiersema 2013).

Sales organisations have undergone change as well. According to Sheth and Sharma (2007), companies are experiencing the shift from product-based selling towards solution selling, which has caused the role of a salesperson to change from the information provider to a customer-based expert, in other words a consultant for the buying firm. Zahay et al. (2014) also add that due to digital and interactive technologies and the changed buying practices of B2B buyers, traditional individual salesperson contacts are quickly being replaced by digital customer relationships. This level of change requires companies to make substantial modifications for their processes and their whole working culture. Therefore, companies need to utilise digital channels and take advantage of automated sales force. Sharma (2007) supports the above and adds that traditional sales force is also more expensive for the company than Internet channels. Sharma (2007) continues by revealing that the cost of an order

through the Internet is generally less than \$10 for the company and \$500 when a salesperson performs the same work.

2.1.1 CRM

Customer relationship management (CRM) is broadly defined and usually understood as a system where the customer data is stored. As well as basic contact details and engagement history with a customer, information on potential leads, suppliers and partners can be stored to the system. Peppers and Rogers (2011, 113) also highlight that addition to names and addresses, age, marital status and gender information can be stored as well as buying habits, history, family configurations, along with demographic and psychographic profiles. Company can also use segmentation and divide customers into different segments in CRM, for instance by purchasing history, value for the company or their desires and interests. The target is on segmenting the customer base in a way that companies are able to be more engaging and relevant.

CRM has undoubtedly many benefits for the company but also for customers. When customer information can be optimally stored into CRM, companies are able to customise not only their marketing and sales actions, but also offerings that suit the needs and wishes of an individual customer (Nuguyen & Mutum, 2012). Saarijärvi, Karjaluoto and Kuusela (2013) also note this and emphasise the customer value creation and usage of gathered data for the benefit of the customer. They also highlight that the importance of the CRM is moving to empower customers instead of companies (Saarijärvi et al. 2013). Richards and Jones (2008) recognise seven core benefits of CRM, which are presented in a TABLE 1. These benefits are for instance, enhanced sale force effectiveness and individualised marketing messages.

Table 1 Core benefits of CRM (Richards & Jones, 2008)

Benefit	
1	Improved ability to target profitable customers
2	Enhanced sales force effectiveness and efficiency
3	Individualised marketing messages
4	Integrated offerings across channels
5	Customised services and products
6	Improved pricing
7	Enhanced customer service effectiveness and efficiency

Furthermore, Nuguyen and Mutum (2012) suggest that in order to attract, keep, maintain, grow and retain important customers, companies need to generate a deep understanding about their customers by learning. Since CRM

can be harnessed to gather information into one place, companies can use collected data for learning purposes and for quality interactions with customers. Ellis (2011, 76) supports the above statement and suggests that companies are able to provide quality service for customers when everyone in an organisation, who is in contact with a customer, can access real-time to customer information, activity and history of interactions through CRM.

Wang and Kim (2017) also discuss about social CRM, which is an extension to tradition CRM, since it includes the social functions, capabilities and processes, and acknowledges not only firm-customer interactions, but also customer-customer interactions. However, Lipiäinen (2016) found in her study, that companies see information gathered from social media channels irrelevant and the value too low compared with long harvesting time. Furthermore, the study discovered that companies do not use CRM for the management of customer dialogue, but for managing customers (Lipiäinen 2016).

Customer-centric relationship

CRM is also a company's practice for managing a customer relationship with a customer-centric way. Ellis (2011, 76) calls CRM as a business strategy aiming to win and to keep profitable customers. The main principle in customer-centric thinking is to build a deep and long term relationship. A win-win relationship that is mutually beneficial for both parties, for a company and for a customer. (Isohookana 2007, 45.) However, it is good to remember that not all customers want to have or to stay in a long-term relationship with a company (Reinartz & Kumar 2000; Zablah, Bellenger & Johnston 2004). Haenlein (2017) add to this by explaining that even though CRM strategies support the idea of a relationship building, some customers do not want to have a relationship but to stay in it for a habit or since a switching cost is high. Moreover, many organisations have not adopted the customer-centric approach even though benefits are identified and understood. Inflexible organisation structure, divided functions and the lack of internal communication among other things create barriers and restrict a customer-centric approach. (Karjaluo 2010, 17.)

IDIC-model created by Peppers (2014) can be used to describe how customer-centric relationships are build and managed. The four key tasks of a model are presented in a figure 4 and they are: identify, differentiate, interact and customise.

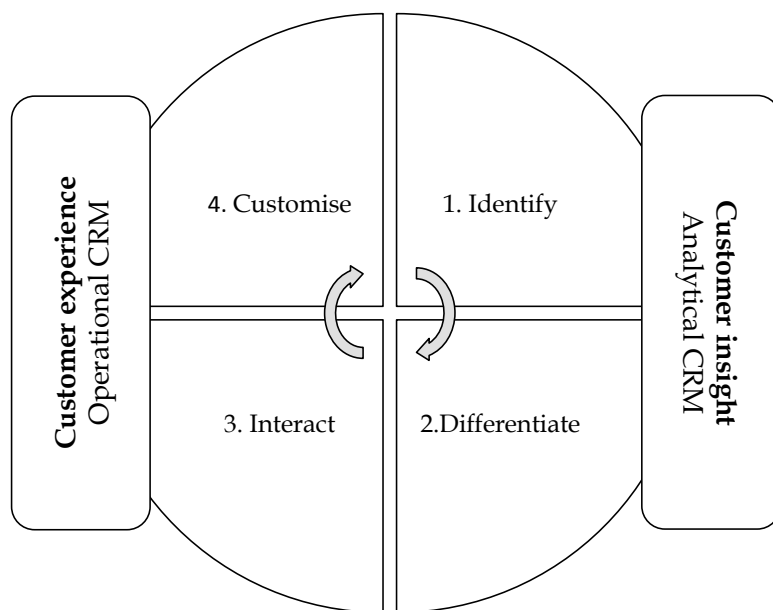


Figure 4 IDIC-model (Peppers 2014)

At the first stage, customers need to be *identified* individually, since relationships cannot be formed with a population or audience. Not only the customer's preferences, habits, names and addresses need to be recognised, but also every touchpoints the customer have had with a company – all media, every location, across every product line. At the second stage, customers need to be *differentiated* since they differ in two principal ways – customers have different needs from the company and customers have different value for the company. By differentiating customers, companies are able to prioritise their resources and to tailor their behaviour towards needs of an individual customer. The third stage is *interaction*, where the key task is to improve the effectiveness and the cost-efficiency of customer interaction. The target is to guide customers more automated channels and to gather only relevant information. Furthermore, the conversation should continue where the last one ended regardless of the channel customer was using. The last i.e. fourth stage is *customisation*, where company changes its behaviour towards a particular customer – to meet customer's expressed needs. Customising might mean for instance, tailoring some aspects of service or mass customising a manufactured product. (Peppers et al. 1999, 4-5; Peppers 2014.)

First, two tasks of IDIC-model, identify and differentiate, belong under *analytical CRM* since they can be utilised to develop better customer insight. Companies are able to do these tasks themselves in their own IT department and customer participation is not needed. Companies can merely analyse their database and generate understanding about their customers – individual customer values and needs. However, these steps cannot be done if data has not been collected in every customer touchpoints. The third and fourth tasks of IDIC-model, interaction and customise, go under *operational CRM* and are

employed to deliver a specific customer experience. These last two steps require customer participation and personal attention. Interaction needs two parties to function and customising behaviour require some level of customer involvement to succeed. (Peppers 2014.)

2.1.2 Data collection

According to Braverman (2015) data matters, since it helps companies to get the insights of prospects, which in turn aid companies to target messages and content. Companies are using computer cookies to follow traces, which customers are leaving behind in the digital environment when they are searching information, sharing experiences with peers or using services and products (Debruyne 2014, 32; Turban, Whiteside, King & Outland 2017, 265). Debruyne (2014, 32) describes these traces as the nuggets of information, since they reveal customers' implicit needs, the patterns of behaviour and structure of related activities. Computer cookies are small files of data, which are sent from a website to person's computer by web browsers such as Google Chrome and Safari. However, some people object the idea of being followed by companies on the Internet and therefore, they prevent to be traced by deleting cookie files from their computers. (Turban et al. 2017, 265.)

Companies can collect data through many different channels. These are for instance, the website, social media platforms and various surveys. According to Salo (2014, 32), many organisations and companies are gathering data through their website and web services by using Javascript code, which sends customer behavioural information to some analytic service such as Google Analytics. Debruyne (2014, 32) adds to discussion by mentioning that by piecing customer behaviour traces together and by collecting data from multiple sources, companies are able to create unique understanding about the market, which then enables them to find unexploited opportunities and real needs behind expressed demands. Turban et al. (2017, 265) also specify that with the help of data, companies are receiving better results, since they are able to target actions and provide relevant content for customers. Data can also be utilised to forecast the future directions and probabilities, which supports company's decision making. Furthermore, profitability can be improved with the use of data. The more versatile information is gathered and analysed, the better overall picture is created of company's clientele. (Salo 2013, 33, 40.) However, gathered data brings managing challenges for companies since technology has opened access to massive amount of data and data traffic increases constantly. This is also noted by Buhl, Röglinger and Moser (2013), who emphasise that companies will face challenges with retrieving, archiving and analysing data, which should be done in real-time, and with the veracity and quality of data.

Competitive advantage can also be achieved by utilising data, since companies are able to identify evolving customer needs in a market better and faster through data analysing. Moreover, data offers a chance for innovativeness and efficiency, which makes the company stand out positively

from competitors. Data is not a challenge or a problem, it is an opportunity and it creates value if utilised. Data offers a strong head start for those companies who are able to use and analyse information. (Salo 2013, 136, 138.) However, Debruyne (2014, 32) highlights that many companies do not utilise the customer data despite they have already gathered considerable amounts of information.

2.1.3 Customer journey

The customer journey represents the overall experience and all touchpoints the customer has with a company when making a purchase. In general, the journey can be described as a linear map of the different stages customer goes through when buying a service or a product. (Debruyne 2014, 103.) Brennan and Canning (2014, 36) also specify that purchasing consist of a number of linked activities, the steps customer undertakes and that is why the buying situation is not an isolated event or a single act. The central idea in the customer journey thinking is to be present when a customer is making a purchasing decision (Gillin & Schwartzman 2011, 157-158). Therefore, companies need to map out all stages potential customer undergoes and to ensure to cover all different questions the customer might have. The key is to provide value through content for customers in different customer journey stages. (Isohookana 2007, 291.) According to Lingqvist et al. (2015) almost 65 per cent of B2B customers drop the purchase decision journey due to inconsistent experience in different channels. Therefore, companies need to integrate their marketing the way all company communication in every touchpoint is uniformed and supporting company's objectives (Isohookana 2007, 291).

The customer purchase process can be described through a traditional stage model. There are many different variations of the stages. Johnson and Sparks (2013) divide purchase process into four stages: screening, evaluation, consideration and procurement. As against Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy and Pervan (2011, 6) divide them into five stages: the need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase and outcomes of purchase. In this study, the model of Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. is used, which is presented in a figure 5.

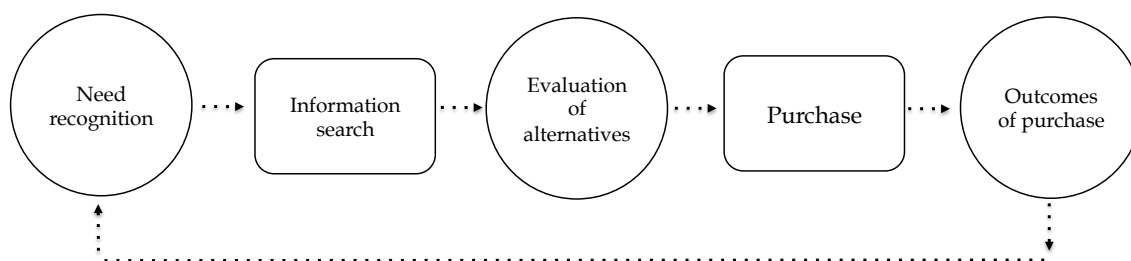


Figure 5 Stages of the purchase (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. 2011, 6)

At the first stage called *need recognition*, a customer recognises a need to purchase a product or service. Then customer moves quite quickly into second stage *information search*, and start to seek information about offerings that might satisfy the need. (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. 2011, 6.) This information seeking process can be extensive and time consuming in B2B environment, since buyers need to find the best possible choice for their company with the minimum risk as possible. Today, information search is strongly shifted to the Internet where buyers can gather information, ask questions and opinions and participate in conversations. According to Halligan and Dharmesh (2010, 6-7), people are finding information from the Internet in three main areas - search engines, blogosphere and social mediasphere. After finding the set of acceptable alternatives, a customer proceeds into the next stage *evaluation of alternatives* and start to evaluate suitable options. Then a customer moves into a *purchase* stage and makes the decision of buying. The last stage is *outcomes of purchase*, in other words, the evaluation of customer satisfaction after making the purchase of a product or a service. (Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. 2011, 6.) Wilson, Zeithaml, Bitner and Gremler (2012, 35) emphasise the importance of this last stage due to the future continuation of a customer relationship and re-purchases.

However, Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2011, 5) highlight that the traditional stage model is an idealised model and purchases rarely occur in clear stages. Brennan and Canning (2014, 39) add to this, that stages might not be followed sequentially and a customer might return to the previous stage or even omit some stages during the purchase process. Grossberg (2016) agrees by stating that the most of the customers zigzag across channels and buying paths no longer happen straightforwardly. Wilson et al. (2012, 30-35) also specify, that the duration of purchase stages depends on the purchase - services and new products might require a more extensive evaluation process before they are purchased, whereas familiar products can be assessed and then purchased automatically. Kannan and Li (2017) also highlight, that digital environment provides fundamentally new ways for customers to execute their purchase journeys.

2.2 B2B marketing

Companies used to practise one-way mass communication according to Vargo and Lusch (2004). Formerly, the marketer independently chose the channel, content and timing - what and when they wanted to say and on the channels they preferred. Then digitalisation emerged and changed the push environment to pull environment. Today the customer is in charge and decides the channel, content and timing - what kind of content they want to consume, when they want to consume it and through what channels. (Merisavo, Vesänen, Raulas & Virtanen 2006, 32.) However, the digital environment and empowerment of customers have changed the marketing in B2B environment. According to Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström and Freundt (2014), companies are facing tremendous challenges due to digital revolution in society and marketing.

Moreover, conventional media strategies will become less efficient in the future since brands will be defined by customers rather than by companies (Leeflang et al. 2014). Therefore, traditional mass media reign is slowly diminishing and new digital media channels have become an essential part of B2B marketing communication (Merisavo et al. 2006, 138.) Traditional marketing techniques are still part of the marketing mix but new digital channels are emerged, since technology has change the way people communicate, gather information and make decisions (Schultz, Doerr & Frederiksen 2013, 184). According to Chlebišová, Kyzeková and Zajarošová (2011) one of the reasons has also been the global financial crisis that started in 2008, which turned companies to use cheaper advertising and communication methods such as social media and content marketing.

Digital communications channels have gradually become more important also in B2B sector, since they are strongly influencing buying decisions (Rowles 2014, 13). Consistent with this, Gagnon (2014) states that developing good content and distributing it on digital channels positions the company in its market better than PR program, brand advertising or any other traditional marketing approach, since today's customers are searching information and products on the Internet. Furthermore, due to the changed media consumption habits, traditional media channels are not able to reach the whole target audience anymore, which also supports the usage of digital channels.

Karjaluoto, Mustonen and Ulkuniemi (2015) identify four main objectives of digital marketing from academic literature, which are: digital marketing builds awareness and helps to develop brands, digital marketing increases the effectiveness of communication, digital marketing creates sales leads, and digital marketing advances customer relationship communication and interaction (Karjaluoto et al. 2015). As for Merisavo et al. (2006, 34.), they classify objectives into two main categories that are operative and strategic - operative objectives aim for accelerating company's current processes, communication and business while strategic objectives aim to create more interactive and firm customer relationships with the value creation.

However, in the changing B2B operating environment, organisations can easily be distracted to use new media channels and methods for the sake of using them, rather than what is effective for the company. Companies need to have a clear sight of business objectives and to focus on sales and marketing activities to support them. (Rowles 2014, 13.) According to Gillin and Schwartzman (2011, 114), the key for organisations is to concentrate on those digital channels and actions, which the most likely will deliver a return. Merisavo et al. (2006, 15) highlight, that digitalisation is no longer a marginal new phenomenon, but a significant channel for customer service, trade and sales. Even though marketing is shifting towards digital channels and offering great new opportunities, changes in B2B environment are quite slow. Järvinen, Töllinen, Karjaluoto and Jayawardhena (2012) found in their research that B2B companies are still considering social media tools as supportive mediums and therefore they are seen to have a less important role. Moreover, the study by Danaher and Rossiter (2011) reveals that companies do not know the media consumption habits and channel preferences of their prospects and customers.

For that reason, companies need to examine their customers to be able to reach them and to choose right communication channels to market their products and services.

The paradigm shift in marketing

According to several authors, the paradigm shift in marketing refers to the focus change in marketing – away from transactions and towards relationships (Sheth & Parvatiyar 2001; Sheth & Sharma 2008; Peppers et al. 1999; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Grönroos 1994). Wilson et al. (2012, 141) state, that the new outlook on marketing focuses on quality, service and innovation and sees customers as partners. Grönroos (1994) talks about relationship marketing where marketer's focus is on building profitable relationships with customers who create results in a long run. Moreover, the primary goal for relationship marketing is to build and maintain a profitable customer base of committed customers (Wilson et al. 2012, 144). Peppers and Rogers (2011, 18) adds to the discussion by saying that company objectives must include making an overall customer base more valuable by establishing profitable and meaningful relationships. Therefore, focusing individual customer satisfaction and value creation rather than mass marketing is important (Karjaluoto 2010, 63). Although, relationship marketing has been acknowledged to be the new paradigm by practitioners and academics, Järvinen et al. (2012) found in their research that B2B field has not yet fully shifted their focus into relationships marketing.

Peppers and Rogers (2011, 14) describe the difference between new and former outlook on marketing with the axis, which is presented in a figure 6.

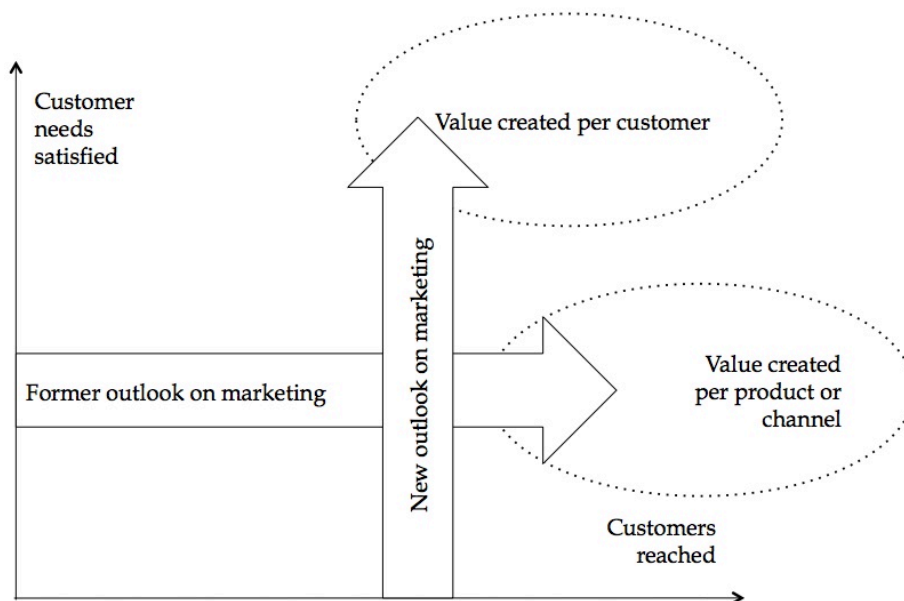


Figure 6 New and former outlook on marketing (adapted from Peppers & Rogers 2011, 14)

Marketers using the former outlook concentrate on reaching more customers, whereas the new outlook on marketing focus on keeping customers longer and growing them larger by satisfying needs. Moreover, the former outlook creates value per a product or a channel by growing their market share, whereas the new outlook focus on the share of customers, where value is created per customer. (Peppers & Rogers 2011, 14.)

Customers and relationships are different. According to Peppers and Rogers (2011, 122) the difference of customers can be explained two ways - customers have different needs from the company and customers provide different value for the company. Therefore by understanding the concept of difference, companies are able to develop a customer-centric, interactive, learning relationship with customers and allocate resources for those customers who yield higher returns (Peppers & Rogers 2011, 122). Nguyen, Paswan and Dubinsky (2018) agree by stating that resources of sales people should not be used to the same extent in all selling situations. Tailored services and customised products can be offered first to those customers who are profitable at company's point of view. It is also important to identify the actual value of a customer and to acknowledge that even though the customer might not currently be profitable, it can become one in the future. (Peppers et al. 1999, 57.) However, Nguyen and Mutum (2012) raise a question of a CRM paradox, where customers are treated differently due to the assumption of dissimilar needs and their potential for the company. This kind of differential treatment of customers or favouritism can raise issues of the distrust, dissatisfaction and feelings of unfair practices (Nguyen and Mutum, 2012).

2.2.1 Permission aka inbound marketing

The central idea of permission and inbound marketing is to get found by customers rather than companies trying to find customers with traditional outbound i.e. interruption marketing (Roberts & Zahay 2013, 264). The key in inbound philosophy is to make a connection with a customer by offering useful information - attract visitors and followers. Companies need to focus on delivering value rather than to perform traditional selling since buyers gravitate to those companies that offer the most value. (Gillin & Schwartzman 2011, 162.) Chong, Shafaghi, Woollaston and Lui (2010) underline that customers are the ones who define the value. Skinner (2016) agrees by stating that customers are the ones to inform companies of their needs, either by revealing them via behavioural data or directly telling about them.

Direct marketing and especially digital direct marketing can be harnessed to deliver personalised information and communication for customers. Schultz et al. (2013, 228) state that the digital direct marketing in other words e-mail marketing is good for promoting new content or services, nurturing leads, staying at the top of the mind of the prospect and delivering automated nurture sequences. Carrigan (2006) adds to this by mentioning that e-mail marketing is powerful, fast targeted, comparative inexpensive and delivers results. However,

Hartemo (2016) presents in her study that there is a paradox regarding the e-mail marketing, since customers quite often find received e-mails irrelevant or irritating while companies think them to be effective and economical. The solution for this contradiction is permission based e-mail marketing, where companies are empowering customers by offering more relevant and tailored content to customers who have opt-in to receive it (Hartemo 2016).

Today people are busier than ever before and time has become one of the most valued substances in people's lives. Therefore people do not want to be disturbed with messages they are not interested in. This has made interruption marketing an enemy for many consumers whereas permission marketing has become a new embraced direction in marketing communication. When volunteering to be interrupted by the marketer, people are consuming communication they want to receive, while companies are able to get the attention they are seeking. This symbiotic exchange serves both marketers and consumers. (Godin 1999, 47.) Consistent with this, Karjaluoto (2010, 69) states that when customers have given permission for direct marketing and maybe even requested it themselves, marketing communication is effective and received as useful information instead of intrusive push advertising. Campbell and Marks (2015) talk about explicit inviting where a customer is receiving brand communication since they have actively chosen to receive it for instance by opting in or by following company's social media presence. As for Reimers, Chao and Gorman (2016), they talk about permission e-mail marketing (PEM) where customers voluntarily accept e-mails from the company that are relevant to recipients' needs.

As mentioned before, companies should have moved towards permission marketing instead of practising interruption marketing and spam e-mailing. Reimers et al. (2016) describe spam as commercial e-mails that companies are sending to customers without explicit permission or relevance. According to Karjaluoto (2010, 69) interruptive spam e-mailing has negative impacts on company's image and even revenue. Consistent with this, Truong and Simmons (2010) found in their study that traditional intrusive digital advertising raises negative attitudes among people and might therefore form negative brand association. Moreover, Finne and Grönroos (2009) have also been studying the relationship communication in the time context and they emphasise that different meanings are triggered by the same message due to history the receiver has with the sender. Therefore, companies should not practise spam e-mailing since it might harm future possibilities due to a bad company image received from interruption messaging.

According to Roberts and Zahay (2013, 179) the only responsible way to perform the e-mail marketing campaign is to use permission-based marketing. Rowles (2014, 154) adds to the discussion by saying that companies, which fail to personalise and to have a two-way dialogue with their customers, will erode customer trust and damage their reputation especially if they continue to send out messages and are slow to react to new situations. Furthermore, Campbell and Marks (2015) highlight that companies are able to strengthen the consumer-brand relationships with adopting non-disruptive and permission-based operation models. Ellis (2011, 308-309) also emphasises the importance of the

accurate e-mailing lists, since while e-mail is an efficient and speedy method of communicating with the target audience, the effectiveness of the communication depends on the accuracy of the e-mail lists. Consistent with this, Peppers et al. (1999, 44) state, information that identifies customer need to be updated and verified at least once every two years in order to keep the customer base up-to-date. According to Truong and Simmons (2010), positive brand association is generated when customers have control over the information they consume on the Internet – control over what information, when and how to consume.

2.2.2 Content marketing

Content marketing creates an opportunity for companies to have a conversation with the target audience and to attract suitable prospective clients (Johnson & Sparks 2013). Content marketing works well since it is able to capitalise customers' reliance on the Internet for information search and customers' changed purchase habits (Schultz et al. 2013, 183). Pulizzi (2014, 6) states that content marketing can also be described as non-interruption marketing since it is communication without selling. According to Chlebišová et al. (2011) the communication approach in B2B sector has become more personal and individual, which also supports the use of social media channels and content marketing. In the digital era, it is more useful for companies to offer beneficial information rather than basic offers. According to Merisavo et al. (2006, 43) these could be for instance, maintenance reminders, entertainment, user guidance and information on events, services and products. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) specify that content needs to solve customers' problems, offer advice and target their needs. However, Campbell and Marks (2015) highlight that companies need to understand all different types of content that their customers or prospects on various platforms are consuming and motivations for consumption, before they are able to create relevant, engaging and interesting content. Moreover, Schultz et al. (2013, 194) state that it is not effortless to generate high-quality content or to build a valuable content stock. They also add that content marketing requires continuous work and optimisation, since increased competition makes it challenging to stand out and results will deteriorate if content is not created regularly (Schultz et al. 2013, 194). Furthermore, Holliman and Rowley (2014) found in their research that content needs not only be useful and valuable, but it needs to help customers to solve a problem or complete a task as well.

The aim of the content marketing is not only to engage but also to drive profitable customer action – it needs to do something for the business (Pulizzi 2014, 10). Gagnon (2014) adds that the key to lead generation and lead development is content marketing, since relevant content is focused on the needs of prospects and solving their problems. The content created has to be in harmony with the customer's buying journey stages. Otherwise great amount of content is created just with a hope of profitable actions. (Pulizzi 2014, 103.) Therefore, companies need to create a content portfolio to match buyer's

interest in each buying journey stage due to the fact that prospects enter to the sales funnel in different stages of their own buying journeys (Gillin & Schwartzman 2011, 163). According to Gagnon (2014), continuous content marketing program will influence prospects over time and transforms company to become a solution provider rather than to stay as another vendor. Therefore, with the help of content marketing, companies are able to differentiate themselves from the competition. Companies need to pay attention to the content quality as well. According to Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 95) good and valuable content is more likely to be found on the Internet, since search engines appreciate good content and drives more traffic to the website, which in turn generates shares and sales leads.

Schultz et al. (2013, 188) divide content into two main types, flow and stock. Flow content is short and often casual and written for a community audience such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook. Stock content goes behind registration and is company's most valuable content. Stock content is usually long and written with more formal tone. Examples are for instance white papers, research studies and webinars. (Schultz et al. 2013, 188.) Here is a brief introduction to some of the most common content marketing formats.

- *E-newsletter* is an inexpensive and technically easy media. It is also a versatile media. Event invites, service reminders and campaign notifications can be send through e-mails. Furthermore, medium can be used to activate people to visit the campaign landing pages, educate the people of difficult subjects and entertain people with interesting content. (Isohookana 20007, 264.) The weekly or monthly newsletter is a permission-based medium for communicating with current and future customers. It is an excellent tool for promoting other content such as white papers and webinars. (Pulizzi, 2014, 165.)
- *Blog* is a website or webpage where content can be created easily for others to read. Blog is a convenient way to present information compactly especially for frequently refreshed web content (Pulizzi 2014, 159). Blog is a great medium for interaction with an audience and it usually has a clear point of view – personality (Pulizzi 2014, 169). Blogs can show the values of the company and how the people of the company think. Blog postings are a good way to create not only search-engine friendly content to spark a discussion on social media, but to distribute valued content for prospects. (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 77.) Ellis (2011, 307) also highlights that blogs are a good medium to provide information with the more personal tone of voice than a corporate website.
- *White paper* is a typically eight to twelve pages long topical report on issues, which require plenty of explanation. White papers can be used to promote thought leadership on issues, which are valued by customers. (Pulizzi 2014, 176.) The tone and style in white papers are quite academic and written pieces are more in-depth than in blog posts (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 54).

- *E-books* are written topical pieces, which are similar with white papers but the tone is more entertaining. E-books are briefer than books and content can vary anywhere between 10 to 50 pages in length. Furthermore, images are utilised to help illustrate important points. (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 66.)
- *Article* offers opportunities to address concerns, issues, trends and topics, which have a great interest among the target audience. Such as a white paper, an article is a great tool for promoting thought leadership. To create an impact, the series of articles need to be planned. Articles can be illustrated as information treasure troves since they have no personal point of view. (Pulizzi 2014, 168-169.)
- *Case study* is generally one to two pages long document or a video, which is based on real-life situation. Case study builds credibility and trust with a genuine client testimonial. The three-stage format is used to build a case study - challenge, solution and results. (Pulizzi 2014, 170.)
- *Webinars and webcasts* are presentations in the online environment. They can be done live or on demand. Webinars include slides and audio, whereas webcasts have in addition a video. A pre-registered audience is signing into a service and joining the same audio line accompanied with slides or video. (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 69.) Webinars are excellent medium for lead generation and nurturing, since other forms of content can be offered for an audience such as white papers, articles and e-newsletters (Pulizzi 2014, 172).
- *Infographic* represents data or information visually. Graphs, charts or other forms of illustration can be used to explain complicated issues. Advantages towards competitors can be gained with delivering value by providing clarity with infographics. (Pulizzi 198.)

2.2.3 Social media marketing

The Internet and especially social media offer a platform for consumers to seek information, to connect and to communicate with other consumers around the world. Rowley (2004) underlines that the Internet has become a place where dialogues are initiated, stories are told and information is discovered. Bruhn, Schoenmueller and Schäfer (2012) also specify that sharing information and ideas, participating in discussion, commenting on releases, distributing links and generating content are essential to social media. As for Grossberg (2016), he emphasizes the nature of social media, where personal and businesslike realms are blended together.

In a changed media landscape, where great amount of information is available on the Internet, consumers are starting to distrust the information

provided in traditional advertising campaigns and relying more on their own information search findings. This is noted also by Bruhn et al. (2012), who state that people trust more the information received from other consumers and are increasingly turning away from information provided by companies and traditional media such as print media and radio commercials. They also add that evaluation of other consumers on social media platforms is trusted by 70 per cent of the Internet users (Bruhn et al. 2012). Therefore, being present on social media offers a good opportunity for companies to reach and engage with potential customers (Halligan & Dharmesh, 2010, 85). This is noted also by Grossberg (2016), who states that social media offers companies almost real-time opportunities for an engagement with the client. Furthermore, even though social media marketing is usually thought to be a medium for B2C companies, it is more natural and beneficial for B2B companies since they have many aspects in their operation supporting social media marketing such as their sales processes, which are based on building relationships and their long tradition in educating customers with content (Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 4).

Companies can be involved on social media through company Facebook pages and LinkedIn profiles. New media channels and especially social media offer a good opportunity for companies to listen to their target audience by engaging with them in the customer's own environment. This way companies are able to get the feedback of their products and services quicker and make needed changes for their processes. (Bruhn et al. 2012.) Merisavo et al. (2006, 138) support the above statement by saying that great amount of potential customers can be reach through different social networking services and portals where contact details and permissions for marketing can also be gathered at the same time. Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 13) add to the discussion by emphasizing that the target in social media marketing for B2B companies is about generating leads and revenue.

2.3 Marketing automation

Marketing automation has its roots in B2B environment and the foundation in the automatic customization of marketing activities (Heimbach et al. 2015). According to Biegel (2009) the ultimate goal is to improve sales conversion by targeting the right prospects with the right content. Grossberg (2016) adds to this by mentioning that content needs to be delivered also in the right dose and at the right time, which supports the development of trust and helps to capture customer's attention. Consistent with this, 2018 Digital Trends report reveals that 62 per cent of studied customers felt loyal to brands that were able to customise experience by their needs and preferences (E-consultancy 2018.)

All marketing automation actions are a direct response to incoming, changing or existing customer information, which makes data a core element of marketing automation. For instance, marketing action is initiated by the automation system when a customer demonstrates a certain predefined behaviour. (Heimbach et al. 2015.) Grossberg (2016) supports the above

statement and adds that, in order for marketing automation to be effective and efficient, the manipulation of huge quantities of data is needed. This can be done by utilising technology since computers are able to register information and create entities with algorithms, which are impossible for people (Vainu 2018).

As stated earlier, sales work in general is quite expensive for the company due to resources it requires. It is also a very intense and time-consuming process. Even though face-to-face is an efficient approach to do sales work, it can only be done one sales event at a time. Therefore, other sales methods such as marketing automation are needed to support sales work. (Isohookana 2007, 133.) Rowles (2014, 152) agrees by saying that marketing automation is generally applied to B2B products and services to help with the sales process. Furthermore, Zahay et al. (2014) state that since buyers today have an access to many sources of information and have therefore many times already started their buying journey before contacting a salesperson, a field sales force is not as significant or as effectual as it has been before. This change in B2B buying behaviour also reinforces the need for the marketing automation system, which supports companies to capture potential customers and open sales negotiations in a digital environment. Bagshaw (2015) also highlights that far less human resources are needed to move a buyer through a sales funnel when company is using marketing automation solution. However, Del Rowe (2016) underlines that even though marketing automation technology lightens the workload of marketers and sales force its true value lies in the ability to improve customer relationships.

Utilisation of marketing automation has many benefits for companies. Here are six main benefits identified in the literature:

1. Enhanced marketing efficiency and timeliness can be reached when a greater control over the cost is delivered through the replication of marketing processes (Wood 2015; Buttle & Maklan 2015, 233-234; Bagshaw 2015);
2. More quality leads and potential customers can be created with nurturing leads (Bagshaw 2015; Wood 2015; Järvinen & Taiminen 2016);
3. Greater marketing productivity can be achieved with marketing automation when companies can run thousands of campaigns simultaneously on multiple channels without a significant increase in the cost (Buttle & Maklan 2015, 233-234);
4. Time is saved since companies are not pursuing bad quality leads and prospects (D'Haen & Van den Poel 2013);
5. The customer experience can be improved with relevant and personalised communications and offers, which are received at appropriate times. This in turn increases customer satisfaction and loyalty. (Buttle & Maklan 2015, 233-234, Wood 2015; Bagshaw 2015; Heimbach et al. 2015);
6. More effective marketing can be implemented when marketing automation allows marketers to learn from the outcomes of actions and

to modify the following campaigns with best-learned practices (Buttle & Maklan 2015, 233-234);

7. The customer engagement can be improved with marketing automation, since companies are able to provide offers and communication for customers that are based on profound understanding about their preferences and their needs learned through customer journeys. (Buttle & Maklan 2015, 233-234; Wood 2015).

However, it is good to acknowledge that utilising the marketing automation system has some challenges as well. First of all, systems are quite costly and the implementation process is generally time consuming. Rowles (2014, 162-163) also specify that set-up process is often a challenge due to possible integration problems with other company's systems in use such as CRM, website and e-mail system. Furthermore, setting the trigger rules may not only be complicated and time consuming, but it may also involve many people and needs continuous modification. (Rowles 2014, 162-163.) Moreover, marketing automation is based on collecting the information of customers, which emphasises the role of a privacy policy. Customers have to feel comfortable and secure when providing their personal information online for instance, when they download content such as whitepapers. Privacy protection policy should state what kind of information the company is gathering and how it will be used or will not be used. A privacy policy strengthens the trust and plays an important role in building a trustworthy customer relationship. (Peppers et al. 1999, 99.) Nguyen and Mutum (2012) also add to this by mentioning that customers attempt to keep their data private or unusable if they think that companies are exploiting their private information. According to Kannan and Li (2017), data collection and usage of partial data or aggregate level data on personalisation and customisation might become challenging or limited in the future due to stricter regulations regarding privacy issues and people's growing concern for their privacy.

2.3.1 Leads and lead generation

The most common objective in B2B sales is to generate suitable leads, which emphasizes the significance of lead management. The importance is also highlighted since numerous leads are lost during the sales process. Buttle and Maklan (2015, 218) reveal that approximately 40 to 80 per cent of sales leads are lost before completing the sales funnel. Therefore, it is important for companies to synchronize company's sales funnel, in other words, the inside sales processes with customer's buying journey. Furthermore, utilising the marketing automation system is beneficial for companies as well. This is emphasized also by Järvinen and Taiminen (2016), who state that fortunately the customer information remains in the marketing automation database, which helps companies to sustain conversation with the sales lead even though leads might be lost at any phase of the sales funnel.

Gillin and Schwartzman (2011, 168) divide lead management into four steps: generating, qualifying and scoring, allocating, and nurturing leads. Generating leads means producing and identifying as many leads as possible. Qualifying and scoring are assessing the quality of a lead for the company and the urgency for contacting, in other words prioritising leads. Allocation is assigning leads to a right salesperson whereas nurturing means preparing a lead to make a purchase by providing them with a premium content in every touchpoint they have with a company. Nurturing can be done with offers, which are white papers, free trials, webcasts, analyst reports, ROI calculators and case studies for among things. (Gillin & Schwartzman 2011, 168.)

Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) divide leads into marketing and sales where marketing leads are identified contacts that have not clearly expressed a purchase intention, whereas sales leads have openly requested to be contacted or whose behaviour signals a purchase intention. Halligan and Dharmesh (2010, 149) also state that leads are not equal and some of the leads will never convert to opportunities and customers. For that reason, leads should be graded differently to determine the nature of the lead. Roberts and Zahay (2013, 267) add to this by specifying that it will cost more to qualify initially poor quality leads than good quality leads. Therefore, it is advisable for companies not to fetch all the possible leads, but to concentrate on building different filters for scoring leads. Hall (2017, 250) also highlights that it might be harmful in terms of wasted time, effort and budget if marketing is pressured to generate volume rather than quality and therefore, leads are passed to sales too early.

According to Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 14), lead generation in digital environment has three core elements. These are: offer, call-to-action (CTA) and landing page. In B2B environment free webinars, salesperson's consultations and white papers amongst other things are counted as offers. CTA is a prompt in a digital advertisement, which guides a person to the landing page. These can be inserted in Google AdWords, banners or text advertisements. The landing page features an offer, which can be exchanged for customer's personal information. The main target of a landing page is to create an action. In other words, propel a person to redeem the offer by filling in the requested information to the form. (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 14.) Schultz et al. (2013, 187) also highlight that leads do not mind leaving contact information as long as the offer material meets their expectations. Buttle and Maklan (2015, 65) agree by emphasizing that the online destination needs to provide engaging content that is relevant to customer's reasons for conducting the search in a first place. Peppers and Rogers (2011, 18) also support the above by saying when customers give information for companies in return for a personalised service that satisfies their needs, a relationship becomes mutually beneficial.

2.3.2 Lead scoring and qualification

As stated earlier, leads are not equal due to the quality of the lead. The quality means the probability of the lead becoming a customer. Therefore, companies need to have a grading system to find out if the lead is suitable for the company

and ready to be contacted by the sales team. Higher the grade the more likely the lead is ready to become a customer. (Halligan & Dharmesh 2010, 149.) Companies decide themselves, which values they give and what kind of grading system they use. By using lead scoring and qualification, companies can allocate their marketing and selling resources to those leads, which are generating the best returns. These leads are the ones, which are relatively easy to close, they buy in quantity and generate high margins, they also have a higher likelihood for repeat sales and might produce high levels of positive word-of-mouth. (Buttle & Maklan 2015, 79.)

According to Grossberg (2016), companies can utilise a customer data model, where the ideal customer is first identified by an organisation in order to recognise from the masses of possibilities the suitable prospects that have the highest probability to become a paying customer. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) also support the idea of utilising the customer data model and state that the profile information and online behaviour of the prospect can be used for lead scoring. The profile is scored depending on an ideal customer for instance, A to D and behaviour is scored by activity of visiting company's website and consumption of content for instance, 1 to 4. Even though the score is affected by the profile and behaviour, the stronger indication of purchase intention is suggested by the behaviour. (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016.) Halligan and Dharmesh (2010, 151-152) also emphasize behaviour scoring and specify that the highest score is given to sources, which have previously converted successfully, in other words the channels bringing most of the quality leads.

Furthermore, Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) highlight that the lead qualification process can be done with a contact form, where needed questions to qualify the lead is asked. Contact form for lead qualification is noted also by Halligan and Dharmesh (2010, 151-152), who specify that companies with numerous employees from desired industry should score high, whereas students for instance should rank low or even be removed from the system since they are the most likely not the right target-audience. General information regarding the name of the person and an e-mail address with a couple of quality assessment questions such as the company name is enough in the lead generation phase. Moreover, it is also important to keep lead generation form short, as opportunities might be lost with a long and exhausting form. The information gathering should be done little by little over a period of time and therefore, more questions can be asked later when lead moves further in the sales funnel. (Halligan & Dharmesh 2010, 151-152.)

2.3.3 Lead nurturing

Buying cycles might be quite long especially in the B2B sector and therefore all gathered leads are not ready to make a purchase right away. However, these unqualified leads with a low scoring should not be ignored since they might make a purchase in the future. For that reason, these leads should be moved into a nurturing program to wait until their further actions make them qualified leads. Maintaining on-going communication in order to be at the top of the

mind of the unqualified lead is the central idea behind the lead nurturing. (Halligan & Dharmesh 2010, 153.)

According to Järvinen and Taiminen (2016), lead nurturing refers to a process where the target is to transform marketing leads into sales leads with meaningful, personalised and timely content, which encourages purchase decision in time. The aim is to provide helpful and supportive information with e-mails and avoid hard selling. The content is also created and tailored around the initial problems of the lead and to fit their needs. (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 151.) Schultz et al. (2013, 228) add that a predetermined sequence of follow-up e-mails can be arranged and scheduled to the marketing automation systems to nurture leads. By offering valuable and relevant content regularly generates trust and eventually when nurtured leads are ready to make a purchase, they will contact the trusted company (Schultz et al. 2013, 185; Buttle & Maklan 2015, 79).

2.3.4 Marketing and sales cooperation

Sales and marketing cooperation has not always been easy and effective even though both functions are responsible for company's revenue generation (Wiersema 2013). Counterparts have difficulties in understanding the viewpoint of the other (Patterson 2007). Rouziès, Anderson, Kohli, Michaels, Weitz & Zoltners (2005) specify that marketing and sales have different mind-sets and therefore it is challenging to improve the interactions between these two functions. Patterson (2007) also describe that problems can arise for instance in lead generation when marketing does not understand why leads are not followed by sales and sales in other hand accuse marketing for providing poor quality leads. Cooperation and alignment of marketing and sales functions would not only be extremely beneficial for the company, but both functions would also learn from each other. Rouziès et al. (2005) agree by emphasising that sales-marketing integration creates more value for the company than when both functions operate in isolation. This is noted also by Kotler et al. (2006), who confirm that the market-entry cost go down, the cost of sales is lower and sales cycles are shorter when sales and marketing functions are aligned. However, Patterson (2007) suggests that marketing and sales cooperation can be achieve by generating a sales funnel, which improves not only the performance of the company but also the performance of both functions. Karjaluoto et al. (2015) add to this by mentioning that companies could achieve more systematic information exchange among sales and marketing departments with digitisation.

Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) have created a joint B2B sales and marketing funnel, which is presented in a figure 7. The funnel illustrates how company is able to connect sales and marketing operations. It also demonstrates how suspect can be transformed into a lead, then to an opportunity and finally into a deal.

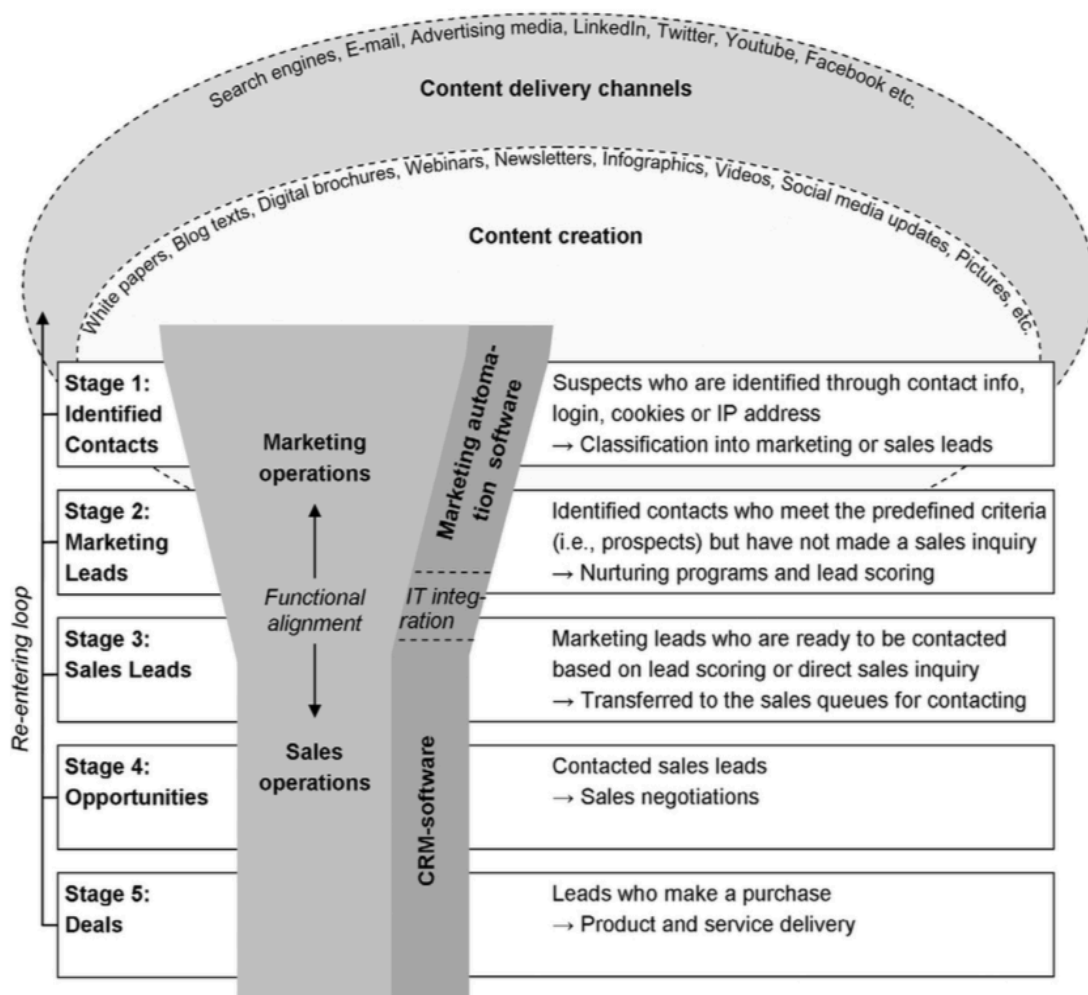


Figure 7 Joint sales and marketing funnel (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016)

The joint sales and marketing funnel from Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) has five stages of actions. First two stages belong under marketing operations and the rest of the stages go under sales operations. Next the stages are examined more closely.

Identified Contacts stage. Suspects are recognised by the company and they are moved into the marketing automation system for instance when they download company's white paper from LinkedIn advertisement or when they visit company's website and subscribe company's newsletter. At this first stage the suspects are also sorted and moved into sales or marketing leads categories if they meet company's predefined criterion. *Marketing Leads stage.* Identified contacts in other words prospects are transferred into nurturing and lead scoring programs if they have not made sales queries. At this stage, leads are nurtured with the marketing automation system, which is used to provide compelling and customised content that relates to the interests of the leads. The marketing automation system can also be harnessed to nurture customers by sending customised e-mails such as blog articles of the themes, which customers are interested in. The target of this stage and nurturing is to migrate marketing leads into sales leads. *Sales Leads stage.* Qualified leads are moved

into sales department to be contacted since they have made a direct request for the contacting or they have high enough lead score. At this stage, sales leads are no longer nurtured and they are migrated into company's CRM system. *Opportunities stage*. These are contacted sales leads, which might become a new customer since company has started a sales negotiation with them. *Deals stage*. Lead has made a product or service purchase. The funnel also acknowledges a re-entering loop, where potential and existing customers can move back and forth and re-enter the funnel in the course of time. (Järvinen & Taiminen 2016.)

2.4 Conclusion of the literature review

A research model is formed as a conclusion to the literature review. The joint customer journey and sales-marketing lead generation funnel is presented in a figure 8. The model is seen as one entity, which connects the customer journey and sales-marketing funnel together with content marketing and marketing automation. The focus is on lead generation, which is essential part of this study. The model merges joint sales and marketing funnel from Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) and purchase stages from Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2011, 6). Furthermore, the target is to generate a simple model based on existing academic and commercial knowledge used in the literature review to describe how the customer journey and company's lead generation processes can be tied together. It also shows how content marketing and marketing automation operate as a connective element between these two processes and how they can be utilised the way it is beneficial for both parties. The model also presents how a customer moves through these two processes when making a purchase. Content marketing and marketing automation is utilised to move customers through their purchase journey and a target is to support them to make a decision of buying. In addition, created research model forms a framework, which helps to get an answer for the main study question: *How can marketing automation be utilised to support lead generation in B2B companies?*

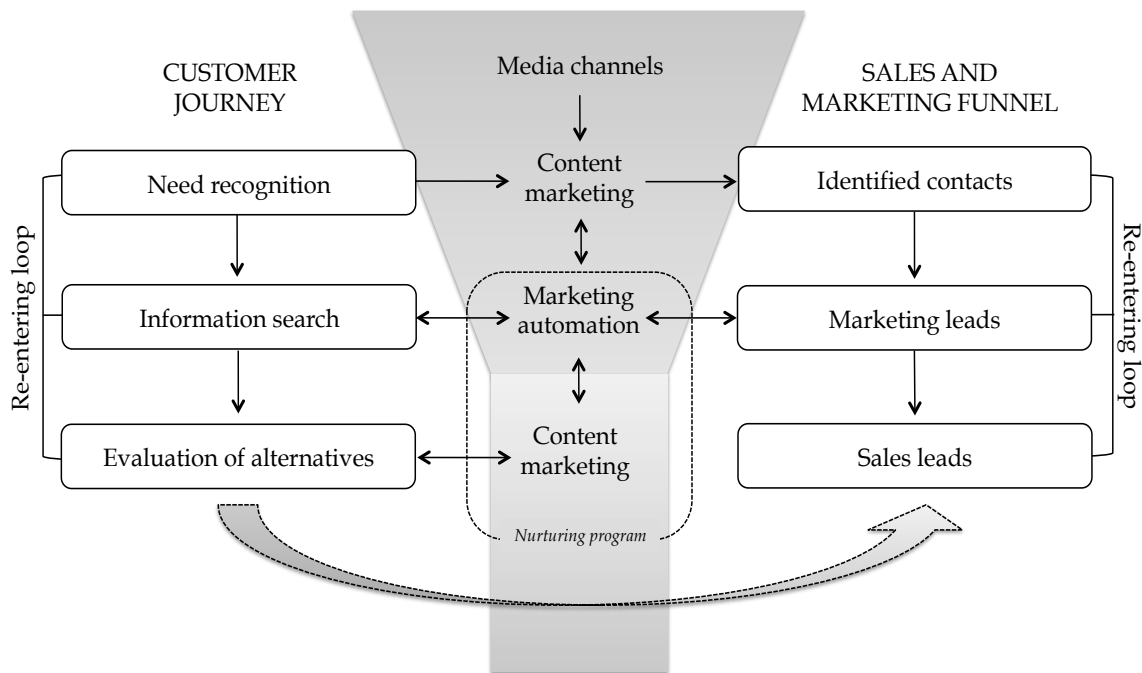


Figure 8 Research model: Joint customer journey and sales-marketing lead generation funnel

The joint customer journey and sales-marketing lead generation funnel portrayed in a figure 8 acknowledges two main processes, the start of the customer purchase journey, which is presented on the left of the model and company's sales and marketing funnel for lead generation, which is presented on the right. Content marketing and marketing automation are keys in combining these two processes together since they are beneficial for both – companies are able to allure new customers and customers are able to get helpful information to support their objectives. Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 21) describe content as a magnet that pulls prospects closer to becoming sales leads. Since the customer's purchasing journey in B2B environment is quite long due to extensive information search, it is important for companies to be present in every purchase stage and provide compelling and helpful content for that customer. According to Schultz et al. (2013, 12) companies get a maximum advantage in lead generation when being present everywhere a customer is looking. Next, the flow of the research model is described more closely.

First, a customer *recognises the need* for a service or a product, which generally originates from the requirements of the organisation. However, it is worth noting that the content marketing material itself might produce the recognition of different needs when a customer reads or explores material online. Then a customer starts to *search information* from multiple channels and eventually to *evaluate potential product or service providers*. A customer might for instance read blog posts, download white papers, subscribe newsletters or attend to webinars, which are company's content marketing actions on different media channels. As noted at the literature review, B2B customer is using typically six different channels before making a purchase decision (Lingqvist et

al. 2015). When a customer is consuming company's content marketing material, company able to *identify and capture a contact*, since all content marketing actions are linked to the marketing automation system, which can track customer behaviour and evaluate the potential for the company.

After identification and criteria evaluation, a customer becomes a *marketing lead* for the company or immediately a sales lead, if a direct contact request is made. All marketing leads in other words suitable customers in information search and evaluation of alternative stages are moved into company's *nurturing program*. This means that company nurtures a potential customer with compelling content and marketing automation as long as they are ready to meet the criteria of a *sales lead* and transferred to sales department to be contacted.

The customer journey seldom occurs in clear stages or as unforeseen events, hence the model of the joint customer journey and sales-marketing lead generation funnel recognises that B2B customers move back and forth during their purchase journeys or they might even have a longer break and then *re-enter* after some time. Therefore companies need to monitor these fluctuations to be able to adapt to changes and to provide not only relevant content per customer journey stage but also per customer and situation. Sales lead might for instance return to being a marketing lead, in which case content marketing material provided through marketing automation in a nurturing program needs to be suitable for to this new situation. Due to these non-linear processes, re-entering loops are added both to the customer journey and sales-marketing funnel processes.

3 METHODOLOGY

The case company chosen for this study is a Finnish branch of a global financial enterprise operating in over 40 countries. The company is a world leader in its field and provides solutions for several different B2B customer segments. The Finnish branch has been established in 2005 and it is a medium-sized B2B company. The case company was selected since it had just purchased the Salesforce Pardot marketing automation system and wanted to start utilising marketing automation methods for lead generation. The aim of the case company was to automate lead generation processes in order to release expensive sales force resources to pure one-to-one sales work and to capture potential customers in a beginning of their purchase journey. In addition to the case company, expert companies operating in B2B field were selected for this study as well due to their knowledge in the digital marketing field and to provide more extensive understanding on marketing automation. The starting point for the research was that the case company had educated themselves and gathered the information of marketing automation but had not hitherto utilised the system and methods in a live environment, whereas expert companies had marketing automation already in operation.

3.1 Qualitative research and case study

Qualitative research is an umbrella term for an array of methods and approaches that studies natural social life (Saldaña 2011, 3). Qualitative research is also interpretive in nature, since socially constructed and subjective meanings expressed about the phenomenon is studied and explicated by researchers. In order to access to meanings and in-depth understanding, researchers are working within research context or a natural setting and therefore qualitative research is considered naturalistic. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012, 163.) According to Saldaña (2011, 3-4) information, which is typically rich and detailed, is collected mainly from textual or visual materials and it is primarily but not exclusively non-quantitative. Furthermore, qualitative research emphasises the expertise of the researcher and common methods of data collection are interviews and observation. Qualitative research relies mainly on

human understanding and perception. Therefore theories and experiments are refined by personal experience, scepticism and intuition. (Stake 2010, 11.) A variety of strategies are associated with a qualitative research. These are action research, ethnography, case study, narrative research and grounded theory. (Saunders et al. 2012, 163-164.)

The case study approach is an empirical investigation, which aim is to investigate a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Farquhar 2012, 5). According to Yin (2009, 4) case study is used as a research strategy to advance the knowledge of a specific phenomenon, in other words when a new or complex phenomenon needs to be understood in-depth. It can investigate single unit (one person, one group, one organisation) or multiple units and often uses familiar research methods such as surveys and interviews for evidence collection (Farquhar 2012, 6). Yin (2009, 10) also highlights that the case study is suitable for being used as a research strategy when the aim of the study is to find answers to “how” and “why” questions. Case studies are based on experience and knowledge and due to context characteristics of a case study, the evidence of phenomenon can be collected where it is taking place, for instance in a company (Farquhar 2012, 6). Case study can be carried out by quantitative or qualitative research methods alike.

This study was carried out as a qualitative research and by using case study strategy. Qualitative research was seen as an appropriate method due to its exploratory nature and possibility to gain insights and in-depth meanings of marketing automation and lead generation from a small sample group. The case study was chosen as a research strategy, since the focus was to study one unit of interest, marketing automation. Furthermore, marketing automation is a new phenomenon also in an academic research as mentioned in a beginning of this study and therefore it needs to be investigated, described and understood more in depth. Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) also mention that the case study approach is appropriate when the focus is to advance theoretical understanding about the new phenomenon. Furthermore, the intention of this study is to get the information of marketing automation from a few chosen individuals in their working environment, which also reinforces the chosen strategy as well as the main study question, which aims to find an answer to the question: *How can marketing automation be utilised to support lead generation in B2B companies?*

3.2 Semi-structured interviews

There are three main reasons to use interviews for data collection in qualitative research – to acquire interpretation and unique information held by an interviewee, discover the facts of a subject that could not be observed by researchers and gather a numerical aggregation of information from numerous people (Stake 2010, 95). Koskinen, Alasuutari and Peltonen (2005, 104) divide interviews into structured, semi-structured and in-depth. Semi-structured interviews are non-standardised and flexible. Therefore some questions can be

omitted during the interview or the order of questions can be changed or completely new questions can be added. In other words, semi-structured interview questions may vary from interview to interview. (Saunders et al. 2012, 374.)

The data was collected for this study with semi-structured interviews, which was seen as the most suitable method of acquiring the information on marketing automation and lead generation. In total of six interviews were organised in Helsinki. Three were arranged with a case company and three with expert company representatives from two different companies - expert company A and expert company B. Study respondents were selected with a purposive sampling. According to Yin (2016, 93) purposive sampling deliberately chooses samples, which would yield the most plentiful and rich data. In other words, people who more than likely had the most beneficial and extensive knowledge of marketing automation were chosen to participate in this study.

Interviews were executed one by one and face-to-face in Finnish. Interview questions presented in an Appendix 1 were formulated in advance and asked almost in the same order from every participant, which is suitable for semi-structured interviews. This way researcher was able to lead interviews and gain needed information but was also able to ask additional questions when seen necessary and keep discussion flowing to discover in-depth information. The beginning of each interview, a picture of joint sales and marketing funnel from Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) that is displayed in a figure 7, was also shown to every participant to stimulate conversation. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim after the interview to get data to more understandable form. More detailed information about interviews is portrayed in a TABLE 2. Interviews were done anonymous to protect the privacy of the companies. Therefore interviewees are cited as respondent A, B, C, D, E or F.

Table 2 Study interviews

Respondent	Gender	Classification	Position	Interview duration
A	Male	Case company	Marketing Director	50 minutes
B	Female	Case company	Marketing and Communication Manager	59 minutes
C	Female	Case company	Digital Sales and Marketing Manager	43 minutes
D	Female	Expert company A	Marketing Assistant	29 minutes
E	Male	Expert company A	Financial Manager	80 minutes
F	Male	Expert company B	Co-Founder	58 minutes

3.3 Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis concentrates on identifying and describing both explicit and implicit ideas, in other words themes from gathered research data (Guest, MacQueen & Namey 2012, 10). Themes can be described as topics that arise frequently from the data. According to Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 126) the themes need to be essential regarding research questions and they need to clarify those questions. In thematic analysis, the researcher first identifies different themes from collected research data and then codes or categorises them for later analysis, which might include for instance identifying code co-occurrence and comparing code frequencies. Thematic analysis also demands great contribution and precision from the researcher due to the interpretation nature of the analysis method. (Guest et al. 2012, 10.)

Thematic analysis was used as a data analysis technique in this study. First the verbatim texts from interviews were read through to obtain a general overview of the collected information. Then text was read through again and the preliminary themes from interviews were colour encoded in the text documents by using different colours. These six themes were: marketing automation, benefits and challenges, utilisation of marketing automation, leads and leads generation, customer experience, marketing and sales cooperation. After finding all the themes, the suitable text from each interview was copied and combined together to the excel table under each theme and marked with an alphabetical letter representing the correct responder. Then data within different themes were further categorised and analysed to discover the most significant information from interviews. Lastly the themes were modified according to analysed data and presented as individual chapters in a study result section. As mentioned before, interviews and therefore also the transcription of interviews and analysing was done in Finnish. However, all study results were translated and will be presented in English. Furthermore, study results are reported on the discussion of findings chapter by using the abductive reasoning that means combining theory and gathered empirical data. This reporting custom is also supported by Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 126), who advice to use interaction between theory and empirical data. The aim for the analysis is to understand and interpret marketing automation.

4 STUDY RESULTS

This chapter represents the study results, which are categorised based on the modified themes derived from analysed interview data. The six themes of this study are: general perception of marketing automation, experienced benefits and challenges, utilisation in the B2B company and role of data, conception of leads and lead generation, the overview on marketing and sales cooperation and lastly the generation of personalised customer experience.

First, the results are presented with quotations from the interviews and with additional spider charts created from the obtained interview data to confirm the interpretations of the researcher. Then the findings of this study will be discussed and finally the evolved research model of the joint customer journey and sales-marketing lead generation funnel is developed on the basis of the study results and will be presented.

4.1 General perception of marketing automation

Interviewees had similar views on marketing automation. They generally described marketing automation as a method of doing marketing or as a tool that can be used to automate customized communication towards potential and existing customers.

“In my opinion, marketing automation is a method of doing marketing communication in such a way that’s relevant to the customer. It’ll also increase the work efficiency of marketing and sales and reduces manual work.” (Respondent C)

“I would define marketing automation as functions relating to marketing that can be automatized in a way that you don’t do them manually one by one, but some bigger system manages the whole process automatically in the background.” (Respondent D)

Respondent A, respondent E and respondent F also mentioned that marketing automation itself is not entirely a new idea and it has been existed awhile. They highlighted that Google AdWords has elements of marketing automation for instance. The majority of the interviewees also thought that the urge in

companies to start using marketing automation has been created by global system providers. In addition, the study results showed that the main reason creating the interest towards marketing automation was digitalisation and changed buying habits. Respondent D also mentioned that companies today are trying to find more effective methods of doing marketing and sales due to strict budgets. On the whole, respondents saw marketing automation as a system that can save resources and perform marketing and sales actions effectively.

“Formerly most of the sales work was done face-to-face. You went somewhere to meet people, you got a business card and you called them. Today the Internet has made it possible that you can first benchmark a couple of companies and then contact the company if you need to buy some products.” (Respondent E)

“We get so much information and data through the Internet, so you don’t have enough resources anymore to do everything manually. People today are expecting to get tailored and targeted communication, so you just have to do it.” (Respondent B)

Furthermore, respondent A, respondent E and respondent F highlighted that marketing automation is much more than a system offered by suppliers such as HubSpot or Salesforce. These interviewees wanted to underline that system itself will not automate anything and make the company blissful, since all processes and target audiences need to be defined by people as well as content created for communication.

“It bothers me that HubSpot and other providers offer their systems with an idea of that you just need to plug in the system, but marketing automation doesn’t work solely with software.” (Respondent A)

“HubSpot has great guides, but many of the subjects you can’t teach. You need to have an understanding about your own customers and you need to know what kind of content you need to deliver to them. This takes time. Automation isn’t something that you just buy and it works immediately. You probably fail 10 times before you’ll get a success. (Respondent E)

“Now everybody thinks that marketing automation is a factory without people, but it’ll never be like it... Big system providers willingly say that buy this system and it’ll reduce your company’s needed resources and everything will work better, but it isn’t like that” (Respondent F)

4.2 Experienced benefits and challenges

All the interviewees of this study agreed that marketing automation is beneficial for B2B companies. Even though there quite often are some challenges, every company can still find several benefits for their organisation.

“I tried to think about some companies that marketing automation wouldn’t be suitable, but nothing is coming to my mind now. I think that every company that’s selling something can benefit from marketing automation.” (Respondent D)

Benefits

The study interviewees were asked to describe marketing automation benefits for B2B companies. These findings are shown in a figure 9. As the spider chart indicates, manual work reduction was the most notified benefit of marketing automation, which was mentioned by all the respondents. Work efficiency and quality improvement, targeted and personalised communication and lead generation were found to be the second important benefits by five respondents. Lead nurturing and value development and customer satisfaction were mentioned four times by respondents making them third valued benefits. The sales increase was seen as the fourth respected benefit with three responses. Management of customer relationships were commented twice making it fifth important benefit of marketing automation.

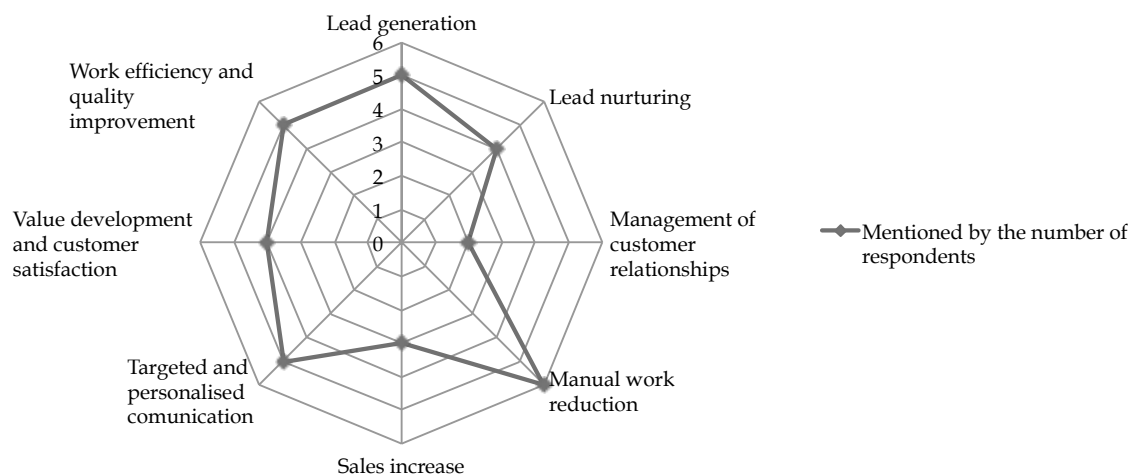


Figure 9 Benefits of marketing automation for B2B companies

Challenges

Marketing automation challenges for B2B companies that were mentioned by respondents during research interviews are presented in a figure 10. Knowledge and understanding was seen as the most challenging issue regarding marketing automation, which was pointed out by six interviewees. Resources were thought to be the second most difficult subject with five mentions, while system integration was seen as the third demanding area in

marketing automation, which was emphasized by four respondents. Sales and marketing cooperation, lack of management support and commitment and data quality and utilisation were seen as the fourth challenging part with three remarks. The fifth most difficult subject on marketing automation was considered the selection of the right system, which was mentioned by two respondents.

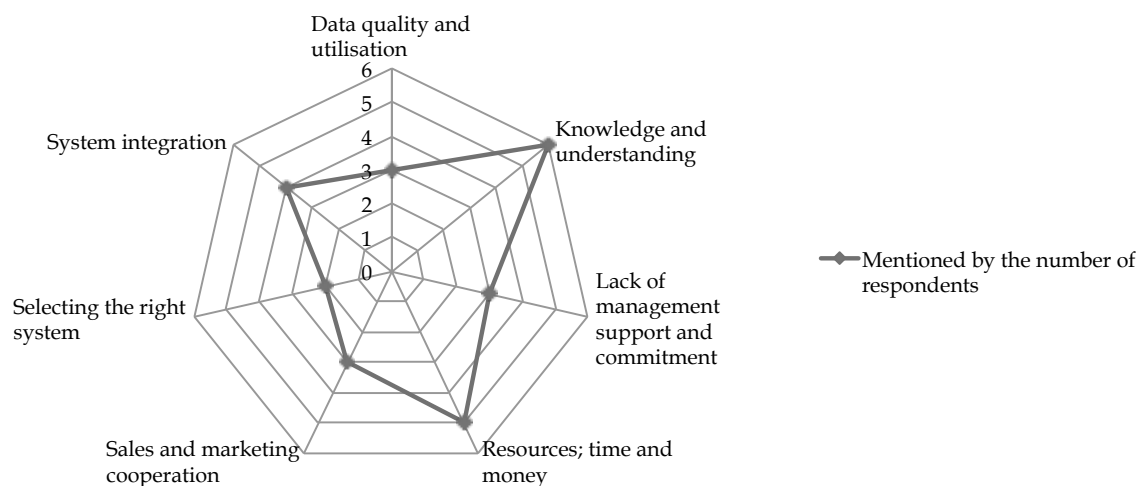


Figure 10 Challenges of marketing automation for B2B companies

Furthermore, the study results also revealed that the generality of the respondents carried quite negative connotations and prejudices regarding the subject of integration and resources.

“Integration is definitely a challenge. We have these kinds of systems in our company already so there might not be ready-made marketing automation software for us. There is also a challenge of how information updated to CRM will transfer forward? All of these questions can be solved, but it isn’t easy and therefore they might be a show-stopper of a problem.” (Respondent F)

“IT projects always have challenges and things that nobody anticipated. How to transfer all the data and how to connect different systems painlessly? There will be many practical challenges. Then these projects will always be delayed and suddenly one year has gone since the date it was supposed to be ready and running.” (Respondent B)

“If you established a new company, you could buy software and hire people to manage the whole marketing automation. However, when you start utilising marketing automation in a company that’s already running, you won’t get a new person to run the system and when you try to integrate software into the existing systems it doesn’t work. This is real-life realism.” (Respondent A)

4.3 Utilisation in B2B companies and role of data

In the interviews, all the respondents agreed that marketing automation is a beneficial tool for the whole company and it can be used for both internal and external processes.

"It's a tool for internal processes in such a way that sales get those leads and for external processes in such so that customer receives needed or requested information automatically." (Respondent E)

"I would say that it's for both. Externally for example, all the communication for customers or potential customers and internally in such a way that you can systematically go through results, follow analytics and utilise this information by making necessary changes for future actions based on analysed information." (Respondent D)

Interviewees also concurred with the view that marketing automation is helpful and can be used in every stage of the sales process from lead generation to nurturing and all the way to closing the deal.

"Sales team doesn't have time to manage every prospect so therefore marketing automation can be utilised and it's able to take care of smaller clients and also generate leads." (Respondent B)

Moreover, marketing automation was not considered a temporary phenomenon among interviewees, but rather a permanent practice in marketing and sales due to ever growing data collection and desire for more tailored communication. Respondent C also stated that the marketing automation systems would most likely develop further towards using artificial intelligent (AI). With a docile system, companies are then able to provide even more automated and tailored communication and sales actions for their customers. Furthermore, respondent F pointed out that companies do not need to automate every process at once, since they can also start by automating just some parts of the processes. However, it depends on the company and their needs, which parts should be automated first.

"...we could start using marketing automation for instance in this part of the process and then proceed step by step... and to automate some parts of the process should always start from company's standpoint. Which part would be the most beneficial for them or which part is the most problematic or which part they would like to develop or which part takes too much effort." (Respondent F)

The results also showed that companies have learned to collect information and data from many sources, but not all fully utilise it. Moreover, analysing the

gathered data is rarely done systematically or even omitted. Respondent B also mentioned that it is not sufficient to just produce reports, since information has to be analysed and actions needs to be changed based on results.

“I think that many companies have this problem at the moment. Everybody is talking about Big Data and there’s so much information and companies want to collect more of it, but how to use it and how to utilise it. For example, Facebook has so much information, but how to make the most of it.” (Respondent C)

“Many companies collect information and might even do reports or calculations of them. Then they are very relieved that they did something, but it’s super dangerous not to act on it... weekly or monthly reports might even automatically arrive by e-mail to you and to your boss, but nothing happens.” (Responder D)

“Analysing data is extremely important and I believe that one of the future trends is data analysing. People who can handle information and data are very desired and companies want to hire them.” (Respondent B)

Furthermore, all interviewees stated that exploiting the data would be beneficial for companies. However, as mentioned before the resources and knowledge were seen as major problems not only in marketing automation, but also in utilising data. Company culture and set working methods might also prevent companies for using and analysing the data comprehensively as specified by respondents. In addition, the study results revealed that attitudes linked to the exploiting data were not all quite positive. This is for the reason that, three out of four respondents had already been surrendered to accept the poor situation where information is not utilised profoundly in their companies and they thought that circumstances would not change for some time.

4.4 Conception of leads and lead generation

All the respondents of this study agreed that a lead is someone who has shown an interest towards the company. Respondent A and respondent B also specified that lead is not someone or some company in a bought sales register, since they have not shown an interest.

“Lead is a person or a company that has shown some level of an interest towards us.” (Respondent D)

Furthermore, respondent C added that more detailed specifications for a lead needs to be decided by marketing and sales together. For instance, what lead needs to do so it is considered as a suitable sales lead in other words the accepted interest stage of a lead needs to be clarified by a company. Respondent

D agreed and specified that someone who understands sales can evaluate the quality for leads and decide future steps.

“Lead is a contact that has been verified by us that they have a possibility and maybe even an intention to buy something from us.” (Respondent E)

Study results also pointed out that subscribing a newsletter or downloading material does not always mean that it is a proper lead in question even though people have identified themselves. According to respondent E, many people are just interested in the content and for instance students can download useful material for their projects or whoever is interested in that certain topic and want to learn more.

“If we get e-mail from someone who downloaded material, are they interested only about the content or also our products?” (Respondent A)

“We gather outrageous amount of contacts from our website, but when we look at them more closely that how many contacts have turned into leads, the numbers are quite poor. We have a lot of interesting content on our website, but it also attracts plenty of people that we aren’t interested in.” (Respondent E)

The interviewees of this study were also asked to describe their lead collecting methods. Different lead generation channels used by respondents are presented in a figure 11. Results demonstrate that the most capitalised channel was newsletters with six mentions. The second was events and different downloadable materials on the website that were stated by five respondents. Website forms and blog articles got four remarks making them third. The fourth most used channels were chat service with three comments, whereas Facebook likes were mentioned two times during interviews making it the fifth most capitalised channel by respondents.

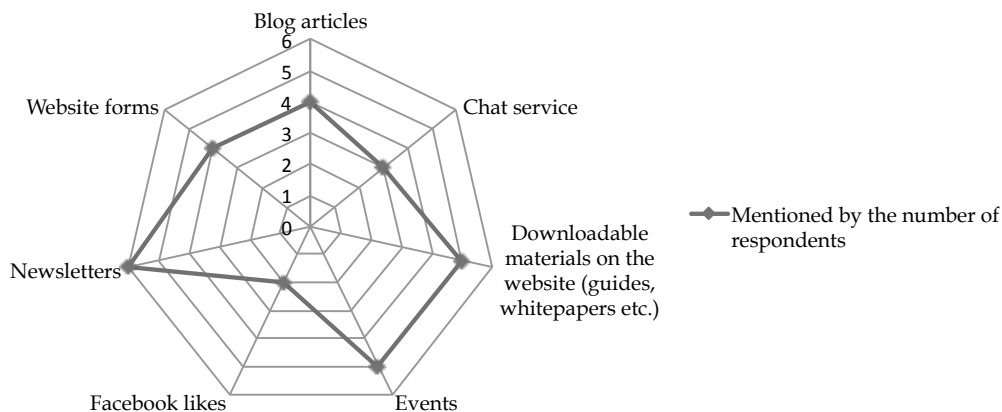


Figure 11 Lead generation channels

In addition, all of the interviewees specified that lead generation should belong both marketing and sales. Nonetheless, four respondents or six revealed that marketing alone is in charge of lead generation in their company, whereas only two respondents of six stated that marketing and sales is in charge of generating leads together.

“In a beginning we also had an idea that marketing will be in charge of lead generation. Now afterwards it’s quite a silly thought. So at the moment, sales first informs what kind of leads they want and then marketing thinks about how to start a conversation with them and how to automate communication.” (Respondent D)

4.5 Overview on marketing and sales cooperation

The study results unanimously revealed that marketing and sales should cooperate. Marketing automation was seen as a tool that might finally compel marketing and sales to cooperate since it is beneficial for both. Respondent E also talked about the sales and marketing hybrid team model that would be in charge of the whole marketing automation – processes, content creation and management of a tool. Moreover, respondent C and Respondent D mentioned that marketing and sales should not be restricted only to specific teams but it should rather belong to work of every employee at least partly.

“Marketing automation is an element that connects marketing, sales and customer service.” (Respondent B)

“Those silos between marketing and sales need to be broken and to determine that now we’ll do this together.” (Respondent F)

“Marketing automation must be broken into the whole company culture in a way that everything is marketing and it belongs to everybody. Marketing automation doesn’t work that way that someone just does something somewhere and then everybody waits for results that never come.” (Respondent D)

The generality of the respondents also thought that the name marketing automation was misleading, since it was considered belonging to the whole organisation and not just for the use of marketing. Furthermore, at this stage of interviews marketing automation was perceived to be much more than a method and a tool by study respondents, it was seen as a way of executing marketing and sales in today’s digital B2B environment.

“The name of marketing automation is funny, since it’s actually company’s practice to do things. It isn’t a tool just for marketing.” (Respondent B)

"It goes under marketing probably because of the name but it's actually company's business and the permanent mode of operations." (Respondent C)

Furthermore, the importance of cooperation emerged strongly from the interviews. Respondent C mentioned that marketing cannot generate and nurture leads by themselves without the support and vision of sales, since marketing might not know what type of leads sales desires. Respondent F continued that in a worse case scenario, the marketing automation actions have been running for a couple of years, but since results are found bland, company states that marketing automation does not work and decides to abandon the whole system.

4.6 Generation of personalised customer experience

All the respondents agreed that companies today have to deliver tailored and targeted communication to improve customer experience. Respondent B and respondent E also highlighted that since people are busier than ever before and they come across masses of communication every day, messages need to be even more personalised in order to capture the attention of the target audience.

"Companies are only interested in selling, but if it's done by providing the tailored communication and a personalised customer journey, then it's a good thing and everybody benefits." (Respondent F)

"You can add value for customers with marketing automation, so they are able to get what they want and what they are interested in." (Respondent A)

"I think that the most important thing today is that you truly know what customers are interested in, what they need and what really speaks to them." (Respondent D)

"You receive so many messages and that's why information needs to be personalised and something you have subscribed. World changes and you don't have time to read anymore and therefore you don't want to waste time for useless messages." (Respondent E)

Furthermore, the majority of the interviewees also highlighted the importance of following the customer purchase journey and providing tailored content at the right time. Respondent B also mentioned that the more company gathers information and follows customer behaviour in digital environment, more helpful they are, since they provide right kind of content at the right time of customer's purchase journey.

"Every encounter with customer needs to take into consideration customer purchase stages. Then you can start suggesting certain kind of things and e-mail them, but you need to gather data to be able to do this." (Respondent C)

"It's important that you are at the right place at the right time to tell exactly the right things that person is interested in." (Respondent D)

"At its best, marketing automation helps you forward and finds the right choice for you. Therefore, it can be thought to be more as a customer service than marketing action." (Respondent B)

As mentioned earlier, collecting data is vital when utilising marketing automation and creating value for customers. For that reason, it was important regarding this study to ask interviewees their views on beneficial B2B customer information. In other words, which is the type of customer information that respondents would regard as valuable to be collected by companies. These results are shown in a figure 12. The most important information was considered interest areas, which was mentioned by five interviewees. The second was behavioural information and contact information with four remarks. Company information was seen to be the third, which was described by two respondents, whereas demographic information was fourth with one comment.

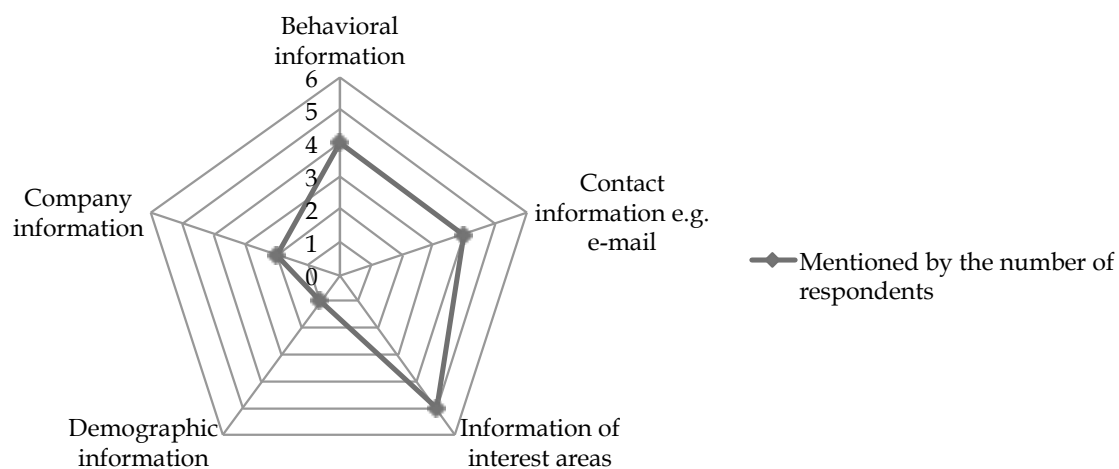


Figure 12 Beneficial customer information to be gathered

Furthermore, marketing automation benefits also for B2B customers were seen necessary to be surveyed in this study. The results revealed that utilising marketing automation was considered beneficial for customers as well. Interviewees mentioned eight benefits. These benefits are presented in a figure 13. As the spider chart indicates, personalised communication and timely communication were the most agreed benefits for customers, which were both mentioned by all the respondents. The second important benefit was seen to be reminder messages, which was commented by four interviewees. The third was time saving with three remarks. Content suggestions of interest areas and

digital customer service were found to be the third most significant benefits by two respondents. Feedback opportunities through questionnaires and tips and offers were both mentioned once and they were considered the fifth most valuable benefits of marketing automation for customers.

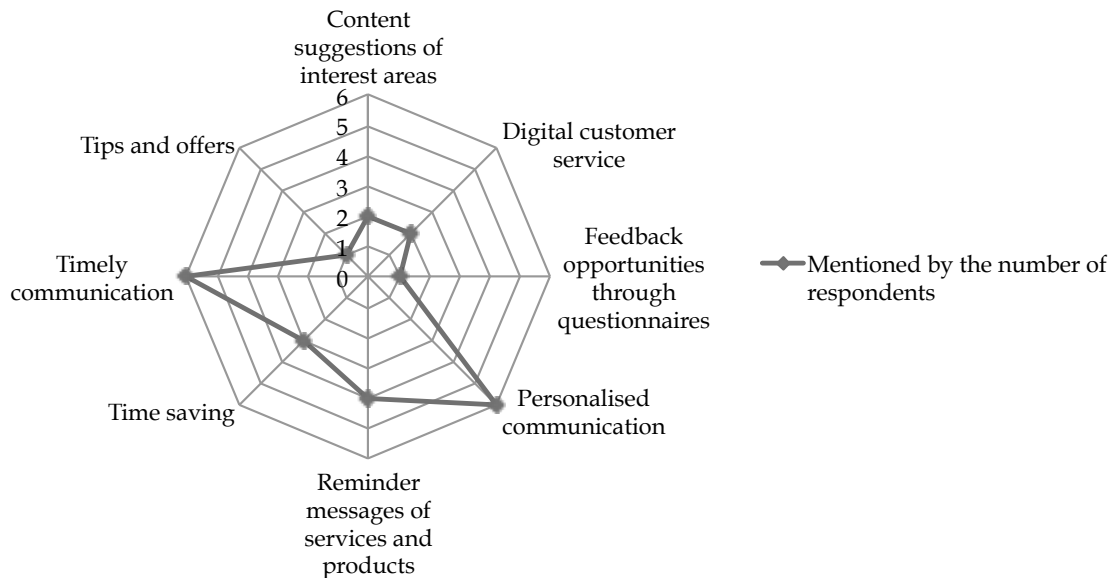


Figure 13 Benefits of marketing automation for customer

4.7 Discussion of findings

The marketing automation technologies have emerged strongly during past couple of years. However, the concept of marketing automation is very broad and can still be understood in multiple manners. Rowley (2014, 152) describes marketing automation as a process of communication, whereas Buttle and Maklan (2015, 232) define it more as an application of computerized technologies. Due to ambiguous definitions, this study started off by examining how study participants determine marketing automation.

The results of this study revealed that generally marketing automation was seen as a method of doing marketing or as a tool that can be used to automate customized communication towards potential and existing customers. On the whole, respondents saw marketing automation as a system that can save resources and perform marketing and sales actions effectively. This notion is in line with previous studies and for instance Rowles (2014, 152) highlights that marketing automation is able to help B2B companies with their sales process. Most respondents also thought that the name marketing automation was misleading, since they considered it to belong to the whole organisation and not just for the use of marketing. Moreover, marketing automation was eventually

identified by study respondents to be far more than merely a method and a tool, since it was seen as a new way of executing marketing and sales actions on today's digital B2B environment. From this standpoint, marketing automation can be considered as a strategic and operational concept. Questions and answers regarding marketing automation definition were extremely intriguing, because they shed light to the dilemma of ambiguous marketing automation definitions. In other words, people commonly see marketing automation as software or a tool with different functions and they generally believe that it belongs to marketing due to the name. One might speculate that global system providers have most likely created this slightly misleading and a one-sided image of marketing automation, which should be broadened with the help of academic research.

Furthermore, rather interesting detail was revealed from interview data when three respondents highlighted that marketing automation is much more than a system offered by suppliers such as HubSpot or Salesforce. These interviewees wanted to underline that system itself will not automate anything and make the company perfect, since all processes and target audiences need to be defined by people as well as content created for communication. This finding was interesting since many people assume that marketing automation is solely a system that will do the work behalf of a person even though a human touch and hard work is very much needed. However, these respondents were still glad that a buzz around marketing automation compels companies to think about the whole sales process, every stage from beginning to the end, and to understand their customers more profoundly.

Findings in this study regarding the most common benefits and challenges of marketing automation for B2B companies support the previous academic research. Respondents agreed that marketing automation is beneficial for B2B companies and they pointed out eight benefits. Manual work reduction was the most agreed benefit of marketing automation. Bagshaw (2015) acknowledges this benefit as well by confirming that companies need less human resources when utilising marketing automation. Work efficiency and quality improvement, targeted and personalised communication and lead generation were found to be the second important benefits. These benefits are also mentioned for instance by Buttle and Maklan (2015, 233-234), Wood (2015) and D'Haen and Van den Poel (2013). Lead nurturing and value development and customer satisfaction were the third valued benefits. Among other, Järvinen and Taiminen (2016), Bagshaw (2016) and Heimbach et al. (2015) acknowledge these benefits. The sales increase was seen as the fourth respected benefit, which is recognised for instance by Rowles (2014, 154). Management of customer relationships were the fifth important benefit of marketing automation and Del Rowe (2016) notes this benefit as well by saying that marketing automation is able to improve customer relationships.

As for challenges, interviewees acknowledged seven aspects that would cause potential problems. Knowledge and understanding was seen as the most challenging issue on marketing automation. Resources were thought to be the second most difficult subject and system integration was the third demanding area in marketing automation. Rowles (2014, 162-163) also identifies these

problems by revealing that set-up process and integration with company's other systems might be quite challenging and consumes plenty of resources. Sales and marketing cooperation, lack of management support and commitment and data quality and utilisation were seen as the fourth most challenging issues. The fifth most difficult subject of marketing automation was considered the selection of the right system. Furthermore, findings regarding the challenges of integration and resources were revealing, not only since they affect company's everyday life, but also because the study results uncovered that the most of the respondents carry quite negative connotations and prejudices regarding those subjects. Therefore, the results demonstrated that these challenges might create fundamental problems, which complicate matters further or even entirely prevent companies from adopting the marketing automation system.

As it was discussed in a beginning of this thesis, companies today are operating in an environment where data has grown exponentially. Hall (2017, 1) highlights that companies today must manage with increased data and be able to understand and capitalise digital technologies. Since marketing automation is one of those tools that will help B2B companies to manage in a new operating environment, it was seen necessary regarding this study to further explore the utilisation of marketing automation and map out the role of data. In the interviews, all the participants concurred that marketing automation is a tool for both internal and external processes. The results also revealed one of the most significant findings of this study. According to respondents, companies have learned to collect data and information from many sources, but not all totally utilise it. This finding is also noted by Debruyne (2014, 32), who highlights that many companies do not use collected customer data even though they collect considerable amounts of information. Furthermore, study also exposed that analysing the gathered data is rarely done profoundly or some companies could even omit to do it. Two respondents also underlined the importance of analysing the gathered data thoroughly and changing marketing and sales actions based on results revealed about the investigated data. Grossberg (2016) agrees by saying that companies need to manipulate huge quantities of data, if they want marketing automation to be effective and efficient. However, as mentioned before the resources and knowledge were seen as major problems not only in marketing automation, but also in utilising data. Furthermore, the attitudes linked to the utilising and analysing data were quite revealing as well. This is for the reason that three respondents had already been surrendered to accept the poor situation where information is not utilised profoundly in their companies and they thought that circumstances would not change for some time. These findings regarding the utilising and analysing the data were very important in understanding the daily operations and manners of companies. It also highlighted that even though the companies might know what they should do, the company culture and working methods might prevent it and therefore the reality in many B2B companies is far from ideal.

Marketing automation is quite often seen as a difficult and a laborious project as study findings regarding challenges demonstrated. However, another interesting study finding was obtained when one interviewee raised a

noteworthy thought that companies can also start utilising marketing automation by automating just some parts of the processes and not everything at once. This way the project would not be as huge and time-consuming as it usually is and companies would be able to start utilising marketing automation much sooner. In addition, companies could learn bit by bit and then expand their learning to other parts of the process. This is rather interesting observation, since many believe that you need to start an extensive marketing automation project where every marketing and sales process is first written out and then everything automatized at once.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, companies have many different definitions for leads and they are understood slightly differently. Therefore questions regarding leads were necessary to clarify this topic. In this study, all interviewees agreed that a lead is someone who has shown an interest towards the company. This finding is in line with a lead perception of Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 13). According to study results, the most capitalised lead generation channel by respondents was newsletters, whereas events and different downloadable materials on the website were second. Website forms and blog articles were seen to be the third important lead generation channel and the fourth was chat service. Facebook likes were identified the fifth most capitalised channel. Furthermore, the generality of lead generation channels used by respondents utilised content, which supports the previous research. As Gagnon (2014) confirms, content marketing is a key for lead generation.

Furthermore, two respondents underlined the significance of deciding different value levels for leads and validating leads together between marketing and sales. Different importance levels of leads are recognised by many academics as well. For instance, Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) divide leads into marketing and sales leads where sales leads are the ones that have clearly expressed a purchase intention. The validation process in general is extremely important hence the resources of a company are not targeted to wrong leads as D'haen and Van den Poel (2013) remind. In addition, all study respondents indicated that lead generation should belong to equally marketing and sales teams. Nonetheless, four respondents revealed that marketing alone is in charge of lead generation in their company, whereas only two respondents stated that marketing and sales is together in charge of generating leads. This was thought-provoking finding, which demonstrates that desire and reality in companies might not encounter.

The collaboration between marketing and sales has quite often been a challenge in many companies as many academics such as Wiersema (2016) and Rouziès et al. (2005) have pointed out. Patterson (2007) continues by stating that marketing and sales have difficulties in understanding each other. In spite of challenges in cooperation, the study results revealed that marketing and sales should co-operate. Marketing automation was seen as a unifying element that might finally compel marketing and sales to cooperate since it is beneficial for both. This finding is in line with previous academic research. Furthermore, the importance of cooperation emerged strongly from the interviews. One respondent mentioned that marketing needs the help of sales to nurture the right type of leads. Another respondent continued that a teamwork efforts are

needed from both marketing and sales thus company do not decide in any circumstance to abandon the whole marketing automation system due to possible bland results, which could have been avoided with marketing and sales cooperation. For these reasons, it is vital to strengthen the commitment of marketing and sales towards cooperation when company starts utilising the marketing automation system.

In line with the previous studies from Heimbach et al. (2015) and Bagshaw (2015), all the respondents agreed that companies today have to deliver tailored and targeted communication to improve customer experience. Two respondents also highlighted that since people are busier than ever before and they daily come across masses of messages, communication needs to be even more personalised. Biegel (2009) concurs by mentioning that the ultimate goal of marketing automation is to improve sales and conversions and therefore messages need to be targeted to right audience with the right content. Most of the study respondents also highlighted the importance of following the customer purchase journey and providing personalised content at the right time. This observation is also consistent with academics such as Grossberg (2016), who mentions that content needs to be delivered timely. One respondent also highlighted the aspect of aid by stating that more company gathers information and follows customer behaviour in digital environment, more helpful they are, since this way they provide right type of content at the right time of customer's purchase journey. This result is in line with the research findings by Holliman and Rowley (2014).

Furthermore, the results of this study show that utilising marketing automation was considered beneficial also for customers. This is consistent with previous research. For instance, according to Buttle and Maklan (2015, 233-234), marketing automation is able to improve customer experience. Study respondents mentioned eight benefits. Personalised communication and timely communication were the most agreed benefits for customers. This result is in line with academic research and highlighted for instance by Wood (2015). The second important benefit was seen to be reminder messages, which is acknowledged also by Merisavo et al. (2006, 43). The third was time saving, whereas content suggestions of interest areas and digital customer service were found to be the third most significant benefits. Feedback opportunities through questionnaires and tips and offers were considered the fifth most valuable benefits of marketing automation for customers.

Collecting data is fundamental when utilising marketing automation and creating value for customers, as mentioned before. Godin (1999, 47) states that with gathered information companies are able to provide personalised content. Respondents of this study acknowledged five beneficial fields of information to be gathered. The most important information to be gathered was considered interest areas. Campbell and Marks (2015) also acknowledge this finding by underlining the importance of understanding the content consumption of a customer and a prospect. The second was behavioural information and contact information. Company information was seen to be the third, whereas demographic information was fourth. These results were quite intriguing, since they revealed as well that not all respondents were entirely sure about needed

information. All of the interviewees did recognize the necessity for data gathering, but it became slightly difficult for them to specify the type of essential information. This is also something that should be examined more profoundly, since literature quite often only discusses about gathering information and gathering data in general, but rarely specifies which type of information would be beneficial to be collected when utilising marketing automation. Literature does mention collecting contact details such as Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 13) have highlighted or very specified information gathering when discussing on the subject of CRM, but more detailed description of beneficial customer data for marketing automation would be required.

4.8 Modified research model

The research model of the joint customer journey and sales-marketing lead generation funnel is enhanced with two fundamental aspects that emerged from the study results. These are data analysis and testing, which are also marked with a blue dash lines into the model. The modified research model is presented in a figure 14.

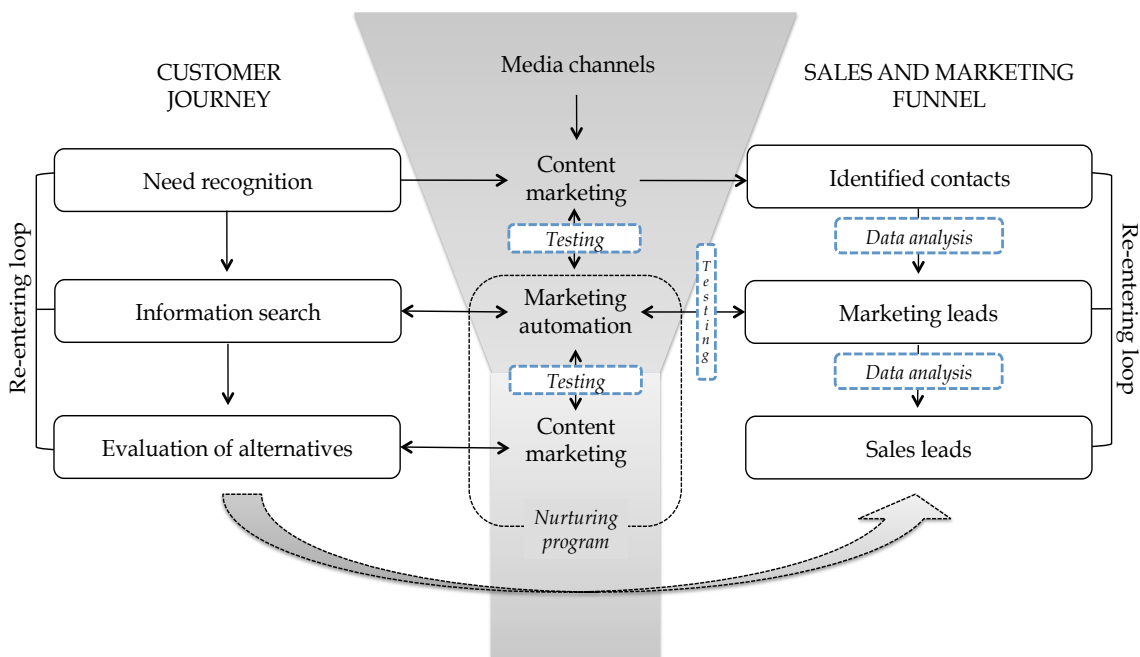


Figure 14 Modified research model: Joint customer journey and sales-marketing lead generation funnel

The study results revealed that not all companies utilise gathered data even though they have learned to gather it extensively. Moreover, findings highlighted that analysing the data and modifying marketing and sales actions

based on uncovered information are not done systematically and in many cases it might completely even be neglected. However, data analysis is a vital function of marketing automation, as well as sales and marketing in general in today's digital B2B environment. This is for the reason that only by analysing data and by making necessary adjustments for marketing and sales actions, which are based on analysed data, companies are able not only to provide personalised communication to customers, but also to focus on the right type of customers and move them in a desired direction inside a sales funnel.

The results of this study also showed that in order to improve customer experience, companies have to deliver tailored and targeted communication. Furthermore, findings also exposed that distributing helpful and timely content that follows the customer purchase journey is extremely important. Therefore, companies are able to obtain the insights and preferences of a customer not only by analysing gathered information, but also by testing the delivered and consumed content, which have an essential role in utilising marketing automation and generating leads.

5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Answers to research questions

The main goal of this study was to enhance understanding on marketing automation and increase knowledge on how B2B companies could utilise it to support sales and lead generation. The aim was achieved by clarifying different aspects of marketing automation and its benefit along with challenges for B2B companies. This study accomplished the set targets and was able to provide valuable knowledge on marketing automation with its theoretical and empirical study sections.

To accomplish the goals of this study, the main research question (MRQ) and three sub-research questions (SRQ) were formed before commencing the thesis. The findings of this study complemented with the theory on marketing automation provide answers to the questions satisfactory. It is good to acknowledge as well, that research questions support each other and therefore certain information is partly repeated.

MRQ: How can marketing automation be utilised to support lead generation in B2B companies?

Before answering the main research question, the present state of B2B sales environment is recapitulated. As mentioned before, B2B operating environment has changed radically due to digitalisation. Firstly, customers today are actively searching information from the Internet and have many times already started the purchase journey before contacting the sales representative of the company they want to do business with. Furthermore, customers are nowadays much more demanding than before and they are expecting to receive helpful and personalised communication also in B2B field instead of mass marketing. Secondly, the amount of data has increased massively in the world. This has lead companies for utilising technologies since nobody is able to handle huge quantities of data. Moreover, companies are able to provide communication that customers today are expecting to receive by gathering data and analysing it as well as by changing their marketing and sales actions based on the results. Companies that are able to take advantage of technology and implement data

based actions are gaining competitive advantage. Marketing automation is one of those technologies that can help B2B companies to cope in this new operating environment.

The answer to the main research questions is described next. Marketing automation enables companies to search for prospects in digital environment and collect information such as customer behaviour data that can be utilised to transmit personalised e-communication to serve customers' needs in different purchase journey stages, which in turn will evolve prospects into a identified marketing and sales leads as well as nurture them to become customers. Marketing automation can be harnessed to support company's sales team and handle quite automatically the whole lead generation process from searching prospects along with scoring and validating leads based on predefined rules as well as sending them to sales team to be contacted, whereupon the sales representatives can concentrate on their resources only for selling and not to use their valuable time for finding leads. Furthermore, some prospects and identified marketing leads might not be ready to make a purchase instantly and therefore marketing automation can be utilised to nurture them to sales leads with personalised and helpful content and eventually convert them to customers.

SRQ1: What are the core functionalities of the marketing automation system?

The variety of core functionalities are recognised by marketing automation literature and the performed research. The following discussion summarises the main functionalities. In the first instance, the marketing automation system is able to collect a variety of customer information in digital environment by tracking and scoring customer behaviour. This functionality helps companies to search for potential prospects, persuade them to identify themselves and transform valid leads to customers. In other words, companies are able to catch a massive amount of leads in digital environment, which then need to be validated with a scoring system to see if they are right type of leads for a company or even ready to make a purchase. Therefore marketing automation can also support companies to nurture marketing leads with tailored content until they are ready to become a sales lead and to make a purchase. Another key functionality is e-communication where predefined and tailored e-mails can be triggered automatically through the system. This helps companies to create value for customers by offering not only personalised and timely content, but also useful content that is based on customer's purchase journey.

SRQ2: What type of benefits marketing automation is able to provide for B2B companies?

The information available states evidently that marketing automation is beneficial for B2B companies. There is vast range of benefits and the most common ones are presented next. First of all, it improves the work efficiency

and quality of marketing and sales actions. Marketing automation also enables companies to provide targeted and personalised communication, which in turn adds value and increases customer satisfaction as well as an engagement. Furthermore, companies are able to perform lead generation and lead nurturing more comprehensively with the system and that way not only to save time and generate better quality leads, but also to increase the amount of potential customers and company's sales. Management of customer relationships can also be partly performed with marketing automation. Lastly, manual work is reduced and productivity increased, since automation is able to manage the multiple assignments behalf of a person. However, manual work is still much needed with marketing automation, but resources are allocated to other chores such as content creation, analysing, testing and management of the system.

SQ3: What type of challenges marketing automation might produce in B2B companies?

The current literature and the conducted empirical study identify following key challenges for B2B companies regarding marketing automation. To begin with, selecting the right system along with the lack of knowledge and understanding on marketing automation might produce problems for B2B companies in the first place. B2B companies should also take into consideration that resources in and lack of management support combined with the shortage of commitment general produce typical challenges. The marketing automation system integration with other systems utilised by the company such as CRM could be quite demanding as well. The free flow of data through different systems is vital when using marketing automation. Furthermore, the utilisation often requires changes in company's working procedures for instance sales and marketing cooperation along with generating actions based on data. Therefore these changes might partly have negative influence regarding attitudes, which might create change resistance towards the new system. Continuous content production and modifications are also required, which may become problematic for some companies. The last key challenges concern the data. First of all, the quality of data has to be suitable and good in order for B2B companies to use marketing automation successfully. Secondly, one of the central aspects of marketing automation is to utilise generated data by analysing the collected information and by testing the created content with the purpose of modifying marketing and sales actions to become more effective. This possible novel way of utilising data might generate challenges for some B2B companies regarding resources and proficiency along with the changed working methods.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This study also contributes to the marketing automation literature and supports the prior research as the discussion in foregoing chapter 4.7 demonstrates. Furthermore, three main theoretical contributions, which are interrelated with each other, are drawn from the study results as well and they are shown in a figure 15.

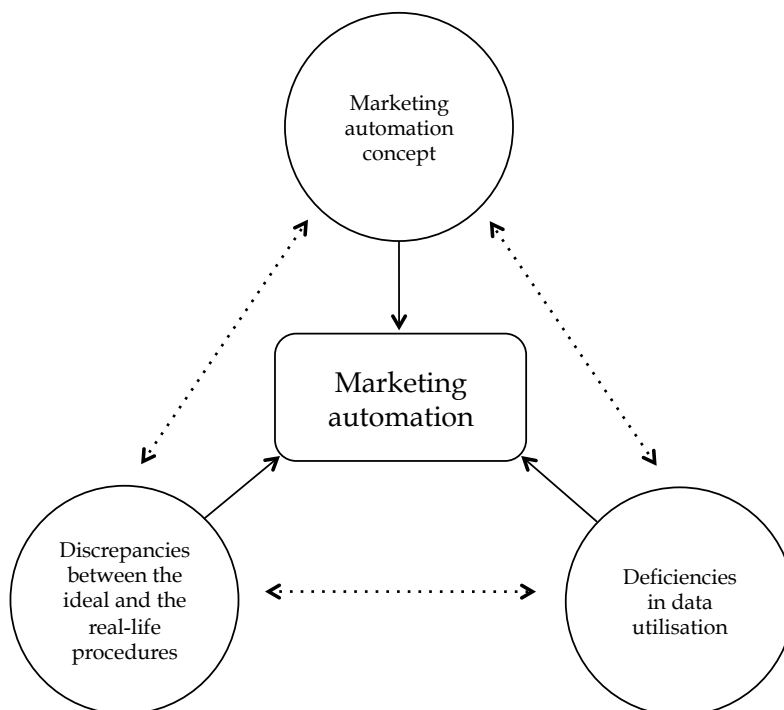


Figure 15 Key contributions for theory

First contribution is the marketing automation concept. The study results revealed that marketing automation is not merely a tool for communication or a method of producing marketing and sales actions, since it has more diverse role in executing marketing and sales actions on today's digital B2B environment. Therefore this study suggests that marketing automation should be considered more as a concept that has strategic and operative aspects. This deduction presents a broader viewpoint to the topic and facilitates the dilemma of ambiguous marketing automation definitions. It also ties together the previous academic viewpoints. For instance, Grossberg (2016) identifies the strategic perspective by supporting the view of marketing automation as a practice of performing marketing and sales by harnessing artificial intelligence and as for Rowley (2014, 152), she recognises the operative aspect by reinforcing the view of marketing automation as processes of communication.

The second contribution concerns deficiencies in data utilisation. One of the key conclusions of this thesis is that companies collect data from many

sources and they understand how important it is for marketing automation as well as their business in general, yet not all companies fully utilise or profoundly analyse the gathered information. This contribution is directly in line with the conclusion by Debruyne (2014, 32), who states that many companies collect considerable amount of data but do not use the collected customer information. The findings of this study regarding the reasons behind deficiencies in data utilisation and data analysis contribute to the marketing automation theory. Study revealed that difficulties arise not only from the lack of resources and knowledge as identified also by Rowles (2014, 162-163), but also from uncertainty that relates to the types of information, which would be beneficial for companies to collect. This finding regarding the uncertainty towards the type of information to be collected casts a new light on marketing automation since collecting data is fundamental when utilising marketing automation. This is noted also by Godin (1999, 47), who states that companies are able to provide personalised content if they gather information. Furthermore, another novel finding regarding defects in data utilisation is the company culture and working methods, which portray an important role as well, since data is not utilised profoundly if both management and employees do not find important enough to follow an outcome of marketing and sales actions made after testing and analysing the gathered data.

The third main contribution to the marketing automation theory relates to discrepancies between the ideal and the real-life procedures. The study results highlighted in a few occasions that companies do not always operate the way that is an ideal for them. Although the study revealed that the sales and marketing cooperation was thought to be vital and beneficial as recognised also by Rouziès et al. (2005) and Kotler et al. (2006) in addition to lead generation belonging to both as highlighted by Järvinen and Taiminen (2016), practices in daily work in companies were mostly far from optimum. Furthermore, as mentioned in a second contribution section above, not all companies utilise or analyse the gathered data even though it was seen extremely important by respondents. Therefore this study proposes that companies have to make focal changes for their company culture and methods when they adopt marketing automation. This conclusion strives to generate understanding that marketing automation is a comprehensive mode of operating and therefore companies should not hastily rush into utilising it.

5.3 Managerial contributions

The study target from managerial perspective was to provide information for practitioners on marketing automation and to shed light on the changed B2B operating environment. These goals were achieved with the theoretical part of this study and conducted empirical research. The seven key contributions that B2B companies should understand and take into consideration when utilising marketing automation are based on study results and presented in a figure 16.



Figure 16 Key contributions for companies

First of all, the B2B operating environment has changed dramatically due to digitalisation and changed buying habits. Nowadays customers actively search information from the Internet and according to Adamson et al. (2012) nearly 60 per cent have already started the purchased journey before contacting the service or product provider. Respondent E also noted this by saying *"Formerly most of the sales work was done face-to-face. You went somewhere to meet people, you got a business card and you called them. Today the Internet has made it possible that you can first benchmark a couple of companies and then contact the company if you need to buy some products"*. Therefore companies need to modify their marketing and sales tactics the way that they respond to present-day requirements. Since modern-day customers search information on the Internet, a natural choice for companies is to exploit content marketing in addition to marketing automation and be visible on every digital channel where customers might search information.

Another noteworthy topic concerns comprehension of marketing automation, which is usually thought to be a tool only for marketing. However, study results revealed that in spite of the name, marketing automation should be considered more as a strategic and operational concept, which makes it a permanent working method for the whole company. As respondent D mentioned *"Marketing automation must be broken into the whole company culture in a way that everything is marketing and it belongs to everybody. Marketing automation doesn't work that way that someone just does something somewhere and then everybody*

waits for results that never come" Moreover, it is a practice to execute marketing and sales actions on today's digital B2B environment, since it is not only able to utilise data and deliver personalised content for customers, but also because it is able to gather data and nurture leads.

Furthermore, marketing automation is usually quite time-consuming and an extensive project. However, study results pointed out that companies could start utilising marketing automation bit by bit and automate just some parts of the needed processes instead of automating every process at once. After generating good results, learning could be expanded to other parts of the processes. This way companies are able to start utilising marketing automation much faster and the project would not feel overwhelmingly vast.

Analysing the data and testing marketing and sales actions are keys to effective marketing automation and to generate great results. In other words, actions should be based on and modified by analysed and tested data. Respondent D also highlighted *"Many companies collect information and might even do reports or calculations of them. Then they are very relieved that they did something, but it's super dangerous not to act... weekly or monthly reports might even automatically arrive by e-mail to you and to your boss, but nothing happens"*. Therefore companies should invest their resources in these vital functions or even hire a specialist to perform these tasks as suggested in study interviews, since only by analysing and testing they can deliver truly personalised communication and that way improve results.

Another important subject to take into consideration when utilising marketing automation is managerial support and resources. Since marketing automation is not a mechanism that starts working and delivering remarkable results by itself when plugged in, hard work is required to define processes and target audiences. Moreover, content needs to be created and gathered data have to be analysed to improve results. In other words, utilising marketing automation requires continuous work and it affects company's business, therefore necessary resources have to be available as well as managerial support.

The next critical topic relates to attitudinal change. Even though there was not noticeable change resistant during interviews, the study results revealed nonetheless that some employees might carry not only negative connotations and prejudices regarding lack of resources and integration of systems, but also stopped believing that their company would ever start utilising data profoundly. As respondent A described *"If you establish a new company, you could buy software and hire people to manage the whole marketing automation. However, when you start utilising marketing automation in a company that's already running, you won't get a new person to run the system and when you try to integrate software into the existing systems it doesn't work. This is real-life realism"*. These findings are extremely significant and they need to be addressed before utilising marketing automation.

The last vital subject concerns marketing and sales cooperation, which is one of the most significant aspects of marketing automation. Respondent F underlined that *"Those silos between marketing and sales need to be broken and to decide that now we'll do this together"*. First of all, processes along with criteria

and validation of leads have to be decided together between marketing and sales in order to achieve quality leads. As stated by respondent D *“In a beginning we also had an idea that marketing will be in charge of lead generation. Now afterwards it’s quite a silly thought. So at the moment, sales first informs what kind of leads they want and then marketing thinks about how to start a conversation with them and how to automate communication”*. Secondly, marketing automation is not a tool only for marketing, but rather a practice to execute marketing and sales actions on today’s digital B2B environment as mentioned earlier. Therefore, cooperation has to be strengthened before utilising marketing automation.

On the whole, this study provides a comprehensive knowledge base for practitioners on marketing automation. With an extensive theory section and empirical study findings, companies are able to increase their understanding on marketing automation and lead generation as well as enhance their chances to utilise marketing automation successfully.

5.4 Quality of study

The findings of this study should be interpreted by taking into the consideration certain limitations. First of all, the findings of this study cannot be generalised broadly. This is due to the context the study was conducted in, which provided a view of small and medium-sized B2B companies operating in Helsinki Finland. Therefore results cannot be extrapolated for larger B2B corporations or even other regions of Finland let alone other countries. Even though the study was performed as a case study that typically has an unfavourable effect on generalizing results or replicating the study, capitalising expert companies in the study provides a wider standpoint and increases reliability to generalize results for small and medium-sized companies in southern Finland. However, repeating the study identically for other B2B companies and by another researcher might prove to be quite difficult. This presents some limitations as well due to the nature of qualitative research, which relies heavily on the interviewer and interviewees along with their expertise and personal experience that will eventually revise the study results.

The second limitation concerns responders. Although interviewees came from three different companies and the gender divide along with the age divide were in balance, the results of the study might have slightly altered due to the lack of concrete daily experience of the marketing automation system behalf of the case company. In other words, the gathered data from the case company regarding utilising the system is based on studied information. However, in spite of tangible experience, the study results from expert companies and case company are parallel. Furthermore, it is also important to highlight that the given responses from representatives of expert companies are undistorted due to the absence of bias perspective, since expert participants were utilising marketing automation itself and not offering systems to other companies.

The third relates to the viewpoint of the research. Due to challenging timetables, the study participants from the case company were all from marketing team and therefore this study was conducted only from the marketing point of view, which is an apparent limitation of the study. This per se creates unilateral results to some extent due to the lack of sales team perspective. However, marketing team in the case company is in charge of the web sales, which was seen as an adequate regarding the study. Nonetheless, the presence of field sales and inside sales representatives would have presumably introduced more depth and shade of meanings to the study results.

The last limitation relates to the lack of research experience of the researcher. The study was performed as a qualitative research by using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, which all emphasise the proficiency of the researcher. Moreover, the deductions of the researcher have a major role in qualitative study, which in spite of all are always influenced by personal experiences and perceptions to some extent. (Saunders et al. 2012, 163; Stake 2010, 11.) Because of the lack of research experience, the researcher examined the chosen research strategy, data collecting and analysing methods in order to gain understanding before carrying out the study. The researcher also strived to capitalise objective working methods along with documenting research steps systematically to the best of her ability while conducting the study. Not only with the gained expertise of selected research strategy and methods, but also with objectivity and multiple years of personal experience of marketing and marketing automation, the researcher was able to achieve study results that are mostly in line with previous academic studies. Furthermore, study questions were answered and set study objectives were achieved with the findings and on this basis the study can be affirmed to be adequately reliable.

5.5 Suggestions for future research

Marketing automation is a quite new field in academic research as was mentioned in a beginning of this thesis. For that reason, there is still scarce amount of research conducted on the topic, especially from lead generation and content marketing perspective. Therefore it would be vital to continue to produce more research to generate profound understanding about the subject and to build a consistent framework. Marketing automation in general offers a fruitful ground for numerous studies due to a novelty of the research area. Several research suggestions are presented next.

This study focused on utilising marketing automation for lead generation, in other words the early stages of becoming a customer and the beginning of the sales funnel. Therefore it would be extremely constructive to research the different stages of customer life cycle that would cover capitalising marketing automation for the customer relationship management and for preventing the customer churn. Moreover, the study was conducted from a perspective of a company and thus it would be beneficial to research a customer's viewpoint as

well. Although, marketing automation in general is seen vastly beneficial also for customers, mapping out customer's perspective would enrich the overall understanding about marketing automation.

Furthermore, the research could also be renewed in the case company after they have been utilising marketing automation for a year and the way that field sales and inside sales representatives would be included in the study. Even though the study could not be repeated identically, it would still generate profound knowledge on marketing automation along with beneficial information for case company. Moreover, study could also inspect that does studied knowledge differ from the knowledge generated with the concrete experience, since the case company would then have gained tangible practice on utilising marketing automation.

Lastly, the validation is required for key theory contributions - the marketing automation concept, deficiencies in data utilisation and discrepancies between the ideal and the real-life procedures. These findings of this study have to be further investigated and validated with larger audience. First of all, more research is needed to clarify marketing automation definition. Secondly, the study finding concerning the challenges in the utilisation of data must be authenticated. Moreover, studies regarding the type of useful data to be collected need to be conducted as well, since study results revealed that not all interviewees were quite sure what sort of information they should gather and what would be beneficial for marketing automation. Therefore, research focusing data gathering aspect would be particularly valuable not only for academics but also for practitioners. Thirdly, discrepancies between the ideal and the real-life procedures have to be further investigated to verify that researcher's findings and interpretations regarding this topic were correct.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1, Interview questions

Questions translated into English

Marketing automation

1. How would you define marketing automation? What does it mean?
2. Why has marketing automation become one of the newest trends in marketing?
3. What are central functionalities of marketing automation?
4. How marketing automation differs from traditional marketing?

Benefits and challenges

5. What kind of companies would benefit from marketing automation?
6. Are there some companies that would not benefit from it?
7. How your company benefits or would benefit from marketing automation?
8. What challenges marketing automation utilisation could bring to the organization?

Utilisation of marketing automation

9. Is marketing automation a tool for company's internal processes or external processes?
10. In which stages of sales could marketing automation be utilised?
11. Is marketing automation here to stay or is it just a trend tool for today's marketing?

12. How are the companies able to utilise information, big data?

Leads and lead generation

13. How would you define lead?

14. How does your company collect leads?

15. Which department is responsible for lead generation in your company?

16. How could the lead generation be improved in your company?

Customer experience

17. What kind of benefits marketing automation provides or would provide for customers?

18. What kind of communication is or could be automatized in your company?

19. What kind of customer information is or would be beneficial to collect when considering customer communication and sales?

Marketing and sales cooperation

20. Which department is responsible or should be responsible for marketing automation in your company?

21. Does marketing automation change organization?

22. Does it change the roles of marketing and sales?