Opportunities and challenges of content marketing as a way of digital marketing communications

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Taru Hakkarainen 0405103

Supervisor: Hanna Salojärvi

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Content marketing has definitely been a trendy topic among marketing experts for the past years. For instance, Adobe and Econsultancy (2013) reported content marketing as a number one priority for marketers in 2013. Interest in the term "content marketing" has also increased intensively on Google Trends from 2011 to this day as can be seen in the figure 1 (Google Trends 2016). This is the core reason of the subject of this thesis – so many comments and writings by marketing experts have been published concerning content marketing, but the definition still remained unclear.
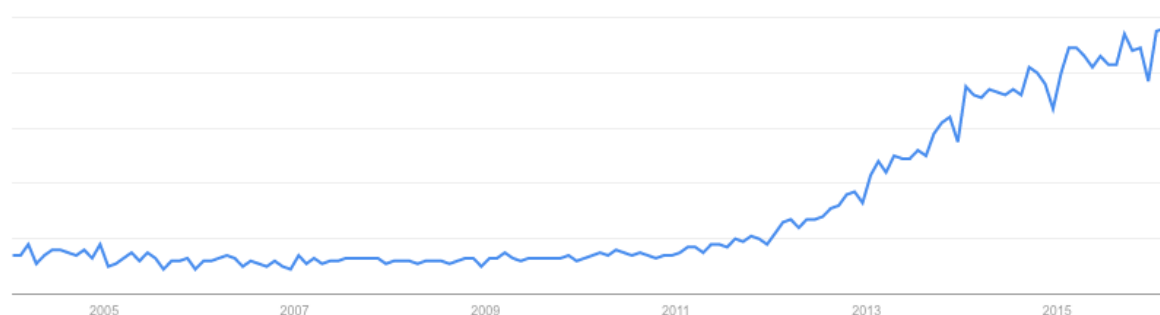
Figure 1. The relative search volume of content marketing globally on Google (Google Trends 2016)

The buzz around the term has been criticized by some specialists, because the basis of the concept is under no circumstances new. According to Pulizzi (2012) the credit of being the first company using content marketing is often given to John Deere due to its *The Furrow* magazine targeted to the farmer customers. The Furrow was first printed in 1895 and the magazine included educational content about the John Deere technology and about owning a successful business (Gardiner, 2013; Pulizzi 2012). As we all know, companies have actively used customer magazines ever since to provide relevant information that the customers want to read about and consequently strengthen the brand. A good example of this is a Finnish airline Finnair and its customer magazine Blue Wings. The magazine does promote new routes and destinations, but it also provides articles that have nothing to do with the airline

itself. The first Blue Wings was printed 1980 and the first issue included for example interview of Pehr Gyllenhammar who was the CEO of Volvo at that time (Blue Wings, 1980).

In Finland the broader perspective of content marketing is little by little getting more toehold. Both online and offline methods are utilized, but the emphasis is on digital channels. Companies use different content methods actively and continuously. It is common that content is produced spontaneously on company's own and to some extent the production is systematic and well-planned. However, measuring the results is still slightly behind. Companies operating in the B2C sector utilize social media posts, online newsletters and website news the most from all the content channels. (Maunu 2015)

Lepkowska-White et al. (2014) claim that marketers are faced with number of challenges nowadays – consumers are becoming desensitized to traditional advertisements and marketers are forced to develop more creative marketing solutions to reach the skeptical and fragmented target audiences. Consumers have the power to decide when, how and where they want to interact with advertisers. Content marketing has been proposed as a solution to the described declining effectiveness of traditional ways of marketing (Holliman & Rowley 2014). Another rather current problem for digital advertisers is the vast variety of ad blockers that consumers use in order to prevent the browser to display online advertisements. Therefore, it is becoming even more crucial to provide different kinds of content than just traditional digital advertisements in order to reach the existing or potential customer.

1.2 Research problem, objectives and limitations

The goal of this study is to find out what kind of elements of content marketing have been found useful and beneficial for companies and also on the other side what elements have been stumbling blocks and need more absorption. The concept of content marketing doesn't have a specific definition yet so this study also aims at providing one. Since the topic hasn't been researched much it is also important to find out what makes the subject so special and different and thus examine if it should be researched more closely.

This thesis has a one main research problem and two supportive sub problems. The main research problem is:

- What are the opportunities and challenges of content marketing as a way of digital marketing communication?

The main research problem is divided into two sub problems. They support the main problem and help to understand the overall topic more comprehensively. The sub problems are:

- What is content marketing?
- What are the characteristics of content marketing that separates it from other types of marketing communications?

This study is limited to the Finnish B2C context and it is conducted from the company perspective. The company perspective in this case includes both individual companies as well as marketing agencies that implement content marketing for other companies.

1.3 Literature review

Digitalization has been a drastic change for the marketing landscape and has naturally been researched from quite many perspectives. Rowley (2001) was one of the first ones to adapt marketing communications to the Internet environment. The impact of digitalization to marketing communications in general has been studied by for example Mulhern (2009) and Keller (2009). The means of digital marketing communications have been researched on a wide scale. For example, social media advertising (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008; Tucker, 2014), e-mail marketing (Ansari & Mela, 2003; Merisavo & Raulas, 2004; Chittenden & Rettie, 2003), mobile marketing (Scharl, Dickinger & Murphy, 2005; Tsang, Ho & Liang, 2004) and display advertising (Hoban & Bucklin, 2015; Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011; Cho & Cheon, 2004; Danaher & Mullarkey, 2003) have been studied from several perspectives. Also several books (Belch & Belch, 2015; Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012) have been written about marketing communications in a digital environment.

The definition and conceptualization of content marketing happened just some years ago and thus it has been conspicuously absent in academia. Some studies have been conducted on the concept of "digital content marketing" (Koiso-Kanttila, 2004; Rowley, 2008), but the focus of these studies is on marketing products that are completely digital so the topic name is slightly misleading. A study by Holliman & Rowley (2014) is the first one conducted on content

marketing and it is in B2B marketing context. The study is based on 15 interviews with key informants involved in B2B content marketing in the USA, UK and France in five industry sectors. Even though the context is different compared to this study the article provides important insights on digital content marketing and thus can be used to some extent in this study.

As already mentioned, the core of content marketing is not new even though the term is rather recent. By sectioning content marketing into narrower parts it is possible to find many studies that help to understand the concept. Corporate blogging as a new way of marketing has been studied by Singh, Veron-Jackson & Cullinane (2008) and blogs have also been included in some social media studies (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011). Many studies have also been conducted about blogs as a PR channel (Fieseler, Fleck, & Meckel, 2010; Schultz, Utz, & Göritz, 2011).

Rosen & Purinton (2004) have studied website content design to find key characteristics that increase the revisit possibility of customers. When it comes to website content it's also essential to keep search engine optimization (SEO) in mind. Zhang & Dimitroff (2005) were the first ones researching how the webpage content characteristics effect on the search engine results. Afterwards, Berman & Katona (2013) have studied the economic incentive of SEO activities as well as the search engine rankings after investing in SEO.

Storytelling as a way of branding has been present in both books and academic journals. The most used book in this area is by Fog, Budtz, Munch and Blanchette (2010) and it gives an extremely broad view on how storytelling can be utilized in branding purposes. Also Herskovich & Crystal (2010) have studied how to connect with the customer on emotional level by means of effective storytelling. Content co-creation process with customers hasn't been researched but user-generated content (UGC) has been studied by for example Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson (2012).

1.4 Theoretical framework

The two main themes in this thesis are digital marketing communications and content marketing. Marketing communications consists of direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotion, advertising and public relations. Content marketing is a form of marketing communications, but can't be counted as any of the mentioned dimensions and thus is presented as a separate dimension. The goal of direct marketing, personal selling, sales promotion and advertising is mostly increasing the sales on a short-term sight. Advertising also aims at creating a specific brand image and that makes it similar to public relations and content marketing. Content marketing and public relations also aim at customer engagement in a long term perspective. The figure 2 below shows the theoretical framework of this study and this framework is the used as the basis of both theoretical and empirical parts. The framework is plain and excludes many smaller details, but it shows the big picture about this thesis.
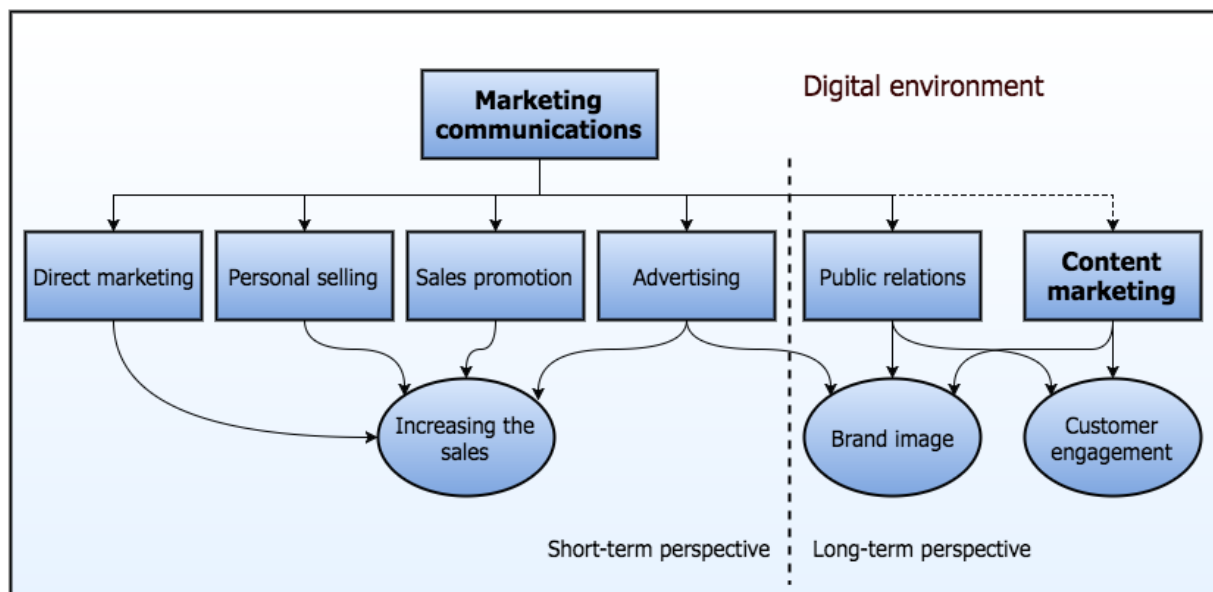

Figure 2. Theoretical framework

1.5 Research methodology

The empirical part of this thesis is implemented by using qualitative research. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world into a series of representations, including interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos

to the self. Qualitative researchers attempt to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln 2011, 3-4)

According to Metsämuuronen (2006, 88) the central research methods used in qualitative research are observation, text analysis, interview and transcription. In this thesis the method of research is interview which means asking open questions from chosen individuals or groups that can give further information about the subject and how this phenomenon appears in their surroundings. The goal of interviewing in general is to find out what someone is having in his or her mind (Eskola & Suoranta 2003, 85).

There are different ways to categorize interviews. Eskola & Suoranta (2003, 86) propose that interviews should be classified into four types: structured interview, semi-structured interview, theme interview and open interview. In structured interview all interviewees are asked the same questions and limited answer options are offered. Semi-structured interview has the same features as structured interview, but the interviewee can answer in his or her own words. In theme interview there are themes and subject matters that are designated beforehand, but otherwise the structure is fickle. Open interview is like a normal discussion where interviewer and interviewee discuss about a subject, but the themes vary among interviewees. (Eskola & Suoranta 2003, 86)

The empirical part of this study is executed as semi-structured interview where the experts of the field answered to fixed questions in their own words. The interviews took place in April 2016 and they were recorded and afterwards transferred into written form in order to better analyze and compare the answers. The two interviewees are further introduced in the beginning of the empirical part of this study.

1.6 Structure of the study

This study is divided into theoretical part and empirical part. The theoretical part finds out what is already known about digital marketing communications and content marketing. Digital marketing communications is discussed in the chapter two and content marketing in chapter three. Chapter three also aims at finding features that separate content marketing from other types of marketing communications.

Empirical part is discussed in chapter four and it sums up the issues that rose up in the interviews. The chapter follows logically the order of the theory part and provides insights on how the theory is applicable to the real life situations. After empirical part the conclusions are drawn and the study is summarized in the chapter five.

2 DIGITAL MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS

This chapter aims at giving an overview of marketing communications in a digital environment. At first, marketing communications is defined and explained. After that, digital marketing communication channels are introduced. A thorough evaluation of marketing communications is important so the distinction can be made between content marketing and other dimensions of content marketing.

2.1 Defining marketing communications

Arens, Weigold & Arens (2013, 26) define marketing communications as "all the planned messages that companies and organizations create and disseminate to support their marketing objectives". Keller (2001) instead defines marketing communications as "the means by which firms attempt to inform, persuade, incite, and remind consumers – directly or indirectly – about the brands they sell". Marketing communications is often known as *the promotion* part in the marketing mix which is one of the most well-known marketing frameworks including 4 P's – product, price, place and promotion (Constantinides, 2006).

When discussing marketing communications, the dominant approach today is integrated marketing communications (IMC). Belch & Belch (2015) describe IMC as a broader view on planning the promotional activities requiring a total marketing communications strategy that involves all ways that the company communicates with its customers even if it wasn't seen as promotion. According to Keller (2009) integrating marketing communications means mixing up different promotion options to achieve the desired awareness and image in the minds of consumers. The goal of IMC is consistency – the brand image should be the same no matter what the communications channel is.

Marketing communication is often assimilated to advertising, but that is only one tool that is used to communicate with potential and existing customers. Belch and Belch (2015, 17) suggest that besides advertising the promotional mix includes direct marketing, digital marketing, sales promotion, public relations and personal selling. Direct marketing means approaching chosen prospects directly for example via telephone or e-mail. Digital marketing includes all the marketing communications that happens online and is often interactive. Sales

promotion includes the activities that aim at boosting the sales. Public relations mean communication between the corporate and its stakeholders. Personal selling happens when sales force is selling the product or the service for the customer at the point of purchase.

The original promotional mix hasn't included the digital aspect, but also Mangold & Faulds (2009) argue that social media should be added to the mix, because they have significantly changed the way of communication with customers. However, when looking at the marketing environment today we can see that all of the dimensions of the original promotional mix are ran both online and offline at least in some way. That is the reason why a remodeled version of the digital promotional mix is suggested in this thesis as seen in the figure 3. The figure shows examples of features in every dimension that are fulfilled online and these features are further introduced in the section 2.2 when doing through the digital channels.
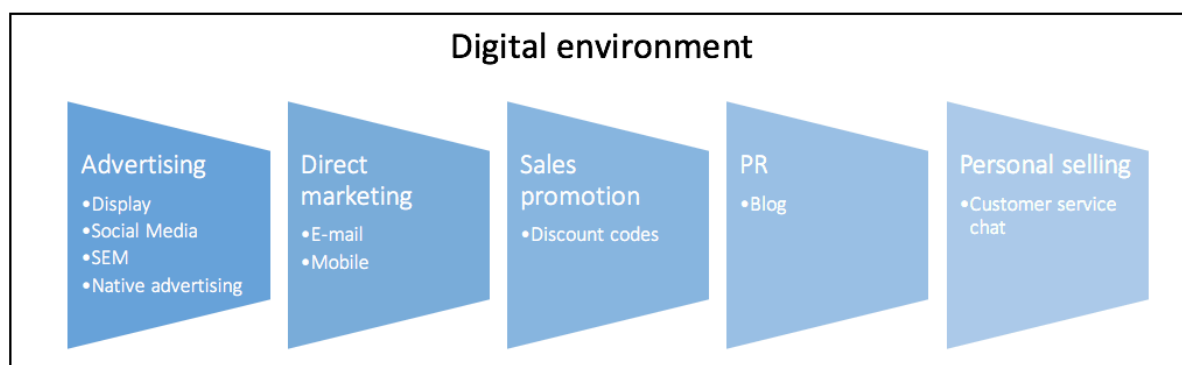
Figure 3. Digital promotional mix (adapted from Belch and Belch, 2015, 17)

Push-pull theory is often used in the context of logistics and supply chain management, but it is also applicable to marketing: push marketing is mostly advertising and direct selling that pushes the message to consumers whereas pull marketing means providing relevant information that customers are already actively seeking. Chaffey & Smith (2013) state that the web is a pull marketing environment in which customers are led to company's websites through search engines and social media. This doesn't mean though that there wouldn't be any push marketing online. Banners and online television advertisements are good examples that push marketing still exists in online channels as well.

According to Keller (2001) the marketing message can provide details about the product or forget about the product and develop specific brand image by pointing out other issues. He

continues that it can be about telling consumers who uses the product, why it is used, where and when it is used or then about what the company and brand stand for. The importance of marketing communications lies in standing out from the competitors by helping customers appreciate the company's competitive advantage. (Keller, 2001)

Budíková (2014) states that we currently live in turbulent times when companies are shifting from the mass communication model towards more personal, mobile and social conversations based marketing which aims at long-lasting partnerships between brands and customers. She continues that the quality of followers or fans is becoming more important than the quantity – the most wanted customers are engaged, passionate and influential brand ambassadors.

2.2 Digital channels and means

In the previous section this thesis presented the digital promotional mix (figure 3) which gave examples of the means to reach customers in the digital environment. These channels and means are now explained in light of the existing academic literature.

2.2.1 Advertising

Display advertising includes advertisements on websites that are often banners in the form of picture, video or audio (Roy 2015). There has been lots of discussion about the effectiveness of display advertising (Hoban & Bucklin, 2015; Goldfarb & Tucker, 2011) and there are plenty of studies conducted about the subject. Chatterjee et al. (2003) state that clicking banner advertisement is rare. This statement can be confirmed, because in Finland the overall click through rate (CTR) is at the moment 0,10 % and this means that one per thousand viewers actually clicks the advertisement (Rich Media Gallery 2016).

Even though CTR is generally low display advertising still drives lots of traffic to the websites, because the total audience that gets exposed is large. The low CTR comes from the "*ad avoidance*" phenomenon that has been on the loose for years (Cho & Cheon, 2004). Cho & Cheon (2004) have found that this is a result of the amount of advertisements that the viewers see constantly – caricatured the more advertisements there are on the web pages the less they care about them. Danaher & Mullarkey (2003) found that the longer the person is browsing on the site the more effect the advertisement has on him or her. They also found that

people that are completing a specific task or mission on the page are less likely to get exposed to the advertisement compared to the people that are just browsing.

Social media has definitely brought new dimension to marketing communications. For a long time, IMC has been considered as one-way communication where the companies have a high degree of control. This control possession is something that has changed because of social media. Social media are also referred as consumer-generated media since most of the content has been created by consumers. (Mangold & Faulds, 2009) Some social media channels can be involved in the activities of all the promotional mix dimensions, but they are now introduced under the dimension they are the most suitable for.

From advertising viewpoint, the most important social media channels are the ones that Constantinides & Fountain (2008) call social networks and content communities. Platforms in both of these categories enable users to create their personal websites to share personal information and to communicate. Content communities have taken the content sharing to a slightly deeper level and in those platforms the users share only specific type of content, for example videos on YouTube and photos on Instagram whereas Facebook includes it all. (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008)

Social media platforms hold an enormous amount of personal data of the users. This data is used thoroughly to target the advertisements to the specific group. Tucker (2014) researched how the perception of control that the user has over his or her personal information affects how likely the user is going to click on an advertisement that is on the social networking site. The research was conducted on Facebook and it shows that by giving users a clear control on their privacy their attitude towards the targeted advertisements become more positive.

One form of online advertising is search engine marketing (SEM). SEM means that the company pays a search engine to be displayed in the beginning of the search results among the organic (non-paid) search results. Search engines have figured that these are advertisements that don't irritate people and that the consumers find useful. (Ghose & Yang, 2009) Sen (2005) recognizes four kinds of activities that are often seen as SEM activities: keyword-related banner advertisements, paid submission for regular updates, search engine optimization (SEO) and paid placements.

Search engine banner advertisements have not been found as effective as organic search results and thus the focus has moved to the result listing and how to be on the first page (Sen, 2005). The first page of the search results is a goldmine, or in other words a necessity, for marketers since only 10 % of the people actually proceed to the second page (Sharp 2014). That's why there's usually a need for SEO or/and paid placements. SEO is further discussed in the third chapter, but paid placements are absolutely part of online advertising. When a company buys a placement on the result page it gets a spot on the sponsored section which for example on Google is in the beginning or on the side (Sen, 2005). Paid placements are not found as credible as organic listings (Sharp 2014), but they still dive lots of traffic to the website if they are shown enough.

Sponsored search results are an example of native advertising. Native advertising is a type of advertising that doesn't interrupt the normal browsing experience. (Sherbin 2013) Native advertising is created in co-operation with the publisher and the advertiser and the goal is that the advertisement would seem like a normal content for that medium and hereby wouldn't be considered as an advertisement by the consumers. Sponsored content needs to have a note that lets the customer know that this content is an advertisement. (Niipola 2015) Besides on search engines, native advertising is common for example on social media, online news sites and personal blogs. One example of a successful native advertisement appears on The New York Times by Netflix as it promotes its series Orange is the New Black. The article tells about female prisons just as in the series although the series isn't even mentioned in the text. There is just the logo of Netflix and the series right above the article. (Deziel 2014)

2.2.2 Direct marketing

E-mail marketing has become a widely used way of mass-customization. E-mails aim at building traffic to the website by providing a short summary about the content and a link to the website where more information can be found. The primary goal in e-mail marketing is as high CTR as possible. To reach the goal it's important to pick up relevant content for the customer, to write alluring summary text and to design appealing layout for the e-mail letter. (Ansari & Mela, 2003)

Merisavo & Raulas (2004) found out that sending regular newsletters to the customers has positive effect on brand loyalty and brand attitudes. They continue that more loyal customers appreciate versatile content including news, competitions, trends, events and so on whereas

less loyal customers mostly appreciate sales offers. Chittenden & Rettie (2003) emphasize the importance of obtaining the customer's permission to e-mail marketing. Their research shows that higher response rates are often gained by focusing on the subject line, e-mail length, incentive and number of images.

Another channel to directly reach the customer is through mobile phone. Mobile phone marketing enables reaching customer regarding of the time or place and thus is convenient for marketers. Short message services (SMS) is the most used form of mobile marketing. As in e-mail marketing, also in mobile marketing it's crucial to ask the consumer's permission. (Scharl et al., 2005) According to Tsang et al. (2004) consumers in general have negative attitude towards mobile advertising unless they have given their permission for that. They state that there is a correlation between the attitude and behavior and thus mobile marketing shouldn't be done without permission.

The information about mobile marketing in academia is somewhat outdated, because SMS messaging has radically decreased after the rise of other internet-based messaging services such as WhatsApp. For example, nowadays more messages are sent over WhatsApp than SMS and this has been predicted to be ending of the story of SMS (Sparkes 2015). WhatsApp hasn't been opened for advertisers yet, but the platform might be opening up for some companies later in 2016, but not for advertising purposes (Ghosh 2016). This change would enable for example banks and airlines to communicate with their customers.

2.2.3 Public relations

Blogs have gained interest in the recent years for both corporates and individual people as a tool to make their voice heard. Blog is a type of website that has date-stamped entries, usually called posts, that appear in reversed chronological order in the home page. Even though the medium is essentially one-way communication it provides a chance for interaction in the form of comment box after every post. According to Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) blogs are often used by companies to improve transparency and to update the stakeholders on something the company finds important. This is why blog is often used as a PR channel for the company.

Public relations and corporate social responsibility (CSR) have a lot in common (Clark, 2000). Fieseler et al. (2010) have studied corporate blogs as a CSR communication platform. They emphasize the engagement potential of blogs due to the commenting possibility. They

state that in general blogs don't reach as large audience as mass-media platforms, but it reaches slightly smaller group of active and well-informed consumers that often are considered as opinion leaders and early adopters and thus are a great target for marketers.

One part of public relations is communication in a time of crisis. Schultz et al. (2011) have studied how the communications medium affect the customer reaction in crisis communications. They found that the message itself doesn't effect on the customer reactions that much, but the medium does – Twitter was found to be a better channel than blogs or newspapers.

2.2.4 Sales promotion & personal selling

Many sales promotion activities are still carried out in traditional media – discount coupons that are delivered by mail, TV-commercials that make people stand in line to get the special product on a special price. However, some activities have been shifted to online channels. Online sales promotion is especially important for the growing field of e-commerce. In 2014 e-commerce growth in Finland was 14,2 % (Ecommerce Europe 2016) which is a remarkable growth during rough economic times.

Digitalization has transformed also the traditional discount coupons to an online form where customers are asked at the end of the online shopping checkout process if the customer has a promotion code before the system calculates the final price. According to a study by Oliver & Shor (2003) a customer sometimes abandons the shopping cart and leaves the site if he or she doesn't have a promotion code when it's being asked. They state that if the customers don't have a code thet might feel that they are not special and might start wondering who is special then. Their study suggests that people that don't have a code feel themselves treated less fair and feel less satisfied and don't necessarily complete their purchase.

Besides price promotion, sales can be boosted for example by promoting the trust. Online retailers often are faced with challenges, because consumers don't trust the sellers online (Salam, Iyer, Palvia & Singh, 2005). To help consumers to know the trustworthy retailers from imposters there are several trust seals that online retailers can achieve. Hu, Lin & Zhang (2002) have found that trust-promoting seals that are related to insurance or guarantee, security and reliability significantly influence consumer's decision to buy from the vendor. Therefore, sales can also be boosted by promoting the trust of the retailer.

Personal selling is something that wouldn't necessarily be thought to happen online, especially on the B2C sector. This has been changed during last years because of customer service chats. The idea of customer service chat is that the customer can ask help from an expert during the purchase process on a chat when shopping online. Just like in-store some companies use more aggressive selling approach when it comes to customer service – sometimes the chat icon is there so the customer can click it if he or she wants, but sometimes it is automated that the customer service advisor asks the customer right away if he or she needs help.

3 CONTENT MARKETING

This chapter will give a comprehensive answer to the question "what is content marketing?". At first it is necessary to define content marketing and describe the objectives. Then the study moves on to content creation and channel selection. Channels are mirrored to other means of digital marketing communications to point out similarities and differences.

3.1 Defining content marketing

According to Pulizzi (2012) "content marketing is the creation of valuable, relevant and compelling content by the brand itself on a consistent basis". According to Steimle (2014) the attribute that separates content marketing from other types of advertising or marketing is the value that it creates to the customer. Thus a traditional advertisement could also be considered content marketing if only the customer finds it valuable which makes the separation of advertising and content marketing difficult.

Pull marketing was already mentioned in the second chapter and it also defines content marketing rather well. Holliman & Rowley (2014) state that in pull marketing companies are trying to reach consumers who are already seeking information, advice, product or service. Halligan & Shah (2011) discuss the similar phenomenon as *inbound marketing* and the term is commonly assimilated to content marketing. They state that inbound marketing enables the situation where customers and potential customers actively seek out brands that provide engaging and valuable content that resonate their needs. According to Content Marketing Institute inbound marketing is only part of content marketing (CMI 2011). Inbound marketing focuses on creating traffic to wanted destination online whereas content marketing includes also offline channels to reach marketing objectives. However, this thesis focuses on content marketing online so the distinction is not as relevant in this case.

Pulizzi (2012) argues that there are three barriers that used to be on the way of successful content marketing and that are now gone which has resulted in the takeoff of content marketing. The first barrier has been acceptance: nowadays consumers trust and engage in content that is published by other sources than journals and companies are viewed as a credible source of relevant information. The second barrier has been talent: talented writers

and creators are shifting from media houses to different brands since it's not seen harmful for their profession anymore. The third barrier has been technology: the improved technology has enabled a situation in which anyone can publish content on the web for little monetary investment. (Pulizzi, 2012)

One feature that separates content marketing for many other types of marketing communications is in the publishing medium. Content marketing focuses on owning the publishing medium instead of renting room from others' (CMIb 2016). The different categories of media are presented in the figure 4. Owned media includes for example web sites, blogs, mobile apps and social presence and this is the category that content marketing focuses on.

ADVERTISING
Paid search
Display ads
Affiliate marketing
Digital signage

Atomization of content into ads

Paid placements

Paid media

DIGITAL PROPERTIES
Web site(s)
Blogs
Mobile apps
Social presence

Owned media   Earned media

PARTNER NETWORKS
Publisher editorial
Influencer outreach
Word of mouth
Social networks

Atomization of conversations through shared APIs and social widgets

Figure 4. Categories of media: paid owned and earned (Chaffey & Smith, 2008, 34)

Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 432) state that the weakness of content marketing is that marketers have less control on the results compared to traditional marketing where the media channel and target group can usually be indeed carefully planned. As mentioned in the previous chapter, this lack of control occurs also on social media marketing, but in a slightly different way. When it comes to social media, companies can't administrate the conversation,

because everyone can say what they want whereas the lack of control in content marketing occurs more in the target audience since companies can't properly decide who sees the content.

3.2 The goals of content marketing

Rose & Pulizzi (2011) identify the key objectives for content marketing: brand awareness, lead conversation, customer conversion, customer service, customer upsell and passionate subscribers. Hall (2013) adds also educating customers and improving corporate image as a recruiter to the list. Some of these objectives don't differ much from the objectives of other means of marketing communications, but the weight is different – as many forms of marketing communications aim distinctly at increasing the sales in a short-term sight content marketing focuses on other features that hopefully result in great sales numbers and satisfied and long-lasting customer relationships.

The key to passionate subscribers is customer engagement. Bowden (2009) defines engagement as "a psychological process that models the underlying mechanisms by which customer loyalty forms for new customers and the mechanisms by which loyalty may be maintained for repeat purchase customers". According to Holliman & Rowley (2014) content marketing incites brands for a customer-centric actions and engenders higher levels of trust from the people that seek it out. Building trust and other positive images in consumers' minds result in desirable situation in customer engagement for both new and existing customers.

Van Doorn et al. (2010) state that the consequence of positive customer engagement for customer is that he or she will engage more frequently and more intensively in customer engagement behaviors (such as word-of-mouth or blogging) and it might help customers to shape and reinforce their social identity. They continue that for the firm, customer engagement results in financials and reputation among customers and naturally positive engagement strengthens these factors whereas negative engagement weakens.

3.3 Content creation

Content creation is the key component in content marketing and understanding how content can be used in engaging customers is central to the development of an effective content marketing strategy (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Davis (2012, 23) argues that the core of content creation is what the audience wants and needs – there are times when the content doesn't even have much to do with the products that the company sells. An example of this could be Elisa, a Finnish telecommunication, ICT and online service company, and its content hub elisa.net. There are of course product and service related articles, but an example of an article that has nothing to do with the company's products and services could be an article where a famous Finnish psychotherapist Maaret Kallio tells how to get rid of perfectionism (Nykänen 2016). There is no relation between the topic and Elisa's offering, but that is something their customers want to read.

Holliman & Rowley (2014) suggest that successful content includes both static content forming web pages and dynamic rich media content, such as videos, podcasts, user-generated content and interactive product selectors. Budíková (2014) also suggests that digital marketing strategies will increasingly focus on strengthening the brand via using multiple formats, for example video, micro video, blogs, white papers, studies, articles, webinars, e-books, live presentations and e-mail newsletters.

One way of creating fascinating content is telling stories. Woodside (2010) argues that the best way to persuade someone is to tell a compelling story. Mangold & Faulds (2009) emphasize the importance of good stories in marketing communications, because they create vivid memories that are likely to be repeated in both social media and traditional word-of-mouth. Stories affect people on emotional level and they make people come back for more (Olenski 2015). Companies don't have to create a fictitious story since often they have plenty of them already. Genuine stories from employees, the CEO, the founder, opinion leaders, partners and customers or stories about the company's milestones or the product itself are often stronger and more credible from the consumers' standpoint. (Fog et al., 2010, 105-106)

During recent years, consumers have increased their influence and credibility as content creators by creating showpieces in the online world through for example podcasts, blogs,

videos, social networks, games, mashups and user reviews. It is no wonder then, that customers have already been involved in content creation and Budíková (2014) predicts that in order to create more individual brand relationships companies will increase co-creation of content with customers. User-generated content (UGC) is excellent for companies for many reasons. The cost of UGC creation is low, the ideas stem of a vast pool of talent, it generates customers into brand advocates and since the content is created by "one of us" it is more influential than traditional promotion. (Liu-Thompkins & Rogerson, 2012)

3.4 Content marketing channels

Multi-channel marketing communication has been emphasized in this thesis and it is no surprise that also content marketing is done in different channels. Different channels often have different roles in the content marketing strategy and multi-channel presence create stability in the turbulent digital world where one channel rises and other falls in a matter of months (CMIa, 2016).

Website is often the channel that is considered as the main hub for content marketing. According to Rosen & Purinton (2004) making the right content decisions on company's website are critical to effective web design. They found that minimalistic approach with eye-catching graphics in the design of the home page makes the web surfer stay on the website for longer. They highlight that website shouldn't be information overload, but it should consist all the information that the consumer wants to know in a suitable way.

Creating content is useless unless the content is found by the public. If the content is on the company's website the company should maximize the chances that the content would be found. SEO was mentioned earlier in the second chapter and it is an important part of content marketing. While SEM is more about paid placements SEO is about the organic ranking. Since customers trust more the organic results than sponsored links (Sharp 2014) it is crucial that the website content is optimized for this. According to Berman & Katona (2013) there are two ways of doing SEO: *white hat SEO* means improving the website content for real and *black hat SEO* means improving the site ranking by tricks that manipulate the search engine ranking process. In content marketing the goal is customer satisfaction and relevant content it is necessary to use the white hat SEO. Using black hat SEO can also be risky since if these

activities get caught by the search engine the website might get banned (Malaga, 2008) and that would be quite tragic event for most of the companies.

Blogs were introduced in the second chapter in the public relations section. Blogs are also an important channel for content marketers. Singh et al. (2008) state that blogs are more authentic, because the message can be connected to a specific person which in this case is the writer. They also mention that blog is an effective platform when it comes to sharing knowledge and experiences with customers. Sharing knowledge and educating customers is one of the objectives of content marketing and this makes blog a great channel to publish content. Blog is also an easy way to optimize the website for great search engine results since it can include a vast amount of keywords without making the website look too complex just like Rosen & Purinton (2004) stated earlier in this section.

Probably one of the youngest forms of content marketing are podcasts, or at least they haven't yet been utilized much in Finland. Podcast is a media file that is in the form of audio or video and is distributed online and listened on computers or handheld devices. (Jham, Duraes, Strassler & Sensi, 2008) Podcasts have been studied in an educational context, but not as a commercial tool. Jakso.fi is a website that lists all the Finnish podcasts and the list isn't long although it is growing all the time. Not many of the podcasts listed are commercial so this is a form of content marketing that most likely will grow with large numbers during next years. A Finnish oil company Neste launched its own podcast "Kaikille teille" early in 2016 and the podcast consists of stories on the road read by famous Finnish people that spend lots of time on the road (Neste 2016).

As mobile based marketing increases companies have found a new way to engage their customers – mobile phone applications, mostly known as "apps". Companies have developed branded apps to support their brand message and to benefit their customers. Bellman, Potter, Treleaven-Hassard, Robinson & Varan (2011) found out that using branded apps has a convincing impact and it increases interest in the brand. Results show that the product category makes no difference, but the content of the app does – the use of informational and user-centered apps shifts purchase intention by encouraging to personal connections with the brand whereas game-like apps focus attention on the phone instead of the content and thus don't necessarily bring wanted results. In direct mobile marketing the marketing message is

pushed to the consumer, but apps make the consumer voluntarily download the content and become influenced by the brand.

Social media are used both as a content platform as well as promoting the content that is elsewhere. Content marketing and e-mail newsletters gain mutual benefits from each other since e-mail newsletters are a good way to spread the content to the customers and content marketing gives relevant and versatile building blocks for the newsletters. In other words, content marketing utilizes advertising and direct marketing tactics to build traffic to the hub.

Even though the focus in content marketing is in owning the content platforms there is no reason why for example product use tutorials on YouTube wouldn't be considered as content marketing. For example, a Finnish cosmetics brand Lumene uses YouTube as a video platform to tell its customers about the products and to provide tutorials on different make-up looks and this is a great example of educational content (YouTube, 2016).

In all chosen media channels it is crucial that the content is friendly for all screen types (PC, tablet, mobile). According to Budíková (2014) mobile responsive design for content will become a necessity in the near future. This is no surprise since in 2015 Google announced that more Google searches take place on mobile devices than on computers in 10 countries including the US and Japan (Google Inside AdWords 2015). If the website is not mobile-friendly the company might miss a great share of its website visitors.

3.5 Measuring and analytics

The Internet differs from other marketing media in many ways. One of the major differences is related to the measurement and analytics – the consumer reactions can easily be tracked and modeled (Chatterjee, Hoffman & Novak, 2003). Deshpande (2014) states that there are no unanimous guidelines on how content marketing should be measured. The framework includes performance metrics that are consumption, retention, sharing, engagement, marketing pipeline impact and sales pipeline impact and operations metrics that are related to production and cost. Digital Marketing Institute (2016) also suggest measuring consumption and engagement, but it also adds conversation metrics. Saleh (2016) suggests a simple framework of three phases: traffic generation, engagement and conversion.

All the mentioned frameworks naturally focus on the similar features and include some same metrics, but because of the simplicity this thesis follows the framework by Saleh (2016) that is illustrated in the figure 5 below. The framework is based on the content life cycle – at the beginning of the content life cycle there aren't any relevant traffic numbers to mirror the results so it's important to focus on the traffic generation and later on focus on engagement metrics and finally also conversion.

Figure 5. Framework for measuring content success (Saleh 2016)

The step one is traffic generation since before measuring engagement and conversion it's crucial to get the people to the site. Saleh (2016) states that the most important metrics in traffic generation are unique visitors, page views, total backlinks and the source of traffic. Naturally, the larger the number of unique visitors is the better it is for the company and especially in the beginning this is the most important metric. The number of page views is something that Saleh (2016) recommends to track, but not to make heavy decisions based on it, because it is affected by many things and might be misleading. Many search engines provide the possibility to report all the websites that link to a given website and these are called backlinks (Thelwall, 2001). Backlinks are closely related to SEO and high number of backlinks affect the search engine results in a positive way (Saleh 2016). Source of traffic is important to know to discover the audience characteristics and preferences in different channels so the content can be marketed effectively.

After leading consumers successfully to the content it's time to measure how they engage to it. The goal is to change the visitors into readers that want to read or view the company's content on a regular basis. Some of the engagement metrics are bounce rate, comparing new and returning visitors, time spent on a website, shares and comments. (Saleh 2016) Bounce rate is the percentage of single-page session meaning that the visitor leaves the website right from the home page without further exploration (Google Analytics, 2016). High bounce rate

is naturally bad for the company and should result in thorough evaluation of the website to make it more appealing. A high number of returning visitors is a good sign meaning that the visitors find the content relevant and beneficial. If the visitors spend long time on the website the content can be considered good. Saleh (2016) adds that evaluating the time spent on each content can help to find the most successful types.

In Holliman & Rowley's study (2014) the most suggested criteria for content creation was *shareability* – companies want their audience to share the content so it becomes viral. Therefore, the number of shares is often a good indicator of the success. Consumers' motivation to share online content has been studied by Ho & Dempsey (2010) and they recognize four potential motivations: the need for belonging to a group, the need to be individualistic, the need to be altruistic and the need for personal growth. Their study reveals that those consumers that are more individualistic and/or altruistic forward content more easily. Sharing means that the customer has been moved in some emotional level and so does commenting. Saleh (2016) mentions that commenting is even a much larger act of engagement than a share or a like. He suggests that visitors should be encouraged to share their experiences about the topic and thus it's possible to open up an open discussion.

The last phase includes metrics for figuring out how well the consumers that are viewing the website are turned into customers. Saleh (2016) lists four metrics for the last phase: opt-in rates, CTR, number of leads and ROI. Opt-in form can be for example a notification on the website asking the visitor's e-mail address so the customer will get e-mail updates concerning new and interesting content. For example, a Finnish workout community and medium Tikis shares content on its website about fitness, healthy lifestyle and motivation and once a visitor moves on from the home page there comes a notification that says "Join the Tikis circle for free – the latest tips, discounts and overall better feeling on your e-mail once a week?" asking for the visitor's first name, last name and e-mail address (Tikis 2016). Opt-in rate for Tikis would thus be the percentage of the visitors that join the e-mail list.

CTR was introduced on the display advertising part earlier in this thesis and it is also used as a content marketing metric. Often content has a hyperlink that can also be called *call to action* that says for example "buy" or "read more". It's important to follow how many viewers found the content interesting enough to click the link to estimate the content quality. Number of sales leads is important to track the conversion and also the quality of the leads (Saleh 2016).

The last metric, ROI, is one of the most important ones, but difficult to measure. There is no universal way of measuring ROI for content marketing since all the situations are rather unique. However, some examples that have been presented by content marketing experts are now introduced. Severson (2015) presents a simple way to calculate content marketing ROI: calculating the organic traffic over a time period and calculating the cost that specific amount of traffic would cost by search engine marketing. He adds that this is a very simplified way of measurement that doesn't take any other features into consideration, for example the increase of social referrals and engagement, higher conversion rates and so on.

Hoffman (2010) has studied measuring ROI on social media marketing and she suggests that the traditional thinking should be turned upside down: besides calculating the company's monetary marketing investment and compared it to the sales revenues companies should also calculate how much investment it is from a customer to visit the content, to engage and what does the customer get from this investment.

4 THE RESULTS OF THE EMPIRICAL STUDY

This chapter analyzes and discusses the results of the empirical study. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the empirical part was conducted by interviewing two persons that work closely in the field of digital content marketing. At first in this chapter, the interviewees and their companies are briefly introduced and then the topics that rose up in the interviews are discussed in their own sections. The interview questions were set to follow the theoretical part quite precisely and thus the structure is well in line with the rest of the thesis.

4.1 The background of the interviewees

The first interviewee is a content producer at a marketing agency and she brings a slightly broader visual angle on content marketing in companies in general since she naturally works with lots of clients from many different industries. She has been working for the current agency for 7 months and has altogether over 16 years of experience in marketing and especially storytelling. At the moment she specializes in social media and blogging and those keep her days busy in the field of inbound marketing.

The second interviewee is a digital marketing specialist at a big international corporation operating in the chemical engineering industry. The corporation has multiple strong brands and it is very active online. The second interviewee brings more detailed insight on how one specific company organizes its content marketing activities. She has been working for the company for 1,5 years and she is responsible for all digital marketing activities for the Finnish B2C customers. Before the current company she has also worked in similar kind of work tasks for other Finnish multinational giants.

4.2 The role of digital marketing communications

Both of the interviewees recognize the great increase in the focus of digital marketing communications. This transition is led by customers and because a large part of customers is shifting to web also companies are putting their resources to digital channels.

"The role of digital marketing communications is large in our company since our customers have a strong desire to influence in digital channels. The role is large when it comes to both resource allocation and actions."

The increasing role of digital channels has not replaced traditional ones when it comes to marketing communications. Both of the interviewees see marketing communications as a combination of both ways and that they can both benefit each other. The first interviewee comments that companies in Finland have still a lot of work to do when it comes to utilizing digital channels. She sees that the companies that see a competitive advantage in digitalization have gone there headlong and the ones that still are doing well with traditional ways should make a change before it's too late. The change calls for changes in general attitudes and changes in production.

"I haven't faced a situation yet where a company would have completely transferred into digital marketing communications. It is always a combination of both digital and traditional."

"We have of course not abandoned traditional marketing since our target group is very large. As a market leader we need to use a multi-channel way to reach our target group."

4.3 Definition of content marketing

As we found in the part 3.1 the academia still lacks an unambiguous definition of content marketing. Both interviewees agree that content marketing is difficult to define because of its diverse features and the viewpoint can easily become too large. There are however several features that both of them mention and that gives a strong base in defining what content marketing really is. Both agree that content marketing parts from advertising when the content that the company provides is so interesting that customers or potential customers want to hear more.

"Content marketing can be considered as even a strategic program in a company that creates and shares interesting content for customers. Content that they want to hear and with help of that they can be engaged to the brand and create value for the company."

Other goals of content marketing that the interviewees mention are pushing customers forward in the path of purchase and being even more flexible and better when it comes to customer service and bringing the company closer to the human level. Content marketing should genuinely help and benefit customer. Both interviewees agree to the content marketing literature when it comes to storytelling – it is a crucial part of content marketing.

As discussed in the chapter three, marketing departments are facing a transition to acting like publishers. This phenomenon was also noted by the first interviewee as she said that many journalists are shifting from media houses to communications or advertising agencies. In her opinion companies should think and act very media-alike – marketing plan should resemble publishing calendar and people working amongst content marketing should have discipline.

"Content marketing has been benchmarked from the media world and it is ironic that at the moment media world is suffering and content marketing is blossoming."

4.4 Creating content – ideas, co-creation with customers, degree of outsourcing

Both interviewees agree that most of the ideas are gotten from the customer interface since the main focus is in helping the customer in his or her problems. Customers are listened in customer service, Internet forums, customer feedbacks and also on the field. Other sources of content inspiration that are mentioned are following analytics, company's own employees and of course the content producers.

"Brilliant way of creating content is also to agilely react to issues that are very current. Even though content calendar is a must the producers have to be empowered to seize a topical phenomenon if it can be well used in the content."

Competitions are the most common way of engaging customers to content creation. The competitions are often on social media and they ask people to comment a post or add a picture related to a specific theme. In these kind of competitions, it is important to clearly tell the terms and conditions for the customer about how the pictures or suggestions are used by the company after participation. Brands often re-gram their customers' pictures as a way to

interact and make a nice gesture for them, but actually that breaks the copyright law. The marketing agency that the first interviewee works for has started to embed for example Instagram pictures in their blog posts to make it more ethical.

It is strongly emphasized that consistent and ongoing content creation takes lots of time and effort and this is why the most common outsourced feature of content marketing is the creation itself. Media agency viewpoint is that the most common scenario in their house is that the planning happens in the company, but the creation in the agency. Sometimes companies outsource their whole marketing department and therefore the agency can also plan what kind of content would be suitable in each case. Third common way of outsourcing is shaping the content strategy in a form of a workshop or such.

People working at the second interviewee's company feel that they know their customers extremely well and therefore they focus on creating the content in-house.

"We know very well what kind of content should be published and that is backed up by research information and analytics."

Some parts of the creation are outsourced since the need is enormous and continuing. The company also has partners that they use in finding new viewpoints to find stories and content that their customers would find interesting.

4.5 Digital channels

The core of the content is most often in company's website. That is still the most common place to look for information and very importantly it is fully controlled by the company itself. Terms and conditions of the domain can't be rapidly changed or the site can't suddenly be shut down as for example a Facebook page theoretically could be. Website can also gather together content from different channels as long as it doesn't bury the relevant static information such as contact details. The content should be well organized and tagged in the website to optimize the position in the search engine result page and to make it easy for the customer to navigate.

"Blog is the easiest way of content marketing. For example, well planned customer service blog is much more appealing and also easier found on search engines than the general FAQ page."

Social media channels and e-mail newsletters are good channels to share the content even if the content itself would be in the website. Mobile applications are a good addition if it suits the offering. Different tests and quizzes might work as applications, although there is a possibility that it is once loaded, tested and then deleted without constant consumption and this opinion was also supported in the theory section. The first interviewee mentions the "Nicotinell 7 Keys to Quit" as a great example of good mobile application as a tool of content marketing.

All the digital channels that the second interviewee's company has a presence are part of its content marketing strategy. Large amount of content is on the website and also the customer service chat, which definitely can be seen as content marketing since it gives tailored help to customers' problems.

"Our products are something that people don't use regularly and it can be seen in our website's visitor numbers – people want information about the projects, instructions and inspiration."

Different content is published in different channels: website provides easily the instructions and product details and social media aims more at giving inspiration. Facebook is used with the whole customer cavalcade in mind including campaigns, competitions and interaction and in YouTube the company continues publishing their popular how to –videos that they first started sharing on television in 1990's.

"We have found that the best content is something that shows the change that can be done with our products. Also the ones where we come close to people and ask their opinions have been found very successful. People also value our expertise."

4.6 Measuring the effectiveness

When measuring the effectiveness of content marketing there are plenty of different metrics mentioned. The first interviewee mentions ROI as a common metric and it can be measured for example by setting track cookies to links that are being used in marketing. Cookies and call to actions are an easy way to see if the content takes off and how much it is being shared. Other metrics are how much people spend time with the content, shares and engagement in general, clicks and views.

The second interviewee comments that they measure how people react to the content. She says that they have concrete metrics that are different for web site and social media channels. Conversions are in main role for measuring the website content effectiveness whereas engagement is the most important in social media.

4.7 Perceived challenges

Challenge for content creators is often related to the response and if the content doesn't take off in the virtual world. If a company starts to produce content systematically from a scratch it might be that there is no response for even six months. Determination often pays off and good content often gets found. In order for stories to take off it's not enough that the creator can write – it's crucial to also understand how search engines work, how hashtags and tags in general work and one might have to use different technologies.

"Challenging is the constant need by the customers and the endless opportunities that the digital channels enable, but it's a wonderful opportunity at the same time – there is so much you can do with it!"

4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Content marketing is a form of marketing communications that can be seen as a rescue for marketers in the time when consumers are becoming more demanding, critical and powerful. It is no wonder then that the term has buzzed among marketing experts during the past couple of years. This thesis studied the concept by combining relevant theoretic information from academic sources and by interviewing two digital marketing professionals to get more depth to the theory and to get relevant real-life examples. One of the interviewees represented the marketing agency standpoint bringing insights on the scene in general and the other interviewee represented an individual company giving insights on how a big corporation produce content in-house.

Content marketing doesn't have a solid definition and one of the objectives of this thesis was to provide one. Based on the existing literature and empirical findings content marketing will be defined as follows:

> *Content marketing is a strategic marketing communications approach that involves creating and sharing content that consumers find interesting and beneficial. Content marketing strives for customer engagement by helping, educating and entertaining consumers in the areas of their interests that are in line with the brand image.*

One of the objectives of this thesis was to point out differences between content marketing and other means of marketing communications so that the specialty of this new approach could be proved. The digital marketing communication channels and means were introduced and then mirrored to the channels and features of content marketing. Direct marketing, sales promotion and personal selling are short-sighted ways that simply aim at increasing the sales. However, public relations and to some extent advertising have more long-term influences and their channels do overlap with content marketing, but the channels are used in different ways. Blog posts that are written in the PR mindset differ a lot from the ones that are written as content marketing.

Often digital marketing communications simply push the message to the customer without asking for permission and that sometimes causes negative reactions in consumers' minds.

Content marketing is a surreptitious form of marketing communications, because it keeps the decision power at the consumer so they decide whether they want to consume the content or not. For example, mobile marketing has been evolved from pushing SMS messages to customers to providing such interesting application that customers want to go to their mobile application store to download it. This expresses that outwardly content marketing switches the effort to the customer, but in reality content marketing takes a lot of effort from the company as well.

The main goal of this thesis was to identify the opportunities and challenges content marketing has as a way of digital marketing communications. As advertising is nowadays losing its effectiveness and credibility, content marketing provides a way to engage customers and improve the brand image in an organic way. Involving customers in content creation makes the content more believable and using user-generated content is cost-efficient and might turn customers into brand advocates. As great content becomes viral, both online and offline word-of-mouth increases and brand image improves. At a long site content marketing of course aims at generating sales but the focus is in increasing the customer lifetime value by creating satisfied and loyal customers instead of single transactions.

In order to succeed, marketers need to be patient and innovative. Creating credible and compelling content and optimizing the website for search engines takes time. It might take months for the visitors to find it, so if the company has fast revenues in mind, it should lean for example on advertising and paid placements. Successful content marketing also requires an extremely strong knowledge about the company's customers and not just their demographics. Creating content just since it's trendy is not going to lead far, but creating content that the customers find intriguing and resonating will. Consumers don't consume content that has been published many times before and thus marketers should be innovative when brainstorming the content ideas. By being the first one providing specific kind of content, companies can attract early adopters and opinion leaders which are often very favorable groups for marketers.

The findings of this thesis can't be generalized for every company since the sample that was interviewed was so small. However, this study is rather universal due to the fact that the subject hasn't been researched and thus there is at least something that most of the companies can learn. Obviously since the research is conspicuously absent there are lots of aspects that

could and should be further researched. It would be important to know more about the relationship between different types of content and the brand image. Also good practices of content strategy development should be studied in order to help and encourage companies to make their content marketing strategic and systematic.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: The interview questions

Questions for the marketing agency representative:
- What is the role of digital marketing communications compared to traditional marketing communications in companies in general at the moment?
- What is content marketing?
- Which part of content creation process is often outsourced?
- Which digital channels are used in content marketing?
- What kind of content is shared in each channel?
- Where do companies get ideas for the content creation?
- Is content co-creation with customers utilized in any way?
- What has been found challenging in content marketing?
- How is the success of content marketing being measured?

Questions for the company's representative:
- What is the role of digital marketing communications compared to traditional marketing communications in your company?
- What is content marketing?
- Is content produced in-house, outsourced or both combined? If it is being outsourced, which parts of the process are being outsourced?
- Which digital channels are used in content marketing?
- What kind of content is shared in each channel?
- What kind of content has been perceived the best?
- Where does the company get ideas for the content creation?
- Is content co-creation with customers utilized in any way?
- What has been found challenging in content marketing?
- How is the success of content marketing being measured?