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**B2B CUSTOMER JOURNEYS AT THE AGE OF DIGITALIZATION – MULTIPLE CASE STUDY IN THE SOFTWARE INDUSTRY**

Master's Thesis 2019

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# ABSTRACT

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The goal of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of customer journeys in a B2B context. The current literature on the phenomenon focuses mainly on B2C context, and there is an obvious research gap regarding B2B purchasing processes. Many authors have argued that the current journey models are too simplistic to suit today's business environment and especially business buying. Thus, the focus of this thesis is on the complexity of B2B buying and the use of different channels and touch points at the age of digitalization.

In the empirical study, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted in seven different companies of varying sizes and from different industry segments. A cross-case analysis was used to analyze the results. The findings imply that the traditional five stages, need-recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase activities, are visible in the B2B journeys as well. However, the traditional models do not take into account that in B2B purchases there are multiple persons involved in different roles and tasks. This thesis contributes to theory by including the 'multiperson' feature into the new model. Furthermore, the most important touch points and channels are identified in each stage; the findings suggest that while online channels are gaining more foothold, offline channels still hold their place in B2B buying.

**TIIVISTELMÄ**

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Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on syventää ymmärrystä asiakaspoluista B2B-kontekstissa. Nykyinen kirjallisuus aiheesta keskittyy pääasiassa B2C-kontekstiin jättäen selvän tutkimusaukon B2B-ostamisen puolelle. Monet tutkijat ovat esittäneet, että nykyiset asiakaspolkumallit ovat liian yksinkertaisia nykypäivän liiketoimintaympäristöön ja erityisesti yritysten väliseen kaupankäyntiin. Tästä johtuen tämän Pro Gradu -tutkielman fokus on B2B ostamisen monimutkaisuudessa sekä eri kanavien ja kosketuspisteiden käytössä digitalisaation aikakautena.

Empiirisessä tutkimuksessa suoritettiin yhdeksän haastattelua seitsemässä eri kokoluokan sekä alan yrityksessä. Kerättyä dataa analysoitiin vertailevan tapaustutkimuksen (engl. cross-case analysis) keinoin. Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että asiakaspolun perinteiset viisi tasoa, tarpeen tunnistaminen, informaation etsintä, vaihtoehtojen arviointi, ostopäätös sekä oston jälkeiset aktiviteetit, ovat tunnistettavissa myös B2B-kontekstissa. Nykyiset asiakaspolut eivät kuitenkaan ota huomioon, että B2B-ostoissa on mukana monia henkilöitä eri rooleissa ja tehtävissä. Tämä tutkielma edistää teorian kehittymistä lisäämällä uuteen malliin usean henkilön vaikutuksen. Lisäksi, tärkeimmät kosketuspisteet sekä kanavat tunnistettiin jokaisessa asiakaspolun vaiheessa; tulokset osoittavat, että vaikka online-kanavat kasvattavat suosiotaan, offline-kanavat ovat edelleen tärkeitä B2B-ostoprosesseissa.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will serve as an introduction to the thesis. First, the background of the study is explained. Secondly, the literature review sheds light into what has already been studied in the field. Building on the found research gap, the objectives and research questions are presented. They are followed by the theoretical framework and definitions of the key concepts. Finally, the research methodology, delimitations, and the structure of the thesis are explained.

## 1.1. Background of the study

Researchers have studied facets of customer experience for the past 50 years. However, in recent years the topic has been raised to the table with a new view: customer experience is seen as a customer's *journey* with a company during the purchasing process covering multiple touch points (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), firms should understand both their own and customers' perspectives of the purchase journey by identifying key issues and touch points along the way, and specific trigger points that lead customers to continue or discontinue the journey. In today's business, it is the superior customer journeys that lead brands to success, not just the quality and value of what they sell (Edelman & Singer 2015). Companies that succeed in delivering great customer journeys tend to win in the market (Rawson, Duncan & Jones 2013).

Research in this field is clearly more concentrated on B2C activities, and studies in a B2B context are sparse. In real life, B2B companies have also started to move toward journey-based sales strategies focusing on customer expectations and needs at different stages, and reallocating marketing resources to the most promising activities (Lingqvist, Plotkin & Stanley 2015). However, current customer journey models are developed for individual customers, and they are too simplistic to suit the B2B environment (Zolkiewski, Story, Burton, Chan, Gomes, Hunter-Jones, O'Malley, Peters, Raddats & Robinson 2017).

To this background, it is important to further study the phenomenon of customer journeys in a B2B context. If an ability to shape great customer journeys creates a crucial source of competitive advantage (Edelman & Singer 2015), more research should be conducted to fill the gap in the literature. Besides theoretical contributions, this thesis will provide insights and guidelines for the chosen B2B SME operating in the software industry.

## 1.2. Literature review

The research on customer experience dates back multiple decades. The phenomenon has been studied in many different contexts, one of the most common ones seems to be retail (Grewal, Levy & Kumar 2009; Puccinelli, Goodstein, Grewal, Price, Raghubir & Steward 2009; Rose, Clark, Samouel & Hair 2012; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016). Therefore, as a research topic, it is not relatively new. However, Lemon and Verhoef (2016) believe that in time, customer experiences have become more social as customers can interact with firms through multiple touch points in multiple channels. They argue that there is a need to strengthen theory, understanding, and knowledge in this important area of marketing.

Over the years, researchers have divided the customer journey into different stages, usually from three to five. Figure 1 shows more clearly which scholars represent which division. The figure also provides a quite profound view of the important authors in the field. Besides the ones listed under the stages, Edelman & Singer (2015) and Zolkiewski et al. (2017) have studied the topic and are referred to in this thesis. This thesis follows the most traditional customer journey model, called the Engel-Kollat-Blackwell (EKB) model, which suggests five stages to the decision-making process of customers (Engel et al. 1968).
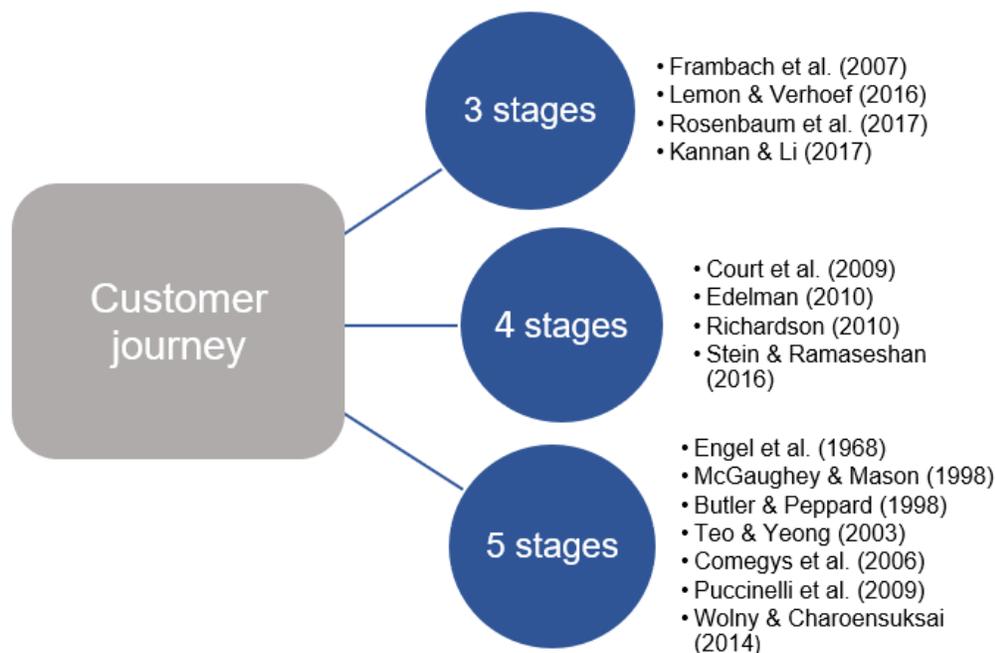


*Figure 1. The division of the customer journey into stages by different scholars*

Court, Elzinga, Mulder, and Vetvik (2009) were among the first to develop a better understanding of the changes in the customer journey. They conducted a quantitative research on nearly 20 000 consumers across five industries and felt the traditional models to be unsuited for today's more complex environment. Voorhees, Fombelle, Gregoire, Bone, Gustafsson, Sousa and Walkowiak (2017) argued that previous research on customer journeys has focused too much on the core service period, neglecting the pre- and post-core periods. They suggested that by taking a more holistic view of the customer experience, companies can strengthen customer relationships, increase customer retention, positive word of mouth (WOM), and profitability.

Many authors approach customer journeys from a seller's viewpoint. Edelman (2010) spoke on behalf of a CDJ (Consumer Decision Journey) strategy with three parts: understanding the consumers' decision journey, determining the prioritized touch points and how to leverage them, and allocating resources accordingly. Edelman and Singer (2015) defined customer journeys being equally important as the products the company sells. They felt that in order to build an effective customer journey, companies must master automation, proactive personalization, contextual interaction, and journey innovation.

Both Richardson (2010) and Rosenbaum, Otalora, and Ramirez (2017) presented customer journey mapping as a tool for developing an effective customer journey. A customer journey map (CJM) is a diagram which describes the steps the firm's customers go through when engaging with it (Richardson 2010). In Rosenbaum et al.'s (2017) version touch points are in the horizontal axis and the vertical axis covers strategic initiatives, which are the key components of the entire service system. The authors explained that they should express managerial cross-functional actions that are linked to the touch points. An example of this kind of map can be found in Appendix 1. Clark (2013) criticized that many customer journey maps are developed from an organization-centric point of view, and they assume that customer journeys are linear, even though they should take into account that customers create their own versions of the journey.

Many scholars in the field propose more research on multiple topics related to customer journeys. The most relevant suggestions regarding the contribution of this thesis are Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) and Kannan and Li's (2017). The former ones highlighted a gap in research on how firms can manage customer journeys in the best possible way; they felt that the combination of multiple types of touch points and their influence in different phases of the customer journey requires more

research. Besides the overall journey, the latter researchers recognized the need to understand the specific roles of each digital touch point in the consumer's overall decision-making.

This preliminary literature review confirms the notion that most studies about this phenomenon focus on B2C industries, and the research on B2B firms is extremely sparse. Zolkiewski et al. (2017) are among the few researchers who have taken the B2B context into account. They strongly argued that in a B2B context, a singular customer journey is too simplistic as there is a variety of personnel interacting with different touch points and having different expectations. This thesis attempts to fill this gap in research and take the B2B view into the main focus in customer journeys. Besides theoretical discussion, this study contributes to the limited amount of empirical studies concerning customer journeys and customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

## 1.3. Objectives and research questions

The goal of this study is to develop a deeper understanding of customer journeys in B2B purchasing processes. Old linear models are challenged and group dynamics of B2B buying are taken into account. As highlighted by many researchers (for example Zolkiewski et al. 2017), firms should change their focus to customers. It is important to understand what customers value in each phase of the buying process. By figuring out which elements affect their purchasing decisions, who have a say in the process, and how people involved in buying interact with each other, it is much easier for the supplier to act accordingly and enhance the overall journeys.

From the theoretical point of view, this thesis contributes to the limited amount of literature available on customer journeys in a B2B context. Traditionally, customer journeys are considered as single customers' processes throughout different stages. However, these singular journeys are too simplistic for B2B purposes. Therefore, more research is needed to take the complexity of B2B buying into account.

Furthermore, the use of different channels and content is an intriguing topic in the digitalizing world. The internet has changed how consumers engage with brands, and traditional marketing strategies and structures no longer work in this process (Edelman 2010; Eid & El-Gohary 2011; Wang, Malthouse, Calder & Uzunoglu 2017). In 2018, there were more than 4.1 billion active internet users and over 3.3 billion active social media users (Statista 2018). As these numbers are growing year by year, and people are using more and more digital channels and tools, it is no

wonder that traditional marketing has to make space for digital marketing. As a consequence, one of the interests in this thesis is to figure out whether B2B buyers truly use digital channels and have a preference for digital content or whether offline channels still hold their place in the journeys.

As this thesis is conducted as a commission, the aim is to bring as much value as possible for the case company. The phenomenon is examined from the customers' viewpoint but the gained understanding aids the opposing party, the supplier. With the results gained from the study, the company should be able to understand its potential customers better and strengthen the marketing activities by focusing on the right audience, touch points, channels, and content.

Based on these objectives, the main research question for the study is:

*What are customer journeys like in a B2B context?*

Supporting the main research question, a set of additional sub-questions are established:

*SQ1. How does the complexity appear in B2B buying processes?*
*SQ2. What touch points and channels do customers use in different stages of the customer journey?*
*SQ3. What kind of content do customers prefer in different stages of the customer journey?*

## 1.4. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework, seen in Figure 2, gives clarity on the structure of the theory chapter in this thesis. Its goal is to work as the fundament describing the phenomenon and its relating concepts, highlighting the areas that need more research. The framework describes the customer journey with five stages, retelling the original EKB model (Engel et al. 1968). The first three stages, need recognition, information search, and evaluation of alternatives, form the pre-purchase process. Purchase decision and post-purchase behavior are the fourth and fifth stages. Loyalty loop (Court et al. 2009; Edelman 2010; Edelman & Singer 2015) is added into the end of the journey to highlight the possibility that after the purchase, current customers can re-enter the process and skip all or some of the pre-purchase stages.
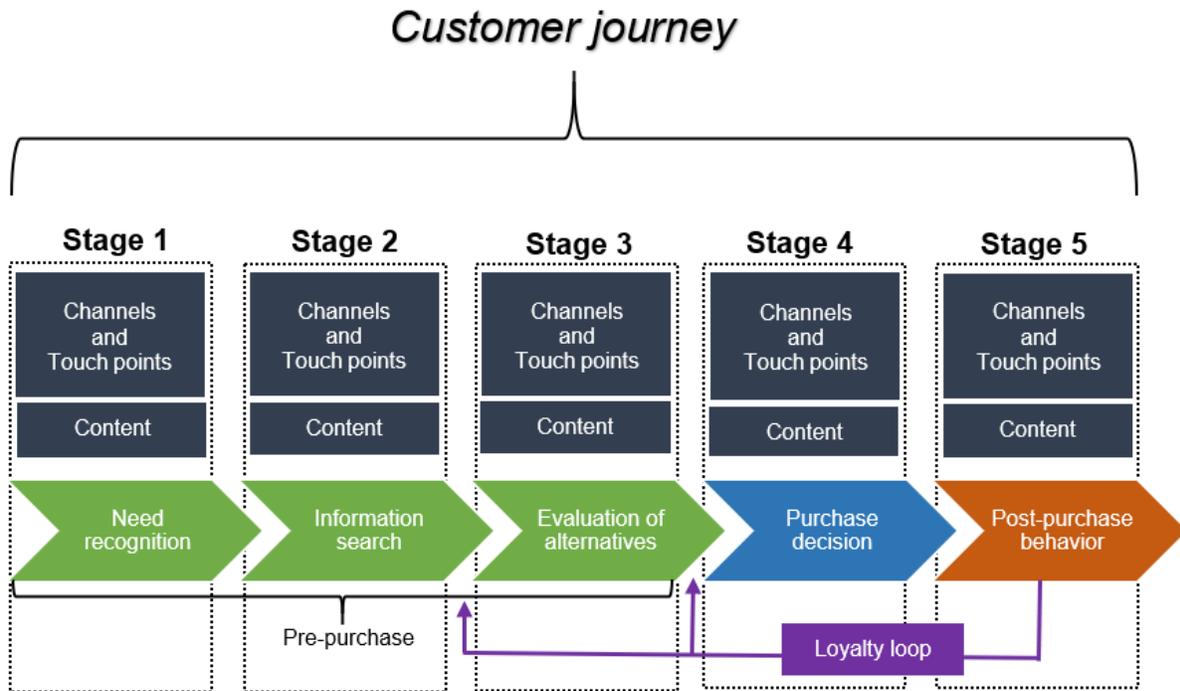
*Figure 2. Theoretical framework of the study*

In each stage, there are channels that customers use and touch points where they interact with a selling company. Furthermore, customers consume different content in each stage. All of these elements vary based on customers' needs and preferences, and one goal of this thesis is to create more understanding of these topics in a B2B environment.

## 1.5. Definitions of key concepts

In this chapter, the most relevant concepts used in this thesis are explained. They are presented in the following order: B2B, customer journey, customer experience, customer engagement, and touch points.

**B2B**

Business-to-business, shortly B2B, refers to the selling of products and services between companies. B2B firms offer materials, parts, and services for companies who then serve the consumers in order to make profits (Uzialko 2017).

**Customer journey**

Also known as customer or consumer decision journey and buyer's journey; Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define the concept as "the process a customer goes through, across all stages and touch points, that makes up the customer experience". Edelman (2010) states that the customer decision journey describes how people move from considering a product or a service to actually purchasing it and engaging with the brand. In each stage, customers experience touch points that are only partly under firms' control (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

**Customer experience**

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) conclude that customer experience is "a multidimensional construct focusing on a customer's cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social responses to a firm's offerings during the customer's entire purchase journey." It is a phenomenon that emerges during various phases of the customer journey involving multiple channels and touch points (McColl-Kennedy, Gustafsson, Jaakkola, Klaus, Radnor, Perks & Friman 2015).

**Customer engagement**

Customer engagement tries to distinguish customer attitudes and behaviors that go beyond the purchase. When a customer engages with a brand, it forms touch points along the customer journey and results in different kinds of responses on a customer's part. CE is viewed as a component of the customer experience. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012) define the concept as "the intensity of an individual's participation in and connection with an organization's offerings and/or organizational activities, which either the customer or the organization initiate".

**Touch points**

Touch points (also touchpoints, points of contact, and contact points) are the critical moments when customers interact with the firm and its offerings along their way to purchase and after it (Rawson et al. 2013). Examples of touch points are advertisements, news reports, discussions with friends, and product experiences (Court et al. 2009). Customers experience different touch points and view them with varying importance (Rosenbaum et al. 2017).

## 1.6. Research methodology and delimitations

Based on the theoretical foundation, the customer journey is brought into a B2B context and the goal is to create more understanding through an empirical study. It is extremely interesting to see what happens when the phenomenon mostly used in a B2C context is taken to another environment. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this has not been tested before and thus the findings are assumed to have both theoretical and managerial contributions.

The research methodology used is qualitative research. Data is collected through interviews aimed at persons involved in buying decisions in the chosen organizations. The gathered data is then analyzed and used for understanding the customer journeys in a B2B context. More detailed information about the research methods and design can be found in Chapter 3. From a theoretical point of view, this thesis focuses on the overall customer journey, which includes five stages. Both the theory and findings are presented in a systematic way retelling the theoretical framework. The customer journey often covers both digital and traditional offline environments (Kannan & Li 2017). In this thesis, the focus is slightly more on the digital channels as digitalization is a current phenomenon influencing the buying activities. However, the traditional channels are not excluded as one of the research goals is to find out whether they still have value in business buying.

The commissioner company of the study operates in the IT-sector focusing mainly on consulting business. Therefore, the interviewed companies for the empirical study are chosen from industries that are relevant regarding the operations of the commissioner company and the purchases discussed in the interviews focus on software development. Due to the resources and time available, the empirical study is conducted only in the capital area of Finland, in seven companies. Thus, it can be stated already at this point that the results are highly context-dependent and do not allow generalization on a larger scale.

## 1.8. Structure of the study

Chapter 2 digs deeper into current literature. First, the characteristics of B2B buying are explained. The differences between B2B and B2C buying are emphasized, and the reader is provided with a better understanding of the context of the study. Secondly, the phenomenon of the customer journey is discussed focusing on each of the five stages individually. Different

activities and reasoning for different ways of acting are explained from the customer's point of view. Lastly, channels and touch points are introduced in more detail.

The empirical part of this thesis starts with presenting the case background, including a more detailed introduction of the commissioner company. This is followed by an explanation of the chosen research design and methods. Chapter 4 presents the actual findings retelling the theoretical framework. However, in the end, a revised model is presented. The new model is created based on the gathered interview data, and it reflects better the different characteristics of business buying. The last chapter (5) concludes the study with theoretical contributions, managerial implications, and limitations and suggestions for future research.

# 2. B2B CUSTOMER JOURNEYS

B2B buying processes are more complex than those in B2C (Åge 2011). This further complicates marketers and sellers' tasks. Wiersema (2013) argues that B2B marketing is undergoing a transformation because of the changing marketplace and growing pressures from customers and competitors. Chapter 2.1. digs deeper into B2B buying and its characteristics to give a more profound understanding of the context of this thesis.

Chapter 2.2. discusses the key topics related to customer journeys. As previously stated, the customer journey is the process, which creates the whole customer experience (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), it includes all the phases a customer goes through on his/her way from recognizing a need to post-purchase activities after he/she has made the decision and purchased the solution. Some of the benefits of skillfully managing customer journeys are enhanced customer satisfaction, reduced churn rate, increased revenue, and greater employee satisfaction (Rawson et al. 2013).

## 2.1. Characteristics of business-to-business buying

Åge (2011) describes B2B selling processes as "complex and dynamic endeavors in which various (sometimes conflicting) interests are ultimately managed by the involved actors". In B2B buying processes, there can be multiple people interacting together in both the buyer and the supplier's side (Grewal, Lilien, Bharadwaj, Jindal, Kayande, Lusch, Mantrala, Palmatier, Rindfleisch, Scheer, Spekman, Sridhar 2015). Johnston & Lewin (1996) introduced the term "multiperson" to describe B2B buying. Zolkiewski et al. (2017) list that in a B2B context, actors involved are service providers, client customers and client users of the service. Furthermore, other external parties, such as consultants and other firms in the industry, can have a say in the decisions (Grewal et al. 2015).

According to Sheth (1973), in the buyer's side, there is typically personnel from three or more departments involved in the different phases of the buying. He claims that most commonly, the persons influencing buying are from purchasing, quality control, and manufacturing departments, and they are identified as purchasing agents, engineers, and users. These people all interact with different touch points and have different expectations (Zolkiewski et al. 2017). Sheth (1973) state that expectations differ because individuals judge the supplier or the brand with different criteria.

He further explains that their background, used information sources, participation to active search, perceptual distortion, and satisfaction with past purchases all affect the expectations.

Sheth (1973) argues that these kind of factors complicate marketers' tasks as it is sometimes difficult to figure out who the actual buyer is. He explains that it helps if the seller knows whether the buying decision is conducted jointly between many parties of delegated to someone for a more autonomous decision-making. According to him, this usually depends on the type of the purchase, perceived risk, and time pressure: if the purchase is repetitive, the perceived risk is low, and there is a time pressure for the decision, it is more likely to be delegated for one party. The company-specific factors also affect: small companies with a lower degree of centralization might use smaller groups for decision-making than large public corporations (Sheth 1973).

Sheth (1973) believes that this multiperson decision-making character is a reason why B2B buying might involve conflicts inside the buying organization. He mentions that different goals, motivation, perceptions, individual characteristics, and expectations can lead to disagreements. As the solutions for these kind of conflicts, he raises up problem-solving actions, persuasion, and bargaining. Sheth's (1973) viewpoint is that even though conflicts take time, sometimes they might be healthy for an organization as the result of the decision tend to become more rational.

What makes B2B buying processes more complex is that they are characterized as multistage or multiphase (Johnston & Lewin 1996; Åge 2011). Unlike B2C transactions, more processes are needed to complete transactions, which means that deals take longer to close (D'Haen & Van Den Poel 2013; Holliman & Rowley 2014). In some cases, tight budgets can also delay the purchase process (Compton 2013). The buying process might also differ depending on the specific service being purchased and its nature (Lindberg & Nordin 2008; Sheth 1973).

Furthermore, B2B buying decisions involve a much bigger risk element for the buyer organization's operations than B2C decisions focusing on commodity products (Hunter, Kasouf, Celuch & Curry 2004). Buyers can be concerned about factors such as safety, reliability, efficiency, customization, and functionality (Lingqvist et al. 2015). Lindberg and Nordin (2008) argue that the cost of the offering is still holding a valuable place in the evaluation of alternatives. However, they further explain that if a service has more strategic importance and it involves higher supply risk, it is evaluated based on its value rather than its price, which is the opposite to the case of standardized services.

Lindberg and Nordin (2008) also state that service procurement is moving towards being more proactive and planning, working in line with firms' overall goals. Schoenherr and Mabert (2011) explain that nowadays buyers have more options to use both offline and online methods in purchasing. Their example of online procurement is an online reverse auction where suppliers bid against each other in real time in a web environment. Offline buying, on the other hand, usually refers to traditional negotiations (Schoenherr & Mabert 2011).

Unlike B2C customers, B2B purchasers have to do a lot more research, look at the specifications, and follow a formal procurement process (Lingqvist et al. 2015). Impulse buying is rare in this context and objective criteria define the choice process (Grewal et al. 2015). Based on Lindberg and Nordin's (2008) study, service procurement includes detailed specifications and contracts. Lingqvist et al. (2015) agree that B2B products must meet strict standards for them to be qualified in the buyer's eyes. Lindberg and Nordin (2008) imply that specifications are done after the need is recognized. The researchers list that initial users, purchasers, and even suppliers can take part in this process. Clearly made specifications serve as a guideline for suppliers to make their offerings, and they make it easier for the buyer to compare their options. However, sometimes there is no time to write detailed specifications if the final customer already requires the products or services. (Lindberg & Nordin 2008) Sometimes situational factors and ad-hoc conditions, such as internal strikes, machine breakdowns, mergers and acquisitions, and price changes can also override the systematic decision-making process (Sheth 1973).

Lindberg and Nordin (2008) explain that B2B firms often use competitive tendering in their supplier selection. They claim that besides the price and other calculative criteria, soft skills can also be taken into account. They explain that some buyers might use rating systems developed together with an internal client to score a suppliers' creativity, presentation skills and other similar kinds of skills. According to these authors, some buying firms are using "preferred suppliers" - suppliers that are already evaluated and found suitable for providing the future needs in specified areas, such as technical consulting services. The agreed frame agreements simplify the buying process and reduce transaction costs (Lindberg & Nordin 2008). Schoenherr and Mabert (2011) found that purchasing professionals prefer offline procurement methods when the purchase is of high importance, and online purchasing, namely online reverse auctions, is chosen when more suppliers are able to participate in the bidding process.

Both Sheth and Sharma (1997) and Lindberg and Nordin (2008) concluded that business buying is shifting from transaction-oriented to relationship-oriented philosophy. The authors explain that this change is due to the fact that firms have started to identify the needs of some specific customers, they have realized that having a relationship with the supplier enables them to get better service and make the procurement process more efficient, and the implementation of strategic issues is easier if there is a formed relationship. Especially complex, strategically important services require different procurement approaches where the buyer-supplier interaction is closer (Lindberg & Nordin 2008). Moreover, competition forces firms to develop better relationships to maintain a competitive advantage (Sheth & Sharma 1997). Furthermore, regarding services, some buyers wish to buy "a specific person, not just a service" (Lindberg and Nordin 2008).

Lindberg and Nordin (2008) argue that industrial buying is moving toward buying more solutions rather than separate services or products in order to reduce suppliers and become more cost-efficient. Buyers are more interested in having their needs satisfied regardless of the specific products or services needed in the process (Grewal et al. 2015). However, solutions further complicate the buying process as it demands a lot of resources to buy them and maintain good supplier relationships (Lindberg & Nordin 2008). They are also much harder to specify, as they can include a lot of factors, such as training, technical support, delivery specifications and financing (Grewal et al. 2015). Furthermore, unforeseen issues may arise in the middle of the process (Lindberg & Nordin 2008).

According to Johnston and Lewin (1996), there are three original models for organizational buying: Robinson, Faris and Wind's (1967), Webster and Wind's (1972), and Sheth's (1973) models. In all of these models, organizational buying is seen as a process with multiple stages: Robinson et al.'s model proposed eight, Webster and Wind's five, and Sheth's four stages to the buying process (Johnston & Lewin 1996). Thus, there are clear similarities between organizational buying and customer journey literature.

Johnston and Levin (1996) explain that these mentioned three models contain nine constructs, which broadly represent the different factors that can affect organizational buying. The variables they listed are environment, organizational influences (such as size and structure), individual participants' characteristics (such as education and motivation), purchase characteristics (such as product type and prior experience), seller characteristics (such as price and the ability to meet

specifications), group characteristics (such as leadership and expectations), information sources and types, conflict/negotiation characteristics, and the stages of the buying process.

The oldest model of these three is Robinson, Faris and Wind's BuyGrid model (Figure 3), which originates back to the 60s. The stages in the model are called "buyphases". (Grewal et al. 2015) As the political environment and the development of different technologies have changed the business landscape, Grewal et al. (2015) suggest a more ongoing process including only four actions: implementation, evaluation, reassessment, and confirmation. They explain the actions as follows: *Implementation* includes all actions towards acquiring "goods and services directly, within the parameters of the current buying decision". *Evaluation* is a process where the parameters, such as seller performance, are examined. *Reassessment* means that the current decision criteria are taken under review; among others, these might include changes in the buyer's capabilities, needs or priorities, external factors, such as new offers from other suppliers or market demands. Lastly, *confirmation* means that the decision of the purchase, whether a renewal or a completely new one, is made.
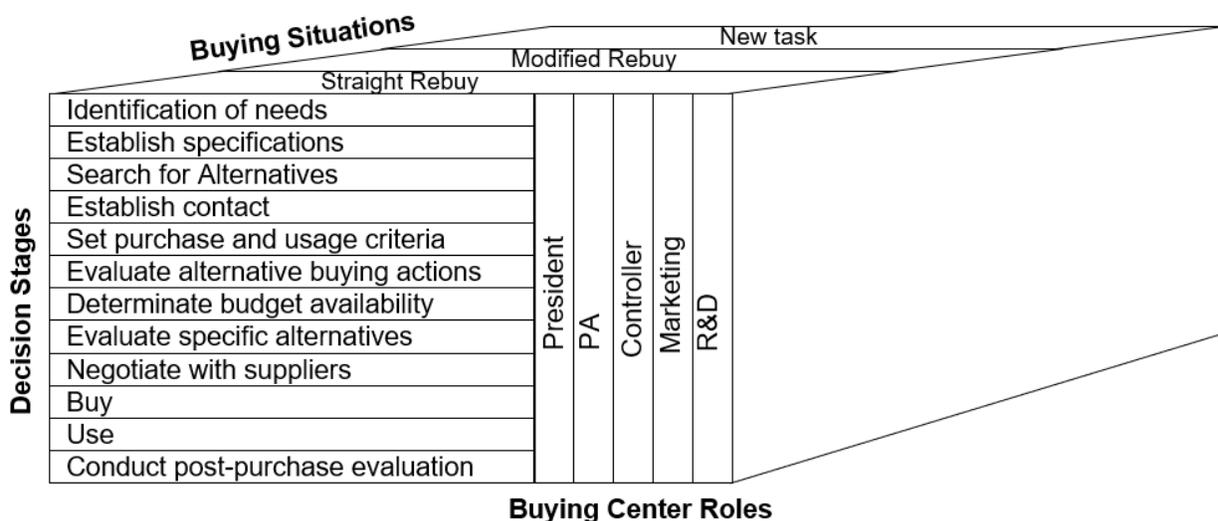


*Figure 3. The BuyGrid model (Adapted from Robinson et al. 1967 In Grewal et al. 2015)*

As seen in Figure 3, the buying situation can be a straight rebuy, modified rebuy or a completely new task, which makes the buying process different. Grewal et al. (2015) modified the grid by creating three new modes of B2B buying: *Routinized Exchange Relationship (RERs)* are appropriate between a buyer and a seller when the needed goods or services are repeated in a

consistent manner. Therefore, the process can be standardized and automated. *Organic Buying Relationships (OBRs)* require more human involvement and adjustments, as the products or services need to be customized and they have more value. Thus, the buying process becomes more complex. *Transactional Buying Operations (TBOs)* refer to one-time purchases, buying of goods or services that are not complex and have less value.

In the buying models, the members involved in the buying process form the buying center, where there are many different roles. Webster and Wind (1972) list five roles - users, influencers, deciders, buyers, and gatekeepers - the definitions of which are presented in Table 1. The authors explain that these buyers are motivated to fulfill both their individual and organizational goals. Furthermore, Webster and Wind (1972) believe that it helps if marketers understand the structure, technology, and tasks in the buying firm, and define the composition of their buying center and the roles and authorities of its members.

*Table 1. Different buyer roles and their definitions (Adapted from Webster & Wind 1972)*

| Role | Definition |
|---|---|
| **Users** | Those members of the organization who use the purchased products and services. |
| **Buyers** | Those with formal responsibility and authority for contracting with suppliers. |
| **Influencers** | Those who influence the decision process directly or indirectly by providing information and criteria for evaluating alternative buying actions. |
| **Deciders** | Those with the authority to choose among alternative buying actions. |
| **Gatekeepers** | Those who control the flow of information (and materials) into the buying center. |

Lingqvist et al. (2015) conclude that even though there are still major differences in B2C and B2B purchasing processes, B2B customers have started to expect more consumer-like experiences, which require the provider firm to know much more about their business and even their individual profile. They also argue that content, such as blog posts or trade show presentations, via digital channels, can get B2B buyers convinced even before a salesperson gets to present the firm's

offer. All in all, the authors believe that B2B buying is becoming more social and more real-time; buyers demand real-time digital interactions, which include tools such as price calculators and product configurators. Besides engaging with customer firms, sellers can also try to influence the actual end customers as they sometimes have a lot of power in the process (Wiersema 2013).

## 2.2. Stages of the customer journey

The marketing funnel has been used for years to illustrate how consumers start with a large number of brands in mind and then reduce them, with the aid of sellers' marketing activities, until they are at the end of the funnel with only one brand (Court et al. 2009). Court et al. (2009) argue that in today's complex and increasingly digital buying environment the funnel concept does not capture all the touch points and key factors. Instead, they propose a more suitable approach, a customer (decision) journey.

The most traditional customer journey model, the so-called EKB model based on the authors behind it, suggests five stages to the decision-making process of customers: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Engel et al. 1968). Another frequently used conceptualization includes three main stages: pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase (Frambach, Roest & Krishnan 2007; Kannan and Li 2017; Lemon and Verhoef 2016). Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) presented five stages as they divided the pre-purchase stage into orientation, information search, and evaluation.

In this thesis, the traditional five-stage model of the customer journey is used as a base for the research. The division into different stages is useful as customers seek different benefits and prefer different channels before, during, and after purchase (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014). All customers do not go through all of these stages every time they want to purchase something. Still, it is good to outline the basic characteristics of each stage. It should be noted that the literature about the stages has mainly focused on the B2C business and is not necessarily applicable to B2B context as such.

## 2.2.1. Need recognition

Need recognition is the first stage of the decision journey, where the consumer becomes aware of the solution that meets their needs, or they discover that they have a need after their interest is captured (Clark 2013). Gupta, Bo-chiuan, and Zhiping (2004) add that the process can start when a consumer recognizes a problem. Comegys, Hannula, and Väisänen (2006) explain that consumers sense a difference between their actual state and a state where they would like to be. Webster and Wind (1972) call this a buying situation, and the formed discrepancy can potentially be fixed with buying actions. Bruner and Pomazal (1988) agree that problem recognition is often accompanied by problem delineation as consumers try to define the need in a way, which guides to buying actions.

Bruner and Pomazal (1988) divide the problem recognition into two scenarios: Generic problem recognition means that a customer perceives a need that can be satisfied with a variety of products. Selective problem recognition refers to the situation where only a specific brand will meet the need. The authors also argue that some needs can occur daily and are easy to satisfy while more complex needs can develop over a longer period of time as the actual and desired stages move further apart.

Consumers might be consciously or unconsciously scanning the markets and reflecting on their own previous experience (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014). Inputs they receive can be from advertising, trends, influence from friends, or from social media, just to name a few (Clark 2013). Bruner and Pomazal (1988) argue that many times need recognition occurs when a consumer simply run out of a product that used to solve the problem in the past. They also explain that novelty can be the cause for a need: even though a customer would be satisfied with the current solution, the desire for a new solution can lead to changing the brand. Butler and Peppard (1998) list changes in a consumer's financial situation, new product announcements or promotional campaigns as examples of possible triggers for need recognition. In the era of the Internet, consumers can also "surf", type keywords or phrases to the search engines, and encounter a stimulus that activates or creates a need (McGaughey & Mason 1998).

Bruner and Pomazal (1988) believe that previous decisions can guide to new needs, as the purchase of one product might present its complementary product in a favorable light. Furthermore, the authors conclude that previous experiences affect the actual stage making

consumers feel either satisfied or dissatisfied. In a B2B context, there are multiple possibilities of who can recognize the organization's need; Lindberg and Nordin's (2008) research revealed that it is usually the internal client who defines the need, which launches the purchasing process. The buying journey can also stop at this stage if a consumer puts a problem on hold for example due to insufficient resources (Bruner and Pomazal 1988).

### 2.2.2. Information search

In this stage, the consumer familiarizes him/herself with the offering (Frambach et al. 2007). Gupta et al. (2004) call this "search effort". The consumer has now developed an intention and is trying to get more information using different channels (Comegys et al. 2006; Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014). In this stage, consumers understand better the mechanisms for learning about products or services (Clark 2013).

The information can be gathered both from external (for example discussions or sales promotions) or internal sources (memory) (Butler & Peppard 1998). An external search is needed when a consumer has not previously acquired the required information or cannot recall it from the memory (Schmidt & Spreng 1996). Clark (2013) argues that in this stage, consumers begin to listen to others' opinions and previous experiences. Voorhees et al. (2017) talk about "pre-core service encounter", and they include access to competitor and third-party websites, offline and online sources, and recommendations to this stage. In B2B buying decisions, this stage often includes the detailed specification of the needed product or service (Lindberg & Nordin 2008).

The intensity of the search phase differs between consumers. If the buyer already has more knowledge of the product category, he/she does not need to do as much research (Beatty & Smith 1987). Kotler and Keller (2006, 191-192) also define two levels of arousal: At the milder level, the consumer's attention is heightened, he/she becomes more familiar with different products, which might suit his/her needs, and pays attention to ads and conversations about the subject. The other level is active information search where the consumer engages more actively in conversations and searches information more deeply. Schmidt and Spreng (1996) argue that consumers' ability and motivation affect information search activity and they vary across purchase situations. Furthermore, if the purchase is repetitive or if it is a standard product or service, the need for information is much smaller (Sheth 1973).

A hypothesis in traditional information economics is that a consumer engages in active information search until the perceived marginal cost exceeds the expected marginal benefit meaning that a consumer searches as long as he/she thinks the search is beneficial. Examples of benefits are the likelihood of finding a superior alternative and reduced risk of eliminating uncertain alternatives. (Klein & Ford 2003) Teo and Yeong (2003) tested this hypothesis with a quantitative study in an online shopping environment and found a strong positive relationship between the benefits and the amount of external search. Schmidt and Spreng (1996) also included both search benefits and search costs into their model of external consumer information search.

The Internet is constantly gaining more and more value in the search process. Gupta et al. (2004) reason that for B2C consumers the online search makes searching for lower prices easier, and thus motivates consumers who have stronger "price-search intentions". Furthermore, they argue that the search for product information has also become easier. Based on research from 2011, search engines were the most important tools used for information searching to back up a purchase decision, and the second came brand or product websites (Vogt & Alldredge 2012). Mangles (2018) explains that in the category of search engines, Google has by far the biggest market share, and people search for information there 3,5 billion times a day using both mobile and desktop. In a B2B context, the desktop is used more often (Mangles 2018). Grewal et al. (2015) conclude that the development of digital and information technologies has indeed moved the search process into online sources. Although, they state that there are still two segments of people - those who prefer the traditional channels and social buyers who rely on social media and online communities.

The multiperson feature of B2B buying (Johnston & Lewin 1996) affects the information search as the sources and levels of information of different people involved in the purchasing process differ. For example, purchasing agents are more exposed to commercial sources whereas engineer and production personnel might utilize trade reports, WOM, and professional meetings for obtaining information. (Sheth 1973)

### 2.2.3. Evaluation of alternatives

The information search generates a set of preferred alternatives (Teo & Yeong 2003). In this stage, consumers start to systematically review these alternatives (Clark 2013). In line with the previous stage, Gupta et al. (2004) call this "evaluation effort". The information search continues

about features such as price, quality, physical attributes, availability, purchase channels, and the brand (Gupta et al. 2004; Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014). Consumers can seek input from their peers, reviewers, retailers, competitors, and the brand itself (Edelman 2010). They download demos, view videos, try the products, and listen to and rely on various conversations surrounding the brand (Clark 2013). Butler and Peppard (1998) list past experience, marketing-sponsored communications, consumer groups, research institutions, and word of mouth as traditional sources of information for this stage. Besides these, they explain that the Internet allows more defined evaluative criteria to be utilized.

Consumers may set minimum acceptable levels for products to get a place in their consideration set (Comegys et al. 2006). In a B2B context, the buying process might be strictly specified and the suppliers are selected based on evaluation criteria created specifically for each service to be purchased (Lindberg & Nordin 2008). Teo and Yeong (2003) argue that consumers use both information stored in memory and information obtained from external sources to develop these criteria which helps them to compare alternatives.

McGaughey and Mason (1998) explain that there are different rules in evaluating alternative products: With the compensatory rule, a consumer decides the importance of a set of attributes and then rates each product choice with these attributes in order to identify the product with the highest weighted performance. The lexicographic rule determinates which attributes are the most important for the consumer and the product rating highest on those is the "winner". Lastly, the conjunctive rule can be used to eliminate products that rate poorly on chosen attributes. This is especially useful among consumers who are worried about making bad choices, McGaughey and Mason (1998) explain.

Besides information about different brands, Comegys et al. (2006) argue that consumers also evaluate how easy it is to process that information. They explain that a brand is "perpetually fluent" if it is easily recognized by its physical characteristics and "conceptually fluent" if a brand comes to mind easily. Experiments by Lee and Labroo (2004) proved that both kinds of fluency may lead to more favorable evaluations of the brand. However, they also found that conceptual fluency can result in the brand becoming less favorable for the consumer if the processing brings negative and undesirable constructs to mind.

Perceived benefits and costs were explained to influence the information search phase. In the evaluation stage, perceived risk is studied to guide the evaluation process. Current literature proposes five different risk components: physical, psychological, social, financial and performance (Gupta et al. 2004). Of these five, Gupta et al. (2004) explain that all except physical risk are relevant in a shopping environment.

Court et al. (2009) highlight that contrary to the traditional funnel model, where the number of brands narrows down, in today's environment, it can actually expand now that consumers are more active in seeking information and evaluating their options. However, Comegys et al. (2006) conclude that consumers have limited time at their disposal, hence at some point, the evaluation has to be stopped and the consumer has to move to the actual decision-making phase. Edelman (2010) supports the view that the Internet has changed the game with brands, and consumers are using more and more channels which are not in a firm's control or even knowledge. Gupta et al. (2004) argue that with physical products consumers may find it difficult to evaluate some attributes, such as style or color, online. Thus, they state that in some cases, online channels can actually partly delay the evaluation process.

Court et al. (2009) emphasize that firms should find new ways to get their brands included in consumers' initial consideration set at the beginning of their decision journey. Edelman (2010) believes that nowadays, consumers' own outreach is more likely to shape their choices than marketers' efforts to try to influence them. Court et al. (2009) also conclude that it has become more important for customers to reach marketers than the other way around.

### 2.2.4. Purchase decision

Purchase stage covers all customer interactions with the firm and its offering during the actual purchase event (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). In this stage, the decision regarding the final purchase is made (Frambach et al. 2007; Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014). Revella (2011) argues that buying decisions are driven by emotional factors and then justified by rational factors about product and pricing. In B2B situations, organizations might weigh different things with more value depending on the product or service in need (Lindberg & Nordin 2008).

Butler and Peppard (1998) explain that this stage includes decisions on where and how questions: *where* concludes the decision on the seller, and *how* concerns the nature of transactions and the

contract. Comegys et al. (2006) argue that a consumer might have ranked the brands in his/her choice set based on the information gathered during the evaluation stage, but this order does not yet guarantee the decision. For example, the opinions of others or unexpected situations, like the sudden urge for some other purchase, might affect the final decision (Comegys et al. 2006).

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) list three concrete actions to this stage: choice, ordering, and payment. McGaughey and Mason (1998) specify this list with decisions on quantity to purchase, payment method, and timing of the purchase. Gupta et al. (2004) argue that customers place a different value on fast delivery, and it can affect customer satisfaction. Furthermore, all core interactions, including employees, other customers, and technology, belong here (Voorhees et al. 2017).

### 2.2.5. Post-purchase behavior

The post-purchase stage includes all aspects of the customer experience after purchase that relate to the brand, product, or service. This phase includes usage and consumption of the purchased product or service, post-purchase engagement, and service requests. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016) Furthermore, customer feedback, reviews, and recommendations are included in this stage (Voorhees et al. 2017). According to Lindberg and Nordin (2008), the soft skills of a supplier, such as creativity, flexibility, cooperation, and communication skills, are particularly important in this stage.

Court et al. (2009) state that in this stage "the marketer's work has just begun", as what happens after the purchase will shape the customer's opinion regarding every purchase decision in the product category in the future. Here, the customer decides whether to continue using the offering and to make repeat purchases (Frambach et al. 2007). Teo and Yeong (2003) explain that the intention of post-purchase evaluation is to help in future decision-making: Good experience may guide the customer towards the same brand when a similar need arises, and a bad experience will lead to post-purchase dissonance. Lindberg and Nordin (2008) agreed that post-purchase evaluations and follow-ups have a lot of weight in supplier evaluation, and some buyers even demand that suppliers perform satisfaction measures on internal customers. They also argued that it is good to measure the effects on the final customer level, although it might be difficult to execute as is the case with other side effects.

Gilly and Gelb (1982) view post-purchase behavior as "a series of steps in which consumers compare their expectations to perceived reality, experience consequent satisfaction/dissatisfaction, and act in a way influenced by that satisfaction/dissatisfaction". If the resulting state is dissatisfaction, a customer may decide to complain. The organization's response to this complaint also leads to satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on the customer's expectations about what he/she thought could be achieved. This feeling affects the likelihood of repurchase. (Gilly & Gelb 1982) However, Geva and Goldman (1991) argue that the link from satisfaction to intention to repurchase is not causal, as some literature suggests. Instead, they explain that satisfaction reflects the need to justify past purchase behavior, whereas repurchase intentions reflect learning from experience. Thus, in some cases, they fill different functions and cannot be thought of as having a causal relationship.

In recent research, a concept of a loyalty loop is added to the post-purchase stage (Court et al. 2009; Edelman 2010; Edelman & Singer 2015). Court et al. (2009) argue that new customer journeys are actually circular, not linear as the traditional models assume. The loyalty loop illustrates that after the post-purchase stage, customers can re-enter the process and repurchase, which indicates customer loyalty and engagement. This new journey might shorten or completely eliminate the pre-purchase stages. (Court et al. 2009; Edelman 2009; Edelman & Singer 2015) This requires that the customer is satisfied with the purchase and that the bond between the brand and the customer has become strong enough (Edelman 2010).

Customer engagement is a broad topic of its own, and both empirical, including quantitative and qualitative research, and conceptual studies have been conducted on the topic (Islam & Rahman 2016). Even though Vivek et al. (2012) state that customer engagement can occur in every stage of the customer journey from need recognition to post-purchase, it is quite natural to discuss it under this stage. Pansari and Kumar (2017) suggest that a relationship proceeds to engagement when it is satisfied and has emotional bonding. Vivek et al. (2012) list that customer engagement can lead to successful marketing outcomes, such as WOM, loyalty, value, trust, and cross-selling. Sashi (2012) and Kumar and Pansari (2016) agree that engaged customers are more likely to recommend products or services to others, give feedback, references, and provide the message of the firm on social media.

## 2.3. Channels and touch points

Channels work differently in different stages of the purchasing process: they differ in benefits and cost, customers have their own preferences and motivation, and there can be lock-in effects, channel inertia, and cross-channel synergies (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Frambach et al. 2007). On average, a B2B customer uses six different interaction channels during their decision journey (Lingqvist et al. 2015).

Touch points are the sources where customers can interact with the brand and form impressions of it (Court et al. 2009). Ojiako, Chipulu, and Graesser (2012) state that nowadays customers interact with the service provider in some ways all the time having to constantly choose where to engage. They call these engagement choices or mediums touch points. Clark (2013) explains that customers rarely rely on single touch points. Instead, they gather information from different sources forming a rich mixture of impressions.

Channels can be divided into offline and online channels. Figure 4 describes this division and further gives examples of touch points in both offline and online channels. Frambach et al. (2007) underline that it is important to understand in which channels the consumers are present in each stage of the customer journey and try to reach them in both relevant offline and online channels. In their research, they noticed that online channels are preferred before the purchase stage, but regarding complex products, offline channels are more favorable in the actual purchase and post-purchase phases. Furthermore, they noticed that a good experience with the Internet enhances the use of online channels in pre- and post-purchase stages. Neslin, Grewal, Leghorn, and Shankar (2006) argue that one of the most dramatic trends in the shopping environment is the multiplication of channels which customers can use in interacting with the firm. They explain that this multichannel environment creates challenges for companies to manage their customers.

Neslin et al. (2006) list six determinants for customers' channel choice: firm marketing efforts, channel attributes, channel integration, social influence, situational variables, and individual differences. They provide examples of channel attributes such as ease-of-use, price, search convenience, service, risk, privacy, enjoyment, security, information quality, and aesthetic appeal. With channel integration, they refer to the ease of moving from one channel to another. Nicholson, Clarke, and Blakemore (2002) further divide situational factors into the physical setting (for

example weather), social setting (shopping with friends), temporal issues (urgency of the purchase), task definition (a type of product), and antecedent mode (mood).

**Offline**

**Channels**
Television, radio, print, direct WOM, face-to-face, telephone, in-store

**Touch points**
Traditional ad, engaging with employees, visiting the store

**Online**

**Channels**
Website, blog, social media, email, display and search engines, online forum, mobile app, ebook, webinar, podcast

**Touch points**
Search ad, display ad, recommendations, online reviews and ratings, newsletter, social media interactions, eWOM

*Figure 4. Offline and online channels and touch points (Adapted from Clark 2013; Kannan & Li 2017; Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Stein & Ramaseshan 2016; Voorhees et al. 2017)*

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) define four touch point categories: brand-owned, partner-owned, customer-owned, and social/external. *Brand-owned* touch points mean interactions that are created by the firm and are under its control. These include owned media, such as advertising and websites, and elements from the marketing mix, such as price, packaging, and sales force. (Edelman 2010; Lemon & Verhoef 2016) *Partner-owned* touch points are not completely under the firm's control; they are jointly designed and managed with a partner, such as a marketing agency or a distribution partner. The line between these two categories is sometimes difficult to draw. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016)

*Customer-owned* touch points are customer-driven and they are not in the firm's control (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). These can also be referred to as earned media including customer-created channels and communities (Edelman 2010). In the evaluation stage, two-thirds of the touch points involve customer-driven activities (Court et al. 2009). Lemon and Verhoef (2016) argue that they are the most important in the post-purchase stage. The last category, *social/external* touch points

take into account all the aspects that surround the customer, such as other customers, peer influencers, and the environment (Lemon & Verhoef 2016).

In their research, Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) found seven different themes related to touch points: *Atmospheric elements* include website design, ambiance, and store attractiveness, *technological elements* are the ease of use, convenience, and self-service technology, *communicative elements* refer to promotional and informative messages and advertisements, *process elements* cover for example waiting time, *employee-customer interactions* include greetings, helpful employees and personalized service, *customer-customer interaction* are WOM and reviews, and lastly, *product interaction elements* cover quality, assortment, and direct or indirect interactions.

# 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study seeks to create an understanding of the customer decision process in a B2B environment. Among others, Richardson (2010) argues that the best way to increase understanding of customer journeys is to conduct customer interviews and in-context observations. Thus, this study uses a case study approach, and altogether seven potential customer companies are identified and interviewed. This chapter explains more carefully the chosen design and methods for the study. Moreover, the chapter starts with the description of the commissioner company of the study and is finished with a discussion about the validity and reliability of the study.

## 3.1. Description of the commissioner company

This study is conducted for a rapidly growing software company, located in the capital area of Finland. The company operates in a B2B sector targeting mainly large organizations which utilize financial technology and industrial internet in their operations. Examples of potential industry segments are the banking sector, manufacturing, entertainment, public transport, and health care. The company was founded in 2009 and it has a long history in payment solutions. The current core business areas are software development and cloud services. For now, the company operates only in domestic markets.

For the company, it is important to focus both on attracting new customers and developing relationships with existing customers. The current problem with new customers is the uncertainty of who makes the purchase decisions in organizations, how they can be reached, which factors affect their decisions, and what they find most valuable while searching for and evaluating solutions to suit their needs. The second issue is related to current customers: When the company already has one or more consults working in the projects for some organization, how can the relationship be taken to the next level? It would be valuable to broaden the scope inside a current customer organization and get more consults into existing or new projects.

As the company is still relatively small, employing around 30 people, its resources should be utilized as effectively as possible. Most of the employed IT-professionals work as consults in the customer companies, and only a few people are running marketing and sales activities. Therefore, it is highly relevant to know which should be the focal points in the strategies, both in marketing

and in sales. By gaining more knowledge from the buyers' side, it will be easier to concentrate on the right channels, touch points, and content. Especially the digital marketing focus points are in the center of the interest.

## 3.2. Research design

The purpose of this research design is to provide a plan for data collection and analysis. In this thesis, the chosen research method is qualitative research. It is suited for this research as it aims for explaining and understanding the phenomenon, it helps to open the unknown issues in organizational processes, and it simplifies and combines observations into rules that apply to the whole research material. (Alasuutari 1995, 50-52; Doz 2011) Doz (2011) uses the phrase "opening the black box" to describe the nature of qualitative research. Although qualitative research contributes to theory building and testing, it is truly useful in illustrating and emphasizing the key elements and relationships in the theory. Furthermore, qualitative research also provides inspiration for new ideas, research agendas and phenomena worthy of investigation. (Doz 2011)

The type of research suitable for this thesis is exploratory, which is especially useful in trying to understand a problem and gain insight into an unfamiliar topic (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 139). Saunders et al. (2009, 139) explain that there are three principal ways for conducting this kind of research; two of them, a search of the literature and interviewing 'experts' in the subject, are used in this thesis.

A research strategy suited with exploratory research is a case study, which helps in understanding the context of the research and in answering "what?" and "how?" questions  (Saunders et al. 2009, 146). To be exact, this thesis uses multiple case study to establish a better understanding of whether the findings of one case occur in others and whether the results can be generalized in any way. In this study, cases can be seen as different companies, which are compared with each other looking for similarities and differences along the customer journeys.

## 3.3. Data collection and analysis

The methods for data collection and analysis are summarized in Figure 5. Data collection is conducted with interviews. The interviews are semi-structured as the questions are formed beforehand but their order and structure can be changed as the interviews proceed (Hirsjärvi &

Hurme 1995, 36). It is necessary to create the questions beforehand to assure that all relevant topics are being discussed. The quality of semi-structured interviews also allows additional questions when necessary (Saunders et al. 2009, 320). The structure and the interview questions are developed based on the theoretical framework, especially around the five-stage purchasing process. They can be seen in Appendix 2.

**Data collection**
- Purposeful informant selection
- Semi-structured interviews

**Data analysis**
- Content analysis
- Cross-case analysis
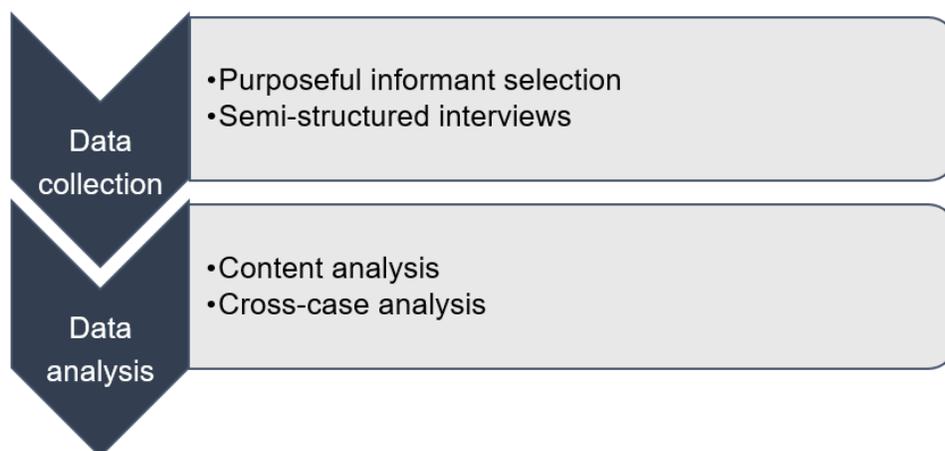
*Figure 5. Data collection and analysis*

Following the example of Stein and Ramaseshan (2016), the use of too specific terminology or jargon is avoided in the interviews. The interviewees are selected based on two factors: they play a key role in the purchase decisions in the organization, and they are available for the interviews in the suitable time. The basic information about the interviews is presented in Table 2 below. Overall the primary research data consists of nine interviews, conducted via phone or face-to-face, within two months. The interviewees represent seven companies of different sizes and industry segments. Both public and private own companies are included.

The analysis of the interviews starts with listening to the recorded interviews and transcribing them to increase the reliability of the study and ease the analysis process. After that, each interview is analyzed individually in its own context. This is followed by a comparison of all the interviews. Qualitative content analysis is chosen for the analysis methods, as it is especially suited for situations where the context is trivial and meanings are not obvious (Schreier 2012, 2). Schreier (2012, 2) explains that it comes into use when there is a need to describe material that requires some degree of interpretation, which is usually the case in qualitative research.

*Table 2. Basic information about the conducted interviews*

| Company | Interviewee | Data gathering method | Time and duration of the interview |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bank 1 | Development Manager | Face-to-face interview | 8.1.2019<br>25 min |
| Entertainment service company | Development Manager | Face-to-face interview | 25.1.2019<br>38 min |
| Entertainment service company | ICT Supply Manager | Face-to-face interview | 25.1.2019<br>22 min |
| Health service company | Development Manager | Face-to-face interview | 4.2.2019<br>33 min* |
| Health service company | Service Director | Face-to-face interview | *4.2.2019*<br>*33 min* *<br><br>*Conducted at the same time* |
| Finance company 1 | CEO | Phone interview | 13.2.2019<br>46 min |
| Manufacturing company | R&D Manager, Software | Face-to-face interview | 19.2.2019<br>42 min |
| Finance company 2 | Director, Mobile and Point of Sale domains | Phone interview | 21.2.2019<br>24 min |
| Bank 2 | Director, Head of Information Security | Face-to-face interview | 5.3.2019<br>28 min |

As the findings are reported on a company-level, the customer journey of each company is seen as a case. Because these cases are compared with each other, cross-case analysis is used. It suits for comparing commonalities and differences in case studies. The method helps in defining factors which might have affected the outcomes of the cases, seeking explanations to why cases are similar or different, making sense in unique or new findings, or digging deeper into concepts and theories. (Cruzes, Dybå, Runeson & Höst 2015)

## 3.4. Reliability and validity

When evaluating the results of this study, the reliability and validity of the research should be taken into account. Reliability refers to the repeatability of the study - does it yield the same results if conducted multiple times? (Babbie 2014, 152) One of the problem points in qualitative research is subjectivity. Unlike in quantitative research, where the findings and interpretations are almost equal no matter who does the research, in qualitative research, the context and the researcher are in significant roles (Schreier 2012, 26). Babbie (2014, 153) explains that especially with a single observer there is a danger of misinterpretation, as a person's own feelings affect how he/she interprets things. Thus, one cannot be sure how much of a certain situation is observed and how much originates from the researcher.

The concept of interviewer bias is somewhat related to this. With the term, Saunders et al. (2009, 326) refer to the issue of the comments, tone, and non-verbal behavior of the interviewer affecting the responses from the interviewee. In order to minimize both of these discussed problems regarding the actions of the researcher, in this study, the researcher tries to be as objective as possible and not guide the interviews in any predefined direction regarding the answers. Furthermore, the interpretations are conducted solely based on the transcribed data.

Another form of bias is interviewee bias. Saunders et al. (2009, 326-327) explain that especially in semi-structured interviews, interviewees may be sensitive in revealing all the details of the topic, which may result in getting only a partial image of the phenomenon. To avoid this, the atmosphere in the interviews was made as comfortable as possible. The interviewer explained that neither the interviewee nor the presented company will be mentioned by name and that the interviewee can discuss the topic in a free manner with no need to hurry.

The validity, on the other hand, concerns whether the research findings are truly what they are said to be about. This refers to the appropriateness of the chosen data collection methods, the accuracy of analysis and conclusions, and generalizability of the results. The generalizability is sometimes referred to as external validity. (Saunders et al. 2009, 157-158) In this study, the author does not claim that the results would allow any generalization. Rather the goal is to understand and explain what the situation is in the chosen case companies. Internal validity, that is the "extent to which findings can be attributed to interventions rather than any flaws in your research design" (Saunders et al. 2009, 593) is ensured by carefully chosen interview questions, which are drawn

from the theory, and objectivity in the interview situations and in the analysis of the results, as already discussed in relation to reliability. Furthermore, Saunders et al. (2009, 159) highlight that it is essential to choose an appropriate theoretical framework, as it is likely to shape the conclusions. The theoretical framework of this study was carefully chosen, and the study follows it in a systematic way. However, as the goal was to challenge the old linear models regarding customer journeys, in the end, a new model is created, which illustrates the findings from the data. The discussion on how further studies could strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings is continued in Chapter 5.3.

# 4. FINDINGS

In this chapter, the focus is on describing the results of the interviews. The findings are divided into eight sections. The first five chapters (4.1.-4.5.) retell the stages in the theoretical framework. During the interviews, these stages were not mentioned in a compulsory way; rather the interviewees were encouraged to freely tell how their buying processes move forward. However, most of the steps described fall quite nicely into the original model and are thus presented in five parts. Chapter 4.6. describes the findings regarding channels and touch points, and Chapter 4.7. discusses the content preferences of the buyers. The findings are concluded by presenting a revised model of the theoretical framework in Chapter 4.8.

## 4.1. Need recognition

In all of the interviewed companies, the process started with some kind of need recognition. The needs originate from different sources. Most of the time, the need seems to come from inside the organization. It can arise from a business unit, a singular person, or originate from the business. For example, a business unit might realize they need a consult, or the buying company knows that the life cycle of their current product is coming to an end, so they need to start a new buying process. One exception was a statement from Manufacturing company, as their R&D Manager noted that sometimes a product idea can come from sellers in their industry, and in some cases "the line can become dim and we believe that we ourselves figured out that this is what we need."

The person or group of people, who wants to find a solution for the need, has the responsibility to get approval for the purchase. In some companies, this approval is sought before doing anything else, and in others, the approval might already require broader information search. According to Bank 2, the process can also be more iterative and they can schedule multiple checks along the whole journey, where the decision is made whether to continue with the purchase or not.

Need recognition stage also includes intra-organizational discussion about resources and own competences - if own capacity or skills are not sufficient, the buying firm starts to look outside its own organization. On the other hand, if there are people with the right skillset free inside the organization, the purchase does not move forward. Thus, the customer journey can sometimes stop at need recognition stage.

*"We'll just raise a hand that we need something and state that this is really good and we really do need it. Then we'll just get funding for it. We'll go to the treasurer and it starts there - as agilely as possible." (Development Manager, Bank 1)*

*"Business recognizes the need and sees whether some opportunity is something we need to put more capacity into. [...] Then we realize that we don't have enough capacity to do all of these things or we are missing some special know-how needed for that specific task." (Director, Finance company 2)*

Bank 2 bases their purchases on yearly planning sessions where they figure out what needs to be done, and whether they have enough time, competences, and resources for the purchases. Health service company implies in a similar way that their business follows an action plan created each fall. Manufacturing company stated that there is not a clear process for planning needs, but they mainly relate to concrete projects as there is not enough capacity to investigate matters if they are not meant for a specific case.

It also seems to vary a lot whether a need or an idea is clear at the beginning of the buying process. Some of the companies explained that they have cases where they know exactly what is needed right from the start, whereas a few companies argued that it is not always that simple. For example, with new projects in the manufacturing business, the first idea can be quite hazy before the buying process moves forward and the buyers gather more information (Manufacturing company).

## 4.2. Information search

In some companies, the purchase needs to be approved by someone with higher authority, which requires some form of information search. The accountable team has to gather material for the presentation directed for superiors such as the CEO, the board of directors, or the executive committee. In Entertainment service company this means writing introduction material about costs, schedule, scenarios about what will happen if the purchase is executed or if it is not, and statements from different experts, for example from the information security team.

Both Health service company and Finance company 2 talked about creating a business case, which helps them to justify the budget for the purchase. This can include estimations of how much value the purchase would bring to the company. Finance company 1 mentions that some of their purchases require advance permission from the financial institution or at minimum risk analyses

and descriptions to prove that the technical quality of the purchase reaches the required level in the industry.

*"We have started with a value-adding base and when we have had the hook that this might be interesting, we have started to count the business case from the business perspective: What does this mean for us in practice? How long is the payback time? How fast can we reach the break-even point?" (Service Manager, Health service company)*

It is mainly in the hands of the project manager or other specialists in the responsible unit to handle information search. For example, in Manufacturing company, the team consists of an R&D Manager, a project manager, a more technical architect, someone with design knowledge and someone from the procurement department. The CEO's role is to question whether the financial reports and upper-level risk analysis are understandable so that the board of directors can make the decision (Finance company 1). Finance company 1 argued that in smaller and possibly also unprofitable companies, the decision-making is more minimized and it concentrates on the CEO of the company because the financial requirements to do purchases are more constrained. Also, some of the companies agreed that in smaller companies, fewer people are needed to push the purchases forward. For example, in Finance company 1 this number lies somewhere between one to five members.

Some of the larger case companies explained that especially with larger purchases, a procurement department is more involved in handling the contracts and issues such as IPRs and NDAs, payment conditions, and frame agreements. They also help with prices and monitor them on an overall level. For example, if they notice that a supplier lowers their prices, they can pressure other suppliers to meet this lowered price. Their information about the prices can also be helpful in setting boundaries so that the buying unit knows what to ask and not to agree on too high prices.

*"I guess one strategic goal is that we wouldn't have to come up with a new subcontractor and supplier for every need. Surely they [procurement department] do such a job that they try to look that 'hey, these are our biggest suppliers' and we need to take care of the relationship towards them." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

*"I have noticed that they have there [in the procurement department] some kind of a ghost line of when to support a bit more. Usually, it goes such that if the yearly value of the agreement is relatively small, they*

*mainly check that the commercial terms are okay, and the rest of the negotiations are left for the business units themselves." (Service Director, Health service company)*

Multiple interviewees stated that it depends on the willingness and ability of the accountables how active they want to be in this stage. For example, in Bank 1 some people are used to doing more thorough analyses while others prefer a short and straightforward way of doing things. Furthermore, the fact whether the purchase is a rebuy, modified rebuy or a new task, and whether the buying firm is familiar with the purchase category seem to affect information search, as some companies explained that with new purchases they have to put more effort on this phase.

*"In practice, it starts from persons' personal preferences and awareness of what is out there. Willingness and ability to look for options." (CEO, Finance company 1)*

In the interviewed companies this stage also covers the formalization of requirements, preparation of procurement material and a questionnaire for potential suppliers, analyses such as SWOT, cost, and risk analyses, and the decision about the criteria for decision-making. All of the companies agreed that these tasks are the most time-consuming part of the whole journey. The need for information depends on the purchased issue. Some companies stated that if the financial value of the purchase is smaller, the scope of the information search is narrower and the duration of the purchase is shorter.

*"It depends on what we are purchasing. If we're buying a system, then there is a long pre-investigation, and market research, and time. We meet suppliers, visit their events, and gather material for requirement specifications. If it's purely a contract supplier of ours in question, then it's straightforward." (Development Manager, Entertainment service company)*

*"When it's a question of a smaller purchase, I might give feedback that 'don't spend so much time on it, because the monetary value is nothing'." (CEO, Finance company 1)*

*"...there is an active inner circle which pushes the purchase forward - from about three to five people - but the whole circle, if we think about the whole approval chain or in some cases control support, expands to at least 20 in organizations of this size." (Service Manager, Health service company)*

In line with the notion about whether the idea is clear or not at the beginning of the buying process, the formalization of requirements also varies. Not all the companies felt that strict requirements are needed in this stage already. R&D Manager (Manufacturing company) explained that there

cannot necessarily be a list of requirements when the idea if still hazy. Instead, their process starts with feelings and builds up as the firm discusses with suppliers. On the contrary, Entertainment service company gave clear examples of where the requirements originate from (for example design, environmental conditions, and business) and talked about "a requirement list", which can consist of multiple hundreds of issues. All in all, the companies summarized that requirements help in looking for the right supplier and solution. When these requirements are well specified, the suppliers know what they are agreeing on and the buying firm can compare and screen the options based on the list.

*"The world is changing a bit. Before, there was an idea that we need to spec really strictly what we want, which results in a questionnaire for suppliers, and then we count that this one has 15 crosses and this one 13, so we'll choose the first one. I don't believe in that. Every R&D firm have uncertainties in the beginning, and no one really knows what is coming, so a more agile operating model, where we start now and the plans become more precise along the journey - that is where this is going more and more." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

*"You need to know who to buy from. It requires expertise from the buyer. You need to set all the criteria and requirements. In that competitive tendering [a recent case that was discussed] we have at the moment 400 different requirements." (Development Manager, Entertainment service company)*

In this stage, the buyers start to search for potential suppliers. This means reaching out to own contacts via phone, email, or LinkedIn, visiting different events and fairs, and asking colleagues and friends. A couple of the companies highlighted that it is important to make sure there is more than one potential supplier so that comparison and price competition is possible, the decision is not made only with emotions, and just overall that the supply power does not rise too high. Bank 2 picks three to five suppliers for whom to send an invitation for tenders. Health service company reminded that sometimes the purchased product is so specific that there are only a few suppliers in the markets.

*"It's screening and examining external networks." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

*"We discussed with suppliers about what they have to offer. We went to fairs to take a look at what is offered there, what kind of equipment, and who potential providers are. One has to know the field. We try to know what we are buying." (Development Manager, Entertainment service company)*

*"When I have realized that this could be useful and have already met the supplier and they have sent an offer, costs and so on, I start to - let's say - warm up."* (Service Manager, Health service company)

Some companies argued that in the consulting business, the supplying firm is on the top of mind first, and after that buyers start to think about the know-how and personality of the needed consult. Overall, recognizability and history seem to be in big roles when screening suppliers. In many cases, familiar suppliers - current ones or the ones who buyers have used in the past - get a head start. Finance company 1 considered it to be a slow process where over the years perceptions about different companies are build up and companies get into the awareness and consideration set of the experts.

*"In many cases, it might be quite straightforward that we have a few collaborating partners of which we know we'll choose another, and we'll continue with the one that happens to answer the phone more happily."* (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)

*"I have the best knowledge from ICT about which contracts we have, so I can exploit my know-how and tell that these are already our contract suppliers and you should ask them whether they have something to offer for that competitive tendering."* (ICT Supply Manager, Entertainment service company)

Some companies implied that new players have a better shot when buyers move to a business area where they are new at. In these cases, old suppliers might not be suitable or buyers consciously want to pick a new supplier to learn from. R&D Manager of Manufacturing company highlighted that the way their managers think and act affects new purchases and the attitude towards R&D. This, on the other hand, affects the ability and willingness to take risks.

*"...if we start to do something brand new, it's only fair to also look to the other side of the fence."* (Director, Bank 2)

*"If the doing is something we've done before, then the old ones [suppliers], but for example, in this one case we had a prejudice that we don't want anyone existing but we want new perspectives, and we didn't even ask any easy and familiar contacts."* (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)

## 4.3. Evaluation of alternatives

Some kind of evaluation occurs in the case companies' buying journeys before it is even decided whether a new solution is needed. Comparing the current solution with a new one can either stop the purchase process as the buyer realizes the current one is better or sufficient, or the process can continue further if a new solution has enough potential.

*"There have been cases where the solution challenges the current service provider, and it has been more like comparing which would be better." (Service Manager, Health service company)*

When the buying firm is ready with their procurement material, the journey can continue to negotiations or to a more formal competitive tendering. The interviewed private-owned companies explained that it depends on the purchase which style of purchasing they choose. In competitive tendering, invitations for tenders are sent to wanted suppliers for example via email, or in public procurement they are published online. As an example, Health service company sent the invitations to 10 companies, of which they chose the best three to the comparison round. They were asked to send their official offers based on which two were chosen for the final round, where the procurement department tried to get the prices down by negotiating with both suppliers simultaneously. Manufacturing company agreed with choosing the number of suppliers which does not take too much time to compare. From two to five is suggested as ideal as they are still manageable and one can provoke enough discussion and sparring.

*"It usually narrows down to two or max three options. [...] In most cases it is the only option based on our own timing. If you move forward to negotiations with too many suppliers, it takes a lot of time." (Service Manager & Development Manager, Health service company)*

Finance company 2 explained that they have three different scenarios based on which they choose the suppliers: The first option is to use offshore partners in for example China or India to get the costs down. If the work is more strategic, executing it nearshore is the second option. The third option is grounded on know-how: If special knowledge is needed, the company looks for local suppliers. Bank 2 implied a bit similarly about the criticalness of the purchase - if they are outsourcing actions that are critical, the qualification criteria get more strict.

*"If we're not outsourcing critical operations, we can look at things a bit more loosely and if it's a very critical task, requirements become more strict." (Director, Bank 2)*

The process differs a bit in public procurement, as Entertainment service company explained that if the monetary value of the purchase surpasses a certain line, they cannot restrict the firms who can make offers. Competitive tendering is therefore open for all firms, and thus the number of options can be much broader than in the processes of private-owned companies.

*"We can't choose. In competitive tendering over X thousand euros, everyone in the EU can make an offer. We are aiming at knowing at least some of the suppliers and that they are found. [...] Public procurement is in many ways slow and stiff. On the other hand, it forces us to act in a vigorous way. When we have a process like that, we might get better deals at the end." (Development Manager, Entertainment service company)*

*"All public purchases are published in Hilma, which is this kind of a portal. Every supplier, whether they're from Finland or from Timbuktu, can offer, as long as they fill certain criteria set for a company." (ICT Supply Manager, Entertainment service company)*

Some companies, such as Finance company 1 and Entertainment service company, use frame agreements. They create a top list of suppliers (for example 10 suppliers), to whom new invitations for tenders are always sent. Finance company 1 explained that only with a good reason, the invitation can be sent to a supplier who is not on the list. Examples of mentioned evaluation criteria used in deciding about frame agreement suppliers were price, knowledge, ability to innovate and develop new ways of acting, continues interactivity, the area of operation, strong knowledge of software methods, and agility. The list of suppliers is updated from time to time - for example, yearly or every three years.

*"There are different criteria, which each company chooses, but the price is always the number one factor." (Director, Finance company 2)*

Before a supplier earns a spot in the comparison set, it needs to pass the requirements. There are usually requirements for both the company and the solution. For example, with technical products, buyers perform tests to evaluate technical features. Development Manager (Entertainment service company) pointed out that all the wanted criteria affect the price by raising it higher. Therefore, buyers sometimes have a hard time choosing what they wish for.

*"First, we'll check the requirements for a company that it fills them. Then we'll check the requirements for a device. Only after that, if the company fills the requirements, we can move to the comparison phase." (Development Manager, Entertainment service company)*

*"We compare the available options and their features, costs, risks, and opportunities. In real life, everything is generated iteratively. In many cases, it is iteratively formed decision-making material, which is grounded through a few comment rounds. Actually, it is also the iterative way of working, which automatically limits the options. In the beginning, we might think that we have a, b, c, and d options but when the responsible unit familiarizes themselves more they notice that b and c options are impossible - let's say that they don't reach the quality criterion." (CEO, Finance company 1)*

All of the companies stated that whether the purchased matter is a consult or a product, such as a technical system, affects both the evaluation style and criteria. If the buying firm needs a consult, they use interviews and more soft criteria in the evaluation. In the previous stage, buyers were explained to think about the company first. Here, the order of importance seems to turn around and the person becomes more important than the employing company. All of the interviewees agreed that the knowledge and personality of a consult weight more than the firm the employee is coming from.

*"In a consulting business, consults are the ones doing the actual work, and the firm can have a certain brand and image which is a form of art as the group might change." (Director, Bank 2)*

*"When we purchase people and their working time, the know-how and motivation of a singular person solve the case, not the company where he/she works at. There's no point in purchasing a bad employee from a good company, whereas sometimes there can be a really good employee who can - in some people's opinion - work at a wrong firm, but you can't see it in everyday work." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

*"Perhaps in some level, we check the background, reputation, and history of the firm. But what matters the most and what has the biggest weight is personality and what the person will be doing." (Development Manager, Bank 1)*

With physical products and other solutions, hard parameters, such as price, quality, and power have more weight. Some companies implied that it is easier to give points based on criteria like this. Multiple interviewees stated that the most important values are price and quality and the balance with those two. Director of Bank 2 explained that a cheap product might be of low quality,

and the total cost can raise a lot if more external resources are needed to patch the chosen supplier's work. Other important criteria listed were previous experience in similar cases, industry knowledge, and the concrete proposal.

*"In larger firms, it typically goes so that the price is one driver, know-how is the second, and the third one is that the right competencies are found for the need." (Director, Finance company 2)*

*"...we have learned from experience that if the supplier has worked in similar kinds of cases, of the same size and for a similar kind of firm than us, the expectations can be better." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

*"The proposal is one of the most important ones. It usually contains the service provider's some kind of view of how the job should be done, how long it might take, what kind of end results will there be, and how much it costs us. This whole package is what we compare between different actors." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

In the interviewed companies, the size of the supplying company can make a difference in some cases. For example, Bank 2 chooses a big firm if they want to make sure the company has what it takes to execute the needed project. The highlighted advantage with smaller firms was that the customership can be a bigger issue for them, which was perceived to raise service quality and make operations more agile. Heath service company gave a similar kind of answer when discussing the choice between a familiar and a new supplier; new suppliers can have more motivation to give more personal service and stretch their offers for a more personalized direction. Finance company 2 trusts that firms who have done certain things in the past can do them again.

*"They [new suppliers] usually have a certain hunger to get the customership and they are ready to customize their regular operations for us." (Service Director, Health service company)*

In public procurement, the evaluation of alternatives strictly follows the chosen criteria. If something is not mentioned in the criteria, it cannot affect the evaluation (Entertainment service company). In other interviewed, private-owned, companies the evaluation was said to be more flexible and even personal experiences and emotions can affect the end result. Bank 2 uses multiple rounds of negotiations to clarify own perceptions about the possibilities. Director of the company also stated that if numbers from the judging (counted using the set criteria, weighted

values, and evaluation scores) contradict with a buyer's own intuition and feelings, it should be checked whether everything is "alright" - not just follow the numbers blindly.

*"I believe it's important in the offer phase that I get to discuss with the suppliers, so when the offers arrive at least one round is needed to get more specific ones because own perceptions change and become more precise after the first invitation for tenders." (Director, Bank 2)*

Not all of the criteria are stated out load in an official way, but if there are two suppliers otherwise equal, some "extra" criteria might have an impact. For example, R&D Manager (Manufacturing company) keeps references, location, and additional services the supplier might offer in mind. Persons doing the evaluations vary between companies and purchases. Usually, it is the same team who have participated in the information search. The group might include managers, persons with more technical know-how, a foreman, and the team where the consult would work in.



*Figure 6. Examples of different criteria buying companies use in the evaluation of products or services, consults, and companies*

All the different evaluation criteria collected from the interviews are listed in Figure 6. The observed elements are divided into two sections: in the left, the two columns represent evaluation

elements the case companies use in the evaluation of a solution to be purchased, in this context a product, a service, or a consult. The third column in the right represents company level evaluation and different criteria used to evaluate supplying companies. Price seems to be the only fixed criteria, and the others vary based on companies' own interests and the purchase category, among others.

## 4.4. Purchase decision

In the case companies, the highest decision-making power differs case-by-case. Usually, it seems to fall into the hands of the managers or directors, but the people who the decision affects are being heard. Development Manager (Bank 1) admitted that if they are hiring a consult, the team's, where the consult will be placed, opinion has a lot of weight. Only a few times have they had to solve disagreements between the team and the manager. In this stage, some companies present a summary for the management. This includes explaining all the examined options, top candidates, and decision criteria for the final choice.

As discussed in the evaluation section, the final decision can originate strictly from the results of the competitive tendering or the order can just be directional. In public procurement, the decision is automatically the outcome from the scoring. Bank 2 explained that they sometimes make a decision straight based on the evaluation round, or they may ask the top two candidates new offers to strengthen the competition aspect and get the prices down. Finance company 2 highlighted that in the final decision the entirety is the key, and the total price and know-how are the most important values to look at.

In this stage, the procurement department usually participates more as they handle the contractual issues. Bank 2 argued that if the supplier already has a frame agreement, the process is simpler and the made agreement is a commission agreement. If, on the other hand, the supplier is new, the formulation of a frame agreement and all the necessary attachments take a bit more effort.

The banks and finance companies highlighted that have to be careful with information security. Therefore it is important to negotiate whether the work happens in the buyer's own business premises or whether the supplier processes the data in their own systems (Bank 2). Health service company believes that negotiations are important and both parties should agree on all the aspects

to avoid problems in the future; for example, jointly decided invoice criteria can reduce conflicts later on. Furthermore, the purchase stage includes a service level agreement (SLA) and arranging practicalities so that the actual work can begin as fluently as possible.

*"...when I have purchased things in the past few years, I have maybe learned to demand a bit more in the agreement negotiations. Perhaps it has been more of a clear division of responsibility and articulation of what each thing actually means." (Service Manager, Health service company)*

When asked about the duration from the need recognition to the decision, the scope in the answers varied between one week and multiple years. The hiring of a consult seems to be the quickest process, at its best one week, and the longest purchases are the ones that cross EU borders and require competitive tendering. Finance company 1 further explained that the duration largely depends on whether they are in a hurry and whether they find a solution they are happy with. The most common cases seem to last a couple of months.

There are also emotions involved in B2B purchases, as buyers are regular people. Finance companies 1 and 2, and Manufacturing company all state that there can be conflicts and disagreements among the people in the buying firm. However, the purchase process forces towards decision-making which is not only based on emotions. The disagreements can be related to whether the suppliers are mapped out in an explicit way, and the price and quality of different options. According to Finance company 2, disputes can emerge between different units inside the organization about good resources. Also, the sub-contractor can change the employees in a project, which can easily cause conflicts.

*"People have personal opinions and it always evokes feelings. [...] It may relate to whether the options are mapped out thoroughly enough and the rational level of price and quality. People can have different preferences. [...] I wouldn't say it differs from normal people's decision-making process that everyone is a bit different and therefore in many cases the purchase process forces that decisions are not made with feelings." (CEO, Finance company 1)*

*"There are discussions from time to time that why from here or why from there. Probably it would be everyone's dream in some way if there was just one company where to buy from." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

## 4.5. Post-purchase behavior

Most of the interviewed companies organize some kind of follow-up actions after the actual work starts. The ambition is that at least strategic suppliers are followed regularly. Depending on the duration and size of the purchase, different possibilities mentioned were a steering group, monthly meetings, support models, or freer communication between contact persons. Entertainment service company listed that there needs to be an assigned service manager and change management manager in data centers. Furthermore, the contract can contain maintenance services and a guarantee.

The main goal of these post-purchase activities is to make sure that everything runs smoothly, problems are solved as fast as possible, and suppliers can develop their activities. If reclamations are needed, Entertainment service company uses a person - in this case, ICT Supply Manager - who is not working daily with the supplier, to avoid any conflicts. The companies also highlighted that it very much depends on the selling firm whether they stay in contact or not.

*"Suppliers have different practices. Some firms want to stay in closer collaboration and some just send bills. [...] The firms from where we have more employers, meaning that we are a more significant customer, want to take better care of us versus if we have one guy from company Z..." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

*"It very much depends on the suppliers' salesman and the agreement accountable. It can be that we have signed the agreement in 2015 and after that, the work has been done without so much meeting, except in problem situations." (ICT Supply Manager, Entertainment service company)*

*"We [buyer and seller] go to have a cup of coffee or a beer once in a while, or have lunch in a relaxed environment and discuss our current and future needs." (Development Manager, Bank 1)*

Sometimes the ambition level is not reached in follow up activities. The CEO of Finance company 1 stated that due to limited time, post-purchase activities wind up in many cases under "unscrupulous prioritizing" where neither the seller nor the buying firm is self-imposed enough to start a goal-directed follow-up project. To evaluate the success of the purchase based on previous purchases, Finance company 1 divides the costs with quality. The CEO also implied that if someone inside the buying firm does "bad" purchases on a continuous basis, his/her power can be agilely lowered or on the contrary, the authority can rise if the inner feedback is positive.

Sellers often try to cross-sell something extra for existing customers. This brings the discussion to the concept of a loyalty loop. It has already been stated multiple times that old or current suppliers might have a head start on new projects. The risks are smaller with the known supplier, as buyers know the company has succeeded on other similar projects before. At least it seems that history with the buyer helps the supplier to get into the negotiations or competitive tendering process. However, many companies argued that in the actual evaluation phase, they try to compare both new and old suppliers in an equal way.

*"Surely it is in the sellers' DNA that they need to contact us. At least my phone rings all the time. [...] I want to tender out once in a while and put them [suppliers] against each other equally to check what is - not just the price level - but also the competence level and what kind of career stories suppliers offer us." (Director, Bank 2)*

Entertainment service company argued that especially more critical products or services require post-purchase actions, and due to this the relationship between buyers and sellers can evolve and strengthen. It leaves a good and lasting impression and feeling when the supplier executes what they promised. Some form of customer engagement was observed when successful projects were discussed. Many interviewees stated that they do share their experiences forward to their colleagues and peers. Besides WOM, loyalty and trust also seem to originate from satisfaction, but they were mentioned to be built over the years.

## 4.6. Channels and touch points

The interest in different channels and touch points can be summarized with two questions: What and when? The goal of the interviews was to find out which channels and touch points are used in which phases of the journey. Furthermore, the interest was in the use of offline versus online media. Most of the channels that came up in the interviews can timely be placed in the pre-purchase phase of the customer journey. Especially information search and evaluation of different suppliers and their offerings require the use of multiple different channels. Besides the pre-purchase stages, important touch points were also perceived in the post-purchase stage. All the spotted offline and online channels and touch points are listed in Figure 7 below.
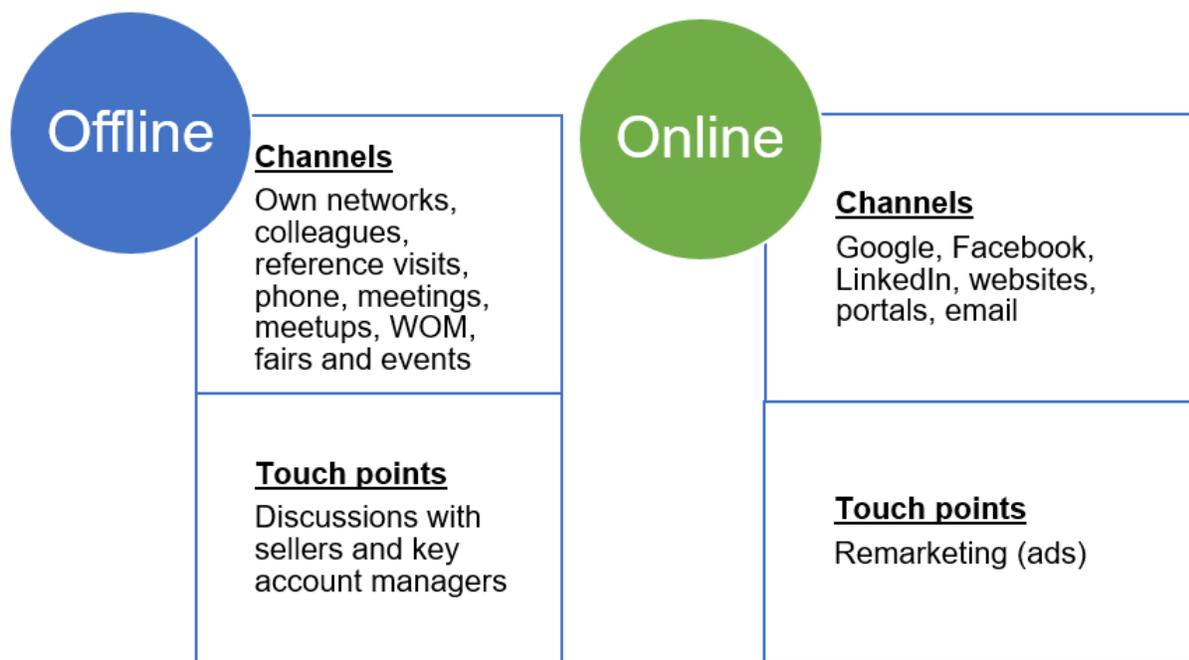
*Figure 7. Offline and online channels and touch points based on empirical findings*

In the offline side, the importance of buyers' own networks came up. Contacts collected over the years and saved to the phone are in a key position when starting to look for potential suppliers. Face-to-face meetings, suppliers' events, and different kind of fairs still have a strong place in the channel spectrum, even though digital channels are becoming more and more important. According to many interviewees, it largely depends on the supplier and especially their key account manager or salesman, how active they are in keeping touch and setting up meetings.

*"...of course all the fairs and events, where I collect material and of course the agreement accountables collect material, but some suppliers are quite active in staying in touch and calling and booking meetings. It very much depends on the supplier's account manager and what kind of person he/she is." (ICT Supply Manager, Entertainment service company)*

Entertainment service company brought up reference visits meaning that the company meets other buying firms and asks them about suppliers to get more knowledge on their know-how and past work. Furthermore, the knowledge of colleagues inside buyers' own organizations can be of great help; different departments and teams have usually used different suppliers and can easily share their experiences - both good and bad.

Word of mouth was brought up in multiple interviews. It is used both inside the organization and between peers from other companies. For example, Manufacturing company shares experiences on a regular basis inside their organization. However, R&D Manager explained that sometimes confidentiality agreements limit the possibilities to share information outside the buying organization. Although WOM originates from successful projects in the past, it has an especially important place in the information search stage when buyers are gathering suppliers for their consideration set.

*"I appreciate if a peer recommends someone. Especially if he/she is someone I rely on, I trust that he/she won't recommend anything useless. I give it weight if someone recommends me or if I have asked and they tell me honestly about their experiences - and I also tell them forward." (Director, Bank 2)*

*"We have told others and sometimes even paid a bonus for a subcontract if all has gone really well. So that is also possible." (Director, Finance company 2)*

As for digital channels, Google was the first thing that was mentioned in almost all of the interviews. It seems to be an especially important tool in cases where experts search for new information and map out options they do not know beforehand. Based on the answers, sometimes the information search can be quite hazardous.

*"The ones who are not 'contract suppliers' are basically selected through Google and it's a shot in the dark who we'll meet and see." (ICT Supply Manager, Entertainment service company)*

*"It depends on the experts' knowledge about available technologies and suppliers, and Google is indeed a central tool when specialists map out options they don't know." (CEO, Finance company 1)*

*"...we have visited some events to get some kind of knowledge of them [suppliers] or just googling what options there are in general. Usually, we are left with two or three options." (Development Manager, Health service company)*

*"If we map out new cooperating partners, Google sings and we can also ask our acquaintances who they have done these kinds of things with." (Director, Bank 2)*

Manufacturing company puts social media above Google; Facebook and LinkedIn are mentioned as the most important media to source information. R&D Manager of the company also seems to see remarketing as a positive thing. As an example, the manager stated that if he googles

something and based on that finds an interesting ad on Facebook about an upcoming meetup, he would gladly attend it and network with suppliers there. The websites of the suppliers were also mentioned multiple times, and they are in a key position especially in the information search and evaluation phases.

*"They [used channels] are those digital channels and networking in general - colleagues and a strong network is used, which is built for example in LinkedIn." (Director, Finance company 2)*

*"Especially in the early stage ergo in the finding phase, their [suppliers] own websites are a good thing." (Development Manager, Bank 1)*

When talking about hiring consults, Development Manager of Bank 1 raised up two channels: Firstly, suppliers can send emails containing CVs of their available consults. Many times this kind of approach from suppliers towards the buying firm does not hit the exact time of the need. However, when the need arises, the emails can come to mind and the manager can search for them later on. The other approach is a special portal or a website of the supplier, where the buyer is given an account and he/she can search for employees who are available for projects at the needed time.

*"...I have just said that they [suppliers] can send CVs through email. I get quite a lot of them, so don't get mad if I don't reply or if there is not a need at that moment. Often a week or two goes by and just then I remember they were there and I check them." (Development Manager, Bank 1)*

Some of the buyers hoped for more collaboration and proactive planning with the suppliers. ICT Supply Manager of Entertainment service company wishes every supplier would have a yearly clock which sets the time for the meetings. This way both parties could benefit, as a better prediction of future projects becomes possible.

*"Among other things I met a supplier yesterday with whom I went through all our plans for this year so that they know how to schedule what they can offer and when. This is what I hope for more with suppliers because then we can also benefit when they can reserve the best workers for us and predict our objectives." (ICT Supply Manager, Entertainment service company)*

At least Director from Bank 2 feels that so-called cold calls, emails and LinkedIn messages from unknown sellers are annoying. He explains that they usually come from foreign companies and

mainly take time away from more important tasks, not giving any value for the buyer. However, familiar suppliers also contact the interviewees on a weekly basis, but that is seen as a neutral or a positive thing. Sometimes the calls can lead to meetings - official ones or more relaxed ones, for example over lunch or coffee.

## 4.7. Content preferences

It is important to know which channels consumers use, but also to figure out why they use them and what they are looking for through them. Therefore, the preferences for different kind of content were observed in the interviews. The need for content naturally settles over the same stages in customer journeys as the use of different channels. The most important form of content for most of the interviewees was references. To be more exact, references in a textual format were seen as the most valuable. One interviewee specified that PowerPoint shows with hundreds of logos of reference companies do not "do the trick". Instead, all of the companies agreed that it is a great way to prove one's credibility and know-how with cases where it is explained more deeply what the supplier actually has done for other companies. Besides these mentioned presentations, references can be placed on websites and also explained orally, as one interviewee pointed out that not all references are allowed to be published online.

Regarding company websites, a clear and professional style is clearly preferred. Furthermore, one interviewee specified that it matters what a supplier raises up as key points in their own business:

*"In websites: the language, clarity... and I must say that I do certain kind of consumer-like comparison and look what the supplier highlights of their own business. Even though many suppliers produce the same service, they can emphasize completely different things." (Service Manager, Health service company)*

R&D Manager from Manufacturing company stated that information about events, other firms, and all current topics is useful. The channels mentioned in this context were Facebook and live events. The manager also explained that the ability to compact issues is important; finding the core matter in the discussions with the buyer and the ability to meet the need bravely with the supplier's own view creates trust.

*"It creates an illusion about the added value that they know how this would go and all we have to do is go along." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

R&D Manager further continued that a lot of suppliers just state that they will do whatever the buying firm wants, which is not necessarily the best way. Besides people, Manufacturing company wants some added value; they want to know what the supplier thinks, and what other than the actual solution the firm can offer. One example of a way to produce added value is educating the buyer. One way to achieve this is to organize trainings about current hot topics.

*"...'if you become our customer, we organize common information sharing cases for all our customers, so you'll also get to hear and learn how others do these things'. Or that 'Furthermore, we have this kind of education system here'..." (R&D Manager, Manufacturing company)*

Finance company 1 agreed that it is important to give a concrete and clear vision of the offered solution. Naturally, there are uncertainties but the director of the company explained that they should not be highlighted in any way. Otherwise, the buyer will have reason to believe that the supplier does not know what they are doing. Other companies agreed that content that proves that the supplier is experienced and has prerequisites for acting in the needed position is seen valuable. One thing that CEO of Finance company 1 warns about is that sellers should not push own ideas forward before actually listening to what the buyer needs.

Another important spot for well-designed content is CVs of consults. All of the companies agreed that with a good CV, one can achieve a place at the negotiation table. R&D Manager of Manufacturing company argued that the buying process can be executed quite quickly if they straight away find a person with "an awesome CV". Of course, that person has to also give a good impression in the interview but a great CV provides a good starting point. The CV should prove that the consult has enough skills and experience to manage in the job. All in all, it can be summarized that customers wish for content that is well-targeted, valuable, and professional.

## 4.8. Revised theoretical framework

In this chapter, the theoretical framework is updated to match the findings. The new model is presented in Figure 8. The five stages are kept unchanged because they were felt to suit the B2B context as well. Some buying companies would require more stages for their journeys, as the

buying process can require many approval rounds and a more iterative way of working. However, this model is seen as a good illustration of the journey. Loyalty loop, which Court et al. (2009), Edelman (2010), and Edelman and Singer (2015) felt could be a way to shorten a new journey, is also included in the new model. The discovered channels and content are placed on top of the figure, above the stages where their importance was the most obvious.
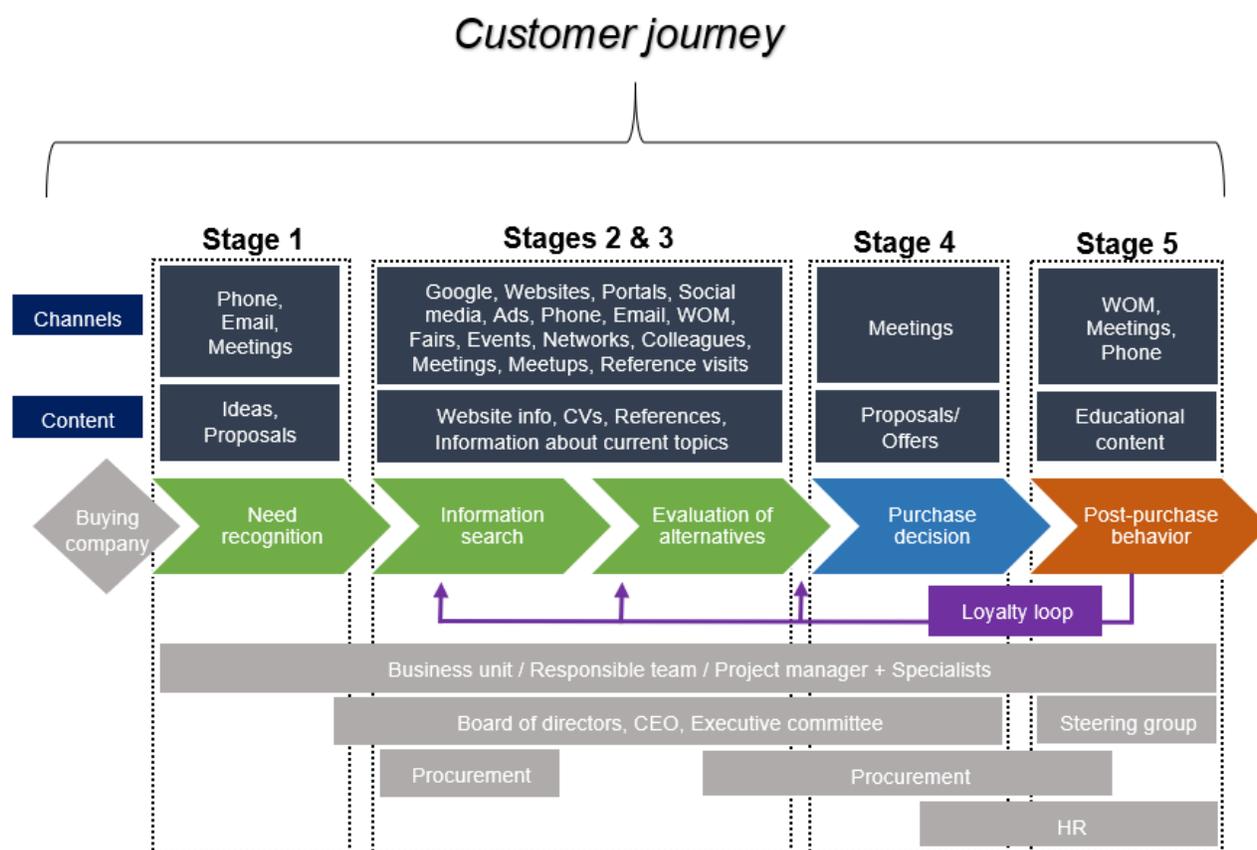


*Figure 8. Revised theoretical framework*

The problem with the original framework was that it did not take the multiperson feature of B2B buying into account. The interviews proved that there can be as many as 30 people involved in the buyer's side. Therefore, the most important revision in the framework is this 'multiperson' feature: The new model does not present the journey as a *single* customers journey anymore but it's the whole buying company's journey, where there are multiple people interacting with each other. Thus, different groups of people involved in buying are added to the model. It is not possible to point out the exact stages where each of these people are involved in a comprehensive way. However, to get a better understanding of the case companies' buying processes, the people are placed under stages where their presence was observed as the strongest.

*"...there is an active inner circle which pushes the purchase forward - from about three to five people - but the whole circle, if we think about the whole approval chain or in some cases control support, expands to at least 20 in organizations of this size." (Service Manager, Health service company)*

It should also be noted that not all of the parties listed in the gray boxes take part in all of the purchases. The case companies specified that the amount of people involved depends on the importance and value of the purchase. One party that is not listed in the boxes is lawyers as they only came up in the discussion with one company; Entertainment service company explained that firms can hire a separate law firm to help with legal issues, for example with the agreements, or there may be a lawyer inside a company's procurement department.



**Need recognition**
- Idea
- Yearly planning
- Listing needs
- Recognising a need
- Resource and competence check

- Approval
- Budget
- Advance permission

**Information search**
- Specifications / Requirements
- Information search
- Gathering of alternatives
- Purchase material
- Business case
- Criteria for decision
- Questionnaire

**Evaluation of alternatives**
- Competitive tendering
- Interviews
- Negotiations
- Specification rounds
- Competitive tendering of price
- Scoring

**Purchase decision**
- Final approval
- Decision / Buy
- Agreements
- SLA
- Presentation of the choice
- Practicalities
- Work / Use

**Post-purchase**
- Steering group
- Monthly meetings
- Feedback
- Freer meetings
- Contact persons
- Support models
- Service- / Change management manager
- Maintenance
- Guarantee
- Strategic collaboration
- Cross-selling

*Figure 9. Buyers' activities on different stages of the customer journey*

To avoid being too generic with only five stages, Figure 9 opens up the observed actions on each stage. These activities are summarized from the interviews, and they represent different possibilities of more concrete steps buyers might experience in their journeys. Overall, it seemed that the lines between different stages are not always distinct and some overlapping occurs in the activities.

# 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This final chapter summarizes the whole study and discusses the main empirical findings in relation to earlier studies presented in the theory chapter. The research questions are answered along with theoretical contributions in Chapter 5.1. Chapter 5.2. focuses on managerial implications, which are especially directed to the commissioner company in the software industry. Finally, the main limitations together with suggestions for future research are presented in Chapter 5.3.

The goal of this study was to contribute to the obvious gap in research regarding customer journeys in a B2B context. The intention was to challenge the linear models, which take only a singular customer into account. A qualitative case study including seven companies of different sizes was conducted using interviews as a method for data gathering. The data was analyzed using cross-case analysis, and the findings resulted in a new model for a B2B customer journey. Not only does this model contribute to the current literature in the field, but the increased understanding of the phenomenon also allows the author to suggest more concrete managerial implications for the B2B environment.

## 5.1. Theoretical contributions

The present study contributes to the existing literature on customer journeys by focusing on the phenomenon from a new perspective. Thus, the most important contribution to theory is the new context and hence the formulation of a B2B customer journey. What comes to the B2B environment, there is an obvious gap in the current literature. Current customer journeys (such as Court et al. 2009; Edelman 2010; Edelman & Singer 2015; Engel et al. 1968; Frambach et al. 2007; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014) focus solely on B2C purchasing. Zolkiewski et al. (2017) opened up the discussion about singular customer journeys being too simplistic to suit the B2B environment, but their research reached only to the conceptual level. This study, on the contrary, used qualitative research to create more understanding of the phenomenon. With the data gathered from the interviewed case companies, a new model for B2B customer journeys was created. The original stages of the most traditional EKB model (Engel et al. 1986) were retained but the revised model includes the multiperson feature of business buying.

Secondly, this study contributes to the limited understanding about channels in which consumers are present in each stage of the customer journey (Frambach et al. 2007) and the combination of multiple touch points, both offline and online, and their influence in different stages (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Kannan & Li 2017). This topic is especially intriguing as digitalization constantly transforms the buying environment. Although B2B buying is also slightly moving towards more online oriented ways of operating, and Jefferson and Tanton (2015, 20) even use the phrase "the digital war" when referring to the current situation in sellers' side, the findings suggest that offline channels and touch points still hold their place in the B2B scene. The complexity of B2B buying, which is discussed more under the first sub-question, makes offline media an important part of the channel spectrum.

Besides customer journey literature, the findings also reinforce organizational buying literature. The elements of the original BuyGrid model (Robinsson et al. 1967) can be found in the B2B buying of 2019 as well. This thesis mostly focused on organic buying relationships (Grewal et al. 2015), which require more human involvement and adjustment. The findings also somewhat support Sheth and Sharma's (1997) and Lindberg and Nordin's (2008) notions about B2B buying moving towards relationship-oriented philosophy and closer buyer-supplier interaction in strategic issues. In this study, this was concretely emphasized as moving from offshore and nearshore markets to using domestic suppliers with the needed know-how. Also, with more business-critical purchases, buyers wish for closer collaboration after purchase.

The rest of the discussion about theoretical contributions and alignment of the empirical study and current literature is divided under each research question. The discussion starts with sub-questions and moves to the main research question in a logical order.

*SQ1. How does the complexity appear in B2B buying processes?*

The interviews revealed that B2B buying indeed in much more complex than B2C buying. There are many different issues that influence the buying process, and one cannot state that purchasing always follows the same path even inside the same organization. Not only can the processes be characterized as multistage or multiphase, but they can also be called as multiperson processes, as there can be many dozens of people involved in different ways (Johnston & Lewin 1996; Åge 2011). The smaller case companies gave an interesting contrast to the results, and the findings supported the notion by Sheth (1973) that in smaller companies the decision-making is in the

hands of a smaller group of people, which may result in quicker processes; sometimes the CEO can even make the decisions alone. The word "agile" was used multiple times to describe the faster pace of decisions and processes both in buyers' and suppliers' side.

All of the people involved have a role in the buying process but their authorities and responsibilities differ. All of Webster and Wind's (1972) roles appeared in the empirical findings. Concrete examples of each role are collected to a table in Appendix 3. As there are multiple people having a say in the process, conflicts can occur among decision makers, as was discussed with three case companies. Along with Sheth's (1973) list of different perceptions and expectations, conflicts seem to arise if someone feels that alternatives are not mapped out well enough and if the price and quality are not on a rational level. Conflicts can also occur between different units as there can be competition about good resources. In the case companies, conflicts were solved through discussions. What does not really come up in current literature is the observation that even though the B2B context sets its requirements and makes the buying more professional than in B2C business, the buyers are still regular people with feelings. Thus, consumer-like reactions, such as the tendency to prefer the latest seller, occur in the business world as well. However, it is accurate that emotions cannot be the only reason for the final decision, although they can guide the decision in the right direction.

All of the case companies implied that the buying process differs depending on the type of solution needed, as Sheth (1973) and Lindberg and Nordin (2008) noticed. For example, some of the interviewees stated that if the purchased issue is a technical product, they have to perform tests to evaluate whether it passes the requirements; if on the other hand, the company wants to hire a consult, qualities such as teamwork skills and personality are evaluated. This is in line with Lindberg and Nordin (2008) as they explained that soft skills can also have weight in the evaluation. Companies also seem to have many possible strategies and tools they can use in buying. None of the case companies mentioned online reverse auction (Schoenherr and Mabert 2011), but competitive tendering seemed to be a normal approach especially in larger purchases.

Specifications should be taken into account in the discussion about the complexity of buying, as they are an important part of B2B buying and strict standards eliminate buyers' options (Lingqvist et al. 2015). Especially with more technical purchases, the interviews revealed that the number of specifications can raise up to multiple hundreds. Lindberg and Nordin (2008) stated that specifications are not defined if there is not enough time; this did not get straight support from the

study, but one company did mention that sometimes the own idea is not clear enough to allow the creation of specifications very early on the journey.

Lastly, one of the issues that should also be mentioned under this question is the final purchase decision, which relates to the number of people involved. In government-owned companies, the case is a bit simpler, because objective criteria define the decision in public procurement, as Grewal et al. (2015) explained. However, this was not as black and white with other companies. The interviewees explained that while chosen criteria and scoring do give direction to the final decision, they do not define it. This brings the issue back to emotions: If the choice does not feel right, weight values can be changed and feelings and personal experiences can affect the choice.

*SQ2. What touch points and channels do customers use in different stages of the customer journey?*

Naturally, channel choices and touch points differ between firms and buyers. One might choose a digital channel over an offline one, while another does the opposite. However, there were a lot of similarities in the seven case companies.  Frambach et al. (2007) noticed that online channels are preferred in the pre-purchase stages, but offline channels have a strong foothold in the purchase and post-purchase phases, especially with complex products. This study supports the latter finding: In B2B buying both the purchase and post-purchase stages require most often face-to-face meetings. The actual buying happens through contracts that are prepared in a precise way to ensure that both parties concur what they are agreeing on. Unlike in B2C business, buying purely online is rare and did not occur in any of the case companies. Contrary to the first argument, offline channels still have a strong role also in the pre-purchase stages. The case companies mentioned own networks, colleagues, phone, meetups, reference visits, fairs, and events as important channels during the pre-purchase stages. This is probably partly due to the chosen industry and the features of the purchased products, as it can be difficult to evaluate the attributes of physical products purely online (Gupta et al. 2004), especially of products with complex technical requirements.

As for the online channels, this study supports the research by Vogt and Alldredge (2012) where search engines were ranked as the most important tool for information searching and product websites became the second. Indeed Google was mentioned in all of the interviews, and it is used the most when searching for information about unknown product categories and potential new

suppliers. Websites, on the other hand, were mentioned as an important way to learn more about the suppliers and compare them. Besides these online channels, social media has a role in B2B buying as well. LinkedIn and Facebook are mostly used in the pre-purchase stages for utilizing own networks and searching for information about current topics and events. In this context, ads were perceived as a positive thing if they are relevant and provide buyers something, for example, a tip of an upcoming meetup. These findings point out that online channels can actually lead the consumer to offline channels; for example, a Facebook advertisement can guide a buyer to a live event.

Word of mouth was mentioned in the information search and evaluation stages, but also in the post-purchase stage. Precisely, the purpose of WOM differs between these stages: In the pre-purchase stages, customers receive recommendations and hear experiences from their colleagues and friends, and they give weight on the opinions especially from persons they rely on. On the contrary, in the post-purchase stage, customers have gathered experience of their own about specific suppliers, so they can, in turn, share their thoughts forward in their networks.

From Lemon and Verhoef's (2016) touch point categories, brand-owned touch points and social/external touch points were perceived. Furthermore, all seven themes of touch points by Stein and Ramaseshan (2016) were observable in the empirical data. These atmospheric, technological, communicative and process elements and employee-customer, customer-customer and product interactions occur in different stages, but overall they have an impact on the success of the whole customer journey.

*SQ3. What kind of content do customers prefer in different stages of the customer journey?*

It is not enough that firms reach customers at the right channels and touch points if they do not know what the customers want to hear and read; thus the important discussion about content preferences follows. Similarities between the findings of this study and that of Järvinen and Taiminen (2016) occur in the notion that content must solve customers' problems, not promote the company's products. One company specifically stated that it is important to listen to the customer and figure out the real need, not just "force their own thing forward". Besides focusing the content to the needs of the customer, honesty and transparency were raised up as key issues for suppliers to understand. These qualities are important in the negotiations and discussions, but they can be extended into digital content as well. The case companies perceived it as decent to

admit if the supplier cannot do everything. This quickens buyers' processes and is therefore seen as both honest and fair.

To be more concrete, the need for content is emphasized in the information search and evaluation stages. References are seen as a great way to prove suppliers' skills and experience. They are used in the evaluation and can have weight in the final decision. CVs are important in consulting business and they are seen as a way to get into an actual interview with the buyers. Furthermore, website information and information about current topics in different channels are valued. In the purchase stage, the case companies specified that the proposal or the final offer is the key; it should be accurate, well-balanced, and targeted. After the purchase, preferred content is something that educates the buyer, such as training sessions. This is seen as value-adding and it might even solve the decision between two otherwise equal suppliers.

*What are customer journeys like in a B2B context?*

The empirical data supported the notion of Zolkiewski et al. (2017) that singular customer journeys are too simplistic for B2B buying. Court et al. (2009) also felt that the traditional models of customer journeys are not suited for today's more complex environment. It is accurate that digitalization and the possibilities it brings, change the landscape of buying. However, even though the nature of the purchased solutions has taken a step towards a more futuristic direction, the actual buying process in a B2B context has still kept its traditional qualities. The findings of this study have multiple similarities to the traditional EKB model (Engel et al. 1968) and past research of industrial buying. As for this main research question, B2B customer journeys can be summarized as multiperson and multistage processes with varying structure, level of complexity, and duration.

The novelty of the findings originates especially from the notion of a large number of people involved. The case companies explained that usually there is an active group of people, such as a business unit, a responsible team, or a project manager and other specialists, who are pushing the purchase forward. Most often they are the ones who recognize the need and do the information search and evaluation of alternatives. The final decision seems to be in the hands of directors or managers, but other people's opinions have weight in it, especially if the decision touches them somehow. For example, if the firm is hiring a consult for a team, the team can influence the decision. Furthermore, some companies have specific departments for certain

actions: for example, a procurement department can aid in the competitive tendering processes and HR has an active role if a consult is hired. Some buyers get approval for the purchase at the beginning of the process and others have more iterative models with multiple approval rounds. Nevertheless, important parties in B2B purchases are the ones with the authority to approve or reject the purchase. These parties can be the board of directors, the CEO, and the executive committee.

After the purchase, the activities are much more formal and structured than in B2C customer journeys; for example, a steering group is a regular way to control the work during the post-purchase period. It seems that it was fitting for Court et al. (2009) to imply that a marketer's work only begins after purchase. B2B companies measure the success of the purchase in many different ways, and the satisfaction after purchase guides the future buying processes. This is in line with Frambach et al.'s (2007) research. Among the case companies, the post-purchase activities from the supplier's side were perceived as extremely critical for the continuity and development of the relationship between the buyer and supplier. Some case companies clearly wished for more structured and regular collaboration.

Another important feature of B2B buying is the duration of the journey. It very much depends on the purchase and as one interviewee explained whether buyers find a solution that satisfies them, how long the journey actually is. While in a B2C environment customers can make impulse decisions and purchase products in a matter of minutes, in a B2B context the processes can last for years at the longest. The quickest purchase mentioned in the interviews was approximately one week and the most common answer was a couple of months. Contrary to Court et al.'s (2009) notion that in today's environment the number of brands can actually expand in the evaluation stage, this study proved that the situation is quite the opposite in B2B business. This relates to duration as case companies felt that options must be limited because it would be too time-consuming to evaluate and negotiate with too many suppliers.

All the traditional stages from need recognition to post-purchase activities were perceived in buying of the case companies. The more concrete activities in the stages seem to differ case by case. Some journeys do not include all the stages, and satisfaction about past purchases and engagement towards a certain supplier can indeed shorten the new journeys. All in all, customer journeys in a B2B context are like puzzles with many moving pieces. Offline and online channels and touch points, valuable content, different buying activities, multiple people with varying styles

and perspectives, changing engagement levels - all of these are factors in B2B customer journeys. The next chapter digs deeper into how these different pieces should be handled from the managerial perspective.

## 5.2. Managerial implications

The main goal of these managerial implications is to guide the commissioner company, hence the focus is directed to the software industry. The findings of this study are not comprehensive by itself for the formulation of a marketing strategy. However, they do give a good basis for recommendations of the direction of different marketing activities. It was perceived in the findings that buyers' processes might differ in business areas they are familiar with and with new business areas. Thus, implications for both scenarios are stated. At the end of this chapter, a customer journey map is created to illustrate more concrete actions based on the discussion.

When the purchase is similar to what has been purchased before, buyers rely on their own knowledge and networks. The findings support Court et al.'s (2009) suggestion that it is more important for the buyers to reach the marketers than the other way around. The so-called cold calls from unknown sellers were perceived as unwanted by some of the interviewed companies. Rather, it seems that in many cases, the suppliers are chosen straight from the contact list in the phone or via LinkedIn indicating that known suppliers are in a better position in the information search phase. Therefore, it would be extremely important to be on the top of mind and in the networks of the people doing purchases - or as Court et al. (2009) put it, firms should figure out ways to get themselves included in consumers' initial consideration sets at the beginning of their decision journey.

Relationship management is also vital for the current customer companies (buyers), especially in the post-purchase stage. Besides delivering what was promised, the buyers can also be kept content by discussing with them on a regular basis; for example, one case company suggested a yearly clock for the meetings. If the customers feel their business is important for the company, they might engage a bit more and possibly purchase again more likely. Also, by reminding them about the brand regularly, the possibility of staying top of mind is more likely.

The strengthening of awareness and recall is important both regarding old and new customers. One way to increase awareness among both groups of customers and to act according to the

found content preferences is to organize trainings. As the commissioner company already has executed successful educational events in the past, the starting point to a more structured and regular system is good. In the software industry, hackathons (events where programmers create solutions for problems over a short period of time) can also be considered educational and they are a great way to strengthen the company's image as an expert in specific business areas. Other recommendation regarding content is to increase the number of references; real case stories were perceived as the most interesting content and even a guiding factor in the final purchase decision. However, relevance is the key here, as buyers are only interested in projects where they can find some assurance for the suppliers' know-how and experience in the purchase area they are interested in. Furthermore, CVs of consults need to be polished as they are a way to open the discussion with buyers.

The interviews implied that information searching can be quite hazardous when buyers try to find suppliers in unknown product categories or business areas. Google was mentioned in this context and thus, it is extremely important for the supplier to show up on top of the search pages when buyers write down keywords or phrases to the search. As search engines provide both organic and paid search listings of websites in response to different keywords (Kannan & Li 2017), two different approaches are recommended. First, all content in the websites should be optimized, so that the key issues are highlighted and the content is search engine friendly. Besides this search engine optimization (SEO), the second approach is to utilize search engine marketing (SEM). This approach requires a budget for Google Ads, and the company pays for the specific keywords, when consumers click the created ads. Remarketing is a logical step to accompany this digital strategy: when the buyer already has indicated some kind of interest, for example, visited the website, he/she can be reminded with valuable content (also controlled via Ads).

These above mentioned recommendations are viewed more closely in the customer journey map in Table 3. The used structure follows Rosenbaum et al.'s (2017) model, which is found in Appendix 1. The goal is to understand the important touch points regarding the software company's potential customers. Four touch points, the interface between the buying and selling firm, Google search, Remarketing (ads), and CVs of consults, are chosen for closer analysis and are shown in the horizontal axis. The vertical axis describes strategic actions to ensure the success of each touch point.

*Table 3. Customer Journey Map for the commissioner company*

| | | Touch points | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | **The interface between the buying and selling firm** | **Google search** | **Remarketing (ads)** | **CVs of consults** |
| **Strategic Action** | **Buyer requirements** | To keep the interactions active but not too pushy. The relationship should develop and problems should be solved quickly. | To find relevant information about the googled topics (keywords). | To receive targeted and valuable content. | CVs should show the experience and skills of the consults in a clear and appealing way. |
| | **Employee actions** | Seller/Account manager stays in contact with the buyer and keeps the relationship up-to-date. | Marketers use paid search in Google Ads to ensure relevant keywords bring the company on top of the search pages (SEM). All content is written in an SEO friendly way. | Remarketing is designed to target the people visiting the company's websites. Display ads are used to reach people interested in certain topics. | Each consult keeps his/her CV updated and furthermore develops the skills that are valued in the industry. |
| | **Design** | Besides calling and setting up meetings, sellers can also remember buyers in other ways: for example, use MailChimp to send newsletters. | Company websites are designed so that they provide a professional, positive, and approachable picture of the company. | Ads are professional, informative, and honest. They give the buyer something valuable, for example a tip of an upcoming hackathon. | CVs are designed to look appealing and professional. Everyone uses the same layout. |
| | **Service innovation** | The yearly clock is used for scheduling regular meetings, where buyers can discuss their needs for the future. This way the company can act in a more proactive way. | "Hot" topics are identified and content, such as blog posts, are created about those topics to lead people to the website. | Test new responsive ads in Google Ads and evaluate the success of different ads regularly. Make changes agilely. | A new digital service (portal) is launched for buyers to ease the search for the right skills. |

All in all, it is important from time to time to shift the viewpoint from seller-to-customer to customer-to-seller. Creating strategies based on what the customer needs can lead the company in the right direction. As the increase in awareness does not happen overnight, the commissioner company should be patient and consistently keep reinforcing its image as an expert in different channels. The channels, where to put the main focus, can be chosen keeping the findings of this study in mind; however, they should not be followed blindly.

## 5.3. Limitations and future research

This study made both important theoretical and managerial contributions, but it still has its limitations. First of all, qualitative studies have their own limitations. The researcher's subjectivity is one feature that should be taken into account. In this process, the researcher tried to be as transparent and objective as possible. The conclusions were solidly drawn from the collected interview data. This was presented in a logical and understandable way using figures, tables, and citations to support the text. The goal was to create more understanding of the studied phenomenon, as is the case with qualitative research. This was achieved, but the results are highly context-depended and cannot necessarily be generalized outside the software industry.

As for the collected material, it is quite narrow as only seven companies were included in the data and one or two members of each company were presented. Some of the answers in the interviews implied that the practices in buying differ inside the company depending on the people involved and responsible for the purchase. Furthermore, it should be highlighted that the interviewees were encouraged to discuss in a relaxed way. They too are subjective in providing answers, which are based on their own memories and feelings about the past buying processes. Future research ought to gather more interviews inside companies, preferably from all the members that are somehow part of the buying process. This way the results would be more reliable and more accurate generalization could be achieved. One area of interest would also be to discover on a broader scale whether people in different authority levels see things the same way.

This study was conducted by someone from the supplier's side. Thus, one suggestion for future research is to follow the buying process inside the buying organization. That would allow a more profound and accurate understanding of the process from a different point of view. Also, as the customer journey is quite different if the buying company is buying something familiar to them or if they are moving to a more unknown business area, these two cases could be separated and

focused on individually. This study could also be extended to different industries. Software development has its own qualities, and the technicality of the products may complicate buying even more. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted only in Finnish companies. An extension of this could be to repeat the study with foreign companies who purchase from Finnish suppliers or foreign companies who purchase domestically.

Supporting the argument from Voorhees et al. (2017) that previous research on customer journeys has focused too much on the core service period, the focus should indeed be targeted more on the pre- and post-purchase periods. The post-purchase stage is extremely important in ensuring customer engagement and its positive outcomes, such as WOM and repurchases. On the other hand, the pre-purchase stages involve most of the channels and touch points and the most potential for a new supplier to be found. In this context, channels could be investigated from a lead-generation point of view. It would be interesting to test the efficiency of the channels that rose up in this study with real content. Both qualitative and quantitative research are needed.

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# APPENDICES

*Appendix 1. Example of a customer journey map (Rosenbaum et al. 2017)*

| The HPM customer journey map: Pre-service | | Touch points | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Visit HPM in the past** | **Talk to others about the mall** | **See highway billboard** |
| **Strategic Action** | **Mall shopper requirements** | To have the same experience as the prior visit. | To have a positive attitude about shopping at the mall. | Advertisements must be visually appealing. Advertisements must be current and creative. |
| | **Employee actions** | Station employee customer ambassadors at informational desks near every mall entrance/exit. Ensure that mall shoppers are satisfied during and after their shopping trip. | Mall's marketing manager actively works with advertising agency to promote the mall's impact in the area. Emphasize the mall's impact in local media (employment, sales). | Mall's marketing manager works with advertising agency to plan mall billboard strategy along major highways. The mall also works with retail tenants on co-op advertising opportunities. |
| | **Employee support** | Customer ambassadors receiving training on service quality, active listening, problem resolution, and mall policies. | The mall's advertising agency and public relations agency create and distribute press release packets. The mall and firms actively work with community organizations and local government officials. | The mall's marketing manager and advertising work with a third party that specializes in billboard advertising. |
| | **Mall design** | Attractive help desks that encourage shoppers to provide the customer ambassadors with feedback. Customer ambassadors wear a uniform with the mall's logo. | Published articles, advertisements, social network posts (Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter), customer reviews (TripAdvisor, Google) should be positive. | Mall shoppers respond to large-format advertising structures located on major highways that direct automobiles and public transportation to the mall. |
| | **Service innovation** | Use raffles to encourage mall shoppers to complete satisfaction, "check in" on social media, and use the mall hashtag. | The mall's social media director is responsible for social media, email and mobile marketing, and for social media monitoring with software. | Command mall shoppers' attention with new three-dimensional billboard designs and moving parts (e.g., shopping bag with mall logo). |

*Appendix 2. Interview structure*

Interviews were conducted in Finnish, therefore this is a translation:

**Background information**

Title at the company, responsibilities/role in the purchasing process

**PURCHASING PROCESS**

**Think about your firm's purchases at a common level**

Which parts of the organization take part in the purchasing process?
How are the tasks/responsibilities divided?
Where does the budget come from and how is it allocated?

**Think about a purchase where you were in an active role**

**Need recognition**

Describe the situations when you recognized the need.

- Who recognized the need?
- What kind of need it was?
- What kind of knowledge did you have about the needed product/service/project/solution?
- How was the need specified into concrete specifications?
- Can the final customer influence the purchases? Can the need come from outside of the organization?

**Information search**

Describe the situations when you searched for information.

- What kind of information were you looking for? Why? Where?
- Who took part in information search?
- How did the defined need change and sharpened in information search?
- What are the roles of current suppliers and partners in information search?
- What kind of role do the potential new suppliers have?
- What kind of information would you prefer to read and where? / What kind of information would you have needed?

**Evaluation of alternatives**

Describe the evaluation of alternatives.

- How many alternatives did you have?
- What did you evaluate/compare in the alternatives?
- Who took part in the evaluation?
- What significance do current suppliers and partners have in this phase?
- What significance do new suppliers have in this phase?

**Purchase decision**

Describe the actual purchase situation.

- How much time was spent between the need recognition and closing the deal?
- Who made the final decision?
- Why did you choose that brand/firm?

**Post-purchase behavior**

How did the process continue after purchase?

- Did the supplier stay in touch after the purchase? In what ways? How did you feel about this?
- Were there any problems after the purchase? Would you have needed something more?
- Have you purchased again / would you purchase again from the same supplier?
- Have you told others about the supplier?

**Channels**

What different channels do you use in different phases of the purchasing process?

*Appendix 3. Table 1 with empirical findings*

| Role | Definition | Concrete roles based on the empirical study |
|---|---|---|
| **Users** | Those members of the organization who use the purchased products and services. | 1) The team, where the consult will work in. 2) Users of a new system. |
| **Buyers** | Those with formal responsibility and authority for contracting with suppliers. | The project leader, managers/directors, the CEO. |
| **Influencers** | Those who influence the decision process directly or indirectly by providing information and criteria for evaluating alternative buying actions. | The CEO, the board of directors, the executive committee. |
| **Deciders** | Those with the authority to choose among alternative buying actions. | Case-by-case. 1) In smaller firms – the CEO. 2) In larger firms – for example, the development department and managers/directors. 3) When hiring consults – a foreman, team leaders, a team. |
| **Gatekeepers** | Those who control the flow of information (and materials) into the buying center. | ICT Supply Manager. |