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**B2B CUSTOMER JOURNEYS WHEN PURCHASING COMPLEX SOLUTIONS –
MULTIPLE CASE STUDY IN IT-INDUSTRY**

Master's Thesis 2021

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ABSTRACT

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This study seeks to develop an understanding on B2B customer journeys in a complex B2B environment. The current literature has a clear research gap in B2B customer journeys as the research of customer journeys focuses mainly on the B2C context. In today's business environment, where partnerships are having a significant role in B2B, the old conception of B2B buying is not anymore valid. This thesis focuses on B2B buying processes from the buyers' point of view.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted to figure out what kind of elements buyers consider important during their buying processes. All interviews were analyzed individually, and after that, cross-case analysis was used to find generalizations. The findings brought out that the traditional five-stage buying process, need-recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior, is recognized in B2B buying. However, the results highlighted that companies avoid the buying processes and rather try to solve their needs by contacting current suppliers immediately after the need recognition. The findings also highlight that online channels are not trusted as an information source, but the sales representatives have a major role as consulting person in the buying process.

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Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on lisätä ymmärrystä asiakaspoluista monimutkaisissa B2B-konteksteissa. Nykyisessä kirjallisuudessa on selvä tutkimusaukko B2B-asiakaspoliissa, koska asiakaspolkujen tutkimus keskittyy pääasiassa B2C-kontekstiin. Nykyisessä liiketoimintaympäristössä, jossa kumppanuuksilla on suuri rooli B2B-liiketoiminnassa, vanha käsite B2B-ostoista ei vastaa enää tarpeisiin. Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma keskittyy B2B-ostoprosesseihin ostajien näkökulmasta.

Empiirisessä tutkimuksessa tehtiin viisi puolistrukturoitua haastattelua, joiden avulla selvitettiin minkälaisia elementtejä ostajat pitivät tärkeinä ostoprosesseissaan. Kaikki haastattelut analysoitiin erikseen, jonka jälkeen käytettiin ristikkäisanalyysiä yleistysten löytämiseen. Tuloksista ilmeni, että perinteinen viisivaiheinen ostoprosessi, tarpeen tunnistaminen, tiedonhaku, vaihtoehtojen arvointi, ostopäätös jaoston jälkeinen käyttäytyminen, tunnistetaan B2B-ostoissa. Tulokset kuitenkin painottivat, että yritykset välttävät ostoprosesseja ja yrittävät ratkaista tarpeensa ottamalla yhteyttä nykyiseen toimittajaan heti tarpeen tunnistamisen jälkeen. Tutkimuksen tulokset korostavat myös sitä, että online-kanavia ei pidetä luotettavina tietolähteinä, vaan myyntiedustajilla on merkittävä rooli ikään kuin konsulttina ostoprosessissa.

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Almost five years ago, I entered the University's Viipuri Hall for the first time with high expectations of the upcoming studies. Still, even in my wildest dreams, I could not have imagined what all fun these five years in LUT University would offer. I have been privileged to carry the neon yellow overalls, and now I feel proud soon to be a LUT alumnus. I cannot think of a better place to study than LUT University and Skinnarila.

I would like to thank Joona Keränen for being my supervisor for this thesis. For sure, I was not the easiest to guide, but Joona always answered my flood of questions and guided me in the right way. I also want to thank my family for the endless support during my studies – that means everything for me. A special thanks also to Enklaavi and Parru HT for a lot of unforgettable moments – surely my time in Lappeenranta would not have been the same without these organizations. Last but not least, I want to thank all the great people I met during my studies in Lappeenranta and Halifax. The words cannot describe how lucky I feel to have met such great people whom I can call my friends now. I am fortunate that even though my studies in Lappeenranta are coming to an end, the friendships will remain.

The past five years have definitely been the best time of my life. However, I am curious about the next adventures life will bring.

In Helsinki, May 3rd 2021

Joel Makkonen

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| 1 INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| 1.1 Background of the study..... | 1 |
| 1.2 Objectives and research questions | 2 |
| 1.3 Previous research | 4 |
| 1.4 Theoretical framework..... | 5 |
| 1.5. Definitions of key concepts..... | 6 |
| 1.6 Research methodology and delimitations..... | 7 |
| 1.7 Structure of the study | 8 |
| 2 CUSTOMER JOURNEYS IN B2B..... | 9 |
| 2.1 Characteristic of business-to-business buying | 9 |
| 2.2 Stages of the customer journeys | 13 |
| 2.3 Channels and touchpoints during customer journey..... | 28 |
| 2.4 Customer experience | 29 |
| 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS | 32 |
| 3.1 Description of the case company | 32 |
| 3.2 Research design | 34 |
| 3.3 Data collection and analysis..... | 35 |
| 3.4 Reliability and validity | 37 |
| 4 FINDINGS | 39 |
| 4.1 Need recognition | 39 |
| 4.2 Information search..... | 41 |
| 4.3. Evaluation of alternatives | 45 |
| 4.4 Purchase decision | 48 |
| 4.5 Post-purchase behavior..... | 49 |
| 4.6 Revised theoretical framework | 51 |
| 5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION | 53 |
| 5.1 Theoretical contributions | 53 |
| 5.2 Managerial implications | 64 |
| 5.3 Limitations and future research | 73 |
| REFERENCES..... | 76 |

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Interview questionnaire

LIST OF FIGURES

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study | 6 |
| Figure 2. A Customer journey map (Adapted from Richardson 2010)..... | 13 |
| Figure 3. Need recognition arise (Adapted from Kotler and Keller 2017, 247–248) . | 19 |
| Figure 4. B2B Elements of Value (Adapted from Almquist et al. 2018) | 24 |
| Figure 5. Service Quality Gaps (Adapted from Zeithaml et al. 1988). | 27 |
| Figure 6. Summary of the data collection and analysis | 35 |
| Figure 7. Revised theoretical framework | 52 |

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Table 1. Background information of the conducted interviews | 36 |
| Table 2. Summary of theoretical contributions | 63 |
| Table 3. Summary of managerial implications..... | 72 |

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

Understanding consumer behavior, customer experience, and customer decision-making process has never been more important for suppliers than nowadays (Puccinelli, Goodstein, Grewal, Price, Raghbir & Steward 2009). While customer experience has traditionally been analyzed mainly through single transactions, the view has during the 2000s changed towards customer-centrism. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016) as well as Venermo, Rantala, and Holopainen (2020), the customer experience is seen as the result of a customer journey. Given this, it is nearly impossible to provide buyers a positive and value-adding customer experience without paying attention to the customer journey. Steward, Narus, Roehm, Ritz and Wendy (2019) highlight that nowadays, many real-world decisions are made unstructured, making analyzing purchases as single transactions challenging. Authors emphasize that the change from transactional purchases towards relationships has shaped customer journeys significantly. Knowing this by researching customer journeys allows a seller company to view their customers' experienced journeys from customers' perspectives. This may help modify the stages where buyers communicate with the seller in a way that these stages ease customers during their purchasing processes and guide them in the desired direction.

Customer journeys have changed remarkably during the past decade (Matias 2018). Since a major part of the customer journeys and decision-making processes are nowadays experienced online without sales representatives (Gartner 2019), it is clear that online activities such as digital marketing and company websites have a big impact on the process. Digitalization and globalization have also shaped purchasing significantly. Earlier suppliers and sales representatives were generally thought to have more power than buyers. However, Grewal, Lilien, Bharadwaj, Jindal, Kayande, Lusch, Mantrala, Palmatier, Rindfleisch, Scheer, Spekman and Sridhar (2015) highlight that nowadays, the power has shifted from sellers to buyers. Enhanced buyer knowledge, tendering, communication applications and, for example, increased amount of information found on the Internet have made buyers even more demanding

and powerful. Globalization also dispels country borders. Nowadays it is possible to buy anywhere from the world with quick shipping and for suppliers' the competitors can be physically located on the different side of the world. Bad customer experiences get publicity quickly through social media and communication applications, and suppliers need to provide good service to stand out from competitors.

Even though buyers' information sources have increased, the suppliers' sales representatives do still have a role in buying processes. Rodríguez, Svensson and Mehl (2020) argue that buyers still need information and help during their entire buying process, but the type and amount have changed. It seems that those companies that can provide the right kind of information in the right channels and help customers with their challenges are strong competitors for other companies.

Companies have noticed the change and importance of customer journeys. As a result, in 2015, there were less than 5000 "Customer Success Manager" titles found on LinkedIn, while in 2018, there were over 30 000 individuals with this title. While most of these titles are related to the B2C market, also B2B companies have started to focus on customer success and customer journeys. This study is conducted with a company working in the field of information business and information security, concentrating especially on security issues with cloud-based software. This field is rather new since cloud services have become more common only during the last decade. Hence, knowledge of customer journeys when purchasing complex cloud systems is limited.

1.2 Objectives and research questions

In this study, B2B customer journeys are investigated from the customer point of view. The goal of this study is to expand the understanding of activities that buyers experience during their buying processes. Ulaga (2018) highlights that companies are struggling to build customer-centric organizations. The easiest way to examine customer journeys is to concentrate only on the buyers who are experiencing the customer journeys. For this reason, the suppliers' point of view is left out of this study. With a deep understanding of what customers consider important, how customers make decisions, and how potential suppliers are evaluated, the supplier companies receive knowledge of how to adjust their actions in order to serve customers better.

Steward et al. (2019) mention that digitalization and, for example, instant information transferring are shaping the processes that buyers use during their buying processes. This study investigates how the traditional buying processes have been changed and which principles of traditional buying processes are still accurate.

This study is accomplished in cooperation with a for-profit company which is called the *case company* in this study. Customer journeys are examined and considered from the buyers' point of view, but in the discussion chapter, managerial implications are presented for the company, and the focus is switched to the case company's perspective. Hence, one goal of the study is to add knowledge and value for the case company. The aim is that with the information of this study, the case company is able to adjust marketing and sales procedures after understanding better what factors potential customers are looking for. This study also seeks to find service models which provide customer-centrism service and help to stand out from competitors.

To achieve the research objectives set above, the main research question of this study is:

How do customers experience their customer journeys in B2B context?

To answer the main research question three sub-questions have been developed to support the main research question:

SQ1. How do the buyer companies exclude potential suppliers during their customer journey?

SQ2. What kind of services customers expect during their customer journey?

SQ3. What channels and touchpoints do buyer companies use during their customer journey?

1.3 Previous research

This subchapter provides a short overview of the existing academic literature and the research gaps that are related to B2B customer journeys. A more in-depth review of the theoretical background to the subject is presented in Chapter 2.

As a research topic, customer journeys are not comparatively new. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) point out that the traditional buying process theory has a long history. However, nowadays, since buyers interact with the suppliers in a wider range of channels and touchpoints than earlier, the old theories must be questioned. Steward et al. (2019) highlight that because digitalization changes customer behavior constantly, companies have to continually evaluate their own actions and processes. However, there is not yet much research on B2B markets in regard to customer success. Research has a gap in explaining how to manage the B2B customer journeys in a customer-centric way, providing value for the customer at every stage of their buying process. Research of customer journeys is mainly focused on B2C customer journeys, and the research related to B2B customer journeys concentrates mainly on characteristics of doing business in B2B, ignoring the actual customer journeys and needs the buyer has during the buying process.

Research by Håkansson (1982) was one of the early investigations of customer journeys in the B2B context. A remarkable finding was that purchases should not be treated as a single transaction but rather consider purchases as a series of the continuing relationship between the supplier and the buyer. While earlier there was a general perception that the buyer is active and the supplier passive, nowadays bilateral relationships are seen as the cooperation model between the buyer and the seller. Steward et al. (2019) highlight that the phenomenon of B2B customer journeys still needs a lot of studying. While the understanding of B2B buying has shifted from single transactions to relationships, the roots of marketing in many B2B companies are still in the old B2B buying processes without customer-centrism. As a result of this, buyers often feel that their needs are not understood, and the service they are provided does not help the buyers in their buying processes.

The rather limited amount of research on B2B customer journeys is focused on the customer journey from the seller's point of view. Mittal and Sridhar (2020) emphasize that senior executives are usually focused on driving sales and reducing costs. As a result of this, customer journeys from the customer point of view do not get enough attention inside companies. This makes analyzing the interactions between the buyer and seller challenging if the buyer is not heard at all. Mittal and Sridhar (2020) argue that customer journeys, customer experiences, and, for example, voice-of-customer research often struggle to get acceptance and finance inside companies. Authors highlight that because linking customer value to sales can be challenging on a short-term perspective, getting one's voice heard inside the company might be exhausting.

1.4 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in Figure 1 summarizes the key concepts and structure of the theory chapter. The theoretical framework describes the B2B customer journey with five stages which is seen as the most traditional model of stages in the customer journey (Puccinelli et al. 2009; Teo & Yeong 2003; Kotler & Keller 2017; Comegys, Hannula & Väistönen 2006). The first three stages, *need recognition*, *information search* and *evaluation of alternatives*, form the pre-purchase process. During these stages, the characteristics of the product or service that is being purchased are defined, and different alternatives evaluated. The fourth stage of the process is the *purchase decision*, and the final stage is the *post-purchase behavior*.

While for the seller the process is seen as a customer journey the same steps are seen as a buying process for the buyer when planning and executing a purchase.

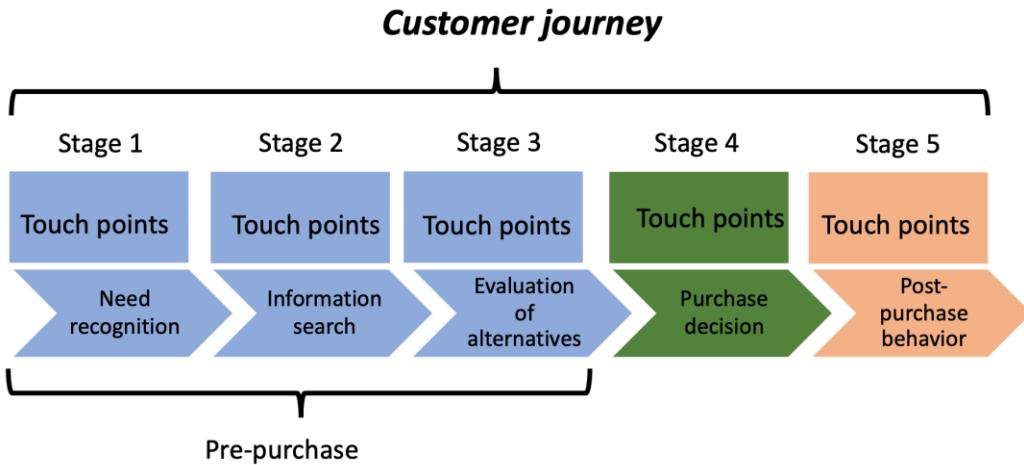


Figure 1. Theoretical framework of the study

During each stage, customers use different channels to support their process. These channels are seen as touchpoints where customers interact with a selling company. In different stages of the process, the customers consume and expect different content and service.

1.5. Definitions of key concepts

In this chapter, the most relevant key concepts are introduced. These concepts are used widely in the study, and understanding them is important to follow the text. The introduced concepts are B2B, BC2, customer journey, DMU, touchpoints, customer experience, and CRM.

B2B is an abbreviation of business-to-business, which refers to buying and selling products and services between companies (Lilien 2016).

B2C is an abbreviation of business-to-consumers, which refers to doing business between end-users (consumers) and companies (Lilien 2016).

Customer journey is the series of touch points and experiences between seller and buyer. The customer journey begins when a customer perceives a need and ends when this need is satisfied. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Poddar, Mishra & Tandon 2020)

DMU is an abbreviation of a decision-making unit, which is the group of individuals or teams who are involved in the buying process (Bonomo 2006). A DMU can also be called the buying center.

Touchpoints are seen as the places and moments where a customer is interacting with a seller company. Examples of touchpoints are advertisements such as digital advertisements, news reports, and conversations with other people (Court, Elzinga, Mulder & Vetvik 2009).

Customer experience is the end result of all interactions the customers have with suppliers for the duration of their relationship with the supplier. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) state how the end result of the process, where a customer goes through different stages and touchpoints, is the customer experience.

CRM is a technology for managing a company's relationship and interactions with current customers, potential customers, and former customers (Salesforce 2021). CRM is an abbreviation from words customer relationship management.

1.6 Research methodology and delimitations

As the theoretical grounds of customer journeys have been mostly in the B2C context, this empirical study is conducted to understand more of the phenomenon in the B2B context. This research is done by using a qualitative research method, and the data is collected with semi-structured interviews. All interviews are first analyzed separately and then all together with cross-case analysis. The study is done from the customer point of view, but the results are provided for the case company, and managerial implications are presented from the supplier's point of view.

The study is delimited only to for-profit B2B companies purchasing complex products and services. All interviews are done from the buyer's point of view, and so the supplier's point of view is not taken into account. Chapter 3 provides more information on the research method and delimitations.

1.7 Structure of the study

This study is divided into five chapters. The introduction chapter describes why this study has been done, what previous research is found on the subject, what is the goal for the study, what theories are linked to the topic, delimitations of this topic, and the methodology that is used. The second chapter is the theoretical part of the study. This chapter focuses on the current literature and research of customer journeys and B2B buying processes. Chapters three and four are the empirical part of the study. Chapter three describes how the data is collected and analyzed. Chapter 4 discusses the findings of the interviews. The fifth and final chapter is divided into two sub-chapters: the first sub-chapter answers the research questions and analyses the data, and the second sub-chapter presents managerial implications for the case company.

2 CUSTOMER JOURNEYS IN B2B

Doing business in the B2B environment is seen more complex compared to the B2C environment (Åge 2011). The complexity has an effect on both seller and buyer. Chapter 2.1 focuses on the characteristics of B2B buying; why B2B customer journeys are seen as complex, and what the B2B buyers see as the challenging parts of their buying processes.

Chapter 2.2 focuses on the stages of customer journeys. According to Lemon & Verhoef (2016), a customer journey includes all activities and touchpoints a buyer goes through, starting from the need recognition and leading up to the post-purchase behavior. The customer journey is divided into five parts, as stated in the theoretical framework.

2.1 Characteristic of business-to-business buying

For B2B companies, it is characteristic of doing business with other companies with a rational way of thinking. This means that companies buy products and services only if they assume it will benefit their business financially. This can be done, for example, by further processing bought materials and selling them at a higher price to consumers or purchasing products and services, which helps the company to concentrate on their core business. (Lilien 2016) The reason for the rational way of thinking in B2B is based on the finance model of companies. Since the purpose of limited companies is to generate income for shareholders, it is clear that all decisions have to be able to be justified for the company's management in a way that purchases are rational and profitable for the company (Manning, Ahearne, Reece & McKenzie 2011, 212–214). When purchasing has to have a rational background, and cannot be done quickly by emotional justification, it is clear that the customer journeys are not as straightforward as those in B2C.

Processes in B2B and buying are seen more complex compared to B2C (Åge 2011; Rodrigues, Takashi & Prado 2020). Gartner's study (2019) revealed that as much as 77% of B2B companies describe their latest purchase as “*very complex*” or “*difficult*”.

A research done by Toman, Adamson and Gomez (2017) also finds top management of companies to struggle with buying processes. Research reveals senior executives of thousands of companies around the world selecting only negative toned words to describe their purchase processes, using words such as “hard”, “awful”, “painful”, “frustrating” and “minefield”. Organizational behavior has a significant impact on the B2B buying processes’ complexity. In B2C buying, the effect of the purchase decision is quite often small and short-lasting. The effect of a purchase decision is often limited to the single person (the buyer) or, at its maximum, to the closest related party such as the buyer’s family. When the effect of a purchase is small, there is no need to have a long and complex process before decision-making. In B2B buying, the situation is just the opposite. The purchase has an effect on the whole company, and decisions are long-lasting (Gartner 2019).

Due to the complex buying processes and long-lasting consequences of the decision, B2B buying processes take more time than B2C buying processes (Rauyruen & Miller 2007). A long buying process is a challenge for the seller company. A long process requires a lot of effort and resources from the seller company, and these investments are not rewarded if the buyer decides to work with one’s competitor. Gartner’s report (2019) describes that during the buying process, the buyer company uses only 17% of their time with straight interaction with the seller companies. When this 17% is divided between all potential suppliers, the amount of time negotiating with a certain supplier is really short.

Compared to the B2C market, a smaller number of customers is characteristic for B2B (Dotzel & Venkatesh 2019). A small lead pool is a challenge for the seller company because of the great importance of a single customer and lead. While in B2C business the seller company is not dependent on an individual customer, in B2B the importance of the individual customer is greater since finding new customers is expensive and takes a lot of time and effort. In addition, a small number of potential customers increases uncertainty for the continuity of the seller company in situations that come unexpectedly. In B2B, changes in the business environment are harder to keep up because the effects to buyer companies’ business environments indirectly affect the seller company. Kotler and Keller (2017, 19) consider, for example, changes in political

and legal environment significant in B2B business because of their compelling changes in consumption which has an indirect effect on, for instance, raw material producers.

Because of the big effects of the decisions, companies tend to have several people taking part in the buying process. Cohn (2015) and Åge (2011) explain that B2B decision-making processes are longer compared to B2C buying processes because there are more stakeholders involved in the process. The group of stakeholders making the decision forms a decision-making unit (DMU). According to Bonoma (2006), typical roles for the DMU are gatekeepers, users, influencers, deciders, purchasers and initiators. Webster and Wind (1972) respectively identify five roles in the DMU – user, influencers, deciders, buyers and gatekeeper. All of these members in the DMU have their own responsibilities and tasks in the buying process. These tasks can be, for example, negotiating the price, defining the characteristics of the product to be purchased and preparation of contracts (Prior, Mudiyanselage & Hussain 2020). Different roles and responsibilities make the buying processes complicated since people with different roles use different touchpoints and have different expectations (Zolkiewski, Story, Burton, Chan, Gomes, Hunter-Jones, O’Malley, Peters, Raddats & Robinson 2017).

For the seller, it is important to recognize the roles of the DMU in order to know how to negotiate. Bonoma (2006) highlights the seller’s psychologist’s eye to recognize the most important people in the DMU and who the actual decider is regardless of the job titles. Lingqvist, Lun Plotkin and Stanley (2013) also emphasize that it is not enough to recognize the decision-maker but also to identify the most important details in the buying process for the decision-makers.

A large number of stakeholders being involved in the buying process is not limited only to employees of the company who is making the purchase. In the B2B buying process, the selling company also has multiple people interacting with the customer during the customer journey. Possible roles on the seller side are, for example, sales negotiator, technical expert and legal department. (Grewal et al. 2015) Many stakeholders from both sides of the negotiations complicate the information transferring and make the customer journey more complicated.

Although in B2B decisions are made by rational reasons, the people deciding still are having individual needs during the buying process. From the buyer side of the view, the end result is decisive, but during the purchase process, personal needs also affect the buying process. Almquist, Cleghorn and Sherer (2018) present five elements that are most important for buyers, from the most important to the least important: *table stakes, functional, ease of doing business, individual values and inspirational values*. It is worth noticing that ease of doing business, individual and inspirational elements are things that do not directly affect the end product or service, but they represent a big part of elements that buyers value. Almquist et al. (2018) describe table stakes as the basic requirements for a purchase, representing important basic features such as acceptable price and regulatory compliance. It is notable that once these requirements are met, and the functional value is reasonable, the other elements are more personal. Svatošová (2013) respectively highlights Maslow's hierarchy of needs behind every purchase. The three personal categories Almquist et al. (2018) find are strongly connected to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Especially individual values and inspirational values can be seen as very personal needs that have a strong effect on the decision making.

Manning et al. (2011) find that great knowledge of helping a customer and making the business situation easier for the customer are highly valued among buyers. Toman et al. (2017) highlight that most sales professionals believe that, for example, giving customers more information helps them to make a decision. However, most B2B customers actually often feel distressed when they receive too much information. Hence, it would be more effective to concentrate on making buying easier for the customer and focus on what actually matters for the customer. Lee and Marlowe (2003) find that in a situation where consumers face complex decision-making situations under pressure, they tend to use heuristics to make a fast decision which helps them to move forward. Dietrich (2010) emphasizes that in complex decision-making, people tend to choose the alternative which requires the least amount of effort or information.

To sum up findings from Almquist et al. (2018), Toman et al. (2017), Lee and Marlowe (2003), and Dietrich (2010), it seems that for buyers, the basic characteristics of the product or service to be purchased are the basis for supplier selection. After these factors are in order, the things that affect the decision are factors that make the buyer

company's operating during the buying process more effortless even though these things do not affect the end product or service directly.

2.2 Stages of the customer journeys

While the buyer side often talks of a buying process when planning and executing a purchase, the seller side sees the process as a customer journey. According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), customer journey is seen as a series of touchpoints and experiences between the seller and the buyer. In addition, every buying process is seen as a customer journey from the seller's point of view. Poddar et al. (2020) sharpen the customer journey as a chain of interaction that begins when a customer perceives a need and continues till this need is satisfied. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) assess that understanding the customer journey is proportional to positive customer experience with leads to customer loyalty and increased sales. Rawson, Duncan and Jones (2013) emphasize that companies who skillfully manage their customer journeys get rewarded with not only enhanced customer satisfaction, smaller churn but also better employee satisfaction. Edelman and Singer (2015) even state that the customer journey is seen as important as the product the company is selling. Authors state that with a well-managed customer journey and customer experience, buyers stay loyal to the company and might not even consider other suppliers.

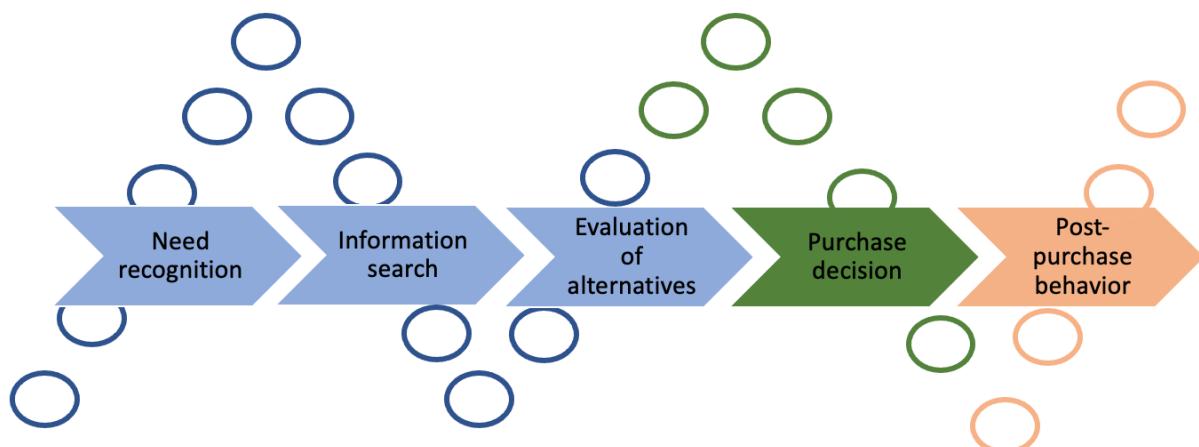


Figure 2. A Customer journey map (Adapted from Richardson 2010)

A customer journey can be presented as a visual map that represents all steps the customer goes through when engaging with a brand (Richardson 2010; Rosenbaum, Otalora & Ramirez 2017). Circles around the stages of the buying process are different touchpoints where the customer interacts with the seller during the buying process. These touchpoints can be both online and offline contacts. As seen in Figure 2, mapping out the customer journey is in a vital position when trying to figure out what steps do the buyer go through during their buying process and what touchpoints the buyer is using (Venermo et al. 2020). According to Richardson (2010), the more touchpoints the customer journey has, the more complicated and important the map is for the seller company to understand the needs of the buyer company.

Defining touchpoints and stages the buying process includes is the first goal of creating the customer journey. However, alone it is not informative enough for the seller company. Patti, Van Dessel and Hartley (2020) highlight the importance of measuring the customer journey and identifying the most important stages of the journey. Patti et al. (2020) criticize, that often companies only use metrics that are important for themselves, and these metrics are not measuring things the customers see important for them.

A general problem for B2B companies is that the process and planning of the customer journey is done by the upper management of the company. According to Poddar et al. (2020), a lot of companies are trying to create a customer journey top-down where the top management creates the customer journey. This is problematic for companies because the actual customer journey is passed and experienced by the customer, not the company. While 42% of companies do not collect feedback from their customers (HubSpot 2020), we can assume that the touchpoints built to help the customers do not match the reality. Without asking customers how they felt about the customer journey, what stages did their customer journey include, and which parts of the customer journey could be improved, it is extremely hard for companies to understand the real customer needs during the customer journey. When the seller company has built the meeting points and the customer journey from their point of view, expecting customers to follow this path and behave in a certain way, it increases the risk that the customers do not experience their buying process as the seller company would want. Consequently, the structure of the processes does not help buyers to solve their

problems. Dixon, Freeman and Toman (2010) highlight that making the customer journey as easy as possible for the customer builds customer loyalty, repurchases and makes the customer relationships longer. Without knowing the pain points for customers, the seller company may not be able to allocate enough resources to these touchpoints, which leads to customer dissatisfaction.

While in today's world, a major part of customer journeys begins online B2B companies lack information of the very first key touchpoints of customer journeys (Bryson, Hajihashemi, Henderson & Palmatier 2020; Ulaga 2018). If the seller does not know where and when the customers first contacted the company, it is difficult to provide value in this specific moment and interaction.

According to Senn, Thoma and Yip (2013), the dynamic B2B environment is nowadays marked by steady consolidation among customers, where customers interact with closer relationships with fewer suppliers than earlier. This trend has forced companies to be more customer-centric than earlier. While most companies are claiming that they are customer-centric and have advertising phrases such as "*we put customers first*", these seldom show up in everyday practice.

Seller companies often handle their customers in a customer relations system (CRM) or in a sales pipeline. A CRM often has different stages for prospects and customers. Using CRM systems, companies can collect data, contact customers, and analyze their data to use it when doing business (Khodakarami 2014). A traditional sales pipeline is illustrated as a funnel that begins with a big pool of leads and prospects and ends to the actual customers. After each stage of the pipeline, some of the prospects drop out from the pipeline because the customer journeys do not continue with all prospects after certain interactions. The goal of a sales pipeline is to map the current situation of the customers and move them forward in the pipeline towards the purchase. In different stages of the pipeline, companies deal with their customers differently because customers' needs vary.

Court et al. (2009) highlight that the traditional way of thinking about the customer journey as a funnel is problematic. In the traditional sales funnel, the consumers start with a big set of potential suppliers, and on every step the amount decreases. Court et

al. (2009) see the situation differently and emphasize how the group of potential suppliers can actually increase while consumers are seeking for more information and evaluating their alternatives. Åge (2011) describes the B2B selling process as dynamical and not linear or sequential, which complicates the operation of the seller company and the buyer company. Patti et al. (2020) also emphasize the misunderstanding of thinking the concept of a customer journey straightforward while the increasingly dynamic nature of today's purchasing makes customers journeys complex and anything but straightforward. Lingqvist et al. (2013) emphasize that nowadays, B2B buying customers have an easier and deeper access to different information sources and easier to compete with potential service providers than earlier. As a result of this, B2B buyers have moved away from the traditional linear sales funnel to a more fragmented buying process.

Before the Internet became the main channel for information search, traditionally, the way how a customer journey started was by the customer contacting a company to get more information about a certain product or service or to ask for a meeting (Clement 2020). For companies, it is problematic to expect this kind of customer behavior anymore since the B2B purchasing journey has faced a remarkable change during this decade (Matias 2018). According to Steward et al. (2019), B2B customers have already completed 57% of their buying process before they contact a sales representative for the first time, and they fulfill 67% of their buying online. The enormous amount of data on the Internet and the possibility to make comparison among service providers fully online has made customers more and more demanding.

Paesbrugghe, Sharma, Rangarajan and Syam (2018) consider the sales representative today more as an assistant party for the buyers and not as a traditional seller whose aim is to sell as much as possible. While earlier buyers contacted the sales representative to get very basic information, nowadays Paesbrugghe et al. (2018) see the sales representative more as a consultant for the buyer party who is expected to solve the buyers' problems and make purchasing as effortless as possible and create value and trust for the buyer. Kotler and Armstrong (2019, 162) also highlight that B2B marketers' are expected to participate in all stages of the customer journey by helping customers to define their problems, solve them, and after the sales, keep in touch with the customer.

The traditional B2B buying process model offers five stages in the buying process when looking at the situation from the buyers' point of view: *need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post-purchase behavior* (Puccinelli et al. 2009; Teo & Yeong 2003; Kotler & Keller 2017; Comegys et al. 2006). Literature also finds simpler versions of the five stages model, such as models with only three stages. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe the customer journey in three parts: *pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase*. Correspondingly Rosebaum et al. (2017) categorize touchpoints with the seller company into three stages: *before service, during service and after service*. When comparing the traditional five stages model and the three stages model, a lot of similarities can be found. In the five stages model, the first three stages combined form the pre-purchase stage or the before service stage. For all models, it is also common that the buying process is seen as a periodic transition where the buyer moves on to the next stage after fulfilling the needs of the previous stage.

Because of the late contact to a supplier (Steward et al. 2019), more than half of the buying process is done without the seller company even knowing of their buying process. Hence, it is clear that the beginning of the buying process can be seen as a significantly important part for companies who are lacking leads. When a major part of the buying process happens online without the sellers' presence, companies that can offer the customers value at the beginning of their customer journey are more likely to be the companies that are contacted when customers need the presence of a sales representative.

However, not all customers go through all five stages when purchasing. When the product or service to be purchased is familiar, and it is a repurchase, the customer can skip, for example, information search and evaluation of alternatives. Longer relationships between companies are trying to be formed to save time in the long buying processes. Analyzing all parts of the customer journey is still important to find possible pain points and critical moments of the chain of interactions. In a rebuy situation, it is especially interesting to determine and identify why certain stages from the buying process can be skipped and how the seller company has won customer's trust so that the buyer does not even like to compare other service providers.

2.2.1 Need recognition

The first stage of the B2B customer journey is the need recognition which is considered as the start for the whole purchasing process (Grønhaug & Venkatesh 1991). Bruner and Pomazal (1988) and Gupta, Bo-chiuan and Zhiping (2004) state that the need recognition is seen as a problem recognition where the customer faces a problem and wants this problem to be solved. Comegys et al. (2006) describe that during need recognition, companies sense a difference between their actual state and state that could be possible after solving the recognized problem. Grønhaug and Venkatesh (1991) describe the need recognition stage to be associated with an evoked need. Authors describe that in the need recognition stage, companies conceptualize the situation in various ways such as “*awareness*”, “*identification of need*” and “*problem recognition*”.

Kotler and Keller (2017, 247–248) describe how need recognition can arise as a result of an internal or external stimulus. An internal stimulus for a need comes inside the company, often as a result of an unsolved problem. Bruner and Pomazal (1988) describe the need recognition can occur when a company runs out of something they need to run their core business. In a situation like this, the person identifying the need is often the user of the product or service. Forman, Lippert and Kothandaraman (2007) argue that the user of the product or service is not always the most visible person in the buying process or in the decision-making unit of the company. However, the authors highlight that the user has a significant role in need recognition and starting the buying process. Prior et al. (2020) emphasize that even though the need often arises from the user’s side, the need can still arise from anyone in the company. Authors highlight that a need can also be a consequence of interpersonal relationships between a salesperson or a company.

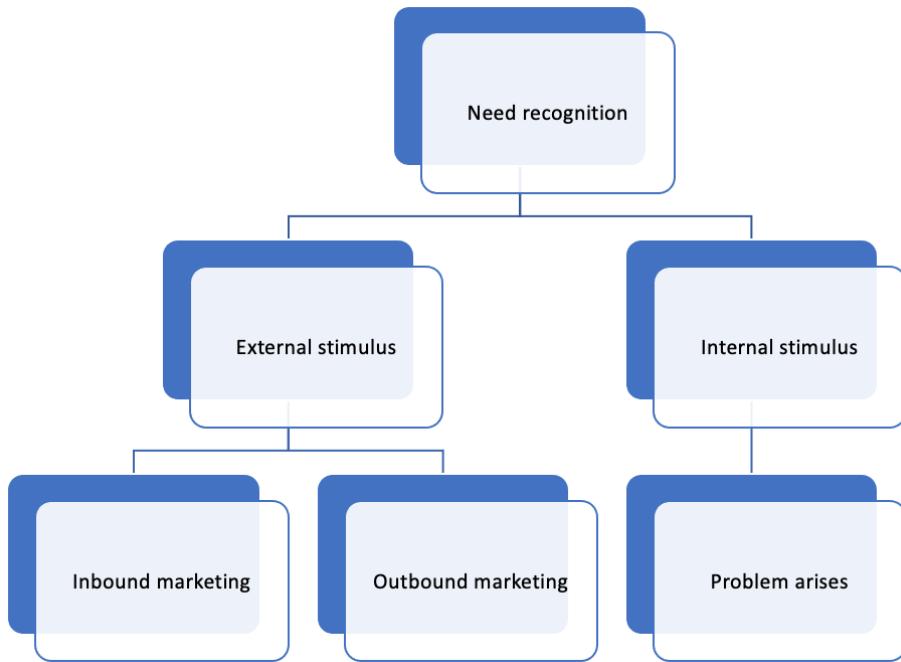


Figure 3. Need recognition arise (Adapted from Kotler and Keller 2017, 247–248)

An external stimulus is often a result of marketing (Gopalkrishnan, Blut, Xiao & Grewal 2020). Marketing the customers face can be divided into outbound marketing and inbound marketing, as seen in Figure 3. Outbound marketing is the result of direct contact from a seller company. This can happen, for example, by a phone call, text message, or a newsletter (Bleoju, Capatina, Rancati & Lesca 2016). As Lilien (2016) mentions, B2B companies buy products and services only if they assume that it will generate more income after purchases. As a result of this, it is clear that when a seller company is offering a product or service to a company that has not yet recognized a need, the seller company must be ready to convince why investing money on their offering is worthwhile. Correspondingly, the buyer company must critically assess whether the company has a real need for what the seller company is offering after receiving outbound marketing. Halligan and Shah (2014) emphasize the importance of helping the customer when doing B2B outbound marketing. Authors highlight that customers do not want to be disturbed by general marketing messages, but they are willing to listen to marketing messages which are targeted to their business and have a clear explanation of how the offering helps the buyer company.

While with outbound marketing, the buyer company gets direct contacts from possible sellers, with inbound marketing, customers end up by themselves watching marketing

material and other content made by a seller company. Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) highlight that a lot of customers identify their need by consciously or unconsciously scanning different sources and markets and this way get a stimulus to learn more of a certain subject. Examples of inbound marketing are word of mouth, social media, public relations and communicating with friends. Hawlk (2018) highlights that inbound marketing is cheaper compared to outbound marketing. However, getting results of inbound marketing takes longer compared to outbound marketing.

Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) highlight that characteristic for scanning the markets is that consumers do not think that they are shopping or starting a purchasing process. Consumers consider themselves scanning new trends rather than looking for information for a certain need or purpose. According to Bruner and Pomazal (1988), unconscious scanning of markets and trends might cause a need for the buyer, which may happen either immediately or after a while. Even if the current situation where the buyers stand has been thought to be suitable, the buyer may consider the possibility for improvements after noticing new solutions after scanning the markets.

2.2.2 Information search

In this stage buyer, searches for information on the possible solutions for their problem (Wolny & Charensuksai 2014). During this stage, the buyer needs to find out what kind of information is needed and if the need is actually possible to solve (Comegys et al. 2006). Alejandro, Kowalkowskida, da Silva Freire Ritter, Marchetti and Prado (2011) argue that companies consider information search as one of the most laborious stages of the buying process. Sheth (1973) highlights that in this stage, the buyer has to not only search for information but also find out who in the company is needed to take part in the buying purchases and what factors are needed to be taken into account.

Regardless of whether the need recognition has been identified by an internal or external stimulus, to continue the process, the company must find out if it has a real need for the purchase and a possibility to solve the recognized problem (Baumeister 2002). For this stage, it is also normal that the buying process ends. Sheth (1973) highlights that an important decision for the buyer company in the information search stage is to decide and clarify to themselves do they have the resources to make a

purchase and go through the buying process. Completing a lengthy buying process consumes a lot of the company's resources; hence it is desirable that if the buying process is being suspended, this should be done as early as possible.

Bruner and Pomazal (1988) reason that if the customer does not find information about how to solve their problem or, for example, lack of money, the buying process may end, and there is no consumer action. The authors emphasize that a consumer might have made an incorrect assessment due to which it is not possible to solve the detected problem cost-effectively. Also, sometimes the high number of ongoing processes force the buyer to concentrate on the most important purchases, which leads to cutting the unnecessary purchases. This is underlined especially in situations where the product or service to be purchased does not directly have an effect on the core business, and the business can be continued without the product or service.

The importance of this stage differs between customers. In a rebuy situation or a situation where the buyer has a great knowledge of the product or service to be purchased, the information search does not take that much effort compared to a completely new purchase (Beatty & Smith 1987; Bienstock & Royne 2007). Sheth (1973) emphasizes that with routine purchases, it is usually cost-effective to contact a well-known supplier and spend as little time on purchasing as possible.

Even in a completely new purchase, the amount of needed information is still limited. According to Yang and Ziv (2012), buyers tend to believe that to reach a good decision, it is recommendable to examine a lot of alternatives and collect as much information as possible. However, Lyengar and Lepper (2006) and Lesonsky (2019) emphasize the risk of information flood, which makes evaluation of alternatives more complicated. According to Muralidharan and Jayachandran (1997, 37–44) and Kotler and Keller (2017, 247–248), information that buyers are looking at in this stage of the buying process is extremely specific. Authors claim buyers often feel that sellers do not understand their situation. As a result of this, the sellers provide buyers information that is not relevant or necessary. Gartner's research (2019) empathizes that buyers struggle with finding relevant and necessary information out of the information flood provided by the seller companies. Ulaga (2018) also emphasizes the importance for sellers to understand the real need of a customer. He highlights the transformation

from goods-centrism to customer-centrism as a result of which knowing the customer's needs and providing the right information is crucial when the customer is looking for a solution for a problem and later on comparing companies with each other. Alejandro et al. (2011) stress that, especially with complex purchases, buyers often feel that their situation is not understood, which leads to a situation where the seller company provides information that is irrelevant for the buyer. Authors emphasize that for buyer companies' trustworthiness of sales representatives, customer contacts and ease of doing business are considered highly important with complex purchases. While the companies search for information about the product or service, they have searched for information of what it is like to do business with the seller company.

During information search, the popularity of the Internet is constantly growing (Johnson 2021). Grewal et al. (2015) emphasize that the development of information technologies has moved the information search mainly into online sources. Gupta et al. (2004) stress the ease of searching information online without having to contact a salesperson who usually has very limited information compared to the information available online. According to Chaffey (2020), even though Bing has slightly increased its share of searches done by search engines, Google is still a clear market leader of search engines with a bit above 70% share of desktop searches. He states that only very rarely B2B customers do not use search engines as a channel during their information search.

Kotler and Keller (2017) divide major information sources into four groups: personal, commercial, public and experiential. Personal and experimental sources can be seen as internal sources, and commercial and public sources can be seen as external sources. Bienstock and Royne (2007) also divide information sources into internal and external. Both Kotler and Keller (2017) and Bienstock and Royne (2007) emphasize the importance of internal sources to be the most predominant sources. Kotler and Keller (2007) argue that buyers receive most information from commercial sources such as websites, advertising and displays. However, the most effective information often comes from personal sources that are independent authorities. Brossard (1998) and Dubois (2000) also emphasize that even though the information received from internal and personal sources is often limited compared to commercial sources, buyers consider information from internal sources as the most relevant and reliable.

Gil-Saura, Frasquet-Deltoro and Cervera-Taulet (2009) argue online information to be more important during the earlier stages of the buying process and information search. According to their research, customers are willing to first search for information as much as possible before contacting the sales representative. As a result of this, companies cut back unconsciously or consciously seller companies that are not that well represented in online sources or of which no further information can be found.

Purchases with higher risks companies use a higher number of different sources to find information. According to Bienstock and Royne (2007), with routine purchases online sources are often enough but with risky and complicated purchases personal sources such as word of mouth and talking with reference customers have a high importance. Alejandro et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of a trusted party such as a reference or a personally known contact. Brossard (1998) highlights that internal sources are seen in B2B buying as the most reliable and important sources for buyers. He argues that for buyers, it is important to have access to a neural source of information which can be, for example, a former customer of the supplier.

2.2.3 Evaluation of alternatives

The result of the information search is a group of alternatives that are seen as potential solutions to fulfill the need, which began the buying process (Teo & Yeong 2003). In this stage, the buying company goes through the alternatives and compares them (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014).

Almquist et al. (2018) present the most important factors for B2B buyers in a pyramid. The different values in the pyramid can be divided into hard values, which represent the first two layers, and soft values, which are represented by the top three layers of the pyramid. Elements on the bottom of the pyramid are easy to measure, and evaluating them is straightforward. After the essential elements such as price, product specifications, and functional values are passed, the following stages of the pyramid are factors that do not directly affect the original need or problem which is being solved. Remarkable is that after the two bottom layers, the remaining layers are more personal, and evaluating companies gets harder and more subjective. Authors describe that

when evaluating alternatives, not only the solution provided is important for B2B buyers but also the company they are interacting with and the way of doing business. Lindberg and Nordin (2008) bring out factors such as creativity, flexibility and ability to cooperate to be seen as important factors when evaluating potential suppliers.

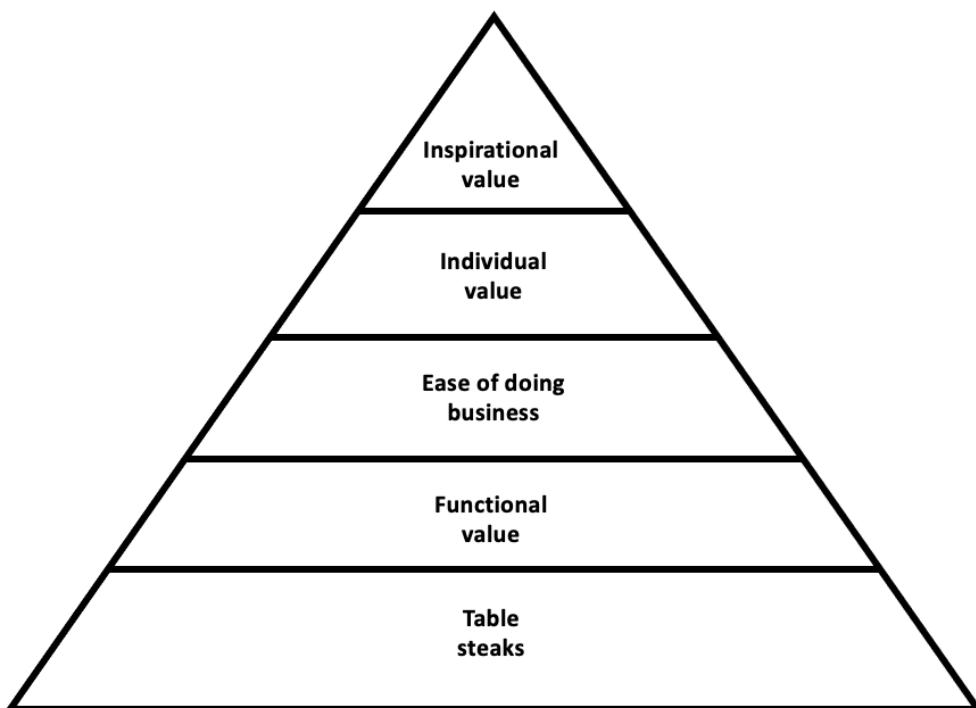


Figure 4. B2B Elements of Value (Adapted from Almquist et al. 2018)

Comegys et al. (2006) emphasize the minimum acceptable levels that an alternative must pass in order to be considered as a viable alternative. Authors argue that consumers unconsciously tend to set rules which cut alternatives that do not fulfill the basic requirements. In the B2B context, the requirements for the purchase have often been defined in advance by the company's management (Lindberg & Nordin 2008). These requirements can be, for example, budgets and strict evaluation criteria where alternatives are evaluated by hard factors. Carmon and Yang (2012) highlight that in B2B, companies tend to evaluate the alternatives rather in reference points than in absolute terms. Authors also continue that although rational elements are the basis for comparison, personal references and soft values have a great impact, especially when there are few options left. According to research by Lindberg and Nordin (2008), buyers commonly argue that they see the soft factors as more important than the hard factors,

especially in the final stages of the buying process. While buyers see the soft factors as extremely important, they simultaneously struggle to measure and calculate these.

Traditionally the buying process has been seen as a funnel where buyers start with a large number of alternatives and then start to eliminate them at every stage of the buying process (Dwyer, Hill & Martin 2000). Court et al. (2009) stress that in the evaluation stage, it is normal that the number of alternatives expands when buyers are seeking more information about their options and evaluate them. This may happen, for example, when buyers evaluate the alternatives online and get targeted and customized advertising from service providers from the same area of business (Lambrecht & Tucker 2013).

Bienstock and Royne (2007) support the importance of internal sources when evaluating alternatives. Authors describe that there is a high correlation between the ease of evaluating and the amount of information from internal sources. Especially in situations where the product or service to be purchased is complicated and the buyer does not have experience in the field of business, internal sources are preferred.

2.2.4 Purchase decision

After evaluation of alternatives, buyers make the final decision of the purchase (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014). Comegys et al. (2006) emphasize that even though buyers compare alternatives and rank them, not always the number one alternative is chosen. Authors highlight that even if the ranking and evaluating is done properly, impulsive purchasing might happen. Practical issues, such as paying methods, may also have an impact on the decision. Revello (2011) points out that buyers tend to make decisions driven by emotional factors, which are justified by rational factors of the chosen alternative. Jarcho, Berkman and Lieberman (2011) argue that in difficult decisions, buyers tend after the decision-making search for arguments to support the decision and after that exchange of views gets harder. Research done by Lyengar and Lepper (2006) proves buyers to be more satisfied with their decisions when they choose from smaller sets of alternatives. In addition to this, buyers describe the buying process to be more effortless in this kind of situation.

A purchase decision does not always lead to a purchase. Comegys et al. (2006) highlight that, for example, an unexpected situational factor, such as a change in the price or change in the company, may cause the purchase not to be made. Especially in situations where the purchase has a big impact on the company, it is possible that the buyer moves back to the information search stage if the set of alternatives are not appropriate (Rauyruen & Miller 2007). Sillanpää (2015) argues that in situations where the purchase is highly related to the buyer's core business and a suitable alternative is challenging to find, the buyer might consider handling the matter independently. This can happen by, for example, hiring a professional in the business area and taking care of the issue inside the company.

2.2.5 Post-purchase behavior

Post-purchase behavior is the only stage of a buying process that takes place after the decision of purchasing has been done, supplier decided, and contract signed. This stage includes, for instance, usage and consumption of the actual product or service and possible service requests (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Lindberg and Nordin (2008) describe the post-purchase behavior to be the contract implementation stage, where the buyer and the seller fulfill their promises and generate value for the other party. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) emphasize that while other stages of the buying process might be short, the post-purchase behavior stage lasts from the purchase until the end of the cooperation with the seller.

Research done by Lindberg and Nordin (2008) highlight the importance of soft values in post-purchase behavior. Authors describe that especially when buying complex services where the outcome of the purchase may not be described beforehand, follow-ups have a great concern among buyers. Buyers expect suppliers to be actively in touch and make sure that everything goes as planned. According to Kemp, Aberdeen, Nwamaka and Wesley (2018), buyers tend to search for the feeling of satisfaction and trust after decision-making. Authors explain that buyers describe getting certainty for their decision if the seller company keeps communicating with the buyer even after closing the deal.

Seigyoung and Johnson (2005) describe that with complex products or services, comparison to other possible solutions is challenging afterward. Lindberg and Nordin (2018) also explain that with complex products or services, the outcome of the decision can be hard to assess in advance. As a result of this quality of the service and relationship with the seller during the post-purchase stage has a significant impact on customer satisfaction and loyalty. A big effect to customer satisfaction is also the possibility of giving feedback and the knowledge that given feedback is being taken seriously. Research done by Prahinski and Benton (2004) proves that an environment with an open dialogue regarding feedback and discussion of the cooperation between the buyer and seller has a strong correlation to the strength and commitment of the relationship.

Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuraman (1988) present a model of service quality gaps which is focused on describing possible gaps where buyer's expectations do not match experiences.

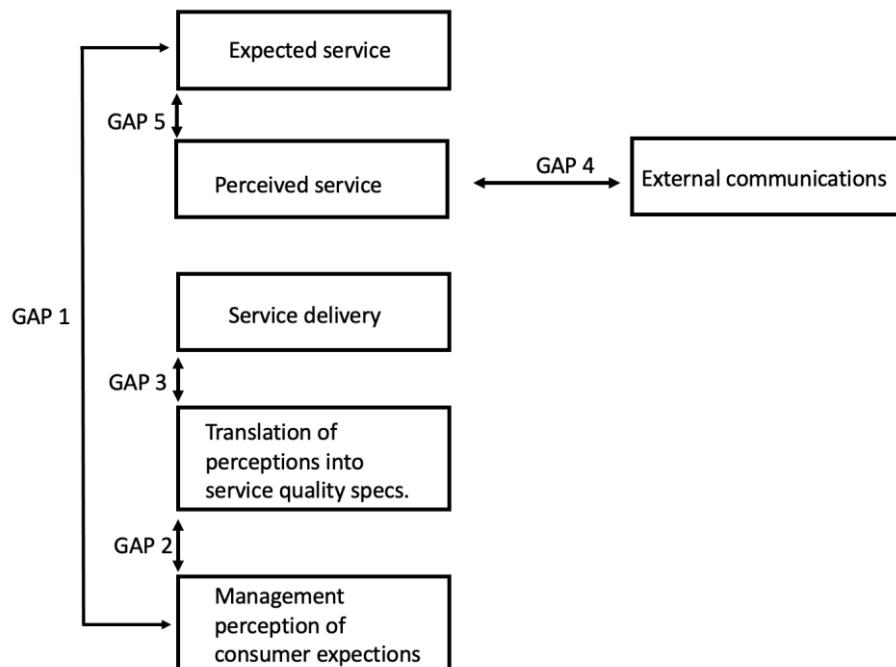


Figure 5. Service Quality Gaps (Adapted from Zeithaml et al. 1988).

Authors identify five different gaps where a buyer may experience dissatisfaction if their expectations of provided service do not correspond to reality. From the post-purchase point of view, especially the gap between service delivery and translation of

perceptions into service quality specs and the gap between perceived service and expected service are critical. Authors emphasize that when employees are unable to perform the service on the desired level, the customer feels disappointed, which weakens the whole customer experience. Respectively failing to transform concepts and promised elements to quality attributes easily leads to a situation where the buyer has high expectations of provided service, but the seller is unable to accomplish the expectations.

Jarcho et al. (2011) highlight that after difficult decisions between equally attractive alternatives, buyers no longer find the alternatives similarly desirable. With cognitive dissonance, buyers actively search for rational factors which support their decision. Even in situations where unpredictable negative things happen after the purchase decisions, buyers rarely reveal, at least in public, that the decision was wrong. Research done by Broosbank and Fullerton (2020) also highlights, that in B2B, the decision-maker is responsible for the decision for the company management. As a result of this, it is common that the buyer feels responsibility for the decision-making, and his or her interest is that the outcome of the purchase looks positive even if, in reality, the situation would be different.

2.3 Channels and touchpoints during customer journey

Day (2011) and Court et al. (2009) describe the touchpoints to be the situations and places that connect the buyer and the seller. Notable is that a touchpoint does not always require the presence of the seller. A touchpoint can also be, for example, when a buyer asks from an external consultant of a certain brand. Pawlowski and Pastuszak (2017) argue that customer journeys can be followed by defined touchpoints even if the customer uses a wide range of different channels if the customer journey is understood properly. Voorhees et al. (2017) highlight that research lacks a deep understanding of the optimal balance between human interaction and technology in customer service during the customer journey.

According to Lemon and Verhoef (2016), during different stages of the buying process, buyers have different motivations and preferences for what channels they want to use to get needed information and move forward in the process. Chiara, Terho, Cardinalia,

and Pascucciet (2019) highlight that a buyer might use a lot of different channels during their buying process and have a lot of touchpoints, but the reverence of these varies significantly. According to research done by Lingqvist et al. (2015), B2B buyers use on average six different channels during their buying processes. During different channels buyers have different needs and they expect different kind of service.

Channels and touchpoints can be divided into online channels and offline channels (Voorhees et al. 2017). Online channels are for example, websites, social media, search engines and online forums. Possible touchpoints in online channels can be different ads such as search ads, social media posts and reviews such as blog texts. According to Frambach, Roest and Krishnan (2007), online channels are preferred in the first stages of a purchasing process. Authors continue that with complex products and services, online channels are not as favorable channels compared to offline channels. Having a strong relationship using only online channels is seen as difficult.

Offline channels are, according to Rosenbaum et al. (2017) and Voorhees et al. (2017), for example, face-to-face interactions, television, radio and print media. Possible touchpoints in offline channels are visiting a supplier and traditional print ads. Offline channels are seen to be important, especially in purchases with a high importance and complexity. Schoenherr and Mabert (2011) highlight that high item difficulty leads to a more relational buyer-supplier interaction which leads to usage of offline channels.

2.4 Customer experience

Customer experience is seen as the result of a customer journey. Mittal and Sridhar (2020) define customer experience as the sum of all interactions the customers have with suppliers for the duration of their relationship.

Research of customer experience is fairly limited and new. Schmitt (1999) is seen as one of the first scholars to emphasize the remarkable role of customer experience in modern business. He argues that the traditional marketing strategies were appropriate during the industrial age but no longer during the era of partnerships. Evanschitzky and Gopalkrishnan (2007) highlight that research finds a lot of numerous ways to

understand and define customer experience because it is a rather new concept. Authors highlight that common for the new research regarding customer experience is the new way of counting the value of a customer. While earlier the value of a customer was counted directly from the sum of purchases, the focus nowadays is more on the length of the customer relationship and, for example, customer satisfaction measures.

Despite the novelty of the subject, companies have started to pay more attention to their customer experience. Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe that big companies, such as KPMG, Amazon and Alphabet Inc., have nowadays chief customer experience officers, customer experience vice presidents and customer success managers who are responsible for managing their customer experience. The increase in employees and focus on this matter is a natural consequence of the change in B2B buying habits. Lemon and Verhoef (2106) argue that today customers interact with sellers through more channels than earlier, and the touchpoints are more fragmented than before. This all makes inputs on customer experience personnel sensible.

Voorhees et al. (2017) argue that companies lack understanding of the holistic picture of customer experience. Authors highlight that suppliers often have a great understanding and focus on their customers during their core service. This can be, for instance, when the buyer is using their service. However, the authors argue that companies have shortcomings and lack information with touchpoints around the core service. As a result of this, the ability to perceive the entire customer experience is challenging and the probability that customers do not get support at all stages of their purchasing process is high. Puccinelli et al. (2009) highlight that during the buying process, buyers aim is to achieve a goal by purchasing a particular product or service. However, if the buyer does not get support during the buying process, the customer experience falls short, which may lead to the need not being met. Hence, understanding the concept of customer experience is significant to identify the critical stages of a customer journey. Having a great end-product does not matter if the customer experience is not positive and the buyer is not willing to go through its entire buying process. By having a deep understanding of the critical stages of a customer journey, a seller company can provide support to those stages and channels that the customer considers most significant while considering continuing the buying process.

Analyzing and processing the customer journey and customer experience does not require a completed purchase. Every set of interactions in which customers are dealing with the seller are seen as a customer journey. Steps of the customer journey can still be analyzed even if the process has not continued after a certain phase (Lemon & Verhoef 2016). Analyzing the customer journeys that did not lead to a purchase is as important as analyzing the ones that led to a purchase. Negative customer experiences can be even more interesting and important than the positive ones since analyzing these may help to identify the most important stages during the customer journey. Dixon et al. (2010) describe how National Australia Group has been contacting their customers who have given the lowest marks in surveys no matter if these customers made a purchase or not and asked why they did not enjoy the buying process. This has increased both their issue-resolution up by 31% and customer satisfaction among those customers who have not been seen as likely to repurchase. This has also increased customers' interest in National Australia Groups offerings, although their previous customer experience has been negative.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This chapter thoroughly explains the chosen research design of the study, research methods and the case company. This chapter also discusses the reliability and validity of the study. The research seeks to understand the processes behind a B2B buying process when purchasing complex products or services.

3.1 Description of the case company

This study is commissioned by a for-profit company working in the field of information security, cyber security, and cloud computing. The company was founded in the late 2010s, and it is located in Southern Finland. The company is classified as a small enterprise at the time of the study. Most of the personnel in the company have a technical background and are working as a security specialist for a customer. At the time of the study, the company does not have a sales team nor a marketing team.

The company is operating in the B2B sector, having customers from small and medium-sized enterprises as well as from listed companies. The company's customers represent a wide range of different industries such as finance, trade, software, mechanical engineering and manufacturing. Currently, most of the customers are located in Finland, but some of these companies are also having business units abroad. Customer relationships are in principle very close and long-term, and the value of customer relationships in euros is measured in high five figures.

The challenge for the case company at the time of the study is that it does not have a clear understanding of the customer journeys of its customers. While earlier companies used mainly intranets and on-premises software and had access to the Internet through the company's firewall, cloud computing has become more common during the past decade. The usage of the Internet and software has changed the way of working, and many companies are using a lot of scalable cloud services and have a lot of data in the cloud. The new way of working and how to store data has created a need for new kinds of security solutions. However, as cloud solutions and cloud security are rather new subjects, the practices in relation to purchasing them are not

stabilized yet. The case company lacks an understanding of how potential customers search for information, what factors buyers see relevant when comparing potential suppliers, and, for example, who are the decision-makers in the buying organizations.

Because of the lengthy buying processes in B2B and the limited number of potential customers for the case company, it is important to focus on those prospects who are most likely to end up as customers with the best input-output ratio. The case company also lacks information on how to improve the relationship with current customers. Interacting with customers is close and it uses a lot of resources. As a result of this, it is important for the company to be able to make the best possible use of these relationships.

In Finland, at the time of this study, information security and cybersecurity have gained a lot of publicity as a result of hacking. A good example of this was the psychotherapy center information leak in October 2020, where cybercriminals demanded ransoms as cryptocurrency and threatened to publish personal information of patients who had used psychotherapy services (Yle 2020). Also, in December 2020, the Finnish Parliament was a target of a cyber-attack where cybercriminals aimed to get access to parliament members' emails (Yle 2020). As a result of these incidents, information security and cybersecurity have received a lot of publicity, and the subject has risen in many companies for processing. This has increased the attention towards the case company's offerings, and it has increased the number of potential customers.

Since the company is relatively small and has a limited number of resources, the budget used towards new customer acquisition should be used wisely. At the time of the study, most of its employees work in consulting and technical issues and have low focus on the marketing side. As a result of this, knowledge of the customer journeys also helps to allocate marketing resources to the relevant channels. Understanding customer journeys can also be utilized by technical issues by providing customers with information that they consider as the most important. Since the company is rather small, it is agile to adapt its sales processes. The case company is also still considering how to compete in the market and how to grow and scale their business. With a good understanding of customer needs, the case company can gain a competitive advantage and provide distinctive service.

3.2 Research design

The chosen research design for this study is qualitative interviews. Teo and Yeong (2003) highlight that to have a deep understanding of customer journeys, focus groups and interviews are the most beneficial way to increase understanding of the subject. However, this study uses individual interviews. The case company works in the field of information security and cyber security, and, therefore, conversations with customers are strictly confidential. The case company has a non-disclosure agreement with most of the customers, which prevents having current customers and previous customers in an interview at the same time. Also, customers without a non-disclosure agreement do not want to disclose what company they are dealing with their security issues neither. In addition, some of the interviewed companies may consider other interviewed companies as competitors. Revealing that two companies from the same field of business are working with the same company and possibly with the same technical specialist could also create trust issues.

According to Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2002, 27–28) and Alasuutari (2011, 39–40) qualitative research method is suitable when the subject under investigation is difficult to explain, and the answers are not easily compartmentalized. The authors describe that qualitative research is commonly seen as an understanding study. Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara (2009, 61–64) highlight that the aim of qualitative research is to find and reveal true facts, and it is important that the voice of the interviewee be at the fore. With a quantitative method research the interviewee is not able to share his or her experiences with his or her own words. As a result of this quantitative method does not provide a deep understanding of the subject under study. Doz (2011) emphasizes that qualitative research also serves as a method for finding things to generalize and research them.

Semi-structured interviews are chosen to collect the data. Qu and Dumay (2011) emphasize that the semi-structured interview frame helps the interviewer to guide the interviewee towards the topics to be studied. Alvesson (2003) highlights that semi-structured interviews are open to what the interviewee feels is important and relevant to talk about. This guides the interviewee to reveal subjects that are most important. As the possible answers vary and the subject is multifaceted, a loose structure is

suitable for the issue. Qu and Dumay (2011) also emphasize that a semi-structured interviewer is suitable for a situation where the interviewees are previously unknown to the interviewer. In such situations, the interviewee can modify the style and pace of the questions to evoke the fullest responses from the interviewees.

The qualitative method is justified for this study because there are only five interviewees. The topic under investigation is unknown, and the responses or experiences of the interviewees are not possible to know in advance. The interview questions are constructed in such a way that the interviewees have to answer the questions with full sentences. Common for the interview questions is that the words “*how*” and “*why*” are repeated to get the interviewees to describe their thoughts.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The data collection process is analyzed in Figure 6. The data collection is done by face-to-face interviews using a video call, and the interviews were recorded for data analysis. The translation of the semi-structured interview-frame can be seen in Appendix 1. The questions were drafted in such a way that the buying process was divided into five parts as described in the theoretical framework. However, these stages were not directly explained to the interviewees; instead, the interviewees were guided towards the next stages during the interview. Questions during each stage were relatively open, and the interviewees were asked to explain themselves what kind of activities happen in their company in certain stages and how they see the whole process. While the interviewees described their answers, the interviewer was able to ask clarifying questions and change the order of the questions (Alasuutari 2011, 32).

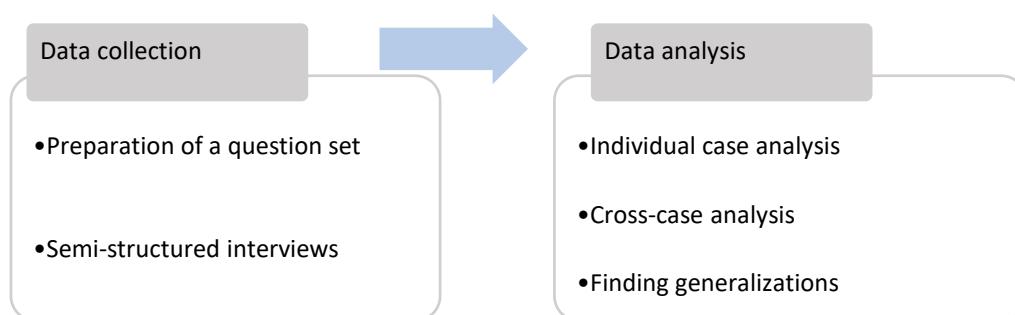


Figure 6. Summary of the data collection and analysis

At the time of the study, the selected interviewees have, during the past 12 months, been negotiating with the case company or been paying customers. The interviewees have been personally involved in the buying process either as a decider or an influential person. All interviewees represent different companies. The size or industry of the company was not a selection criterion for the selection. The only exclusionary selection criterion was non-profit companies. Since the case company mainly focuses on for-profit companies, this study does not take into account, for example, buying processes of government-run companies or non-profit companies. Table 1 presents background information of the interviews. Due to the sensitivity of the subject under investigation, the information provided about the interviewees and companies they present is limited only to industry, role in the buying process, data gathering method and information of the length and date of the interview.

Table 1. Background information of the conducted interviews

| Company's industry | Name in the study | Buying process role | Data gathering method | Interview date and length |
|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Software 1 | A | Influencer | Face-to-face interview via video call | 23.3.2021 31 min |
| Manufacturing | B | Decider | Face-to-face interview via video call | 26.3.2021 26 min |
| Finance | C | Influencer | Face-to-face interview via video call | 26.3.2021 29 min |
| Processing technology | D | Influencer/Decider | Face-to-face interview via video call | 30.2.2021 31 min |
| Software 2 | E | Influencer | Face-to-face interview via video call | 31.3.2021 29 min |

Analysis of the interviews began with listening to the recorder interviews and breaking down the recorded interviews according to the theoretical framework. In some of the interviews, the interviewees described their buying processes in a different order than the framework of this study. It was also characteristic for the interviews that the interviewees refined their previous answers at a later stage of the interview. As a result of this, before starting the actual analysis of the answers, all comments were arranged so that there was clarity to which stage of the buying process a certain comment was related.

After all the interviews were formulated to fit the theoretical framework, all interviews were analyzed individually in their own context. Every interview was thus considered as its own case-study. Mintzberg (1979) highlights that case-study leads to closeness which gives the ability to sense how the interviewee feels about the studied subject and how it seems to them. After the interviews were analyzed individually, all interviews were analyzed together, and the results were compared. With cross-case analysis, within-group similarities and across-group differences were searched (Eisenhardt 1989). The chosen method offers a high possibility of relevant information. As the process is intimately tied with evidence from personal experiences from the interviewees, the results mirror reality.

3.4 Reliability and validity

During the evaluation of the results, reliability and validity have to be considered. The qualitative research method poses challenges for the interpretation of the received responses. Rose and Johnson (2020) highlight that qualitative research methods are often highly subjective because of the required human interpretation. Authors argue that it is highly unlikely that different researchers arrive at similar results. Hirsjärvi et al. (2009, 164) correspondingly highlight that the data is regarded as unique. However, this can be seen as a strength when different perspectives emerge with the help of different researchers. Subjectivity also undermines the reliability of the answers since the interviewee describes the buying process from his or her own perspective, which might differ greatly from the view of the entire decision-making unit.

At the time of the study, the Finnish COVID-19 situation did not allow to have face-to-face interviews. As a result of this, all interviews were conducted remotely by a video call. Observation of the interviewee, interpretation of tones, and, for example, responding to questions without being in the same location with the interviewee is challenging. This problem was being reduced by keeping the video on during the interviews, and the tone of the interview was designed to be kept as relaxed as possible to avoid the situation seeming like an interrogation.

The topic under study also contributed to the respondents' responses. As the subject is sensitive, both the person interviewed or the company represented do not want to be identified. As a result of this, the responses may not have reached the same level as in a situation where there would have been complete confidence. In order to minimize presented problems, all interviews started by the interviewer telling the interviewees that the answers are used only for this study and not, for example, for marketing purposes. The interviewees were also told that neither their identity nor the company's identity is not mentioned in the study.

Validity expresses how well the measurement method used in the study measures exactly the property of the phenomenon under study (Kirk & Miller 1986, 5). This refers to the appropriateness of chosen data gathering method, the exactitude of analysis and conclusions, and can the results be generalized. The goal of this study was to understand the background behind chosen case companies' buying processes. The questions interviewees were asked follows the theoretical framework of this study assuming that case companies' buying process follows the five-stage buying process model. According to Qu and Dumay (2011), especially when the interviewer has to require responsiveness from interviewees, it leads the interviewees to give answers that fit the question well regardless of if they really think that. All respondents were involved in the buying process, but their key responsibilities were in different positions in the company. Hence, the concept of a buying process was not entirely familiar, as a result of which the interviewer sometimes had to help with questions and give examples that could lead the interviewee to certain answers.

The theoretical framework for this study was chosen deliberately to be beneficial to the case company. The theory part and the interviews follow this framework carefully.

4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the results of the interviews. Every stage of the five-stage buying process is presented in its own lower paragraph (chapters 4.1–4.5). The findings are summarized in a table with the most important and most frequent findings gathered in the final chapter.

4.1 Need recognition

All of the companies interviewed saw that their buying process started with an apparent need. In most cases, the need stood out inside the company from the actual users. However, interviewees said that a need could arise from anywhere from the company, but the needs that are left to be solved are often those that come directly from the users. All interviewees agreed that the top management of the company is very rarely identifying a need or launching the buying process. One of the companies mentioned that a need had arisen by the C-level personnel of the company.

[...] it starts from the very grassroots [...] we find that we need something or that something is hard or that we just have some problem among the users.” (Influencer, software company 1)

“It starts from the user side, we [the management] do not start suggesting things – usually they [needs] come from the users. They [users] come and talk to us and say that they have a problem or stuff like that and then we start thinking that can something be done for that problem and if yes how and who could help” (Decider, Manufacturing company)

D highlighted that the need could also arise from their current supplier, whose task is to make suggestions at regular meetings on how the current situation and solutions could be improved. Other interviewees stated that only rarely does the need recognition or the buying process start with a seller's contact. Three of the interviewees mentioned that they receive a lot of contacts from suppliers and attend many seminars, webinars and other events regarding their field of business. They stated that they

actively gather information of potential suppliers and solutions to be up to date and keep the presentations for later use. Interviewees highlighted that the buying process is easier to start when there is already a set of potential suppliers and information about their abilities and personnel.

"We have a lot of these sales presentations where suppliers present their portfolios, and we usually take the slides for us for the future." (Influencer, software company)

For all companies, prevalent is that the ones who raised the need have the responsibility to clarify the need for their management and justify the use of money. These persons also have a significant role in the whole buying process, and their opinion is seen as important not only at the beginning of the buying process but also at later stages. Some of the companies mentioned that the early stage of their buying process also includes "selling" the idea for the management of the company to get funding and support for the project.

The beginning of a buying process demands a lot of resources from the companies. D stated that they have several projects going on all the time, and prioritization is essential. B highlighted that needs and wants rise all the time, and a big part of those are ones that are not able to get solved or the cost to solve those is too high. A buying process in the B2B context is always seen as a demanding and lengthy process by all interviewed companies. All companies highlighted that a buying process involves a lot of different people to perform a buying process. Correspondingly, there are many people inside their own company for whom the buyers are responsible, which also complicates the process. All companies stated that in principle, all needs are tried to be fulfilled with existing partners and resources to avoid ending up in a long and complex buying process.

"[...] of course, we prioritize them [needs] and maybe through a gate model we can consider that certain criteria must be met [...] for example need to generate more revenue, need to have a certain pay-back. Pretty often they [needs] are just left on the table [the buying process does not continue]" (Influencer/Decider, Processing technology company)

“People asking these [solutions for their needs] do not know the technology nor the price. Then we start figuring out is there any sense [fulfilling the need] or is it even possible [to fulfill the need] and do we really need it or can we figure it [the need] with current resources and develop them.” (Decider, Manufacturing company)

C and A emphasized that, for example, information networks and information security are seen as support functions for their company. As a result of this, the needs may arise from other departments of the company after a problem has occurred. C also mentioned that a lot of needs come to exist because of the regulations by financial supervision. Companies mentioned that they might know exactly what they need to solve. However, the company may not know what the possible solution could be or what the solution requires from the company. C and A stated that during the first stages of the process, the need often changes significantly, and the sellers have an important role in helping the company by identifying a possible solution.

“It is kind of a cycle which goes around when we realize that with this product or service, we can actually tackle these other problems also or it can help with other problem also and then the whole need is looked from a slightly different angle” (Influencer, Finance company)

4.2 Information search

After the need is identified and approved by the company and a budget is issued, the companies start to find information about their need as well as possible solutions. It is common for all companies that they start the information search inside the company. The first source all companies mentioned is current suppliers. A stated that they have certain suppliers that they have used as partners for a long time, and their sourcing department has determined that existing suppliers must be considered first before looking at new suppliers. A emphasized that it is always an aspiration to extend existing agreements or to use close partners of existing suppliers. C highlighted that only in situations where the need is new, and there is no knowledge of it inside the company, information is searched outside the current suppliers. All companies are trying to avoid getting into a situation where they are forced to search for solutions from totally new suppliers. One of the companies mentioned that they start information search by using

search engines. All other companies mentioned that in situations where they do not have a specific supplier in mind, they still usually have a set of potential suppliers that they know could be potential suppliers.

"We have certain technology companies and suppliers that we already do cooperation with. In the sourcing department is also said that we have to go first through current suppliers and check if they could help us before contacting new suppliers" (Influencer, software 1 company)

"Often if it is a completely new thing where we do not have a current partner then it often starts that we for example look at some of the leading names in the field and then Google them." (Influencer, Finance company)

"[...] and then we might even use Google search if we do not know anything in advance." (Influencer, software 1 company)

All companies mentioned that at the beginning of the information search, the users and "case owners" are the main people for searching information. For example, D mentioned that people involved in the information search process are the owner of the subject area, owner of the business case, a service manager, and a salesperson who takes care of the prices and technical matters of the contract. A described that depending on the product or service to be purchased, a group of three to four persons from the users' side and the experts' side are involved in information search at the start. It is common that during the information search there is no C-level personnel involved in the process unless it is a considerable investment. C described that with most of the processes the information search is done by the small team who is responsible for the business area, and only in really big processes might there be someone from the management in the first meetings. However, the actual information search is done by the users and experts, and the person from management is only participating in the meetings to know what is going on.

"[...] the one that happens to know most [of the solution] [...] is dealt by ad hoc and with who then will use it the most. [...] and if it is a bigger purchase then all the team members are involved [in information search]. Basically by ad hoc [deciding who

[...] searches for information] whoever happens to have time available.” (Influencer, software 1 company)

“If there is a bigger project that I may not be the only one dealing with, then there is very quickly all [members] that are needed. Instead of one person there are four people listening to those conversations.” (Influencer, Finance company)

Price, delivery model and upper-level functionality were repeated when asked what information they look for at the beginning. C stated that at the very beginning, they expect so solve the price and a top-level adaption to the need. D mentioned that at the beginning of the information search they have certain criteria such as security, cloud compatible, and, for example, opportunity to purchase as a service that are clarified.

“I think a top level fit for the needs [the first information needed] [...] pretty quickly also talking about the euros – if the service costs half a million and we have a budget of 30 tons it is needless for us to talk more about it” (Influencer, Finance company)

“[...] have to fill certain criteria [...] security, whether it is cloud compatibility, can it be purchased as a service [...] price matters of course” (Influencer/Decider, Processing technology company)

Soon after the companies have an upper-level idea of what they have to find out about their need, they contact a potential supplier. C stated that with complex products the required information is not available online since the situations are never standard. D argued that purchases are so complex that the supplier is expected to see the situation from the customer's point of view, and therefore, the contact with the suppliers needs to be done at the very start of the process.

“[...] the truth is that in complex products you do not get nearly everything you want from a public source [...] and then it is a salesperson or a technical salesperson or someone like that who tells you in more details [...] so nowadays the salespersons are involved in pretty early stage” (Influencer, Finance company)

"Well, really fast, in fact, at least for me [first contact to a supplier]. Sometimes I first compare and research online, but I am quickly interested in knowing how things could work out in practice." (Influencer, manufacturing company)

"It will happen [contacting the supplier] pretty soon these days. For us these are based on partnership [...] it [a contact] will be almost immediately." (Influencer/Decider, processing company)

The final product or service to be purchased often changes very much during the information search. All companies emphasized that the companies do know well what problem they are solving, but they have only a directive idea on the solution. B mentioned that products and services they are usually buying are not related at all to the core business of the company, and therefore during the information search, the need and the product or service sharpens and adapts a lot.

All companies emphasized the need for a consulting sales representative from the supplier's side who knows how to step into the buyer's situation. C highlighted that an extremely important part of the buying process is to find a supplier whose sales representative or technical salesperson knows how to step into the buyer's situation. C continued that all information needed is not possible to find without a sales representative. D and E mentioned that during the information search they are looking for a supplier who understands their situation and knows how to offer them a tailored offering where all the small details of the company as well as the whole industry have been taken into account. A argued that the sales representative should be part of the process from the very start as a professional and help the buyer as if the sales representative was a part of the buyer team. For all companies it appeared that the main reason for contacting the supplier quickly is the need for consultative help and tailored knowledge.

"After all, especially generic information is easy to find but kind of information which has already been kind of chewed for us is something we need more [...] usually the necessary information cannot be found without talking to the seller." (Influencer, Finance company)

“In the purchase of larger entities, it is the role [helping the customer] of the seller in the initial stage [...] it is the seller and technical presales person who tries to help to discover what we as a customer want.” (Influencer, software company 2)

Most of the companies highlighted that when talking to a sales representative during the information search, the answers come really quickly. However, companies stated that the answers are often not informative enough, and the buyer feels that the seller just wants to hurry to the agreement. D mentioned that it is challenging to find a supplier who has the patience to make a deep acquaintance to customer's business and understands the situation broadly. A and D mentioned that when the seller realizes a deal is potentially happening, the sales representatives are active at the beginning of the process.

“Relatively agile specifically sellers are to answer questions” (Influencer, software company 2)

“Yes, they do take the role [seller answering to questions] at the point when a deal possibly arises” (Influencer, software company 2)

“It is maybe related to the understanding of the customer's condition and business and how it fits [answering a question about what is challenging with sellers].” (Influencer, Finance company)

4.3. Evaluation of alternatives

Evaluation of alternatives occurs in the companies even before the buying process is actually started. E mentioned that soon after having even a little thought of a potential need, a preliminary set of alternatives is formed of the potential suppliers. As a result of this, the preliminary evaluation of alternatives occurs at the very beginning before the actual information search. D stated that before any purchase, the company usually has a longlist of seven to ten companies which consists of companies already familiar to them. From the longlist the company seeks to quickly narrow down the options to two or three options with which the actual price competition and comparison will take place.

[...] we have that benefit that we know our own business areas well and we are able to make a shortlist without major sparring [at the beginning of buying the process]."
(Influencer, software company 2)

"In larger or medium-sized projects we start with an idea from the longlist – about seven or ten [alternatives] and aim to get into three or four with whom to talk"
(Influencer/Decider, processing company)

All companies brought up quickly the price and highlighted that even though the functionality is always important, the price is often the crucial factor, especially for the decision-makers. B mentioned that the management is always "after money" and is willing to choose the cheapest alternative if it just fits in the circumstances.

"Money is the number one [what is being evaluated] – management is always after the money but we also have something to say, and it does not always go so that we take the cheapest." (Decider, Manufacturing company)

C highlighted that the history with the suppliers has an extraordinary weight. C continued that having a long-term partner who knows the company and processes well is always a less risky alternative compared to a totally new company. If the current partner is seen somewhat close to the new suppliers in comparison the current partnership gets a lot of weight.

"If we have a partner who knows us well and they have a solid product they get so much bonus points." (Influencer, Finance company)

Some of the companies emphasized that as the company is a for-profit operator, the evaluation is based on rational factors. A stated that they often evaluate the alternatives with an Excel file where different functions have a different weight. Companies also quickly brought up that the price is a clear classifying factor in every evaluation. Common for companies was also that the evaluation was done by subjective factors, and these evaluations were reasoned with rational factors.

"We placed suppliers to Excel – to columns – and checked if they meet [certain points] and place certain weights and then order them gold and silver and bronze places." (Influencer, software company 2)

In addition to rational values, companies also emphasized that decision-makers are humans and soft values have a significant role when evaluating the alternatives. Companies mentioned that, especially in tight situations, gut feeling and emotions have a clear impact when evaluating alternatives. In situations where all obligatory conditions, such as price and usability, are met, and two or more alternatives are really similar, companies described that they evaluate the suppliers' soft values such as customer service. C mentioned that in situations where alternatives are really close to each other, smoothness of the entire purchasing process, discussions with the seller, and how the seller has been able to exceed expectations and made additional work decide the choice. C mentioned that subjective decisions occur when the prices do not differ remarkably.

"Let's say that price and pricing model is close [...] then it goes subjective, how the process has gone, how we have got answers" (Influencer, Finance company)

Opportunity for a trial or test period emerged in some of the interviews. A mentioned that a test period works as an insurance for the buyer, especially in risky and long-term purchases. D highlighted that opportunity to test is seen as a really important feature since information systems solutions are often so complicated, and the need for adjustability is high.

"[we] want to test and verify and do the process [evaluation] properly." (Influencer, software company 2)

References and public customer cases emerged in several interviews at the time of evaluation. E described that when they have only a few alternatives left, they often call to reference customers to ask how they have used a certain product or service. E continued that public logos and references on the company's website are seen as really big elements building trust, especially if the reference companies are from the same field of business. A correspondingly mentioned that they see public references

and well enough described cases of previous partnerships as the most reliable sources. References are also seen as benchmarks for the companies. D pointed out that they do not want to be the first ones to pilot a new software because, as a small company, they cannot afford mistakes that much.

"We ask in what kind of use they have the products, and does it match the usage we have thought for that product [talking with reference customers] then we ask the feeling of the supplier – what it is like with credibility and so on." (Influencer, software company 2)

"Reliability is brought by the company's own website [...] there are public references and sufficiently well described reference cases." (Influencer, software company 1)

4.4 Purchase decision

All companies mentioned that the people, whom the decision affects, are being listened to during the purchase decision. Often the final decision is made of a group of alternatives that are accepted by the ones who will primarily be dealing with the purchased product or service. A highlighted that the final decision is always made by the budget owner. During the decision-making a C-level executive might be part of the process by influencing or deciding of the remaining options. The owner of the budget, business unit director, and, for example, the executive team were also mentioned to make the final decision on the basis of the options provided.

"[...] yes, I would say the one who owns the budget makes the decision on what [alternative] to go forward [...] and there are certain levels of management like the chief information officer who may be influencing the decision." (Influencer, software company 1)

Usually, in this stage of the process, lawyers and other people with a focus on contract issues will be part of the process. C mentioned that this is often the slowest and most long-winded part of the process since the contracts are being sent back and forth between the legal departments of the buyer and seller. In this stage, respectively, the users do not have that significant role anymore.

"Kind of a contractual assessment – it is a pain point" (Influencer, Finance company)

Companies A and D mentioned that the purchase decision is actually one of the easiest parts of the buying process. Both companies argued that when the background research and other stages of the buying process have been done carefully, it inevitably leads to a situation where the remaining alternatives are all at least moderate.

"Yes, so far it has been relatively easy to choose. When the initial work in that process and all that [...] when you do it properly and understand what is being bought and what is needed [...] at least we have not had any regrets yet" (Influencer, software company 1)

The companies have substantial differences in relation to the lengths of the processes. When asked about the most common length of a buying process, the answers were about three to four months, but the overall scope in the answers varied from several weeks to multiple years. The total cost of a purchase and the length of the process were directly proportional to all companies. Especially in situations where the product or service to be purchased was new for the buyer and the supplier previously unknown, the length of each stage was described to be time consuming. C explained that even in situations when the need is urgent, the hurry is forgotten at the latest when the technical aspects of the contract begin to go through.

4.5 Post-purchase behavior

After the supplier has been chosen and the contract signed starts the implementation stage of the actual product or service. Depending on the size of the purchase and what has been agreed in the contract, the buyer starts the deployment project with the agreed contact person from the supplier. Together these persons go through ongoing dialogue and have the responsibility that the project goes like planned and the original need gets met. A, B and D highlighted that they have monthly meetings with the supplier to go through how the process has gone and if there is a need for changes. A mentioned that they expect the seller to be actively in touch if they have development proposals or if the purchased product or service has additional features that could be

of interest to the buyer. The need of the supplier is highlighted by all companies in the post-purchase behavior.

"We choose from our side a responsible person and usually the suppliers have their own counterpart – it is like a couple who starts to work with the project through and checks that it goes as planned" (Influencer, software company 1)

"[...] there are monthly meetings with the main partners, and we are active on both sides – are there any new features or things like this that are considered" (Influencer, software company 2)

"If there is something new or something of such attention value that we might want to take into account, it is good that you are calling. Especially if there is any additional information on the service then it is very welcome." (Influencer, software company 1)

Companies mention that during the post-purchase stage an important factor is measuring the success of the purchase. D mentions that during the post-purchase stage, they try to look back at the primary need and verify that the purchased product or service fulfills this certain need. In addition, before closing the case, it is important to go through how the whole process went and could some part of the process happen more efficiently.

In the implementation stage, companies strongly emphasized the need for the supplier to help with onboarding the purchased solution. Companies mentioned that a close partnership where the supplier is available at all times and willing to help the buyer is expected. However, A, B, C and E pointed out that they do not get enough support from the seller anymore at the post-purchase stage. A and C mentioned that the supplier relationship often ends once the contract has been signed and the invoice has been paid. C highlighted that in this kind of situations there is a risk that the company will have a bad feeling about the supplier and that the purchased product or service will be underutilized especially in the case of a complex system. D mentioned that nowadays the suppliers do keep in touch well and highlights that suppliers cannot afford to handle the post-purchase stage poorly.

“Well, then yes, you get answers pretty well, you say, really fast [getting answers during the information search stage], but then when you start to have contracts signed, it starts to fade [cooperation with the supplier] [...] when you have signed the contract there are cases when you have to remind [the seller] that hey, did we have someone to support” (Influencer, manufacturing company)

“Often it bit like ends [relationship with the supplier] when the names are on paper [...] or at latest when we have paid the invoice [...] sometimes systems remain underutilized if they require complex post-acquisition work [...] and it obviously affects our image of the system and suppliers [...] if it [purchased product or service] remains underutilized we might get a feeling that we paid a bit too much” (Influencer, Finance company)

“Nowadays they [suppliers] do not disappear – they cannot afford it [not being in touch after purchase] (Influencer/Decider, processing company)

4.6 Revised theoretical framework

In figure 7 is seen the revised theoretical framework with summarizes what kind of activities are seen as the most important during the customer journey according to this study and what channels buyers prefer during their buying process. Key members of the DMU at each stage are also identified.

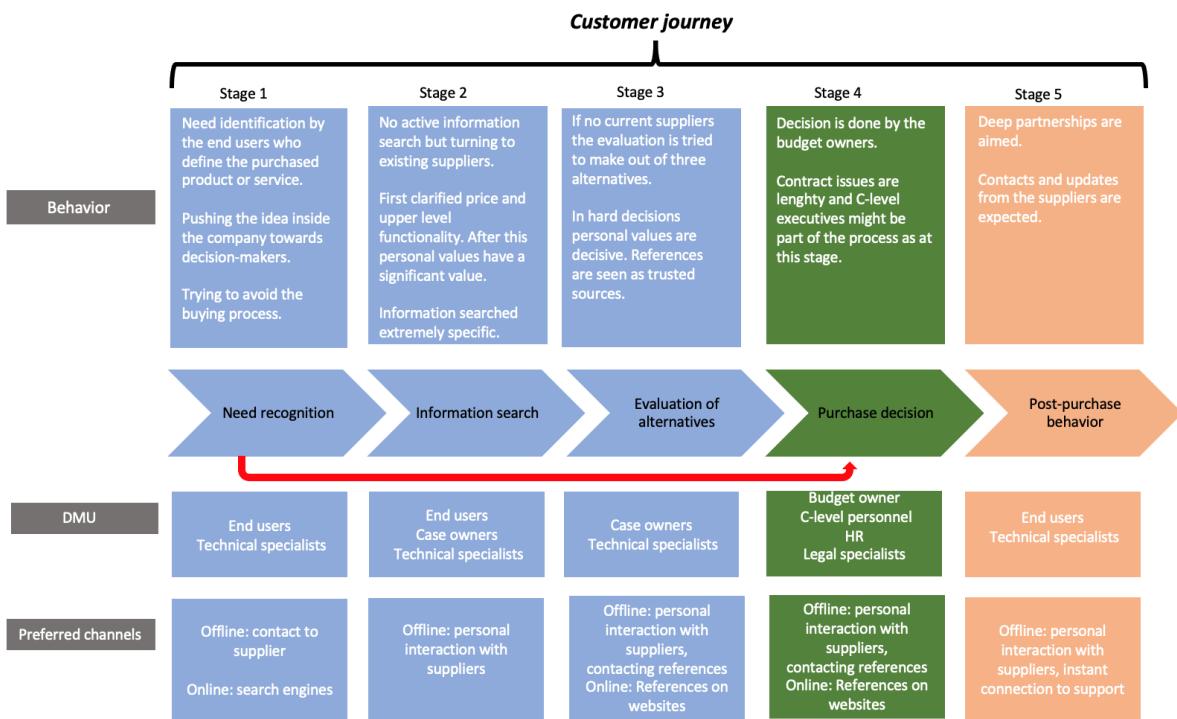


Figure 7. Revised theoretical framework

All companies identified the five stages of the customer journey as the theoretical framework offered, but companies highlighted that they avoid going through the whole purchasing process if possible. The red arrow reflects the companies aim to go straight to purchase decision with a current supplier after a need has been recognized. All companies highlighted the importance of the post-purchase behavior and mentioned that they often lack support during this stage.

All companies mentioned offline channels as the most important channels during the buying process. Online channels were mentioned to be important in situations where the purchased product or service was unknown and current suppliers were unable to help with the purchase.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This final chapter summarizes the whole study and discusses how the findings of the interviews are related to the earlier studies presented in the theory chapter. Chapter 5.1 focuses on theoretical contributions, and the research questions are answered. The research questions are answered starting from the sub-questions and moving to the main research question to make the ordering progress logical. Chapter 5.2 focuses on managerial implications, which are directed at the case company. At the end of chapter 5.2 main managerial implications are summarized in a table. In the final sub-chapter, limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are presented.

In previous research, there is clearly a gap regarding B2B customer journeys with complex purchases. The goal for the study was to fulfill this gap by providing a study that covers the buying process from the customer point of view and is focused on customer-centrism. The study was conducted by using qualitative case studies of five different companies. A cross-case analysis was used to find similarities and dissimilarities in the findings.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

This study focuses on the existing literature on customer journeys from a partnership perspective. Research of customer journeys (Wolny & Charoensuksai 2014; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Rosenbaum et al. 2017; Court et al. 2009) focuses mainly on customer journeys from a B2C perspective and purchasing goods for own use without long-term effects. While B2B research focuses mainly on general characteristics of B2B business (Lilien 2016; Åge 2011), the research lacks understanding of the significance of relationship management, long-term customer relationships, and the seller's ability to help the client as the client's consultant. This study is focused mainly on what happens inside the buying companies during the stages of a buying process and what kind of activities companies perform and consider important. This study used a qualitative research method to get more understanding of the phenomenon. Poddar et al. (2020) mention that in many companies, the customer journey is made by the upper

management of the seller company without customer-centrism. During this study, the focus was directed only to the customer.

SQ1. How do the buyer companies exclude potential suppliers during their customer journey?

The interviewees stated that the initial decrease of potential suppliers happens even before the buying process is truly started. Companies mentioned that their basis for the potential suppliers are their current suppliers or companies that their current suppliers suggest. In a situation where the companies do not have an existing supplier or the existing suppliers do not suggest a potential company to cooperate with, the buyer companies still seem to have an idea of what companies could be potential suppliers. In the field of information and cybersecurity, the companies know other companies well. Many buyer companies stated that they know the biggest companies in the business area and then contact them. Scanning markets and following the newest trends came up in several interviewees just like Wolny and Charoensuksai (2014) presented. It seems that at the very beginning, companies have already done, either consciously or unconsciously, elimination of alternatives, and all suppliers do not get an equal opportunity to be heard. When thinking of the possibility of being in the group of suppliers of which the decision is made, big companies have an advantage because they are most likely more known than smaller companies and get more publicity because of this.

After the initial stage, when companies are dealing with potential suppliers at the first negotiations, the goal is to figure out the conditions which are necessary to continue negotiating. The clearest conditions of all are price and that the functionality meets the minimum requirements that have been defined. In situations where the sectors are regulated, such as the banking sector is regulated by financial supervision, meeting these regulations is the starting point for the negotiations. During the first negotiations, the aim is to quickly eliminate those suppliers, which do not fulfill the need or are, for example, so expensive that negotiating is a waste of time. Once the necessary conditions are met, the remaining suppliers are in principle seen as potential suppliers and in later stages softer values are considered when evaluating alternatives.

Argument by Kotler and Keller (2017, 247–248) and Muralidharan and Jayachandran (1997, 37–44) of buyers looking for specific information to support their buying processes is in line with this study. Companies mentioned that suppliers that have the ability to settle into buyer's perspective, are the ones with whom the negotiating continues. The ability to provide exactly what the customer needs and customize what is offered are mentioned to be significant issues when looking for a reliable supplier. Companies mentioned that suppliers that can only offer general solutions for complex problems are eliminated. Argument by Lyengar and Lepper (2006) and Lesonsky (2019) about the negative impact of information flood is highly supported by this study. Companies mention that they often struggle when suppliers explain a huge number of features that their service or product has, even if they have no meaning to the buyer. This can be a result of not understanding the buyer's situation thoroughly, which is often a turning point for the supplier to drop out of the comparable alternatives. Providing too much unnecessary information complicates and slows down the buyer's process, which is seen extremely negative by the buyers.

All companies mention that they aim to have “*longlists*” and “*shortlist*” or, for example, “*preliminary alternatives*” and “*actual alternatives*” just as Wang and Ziv (2012) highlighted. For all companies, it seems to be common that the final decision is made out of a group of about three suppliers. References and possibility for a test period are seen as highly important when evaluating the final alternatives. Companies mentioned that at this point, it is common to call for reference customers and ask how the cooperation with the supplier has previously worked. Especially a reference customer from the same field of business is seen extremely crucial at the very last comparison. Statement by Alejandro et al. (2011) of the importance of a reference or a personally known contact is really strongly in line with this study. Companies mentioned that even in situations where they have a good feeling about the supplier and their offering, companies struggle to start a cooperation if their personal contact gives negative feedback about the supplier.

Soft values, subjectivity and personal preferences appeared in all interviewees to be important factors during the final stages of evaluating the alternatives. Findings support well Almquist et al. (2018) argument that after the essential elements, the so-called “*hard values*”, are met, the “*soft values*” such as individual values, ease of doing

business and inspirational values have a significantly big impact when evaluating alternatives. Findings by Almqvist et al. (2018) and Ulaga (2018) are strongly in line with this study. Companies mentioned that they expect the suppliers to make the buying process as easy as possible and help the buyer with their needs. Carmon and Yang (2012) and Lindberg and Nordin (2008) argue that buyers tend to rely on soft values, especially when there are only a few alternatives left and when the decision is hard. This is also in line with this study as companies described that in situations where two or more alternatives are almost similar, buyers tend to choose the alternative with which the whole process has worked the easiest and of which they have the best feeling.

SQ2. What kind of services customers expect during their customer journey?

Findings strongly support observations by Schmitt (1999) and Manning et al. (2011) that B2B buying is moving towards long-term relationships where the buyers and sellers work together closely and know well the other party's organizational structure and needs. In this study, all companies strongly emphasized the importance of finding a reliable partner who understands the buyer's situation and works as a consultant. Companies mentioned that this requires a lot of effort from the supplier and, possibly due to this, finding this kind of supplier is challenging, just like Senn et al. (2013) mentioned. Companies highlighted that suppliers that deeply concentrate on the customers' situation, and take an extra step for the customers, stand out from the average suppliers. This study strongly supports the statement by Paesbrugghe et al. (2018) that customers expect the sales representative to work as an assistant buyer for the company.

Most of the interviewees also mentioned that suppliers often "disappear" after the contract has been made and the invoice paid. This finding is in conflict with previous research, which emphasizes the ongoing communication between buyers and suppliers. Several companies have had challenges with suppliers during the post-purchase stage because of these situations, and it has left the customer with a bad memory of the supplier. This also has a clear impact on repurchases and the length of the cooperation. Many interviewees pointed out that after the contract period is over, and the company could change the supplier, they do not easily change to a new

supplier. Even in situations where a new supplier could provide a lower price, the threshold to change is high if cooperation with the current supplier has worked. Some companies even highlighted that if the connection with the supplier is seamless and doing business is easy, they are more forgiving to small mistakes by the supplier or their products. Minor delays are not that consequential when the general level of service and functionality is on a high level.

The empirical data strongly supports the statement by Kotler and Keller (2019, 162) that B2B marketers' and sales representatives' main task is to participate in customer journeys at all stages and help the customer during its process. It seems that the end product, which solves the original challenge of why the buyer started the buying process, is just a small part of the total solution. Obviously, the end product needs to solve the problem, but in addition to this, to stand out from the competitors, sellers are expected to provide value for the buyer company at all stages during their buying process.

Findings by Lindberg and Nordin (2008) that buyers consider soft values as the most important factors during the post-purchase stage are highly supported by this study. Interviewees mention that suppliers are expected to have an active approach towards customers during the post-purchase stage. Companies highlight that the actions do not have to be large. For example, contacting a few times per year and asking if the provided solution has worked and if there are new needs is enough. It seems that it is important that buyers sense that their suppliers are available if needed. Noteworthy from the suppliers' point of view is that the buyers even seem to expect contacts even though these contacts would have a sales approach.

SQ3. What channels and touchpoints do buyer companies use during their customer journey?

While Steward et al. (2019) claim that companies fulfill their buying process mainly online and contact the suppliers in a late stage of the process, this study strongly disagrees with that. All interviewees stated that the contact to a potential supplier happens in the very early stage of the process – sometimes even right after the need recognition. This is new information that current literature does not find. While Gupta

et al. (2004) and Frambach et al. (2007) stress the ease of searching information online, especially at the beginning of the buying process, the interviewees mainly disagree. Companies highlighted that with complex products and services, the information found online is generic and insufficient. Companies mentioned that their solutions usually require customization, and for this reason, the supplier is needed at an early stage of the process to act as a consultant. Statement by Frambach et al. (2007) that offline channels are preferred information sources at the final stages of a buying process, especially with complex products and services, is strongly supported by this study. However, this study also highlights that offline channels are the preferred channels also already at the first stages of the buying process.

Research that the Internet works as the main source for information search (Johnson 2021; Grewal et al. 2015) are not in line with this study at all. Chaffer (2020) mentions that only rarely customers do not use search engines during their buying processes. This study disagrees with this strongly: not all interviewees mentioned using search engines at all. According to this study, search engines are considered to have a significant role only in situations where the buyer does not know what a possible solution for the need could be. The minor usage of search engines during the purchasing process, especially at the first stages of the buying process, is surprising. It seems that the information provided by search engines is too generic for complex solutions, which requires customization and a deep understanding of the buyer's company. Using time for searching solutions online appears not to give value to the buyer if contacting a supplier personally is necessary anyway. This study indicated that online sources such as search engines are seen mainly as support functions during the buying process.

When using the Internet as a channel for information search, companies have a considerable weight on the suppliers' websites. References, such as logos of current customers and case texts, increases the confidence of the supplier, which supports findings by Bienstock and Royne (2007). Interviewees also mentioned that, for example, the CVs of the personnel have a big impact, especially in situations when the company is buying know-how. Companies mentioned that LinkedIn profiles and personnel's previous employers are investigated carefully, especially with senior advisors.

Being named by big information technology or cyber security influencers such as Forrester, Gartner, or Kyberturvakeskus are also valuable elements. These leading research companies provide information that is seen as extremely reliable for buyers. Interviewees mentioned that they follow these big influencers and authorities on a daily basis to stay up to date with the latest news.

The suppliers' technical experts are also seen as important channels for information search and support during the buying process. Companies mentioned that especially suppliers' senior advisors with long experience in the certain business field are seen as trustworthy. In particular, senior advisors who have been in several different companies and have experience also from the business perspective are seen as reliable. Confidence also increases towards suppliers and experts who openly tell negative features of their offerings as well. One of the interviewees mentioned that they have even experienced a case where a seller guided them towards a competing supplier because the supplier considered that their offering was not the best solution for them.

Sales representatives from the suppliers' side are not always seen as reliable sources of information, according to this study. The study reveals that many companies have experienced difficulties in situations where sales representatives have told information and promised conditions that are not true. Especially in situations where the sales representatives do not have a technical background, the probability of exaggeration increases. However, this study explains that buyers are willing to cooperate with sales representatives with a technical background. Companies mentioned that with technical sales representatives, it is easy to cooperate since they know the technology behind the products and solutions and have the ability to answer challenging questions. In addition to this, technical sales representatives have the business knowledge and ability to justify the offerings by rational factors. Technical sales representatives are also seen agile, since they can, in some cases, take care of the whole buying process alone from the supplier's side. This speeds up the buyer's buying process, which is seen as a positive matter.

Personal contacts such as friends and colleagues for current and previous jobs are clearly seen as the most important channels for information search. Alejandro's et al.'s (2011) statement of the importance of a trusted party such as a personally known contact is mentioned by every case company as the most reliable information source. Especially in urgent situations and situations where the decision is hard to make companies mention to trust their personal contacts over everything else.

How do customers experience their customer journeys in B2B context?

On a general level, empirical data supports well the previous research on B2B customer journeys. The complexity of B2B customer journeys (Åge 2011) is noticeable in all companies. Still, noteworthy is that not all B2B buying processes are complex. Findings indicate that the big purchases in B2B always include complexity. However, the companies also mention that a lot of small purchases happen which are less complex. It appears that the price of the purchase is a decisive factor, and the price is directly proportional to the complexity of the customer journey.

A large number of stakeholders involved (Cohn 2015) in the buying process is widely identified. Companies mention that at the beginning of a buying process, usually involved are the users, technical specialists and a project manager. This group has a major role not only in recognizing the need but also to get approval and funding for the project. With the exception of one company, people who recognized the need and who will be dealing with the possible solution on a daily basis are the ones who do the information search and evaluation of alternatives at the beginning. Once the process goes further, it seems that the final decision is made by directors and budget owners. These can be, for example, business unit directors or CEOs in smaller companies. Roles Webster and Wind (1972) described to be in DMU were all found in the study. Common for especially smaller companies was that the user and influencer was the same person and, for example, decision-maker and the buyer was the same person.

Common for all companies was that the bigger the company is, the more there are people involved in the process, which often causes problems. Different roles, responsibilities, and people with different backgrounds may cause conflicts. People

having different expectations and different interests regarding the purchase make the process more complicated, just as Zolkiewski et al. (2017) noticed.

Statement by Rauyruen and Miller (2007) of long-lasting consequences of buying processes were recognizable in the findings. Companies even mentioned that because the consequences of starting a cooperation with a new supplier are so significant, companies try to avoid purchasing processes if possible. This study is also in line with Bruner and Pomazal's (1988) findings that many buying processes end without purchases. Companies mentioned that a lot of processes start, and a solution is searched, but the idea is left behind if the possible solutions found do not solve the need or are too expensive. It seems that the companies are constantly experiencing the beginnings of buying processes but only the most important ones are continued. Sheth's (1973) statement of trying to, as early as possible, decide whether the buying process is completed or not is highly supported by this study.

The traditional five stage customer journey by, for example, Puccinelli et al. (2009), Teo and Yeong (2003), Kotler and Keller (2017), and Comegys et al. (2006) was identified in all of the companies. Activities during each stage varied a lot depending on the purchase. Especially in customer journeys where the company already worked closely with the supplier, some stages were cut off. The demanding of executing a buying process by going through all stages was surprising. Even though Toman et al. (2017) highlighted how companies struggle with their buying process, it was still surprising that companies emphasized that after effective cooperation has been achieved, in most cases, the buyer does not even consider changing the supplier even if the price would be lower and the new solution better. Companies did not directly state that buying processes are "*painful*" or "*frustrating*" like in research by Toman et al. (2017). However, it seems that companies still try to avoid the buying processes, which indicates that the buying processes are consumable.

When considering the stages of the buying processes, the most noticeable is the emphasis on the post-purchase behavior. Companies highlighted that the most important part of the buying process starts when the contract has been made and the product or service is put into use. Activities during the post-purchase stage are seen as formal and planned. Some companies even argued that once the contract is made,

the process actually starts, and everything before that is just preparation. The need for support and resources at this stage is unexpectedly high, and companies claim not to get enough support. It seems that with complex B2B buying processes, the post-purchase behavior is the stage where buyers face most difficulties. Companies mentioned that after doing the information search and evaluation of alternatives properly, the decision-making is easy. However, problems often occur during the post-purchase behavior. It looks like that either the sellers break their promises, or the buyers assume too much. It seems that in the first four stages of the buying process, the supplier is responsible for pushing the process forward, and during these stages, the buyer gets the expected service. However, during the last stage, after the contract has been signed, the responsibility changes to the buyer reluctantly.

This study is highly in line with research by Zeithaml et al. (1988) related to gaps in perceived service and expected service. It seems that buyers experience gaps especially between expected experience and perceived service. It also seems that companies often feel that the sales representatives cannot be trusted as well as the technical experts or technical sales representatives. Companies mentioned to have negative experiences when sales representatives have promised a lot of different features and solutions, and after long negotiations, it has become clear that certain features are not possible.

There seems to be a gap as well in transforming concepts and promised elements to quality attributes. Findings are somewhat surprising. Companies mention to do very accurate background research of their purchased solutions and the suppliers, but still, companies often mention having problems with suppliers especially during post-purchase behavior. Even though some companies mention always asking references from their own network, they still seem to have challenges during the post-purchase behavior.

Findings are remarkable also from the suppliers' point of view. While a lot of suppliers mention themselves to be customer-centric and focus on customers' needs, it seems that the customers do not agree with this. Findings by Poddar et al. (2020) related to customer journeys to be created by top management instead of real customers are

highly correlated with this study. It seems that a lot of suppliers have started to pay attention to customers' journeys, but the way of developing them is insufficient.

It is also remarkable that buyers are often forced to remind suppliers of the contract between them. According to this study, even though a contract has been signed, client companies struggle to receive agreed actions during the post-purchase stage. Interviewees mention that this is one of the main reasons why the companies are not willing to change suppliers. The finding is surprising. It seems that suppliers use a lot of resources towards new customer acquisition but do not give enough attention to the customer on the final stage of the customer journey, which has been proven to be the most critical stage of the customer journey.

In table 2 is summarized how the findings are related to previous research. Each research question is answered and the relation to existing research has been evaluated.

Table 2. Summary of theoretical contributions

| Research question | Answer to research question | Relation to existing research |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| How do customers experience their customer journeys in B2B context? | Complex and demanding set of interactions that are trying to avoid by using current suppliers. | Supports findings by (Åge 2011) of complexity. No current literature on the aim of trying to avoid the buying processes. |
| SQ1. How do the buyer companies exclude potential suppliers during their customer journey? | After the hard values are fulfilled, the focus is on soft values which makes the process easier. | Findings are in conflict with research by Manning et al. (2011) and Lilien (2016). Emphasis of soft values higher than research considers. |
| SQ2. What kind of services customers expect during their customer journey? | Suppliers are expected to offer value at every stage of the buying process and work as a consultant. | Supports findings by Paesbrugge et al. (2018) of providing value at all times. Companies expect extremely close relationships. |
| SQ3. What channels and touchpoints do buyer companies use during their customer journey? | Buyers prefer internal information sources at all stages of the buying process. | In line with findings by Brossard (1998) and Bienstock and Royne (2007). Contact to a potential supplier faster compared to previous research. |

All things considered, B2B customer journeys are complex ensembles where there are many strings attached from both suppliers' and buyers' sides. Different people, expectations, situations, touchpoints, and needs make the journey complicated. From the supplier side, being able to help the customer move forward in their process, solve their problem as easily as possible, and create value at every stage of the process are key elements to succeed in order to be the chosen supplier.

5.2 Managerial implications

In this chapter, managerial implications are offered to the case company, which is focused on offering complex products and services for B2B customers. The findings and suggestions are specifically targeted for the IT-industry with complex solutions but also give a basis for other industries working with B2B.

5.2.1 Activities towards current customers

All companies highlighted the importance of partnerships and current suppliers as the basis for purchasing new products or services. This finding supports the statement by Schmitt (1999) of understanding the whole customer experience and emphasis by Prahinski and Bentons (2004) on open dialogue and tight cooperation between the buyer and the seller. It seems that keeping the current customers extraordinarily satisfied by providing surprisingly superior service has a clear connection for possible repurchases and customer loyalty. A possible way to consider this issue is to provide superior service for current customers and try to surprise current customers and prospects by doing extra service for them.

Morales (2005) highlights that when company's effort is personally directed, and the customer experiences extremely good service, it leads to gratitude and indebtedness. When serving the customers better than expected, the possibility to get to use the customer's case as a reference case increases. As the findings emphasize the importance of references and customer cases when evaluating the alternatives, the case company should try to get case references as much as possible. Getting a sense

of gratitude for current customers is profitable in order to ask the customer for reciprocal actions. With references and case text it is possible to build trust in the eyes of potential customers and get to the set of potential alternatives from which the buyer starts the information search process.

However, providing superior service is simultaneously challenging and expensive. It requires staying up to date for both the customers' companies' situations and the industries as a whole. In a small company where resources are limited, this kind of strategy includes risks because the results of providing superior service will be possibly realized later compared to a situation where the time is spent, for example, on acquiring new customers. However, according to this study, this kind of strategy could be profitable. Interviewees certainly mentioned that they are more forgiving to possible small mistakes by the supplier if the service has been extraordinary. By receiving remarkable service threshold to change to another supplier raises. Some companies even mentioned that even if the price from a new supplier is lower and the product or service slightly better, customers do not lightly change from the current partner. The case company can take advantage of customer loyalty. It seems that once the supplier has earned the customer's trust, the supplier is able to increase pricing, especially in upcoming purchases from the same customer.

The existing customers should be the primary focus when seeking more sales. Findings prove that customers are willing to hear from their suppliers' new suggestions on cooperation, and sometimes customers even demand it. Thoroughly knowing the existing customers speed up, for example, making an offer request when the decision-making unit is already known, and legal issues are also known. Making development proposals for current customers also shows that the case company takes care of their customers and wants to provide value for them.

Taking care of relationship management has a major impact on repurchases and recommenders. In addition to delivering what has been promised, the customers should be at all times updated on new features in products or services. The findings highlight that customers want to be contacted on a light basis if there is new information that could help them. This could be handled by naming a project manager for every customer, even in small contracts that are non-recurring transactions. Even in

situations where everything works as planned, the customer could be contacted and asked for a yearly meeting where the supplier could make a proposal on how the cooperation could be taken forward. Even if there was no possibility for additional purchases at the moment, a quick meeting would remind the buyer of the brand and create a feeling that the customer is important. Most companies mentioned that the supplier relationship often weakens or even ends after the contract has been signed or at the latest when the invoice has been paid, and the product or service delivered. It seems that many suppliers do not concentrate enough on the post-purchase stage of their customer journey but rush towards the next customer relationship. This leaves a negative memory mark for the customer. By handling the post-purchase stage properly and even surprising the customers with extraordinary service might offer a great competitive advantage.

The information and cyber security business seem to be a business where the companies do avoid public talk of their solutions and partners. This is understandable because of the sensitivity of security issues. However, companies seem to open up to their partners widely. This should be exploited as well by, for example, asking how the service could be improved. It is obvious that in consulting business, the way of communicating is mainly offering paying customer advice. However, especially in close relationships, the customer could give not only feedback but also make development proposals. Even though the company is quite small and not capable of unlimited investments and fulfillment of aspirations, asking customers in depth-feedback could help to know in which direction the company could potentially be taken in the future. This would also activate the customers and make them feel important.

5.2.2 Value adding activities towards new prospects

Buyers see their buying processes as demanding because of complex suppliers. While from the supplier's side there are also a lot of people involved in the buying processes such as sales representatives, technical specialists, legal experts and, for example, project managers the knowledge transferring is not always as agile as one would like. Companies mention that, especially with bigger suppliers, there are usually many different people involved in the process, which is not always seen as a positive matter by the buyer's side. Being a rather small and agile company can also provide a

competitive advantage for the case company. While bigger suppliers have long-lasting processes and stiffness brought by a big company, smaller companies can modify one's mode of operation faster. For example, in a situation, where the buyer's need is extraordinarily complex, and bigger suppliers need to follow their procedure, a smaller company can be more agile and, for example, have in the very first negotiations already a technical expert involved in the process. This demonstrates to the buyer that the supplier is serious, and the buyer means a lot to the supplier.

For large companies, the business model is usually concentrated on invoicing customers. Technical specialists try to invoice as much as possible in hours, and this obviously is not possible in negotiations with potential customers. In a smaller company, the supplier can offer extra value by having already at the very beginning of negotiations development ideas done by a technical specialist and a road map ready for the buyer. This kind of mode of operation adds value for the customer at the very start and serves as a good starting point for cooperation. Interviewees mentioned that, for example, information technology and cyber security are support functions in their companies. As a result, these are often elements that have to be taken care of, but the company is not specifically interested in these solutions as long as they work properly. The case company should focus on providing at the very start of negotiations for the buyer a feeling that with the case company, the buyer can concentrate on their core business, and by outsourcing the security matters for the case company, everything will work effortlessly.

Users of the products and services that the case company is providing are mostly people with a technical background. These users are at their companies as a specialist but rarely in the top management which makes the final decision in the buying processes. The study reveals that in its simplicity, the users have a big influence on which alternatives the decision-makers can choose of. Interviewees mention that sometimes they struggle to justify some need or alternative to the decision-makers who are usually focused mainly on the easily measured elements such as price and other numeric factors. In all of the interviews, it became clear that the final price is often the most determinant factor for the decision-makers while the technical specialist often would like the cheapest option of all not to be chosen. The case company should help the users in this kind of situation by providing information for the users to present inside

their company. The advice could be presented as if the seller worked as a consultant in the user's team. This would also bring the supplier closer to the buyer and make the relationship stronger. For example, KPI's for every product and service, such as total cost of ownership, payback time, and efficiency values on certain business units, should always be easily available so that the buyers could present them to the management. Reference cases should also include these KPI's to show what kind of outcomes are possible. If the case company knows the estimates of competitors' offerings, the presented offer should be formulated in a way that if, competing with the purchase price is not possible, the company could present estimations of the total cost of ownership. Most important is to be able to provide for the decision-makers numeric factors which indicate that the case company's offering is profitable.

The study indicates that in B2B, when purchasing complex products or services, the business is more people business than solution business after certain minimum requirements have been met. After the basic functionalities are met, and the price fits into the budget, subjective and soft values that, for example, Almquist et al. (2018) mention, rise to a surprisingly major role. A lengthy background and experience from business are also seen as clear merits when evaluating the technical specialist of the supplier company. According to this study, seniority and age of personnel increase trustworthiness for buyers. Employees who have already dropped out of work, for example, to retire but still work as a part-time consultant, senior advisor, or other specialist, are seen as really valuable. Most likely, these advisors do not work because of money which gives more objectivity.

To stand out from the competitors, the case company should concentrate on highlighting personnel's knowledge. On the company's website could be described more of the advisors and what their background is. Especially the senior advisories and their experience should be highlighted. A good way to do this is, for example, an introductory text or video of the person describing what he or she has done before and why he or she decided to join the case company. Small details of what solutions and products the person has worked with before are not that important; more important is to bring out the long experience in a certain field of business and expertise to adapt to the wide range of situations. As a business field, information security and cyber security are moving rather fast. Pointing out that the employees have a good track record of

solving different kinds of situations and the employees are constantly participating in, for example, educational events are reasonable to mention.

In the end, it seems that the buyers are more interested in the personnel who work for the company and with whom they will potentially collaborate than the product or service the personnel offers. It is safe to argue that personal brand and, for example, CV and LinkedIn profiles have a significant role in building the company's image in the eyes of buyers in the information and cyber security business.

5.2.3 Publicity increasing

A major part of interviewees mentioned that they try to centralize their outsourced solutions on current suppliers or into suppliers their current suppliers recommend. This gives a great opportunity for the case company to offer their solutions and services indirectly to their current customers' partners. When the case company is offering new solutions for current customers, the case company can also ask if the customer has another company or person in mind who could be interested in the offering. When the customers have received good service and have a positive thought of the company, they are most likely willing to propose potential companies or people. This would help the case company in new customer acquisition. Contacting a previously unknown prospect is a lot easier when the contact can be started by telling why the case company is contacting the prospect. The prospect may experience a sense of duty if the person who is recommended to ask for a meeting is close to the prospect. This more likely increases the possibility to listen to what the supplier has to offer. Even in situations where the first meeting does not lead to a follow-up, the prospect remembers the supplier for the future. Interviewees often mention to begin purchasing processes by going through not only the existing suppliers but also the "information bank" they have collected from presentations and events. By ending up in this "information bank", the possibility to get more inbound leads in the future increases. While the main source for new sales should be on current customers, this way of working would avoid the situation that there is a too big weight on a single customer.

Another potential way to get more leads is to create a "member brings members" campaign. The current satisfied customers would be asked to provide potential

customers for the case company, and if these end up being paying customers, the referee would get some kind of reward. These kinds of campaigns are widely used in B2C sales but could also be used in this kind of situations, where the relationships between customers are close.

When a buyer starts the buying process, interviewees mention to have a potential group of suppliers already in mind. It seems that buyers often do not actively search for new suppliers, but they rely on current partners and suppliers which they already know. With this in mind, the case company should, from a marketing point of view, focus mostly on activities raising awareness and creating informative content rather than contacting totally new customers. Potential marketing material could be, for example, blog texts, video series, informative webinars and statements on current news around specific topics. The aim of this would be to get to the group of potential suppliers that comes into mind of buyers when thinking of potential suppliers. As interviewees state that they do not actively search for suppliers from the Internet at the very beginning, the only way to get involved in the group of potential suppliers is to gain publicity and be as present as possible.

Cold calling and sending newsletters to totally new contacts is not seen profitable, according to this study. Companies mentioned that they do not remember a purchase process that has started directly after a contact from a new supplier. If contacting a totally new customer is wanted to be done, it should be outsourced and done by a commission-based model. If possible, the commission should be highly dependent if the first sales meeting leads to a new appointment. Worth thinking about is also that if cold calling would be done by providing information rather than gathering leads.

Marketing with, for example, Google Ads and designing and editing the web pages of the case company should be done as automated as possible. With new customer acquisition, the main focus should be on content creation. Creating blog texts and taking a stand on topical issues works simultaneously as organic search engine optimization. Creating material and working around subjects that are commonly discussed enables to get more followers to the case company's social media accounts.

In cyber security, the main educational institutes in Finland are the University of Jyväskylä and JAMK University of Applied Sciences. Information security can also be studied, for example, in the University of Helsinki and Haaga-Helia, which are located in the same area as the case company. A possible way to increase awareness among future security professionals is to be active towards these educational institutions. Case competitions, trainee places, networking events, and, for example, excursions are all rather easy but functional ways to create brand awareness for a large mass of people. Being active towards students not only increases awareness but also causes goodwill. Case competitions and doing cooperation with certain courses by providing real-life practices for the students would also give the case company a lot of knowledge from students who have the latest education and knowledge. As the cyber security is changing really quickly during digitalization, having the latest knowledge is desirable. While benefiting from these opportunities, the activities also build the corporate brand image among students. Being an eligible and active company will also help in future recruits when graduates remember the company.

5.2.4 Conclusion on managerial implications

In table 3 is summarized the managerial implications for the case company.

Table 3. Summary of managerial implications

| Focus | Managerial implications | | | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Service for existing customers | Strive to get customers a sense of gratitude. Use as references cases. | Seek for new sales. Ask for quarterly meetings and offer development proposals. | Ask feedback and development proposals – activate the customers. | Have a named project manager for every customer. Focus especially on post-purchase behavior. |
| Concentration on value adding partnership activities towards prospects | Provide superior service and exceed expectations. | Help DMU by providing information to the users to push the project towards the decision-makers. | Find out the buyer's professionalism and avoid information floods. | Have a technical specialist with a ready plan of action at very first negotiations. |
| Publicity increasing | Activation towards educational institutions such as JAMK. | Create value adding content which aim to get publicity. Concentrate on continuity and targetability. | Outsource efficiently and use automation. Follow data of all provided actions. | Highlight especially the senior advisors of the company and their knowledge. |

As a conclusion, when comparing acquiring new customers and satisfying the existing customers, there is no single right way to allocate resources between these two. The case company is still quite small in terms of the number of employees and hence time is limited. Vital for succeeding with customer relationship management is to sort out how much time and inputs have been invested in new customer acquisition and existing customers. Estimated value should be evaluated for each client, and there should be an exact evaluation of what is the average hit rate with all marketing activities. A good way to start this is to go through all existing customers and figure out how they end up as customers and compare it to the marketing efforts made. All

terminated customer negotiations as well as customer relationships should also be analyzed and have statistics why these negotiations did not lead to a customer relationship.

5.3 Limitations and future research

This study still leaves some unanswered questions. The number of interviewees in the study was rather small, five people, and the sample contained mostly users and influencers of the case companies. Getting C-level executives to be interviewed proved to be difficult since most of the executives are rather busy. It would be valuable to compare answers between users and deciders related to the purchasing process. Another limitation of the study is that all interviewed companies have worked closely with the case company. It is highly possible that interviewees described their buying processes by describing the process with the case company. Some of the interviewees even mentioned "*I think of this now as the process with you [with the case company]*" even though interviewees were told to think of the buying processes on a general level.

One goal for the study was to find what pain points B2B buyers experience during their buying processes with complex solutions and how the case company could serve their current customers and potential customers better. As a result of this, a lot of questions had a negative tone of voice, and the focus was on finding stages and channels of the buying process where the customer has faced problems. By focusing only on complex solutions, the study's findings are not that usable for B2B buying processes with uncomplicated products and services. The interviewees highlighted that the most complex purchases require the most time, and because of this, the routine purchases do not get that much attention inside the company. However, all interviewees mentioned that routine purchases are happening all the time, and the buying processes differ a lot compared to complex purchases.

The interviewer has not been involved in the buying processes in any of the case companies. This might, in some situations, add the reliability of the answers if the case companies are concerned that their answers will be used for marketing purposes. However, this might also undermine the reliability of the study if the interviewees did

not trust an external person. As a result of this, the findings cannot be considered as a certain truth. However, the comparison between findings proves that most of the companies emphasize fairly the same kind of elements in the purchasing process.

Surprisingly interviewees did not emphasize the Internet as one of the main channels of the buying process. However, Internet did have role with most of the case companies. Google reported receiving more than 146 billion dollars of revenue from Google Ads during 2020 (Johnson 2021). It is obvious that a big part of revenue comes from companies that are doing marketing towards B2C customers. However, a lot of B2B companies, including the case company, are using Google Ads as a marketing tool. It would be interesting to do more research on the role of the Internet during the buying process to find out in what situations the buyers end up using the Internet and what kind of advertising would be most affecting at these certain stages.

This study was done as an assignment from a company that works as a supplier in the information and cyber security. In future research, an interesting alternative would be to conduct the same research by a person who is working in a buying organization. If a company knows that they would be purchasing a complex product or service, someone could use that as a single case study and research the done activities. This would give an understanding of the subject from a different point of view and bring out new aspects. This would most likely bring more understanding to the process since, in this research, trust issues might have left some things unsaid. It could also be interesting and explanatory for the buyer company to ponder their own processes and clarify if the processes are efficient. After conducting the interviews of this study, many of the interviewees mentioned that they not only felt that they were helping the study but also felt that pondering processes out loud opened their eyes to what is actually happening during their processes. Some of the interviewees even mentioned that often the processes are just done like before without actually thinking if something could be done differently.

Most of the companies mentioned that they have had problems with suppliers during the post-purchase stage. Lindberg and Nordin (2018) argue that the post-purchase stage has an extremely important role with repurchases and with the general image of the supplier company. It would be interesting to find out why companies have had

negative experiences during the post-purchase stage and into what kind of challenges these situations have led. It would also be interesting to know if something could be done during the first four stages of the buying process to avoid problematic situations in the post-purchase stage. As the post-purchase stage might last for decades for suppliers it would be interesting to know what kind of situation may be ahead after signing the contract especially if a long-term support has been agreed. Qualitative case research would work in this kind of research, and the research question could be, for example, "*In what kind of situations a company has had challenges during post-purchase behavior after purchasing complex products or services*".

Another interesting research subject would be to interview suppliers regarding the post-purchase activities. From all but one of the interviewees, the struggle during post-purchase behavior was raised several times during the interviews. It seems that the negative experiences during the post-purchase stages have created a negative reflection on the whole purchase processes and buyers try to avoid starting purchase processes. This, combined with the negative experiences by buyers getting overflowing expectations from sales representatives, gives the feeling that purchasing processes in B2B can be challenging situations. A study with B2B suppliers could clarify if the claims above are true or are the buyers too demanding and expect to get service that have not been agreed upon. It would be interesting to find out the reasons why relationships between suppliers and buyers have been terminated.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. The Interview questionnaire

All interviews were held in Finnish; thus, the questionnaire is a translation:

Title at the company:

Responsibilities/role in the purchasing process:

Size of the company:

Company form:

PURCHASING PROCESS

Describe your company's purchases at a common level

Which parts of the organization take part in purchasing processes?

How are the responsibilities divided?

Who decides the budget and how it is done?

NEED RECOGNITION

Who recognized the needs? What kind of situation they are?

What kind of need usually are? Is it clear in the start that eventually you will purchase something? Could be company keep doing business if the need would not have been filled?

What kind of knowledge did you have about the needed solution?

How was the need specified so that the buying process could start?

Can the final customer influence the need recognition?

Can the need come from outside of the organization for example by advertising or someone contacting you?

INFORMATION SEARCH

What kind of information were you looking for? Why? Where? How?

Who took part in information search? How long did it take?

Did the defined need change and sharpened during the information search?
 At what point did you first time talk to a potential supplier?
 What role did the supplier have in this part of process or did it?
 If you asked help from the supplier did you get answers quickly enough and did the answers help your process?
 Was it easy to find the information you needed? What kind of information would you have needed?

EVALUATION OF ALTERNATIVES

After information search how many alternatives did you have?
 How did you rank the alternatives and how you compared them?
 Who took part in the evaluation and who's opinion was the most important?
 What aspects were most important when evaluating the alternatives assuming that they fitted the budget?
 When alternatives were really similar, what factors are considered as the most important?

PURCHASE DECISION

How much time was spent between the need recognition and closing the deal? Was this time too long? If yes, what parts of the process took too long, and do you know why?

What could have speeded up the process? If there something the suppliers could have done to speed up the process?

Who made the final decision?

Why did you choose that alternative? What was the biggest reason?

Can you name something that distinguished the chosen alternative from the second-best option?

Was the decision easy to make after evaluating the alternatives and ranking them?

POST-PURCHASE BEHAVIOR

How did the process continue after purchase?

Did the supplier stay in touch after the purchase? Which way? Would you have wanted something more?

Were there problems after the purchase?

CHANNELS

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

What is the most important channel?

How do you describe the information received between internal sources and external sources?

Which channels you prefer and why?

Is there some information channels you do not trust?