Digital Marketing in Start-Ups:
*The role of digital marketing in acquiring and maintaining business relationships*

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the usage of the digital marketing to acquire and maintain business relationships, or more specifically, digital marketing in B2B start-ups within the Swedish market. Digital marketing is essential for businesses nowadays and has become a significant factor for business companies for improving and implementing their marketing strategies. Furthermore, business relationships have always taken an essential role among companies especially today due to the heightened level of digitalization. This case study attempts to answer two main research questions which this paper investigates on. To provide an exhaustive answer to the research questions: “How digital marketing contributes to acquiring business customers in B2B start-up context?” and “How digital marketing contributes to maintaining business customers in B2B start-up context?”, digital marketing approaches of eight respondents, theoretical implications and additional information will be examined in the upcoming chapters.

The study concludes, that it was found that digital marketing is understood as an innovative and effective method for attracting, maintaining and building business relationships. However, the lack of resources is one fundamental reason why start-ups have difficulties in acquiring and maintaining business customers in practicing through digital marketing. Additionally, it was found that digital platforms and tools such as websites, industry specific platforms, and blogs provide the highest advantage for start-ups. Moreover, social media platforms like Instagram, LinkedIn and Facebook were in most use for presenting content that is informative, educational and honest.

Digital marketing strategies in acquiring and maintaining business relationships are indicated in the analyses which give sufficient details in answering the research questions. The paper will provide suggestions for doing further research in improving the current topic in digital marketing.

Keywords: Digital Marketing, Digital Marketing Strategies, Digital Marketing Tools, Business Relationships, Acquiring Customers, Maintaining Customers, B2B start-ups.
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1. Introduction

*In the introduction chapter, the paper will present the key components which are going to be discussed later in the paper. This leads to setting a research gap, discussing the problem and providing the main purpose of the paper.*

1.1 Background

As the relationships are important for any Business-to-Business (B2B) company, they are especially important for start-ups growth. Utilizing relationships and networks strategically can help in tackling the fierce competition of today’s business environment (Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016). Therefore, building a customer base is vital for start-up companies, in order to continue the business (Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016). Furthermore, in order to acquire and build customer relationships, start-up companies must gain exposure and practise marketing. Hæreid and Indregård (2015) suggested, that start-up companies should use alternative marketing methods that can be more effective regarding to the size and limited resources of the company. It has been suggested for small companies to focus on digital marketing instead of traditional marketing, because digital marketing allows small businesses to attract new customers and reach existing customers more efficiently (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015).

According to Wymbs (2011), digital technologies have changed the traditional way of marketing. Also Smith and Chaffey (2013) stated how digitalization has influenced greatly the marketing practices, requiring the marketing activities adaption to the digital and online environment. Moreover, Wymbs (2011) explained how digital marketing provides new channels for selling products and services, and helps with building relationships and loyalty with customers. Additionally, it enables better communication with customers, as well as meeting the changing needs of the customers (Ibid). Therefore, Mazzarol (2015) suggested, that start-ups must invest in online and digital tools that allow small firms to reach larger audience and connect cost effectively with the suppliers and customers.
According to Smith & Chaffey (2013), internet marketing e.g. digital marketing, is practiced through online digital media channels. Through these channels, companies are able to identify, acquire knowledge of customers, as well as discover and meet their needs more efficiently (Ibid). However, there is variety of digital media channels that companies can choose to utilize in their digital marketing strategy. Extant studies have proposed certain digital media channels that are suitable for B2B companies. These channels include websites, online ads, and emails (Smith & Chaffey, 2013), as well as social media platforms (Foroudi et al., 2017) such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter (Michaelidou, Siamagka, & Christodoulides, 2011). Moreover, social media channels can direct the traffic to the company’s own website (Karjaluoto, Mustonen, & Ulkuniemi, 2015). These channels can thus enable the customer acquiring, because the created content attracts and pulls the customers (Smith & Chaffey, 2013).

This paper will further inspect which digital marketing strategies are the most practical and essential for start-up companies in the business relationship aspect, taking into consideration the lack of resources small companies often have (Weerawardena, 2003).

In the following section, the authors will discuss the topic further and, in more detail, which essentially provides a direction for the purpose of the research.

1.2 Problem Discussion

Business-to-Business companies must be able to acquire and maintain relationships with customers, in order to maintain their competitiveness in the market (Samanta & Danson, 2014). The relationships can be retained by trustworthiness (Lancastre & Lages, 2006) and maintaining loyalty in the customers (Rauyruen & Miller, 2007). It is suggested, that customers become loyal if the companies develop individual relationships with the customers (Ibid) and create value to the customers (Kumar & Scheer, 1995). Shankar et al. (2003) study investigated how the online environment influenced the customer satisfaction and loyalty, and the relationship between these two factors. Digital environment enables customers to share their experience through word-of-mouth (WoM) more easily within their network.
Thus, the digital environment allows the companies utilizing it, a wider reach to the potential customers (Ibid).

Digital technology steers the growth of small companies, through innovation and management capability (Foroudi, 2017). Digital marketing has been defined as targeted and measurable communication through digital technology, including web, email, databases, mobile, and digital TV (Wymbs, 2011). Additionally, digital marketing supports activities aimed at acquiring and retaining customers (Ibid). Moreover, to enforce building and developing relationships with customers, digital tools and online channels are used, according to Wymbs (2011). The study stated how these enable communication and interaction with customers on different platforms, such as websites, portals search engines, blogs, and e-mail.

As digitalization has heavily affected the way of achieving competitive advantage in the relationship context (Samanta & Danson, 2014), it has also created three types of effects on B2B relationships (Pagani & Pardo, 2017). Firstly, digitalization supports already existing activities and improves the effectivity, such as information exchanges or communication. Secondly, the digitalization can support existing activities to create new activities, for example, the affected resources enable the creation of new services. Thirdly, it can also provide a connection between two actors which have not been connected before. As an example, digital marketplaces have enabled an effective way to create business relationships (Ibid).

Furthermore, internet has become the most efficient way to acquire customers and expand the relationship network (Samanta & Danson, 2014). Harrison-Walker and Neeley (2004) study concluded that the utilization of internet for acquiring and building relationships, can positively create customer satisfaction. For B2B companies, internet allows interaction in various ways with a great number of customers. It enables virtual communities, in which companies can provide individual service and the relationships can be built with customers through an ongoing communication (Ibid). However, utilizing internet alone does not provide competitive advantage for the firm, the firm must actively promote its business activities, create a website that is well designed and provides relevant information (Samiee, 2008).
Also Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi (2015) findings emphasized the importance of personal communication and face-to-face interaction for business relationships. The study presented emails as an effective form of personal contact, enabling the contact to occur when it is suitable for both parties. Emails provide a channel through which the newsletters, customer magazines, and seminar or event invitations can be sent (Ibid).

A “startup explosion” has occurred, due to digital services and products becoming omnipresent and low-cost (Seigele, cited in Zhong et al. 2018). Richard & Devinney (2005) study concluded how start-ups are also able to establish changes in the company, and adopt to new technologies due to the vague organizational structures, routines and processes of the companies. Moreover, Seigele (2014) argued how start-ups’ opportunity of growth, becomes greater because of the digital technology. However, as the literature remains limited on relationships in B2B start-ups, this study brings forward the question of how the digital marketing is utilized for their business relationships? More specifically, how digital marketing helps B2B start-ups with acquiring and maintaining business customers?

Wymbs (2011) argued that the future of digital marketing will be customer oriented. The author suggested that in order to succeed, the companies must deliver the customers information they are interested in, when and where they want it. Additionally, the companies should be cautious on delivering irrelevant information (Ibid). According to Foroudi et al. (2017) including social media channels in the digital marketing strategy, can be cost-effective way for start-ups to interact with customers. Also Wang, Pauleen and Zhang (2016) study found that social media applications have a positive influence on the communication performance of B2B start-ups. However, in contrast Järvinen et al. found that the social media tools are more important to large companies (Järvinen et al., 2012), while Keinänen and Kuivalainen (2015) results concluded how many B2B companies do not regularly use social media tools for communicating with their customers. Järvinen et al., (2012, p. 109) study also concluded how the more traditional digital marketing tools such as email marketing, newsletters and digital customer magazines are perceived to be more important than social media tools. This type of traditional digital marketing is however more based on pushing the messages out to the customers, thus not necessarily aimed on engaging the customers to an on-going interaction (Ibid).
Although, Keinänen and Kuivalainen (2015) stated that the social media channels are not ideal for reaching out to industrial customers, they suggested that the use of social media can be relevant in B2B businesses too. The study also found that the social media channels that were used, were for engaging with the business networks and communities. This would however require accurate planning and to reach customers from the channels and platforms the customers prefer (Ibid). Additionally, Keinänen and Kuivalainen argued that if the customers’ senior management does not value the social media tools, the usage of them is not beneficial either. Therefore, this study proposes that this can possibly indicate that the usage of social media channels is more accurate for 1) B2B businesses operating in a non-industrial market, 2) B2B businesses specifically operating within digital services or products, 3) B2B businesses that have senior management managers, who are adapted to digitalization.

In summary, there are variety of aspects included in how B2B companies practice digital marketing (e.g. Järvinen et al., 2012; Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi, 2015; Foroudi et al., 2017). More specifically, start-up companies have ample options of digital marketing strategies and tools to choose from (e.g. Wang, Pauleen and Zhang, 2016; Keinänen and Kuivalainen (2015). As stated before, the literature on B2B start-ups’ usage of digital marketing and its effect on business relationships is limited. This research therefore focuses on addressing this gap, which will be further explained in the following section.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the usage of digital marketing strategies and tools, when B2B start-up companies acquire and maintain business relationships.
1.4 Research Question

**RQ1**: How digital marketing contributes to acquiring business customers in B2B start-up context?

**RQ2**: How digital marketing contributes to maintaining business customers in B2B start-up context?

1.5 Delimitations

This study is delimited to B2B sector, focusing on the start-up companies in Sweden. As there is both online and offline digital marketing, this study delimits to online digital marketing.

1.6 Outline of Thesis

This paper is divided into seven (7) sections. First, the literature review and relevant theories are presented. The second section of the paper outlines the conceptualization of what the overall topic includes in itself. This is followed by the third section of methodology, in which the research approach, research design, data collection method, sampling, ethical considerations, data analysis, and quality criteria are outlined. The paper then continues to present the empirical data in the fourth section, of which the data is analyzed in the next section with the previously presented literature and theories. Lastly, the conclusion is drawn from the conducted analysis and implications to finalize the study and give additional suggestions for further research.
2. Theoretical framework

This literature is derived from previously conducted researches. The sources used in the literature review include journals and books on digital marketing and digital marketing strategies. Due to the rapid changes of digital marketing, the paper has aimed on using the latest available studies and literature.

2.1 Business-to-Business Relationships

Albadvi and Hosseini (2011) discuss business relationships as essential for B2B companies. The same study raised the importance of defining the target markets and customers, because of the particular needs and wants of B2B customers. The initial challenge within business relationships in B2B context, is threefold. Companies must choose the most beneficial business customers, while building and maintaining the relationships with them (Albadvi & Hosseini, 2011). Additionally, the B2B companies must have a network to generate their competitive advantage (Ibid). Relationship value is essential for the continuance of relationship, in both relationship building- phase and the maintenance- phase (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2017).

Eggert, Ulaga and Schultz (2006) emphasized the importance of creation of value in B2B relationships in the relationship building- phase. The authors presented the main factors on creating value; service support and personal interaction. A valued business relationship enforces satisfaction, commitment, and trust, which ultimately leads to loyalty (Gil-Saura, Frasquet-Deltoro, & Cervera-Taulet, 2009). Moreover, the company should focus on sharing information and responding in real time, to increase interaction satisfaction and meet the customers’ needs (Chang et al. 2012). Additionally, each interaction should be positive for the business customer, which will ultimately be beneficial for both short- and long-term profits (Ibid).

Albadvi and Hosseini (2011, p.510) argued how it is vital to understand the value of the business customers, in order to retain them. According to Gil-Saura, Frasquet-Deltoro, &
Cervera-Taulet (2009) the business relationships have generally shifted from the transaction based, to only maintaining relationships with business customers, who are valuable for the company. This could be explained by long-term business relationships being more profitable than acquiring new customers (Akrout, Diallo & Chandon, 2016). By only maintaining valuable business relationships, both parties benefit mutually from better communication, innovativeness, and growth in sales and profits (Gil-Saura, Frasquet-Deltoro, & Cervera-Taulet, 2009). Investing in activities that enhance the business customers’ perception of the relationship is important as the relationship matures (Casidy & Nyadzayo, 2017). Therefore, when maintaining the relationship and satisfaction requires ongoing adjusting to the changes of what the customers perceive valuable (Eggert, Ulaga, & Schultz, 2006).

2.1.1 Communication in Business-to-Business Relationships

According to Gruner and Power (2018), the communication process has become an increasingly vital component for B2B organizations. Moreover, communication is considered as one of the most significant strategies for building and acquiring strong relationships with business customers (Murphy and Sashi, 2018). Reaching the right communication between parties include an effective listening and responding from each side (Goneos-Malka, Grobler & Strasheim, 2013). As a result, this brings a strong impact on the firm’s ability to compete in the market, depending on the positive or negative feedback or result (Ibid). The communication process has changed over the years (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). For example, in the past, the communication was concentrated on the one-way process where the corresponding was from the sender to the receiver (Hänninen & Karjaluoto, 2017). For example, when only the company was willing to share information with the customers without knowing their expectations before that (Ibid). However, the communication process has developed through the years to the level where the process is conducted in a two-way. That means that sender and receiver exchange information and feedback of messages, where the information cannot be only seen, but also discussed and commented (Ibid).
Since the digitalization has occurred, social media has become a new communication process, where marketers and customers can exchange knowledge and information (Gruner & Power, 2018). The communication process can no longer in this sense be seen as a linear process, but more of a networking process in which the information having the can be shared by anyone, anywhere, and at any time (Järvinen et al., 2012). Moreover, the digital communication channels such as Facebook or Instagram are used to create a measurable communication process, that aids companies to acquire and retain customers while build a relationship with them (Killian & McManus, 2015).

Furthermore, social media provides a tremendous communication opportunity for professionals to interact and communicate in a more personal way with current and potential customers such as through email, websites and newsletters (Järvinen et al., 2012). Nowadays, customers are more active and marketers can involve the potential or current customers to take part of the actual creation of the marketing content (Gruner & Power, 2018).

### 2.1.2 Trust in Business-to-Business Relationships

It is assumed that a successful B2B relationship requires relationship trust (Svensson, 2001). Gil-Saura et al. (2009) also argue, that B2B businesses seek to build long-term relationships with their business customers and trust is considered as essential part in reaching that goal. Gil-Saura et al. (2009) discuss the trust as a firm’s belief when the other party perform an action, which does not bring negative outcomes to the firm. As new entrants in the market, building trust is a fundamental part for B2B start-ups, as they focus their attention in developing and maintaining their business relationships (Akrout et al., 2016). Svensson (2001) discussed the importance of trust, as a phenomenon which strengthens the B2B relationships. As a result, the business relationship improves and it contributes to higher level of confidence, predictability and ability (Ibid). While the communication Is one of the essentials for motivating business customers to build long-term relationships (Murphy & Sashi, 2018), Wang, Pauleen and Zhang (2016) discussed how the right communication is not only a method to build the relationship in B2B businesses, but also trust as well.
2.1.3 Loyalty in Business-to-Business Relationships

Loyalty includes attitudinal and behavioral elements and demonstrate customers’ purpose to improve building the relationship and positive feedback between business customer and company (Hänninen, 2017). It is considered that word-of-mouth (WoM) or recommendations are key indicators for measuring loyalty. Recommendations present the customers’ positive attitudes towards the B2B company (Ibid). Therefore, loyal business customers might benefit their relationships with suppliers even they do not have experience with those suppliers. They might use their previous experience with past suppliers (Ibid). Donnelly et al. (2012) suggest that loyalty is an important part in B2B marketing. When the loyalty among business customers increase, the level of direct relationship, building brand awareness and value perceptions increase too (Ibid).

2.1.4 Satisfaction in Business-to-Business Relationships

Satisfaction measures the overall interaction of an exchange in the business relationship, based on past communication and performance (Gil-Saura et al., 2009). Murphy and Sashi (2018) argued, that satisfaction does not guarantee for the intermediate interaction to berational between the company and the business customer, but it is a significant component for continuous development on the long-term basis. However, without satisfaction the relationship might not develop further or might not be repeatable from the customers’ perspective (Ibid). When business customers are satisfied based on what they have taken in the past as transactions, they is more likely to repeat the transaction (Gil-Saura et al., 2009). Thus, Shankar, Smith & Rangaswamyc (2003) discussed that satisfaction influences business customers. More likely, customers prefer to repeat their purchasing action from the same firm when they feel satisfaction (Ibid). Simultaneously, satisfied customers are more preferable among companies because they are less sensitive to price increases and the companies can reduce their investment in the particular customer (Murphy and Sashi, 2018).
2.2 Start-Ups

The definition of a ‘start-up’ has not been clearly defined, as the academics have different explanations to the concept (Mazzarol, 2015). Start-up companies are essential components of a dynamic network. According to Laari-Salmela, Mainela and Puhakka (2017) start-up is a company which has existed in the market for less than ten years. It is considered that start-ups face obstacles in having all resources they might need, which is why they acquire resources from their business networks including other companies and organizations (Ibid). Therefore, one of the most crucial start-up activities is to make sure that people, who take action in the business network consider the investment as worth it. Additionally, it is discussed how by obtaining resources from networks, start-ups improve their legitimation and network capabilities (Laari-Salmela et al., 2017).

Moreover, According to McGrath, Medlin and O’Toolec (2017) start-ups are firms with resource deficit and have limited development. The key concept for start-ups is the business network which activate and improve the relationship with other firms. The study discusses how the managers have the capability of improving the network, as the managers can accept whether business relationships are important, and if they should adapt or adjust in the business networks.

2.2.1 Business Networks in Start-ups

Business networks can be defined as a variety of businesses forming relationships, through business transactions and interacting together (Landqvist & Lind, 2017). The study presented the importance of networks and business relationships for a new firm (Ibid). McGrath, Medlin and O’Toole (2017) argued that start-up firms are vital for networks, while being part of a network can secure value creation. Developing the network includes adjustment of relationships and selection of business partners (Ibid). According to Pagani and Pardo (2017) digitalization has influenced the business networks by enforcing alliances, innovation and growth.
However, Landqvist and Lind (2017) concluded that networking in start-ups can be challenging due to limited resources. The lack of time and resources are difficulties companies face, which in turn prevents from fully leveraging of networking (Halinen, Törnroos, & Elo, 2013). Understanding the complexity and events of the business network increases the success of the strategic management within the network (Ibid, p. 1223). The business relationships in the network must vary from weak to strong relationships (Landqvist & Lind, 2017). The authors explained this through strong relationships requiring longer period of time to develop, while requiring resources as well. The weak relationships in turn, allow short-term relationships, which can essentially develop into long-term relationships (Ibid).

2.3 Digital Marketing

Digital Marketing has been defined as marketing that is practiced through platforms such as websites, email, apps, and social networks, which are accessible with electronic devices such as computers, tablets, and mobile phones (Singh & Singh, 2017, p.45). This definition also aligns with Smith (2012, p.86) definition of Digital Marketing, which is elaborated as a way of promoting products and services through digital channels by computers, mobile and digital devices. The platforms are utilized in order to reach e-commerce transaction, brand, or building relationships for acquiring and retaining customers (Ibid). The ultimate objective of B2B digital marketing, for ecommerce companies, is to finalize the online transaction. Those B2B organizations which do not apply e-commerce itself, their digital marketing is mostly known as content marketing or inbound marketing. The objective is to support customer acquisition, conversion and retention via lead-generation (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick, 2012).

According to Leeflang et al., (2014, p. 3) there has been an increasing use of digital media tools in marketing, which has in turn allowed to have a better interaction with customers, to obtain data and insights from the market, and to expand the target market. Moreover, the most common digital channels and tools companies use, are company homepages, email, and social media (Ibid).
Digital marketing in B2B context is relatively new area of study, as Holliman & Rowley (2014) claimed to be the first to study the use of digital marketing in B2B contexts. The study argued, that digital content marketing in B2B context is used as an inbound marketing technique, in which the company creates content that the potential customers are likely to engage with, thus creating a “pull” effect. This effect is aimed at customers who have an interest or in the search of information, or a product or service (Ibid.)

2.3.1 Benefits and Challenges of Digital Marketing in Start-ups

Benefits

Digital marketing brings different benefits to B2B start-ups, such as reaching a large number of business customers or allowing start-ups to grow faster by spreading awareness about them in the social media (Singh & Singh, 2017). Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011) discussed the importance of increasing the awareness and communicating about the brand online. The same study considers that by increasing the awareness among customers, it is likely the interaction between both parties to increase which leads to increasing the business relationship too. Moreover, it is considered that spreading the awareness through the social media does not require a large investment (Ibid).

According to Singh and Singh (2017), digital marketing keeps the information accessible to customers actively, with an equal amount of efficiency through the whole period. Thus, customers are allowed to search for a specific company when they have a need for that, can understand the location, or learn more in details what the company deals with. As a result, business customers can make an order, ask their questions or share their opinion with the company (Ibid).
Challenges

The increasing digitalization leads to various challenges which B2B companies face in the marketing aspect such as explosion of data (Leeflang, Verhoef, Dahlström & Freundt, 2014). For example, the vast and complex amount of information brings difficulties among B2B companies in searching for business customers. Therefore, it is important for businesses to understand how to cope with the challenges such as 1) gaining an understanding about the possible challenges; 2) assessing the relevance of each challenge; and 3) to searching for solution to each challenge (Ibid). Additionally, Singh & Singh (2017) argued how another significant challenge which many B2B start-ups might face, when they practice digital marketing is the lack of resources. Although, it is important for B2B businesses to practice digital marketing because it is considered as an essential part in searching, acquiring and building relationships (Ibid). However, it is challenging for start-ups to concentrate on digital marketing and investing vast of the resources in it by hiring people or pay for commercials (Ibid).

2.4 Defining Strategy

2.4.1 Five Ps of Strategies

The definition of the concept “strategy” cannot be defined in one way as the word can be applied in different ways under different situations. Thus, the various definitions of “strategy” allows practitioners and researchers to maneuver through this particular field. Mintzberg (1987) discuss five different components of strategy: plan, position, ploy, pattern and perspective.

- Strategy is a plan for making continuous actions and it works as a guide for dealing with a specific situation or case. In that specific sense, the plan can be identified as a ploy as well, as it takes the same functions as a plan.
- Strategy is a pattern in a stream of actions. Based on this definition Mintzberg (1987) consider that the strategy is consistent and somehow intended.
• Strategy could be also a position which focuses its attention on the localization of the organization.
• Strategy as a perspective is focused not only on the specific location of the organization but mostly on the ingrained way of perceiving the world.

Figure 1. Presents all five (5) Ps for strategy important for that specific field.

![Diagram of 5 Ps of Strategy](Source: Mintzberg (1987).

### 2.5 Digital Marketing Strategies

Companies and organizations in the digital era have changed their marketing strategies to digital marketing strategies due to digitalization, as new technologies such as mobile phones and printers improved the communication process between businesses and customers (Li et al., 2011). In order businesses to understand how to utilize digital marketing properly, it is a must to learn which strategies should be applied (Ibid). Moreover, it was explained how
digital marketing strategy can be defined as a process or method for attaining digital marketing objectives with the clear aim to improve e-business and online communication relationships. Additionally, according to Bakhtieva (2017, p.473), digital marketing strategy is dependent on the company’s overall business strategy and internal communication.

Lashgari (2018) study supported the findings of Michaelidou et al. (2011), by confirming that there has been a growing interest of B2B social media usage since 2010. The same study further explained, how B2B companies have since then become more aware of utilizing social media to reach different goals. The study concluded that when utilizing social media communication in B2B firms, it should be done strategically. A multi-layer strategy was thus proposed, including strategically viewed content on the platforms, choosing the target group to which the content is for, and in which platform the content is shared on (Ibid, p. 52).

Furthermore, Lashgari, Sutton-Brady, Solberg, Ulfvengren, & Johnston (2018) study found that the lack of a digital marketing strategy causes B2B marketers to view social media platforms as fruitless and unimportant. The study argued that companies experiencing this, is due to not having a strategy for utilizing the potential of social media to its full extent. Therefore, Lashgari et al. (2018) study presented a model (Figure 2.) for B2B companies’ social media adoption and integration strategy, within marketing communication channels.
Figure 2.
**Multi-Lawyer Strategy Model**

As the Figure 2 shows, the main components of the strategy are: The goal of the company, the target audience, the type of content, the type of platforms, and the integration of social media in other marketing channels of the company (Ibid, p.11). Additionally, the study proposed three processes, in which the components are situated in: Selection process, the adoption process, and integration process. The processes were explained further as:

- **Selection Process** includes the selection of the content the company creates and shares, varying from technical, environmental, and product information, to advertising and promotion content. The selection process also includes choosing the
type of content based on what is the goal of it, such as customer loyalty, brand awareness, creation of demand or lead generation.

- **Adoption Process** includes the applied structure when creating content. The authors presented two approaches, *hierarchical* and *flat*. In the hierarchical approach the depth and style of the created content indicate in which platforms it is shared on, whereas the in flat approach the created content is shared is shared on the utilized platforms regardless of the depth or style.

Moreover, this process includes moderators that are regarded as an essential part. The moderators act between the content and the audience, by elevating the communication and integration in between. The next step of the process, is selecting whether the content is *public* or *gated*. If the company adopts public content, the goal is seldom to collect any feedback. However, choosing gated content, the goal is often to have a close communication with the audience, to measure the results and possibly generate leads.

- **Integration Process** is the final part of the proposed model, which explains as the integration of the social media in other communication channels. It includes either an ad-hoc or continuous approach, which differ according to the scope of the communication plan and chosen regarding the goal.

This figure (2) is a contemporary model, which provides a ground for this study when examining further on the applicable strategies in start-ups.

The utilized tactics and methods used in digital marketing strategies today are known as Social Media Marketing (SMM), Email marketing and Inbound Marketing (Li et al., 2011). Digital marketing is practiced through online channels where people exchange information, communicate and build business relationships. Such online channels allow people to extend their business integration and go beyond their local contacts with other businesses (Ibid). In the following sections, these strategies are further addressed, while other strategies that this study regards essential are also presented.

### 2.5.1 Inbound Marketing

Inbound marketing is a Digital Marketing strategy, which is focused on creating relationships
with customers, through trust and loyalty (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016). Inbound marketing utilizes digital tools such as content creation, search engine optimization (SEO), social media, and emailing (Marketing-Schools.org, cited in Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016). According to Nosrati et al., (2013, p. 60) inbound marketing target potential customers from similar market segments. The target is however, in potential customers who are not necessary aware of being targeted or have no intentions for the product.

Holliman & Rowley (2014, p.270) also elaborated that inbound marketing is highly engaged with the customers’ wants and needs. It is a very customer-centric technique with an brand-centric approach, which creates trust for the potential customers in the process. Thus, creating content which is aimed for potential customers is essential in practicing inbound marketing (Ibid). Moreover, Lusch and Vargo (2009, p.9) argued that the inbound marketing is effective when the customers are a part of the process, as equal value creators. The authors presented steps, on how inbound marketing should be practiced with a service- dominant approach. The four (4) steps of the process included: 1) Co-value creation with the customers, 2) Customer engagement and dialog, 3) Recognition of unique perceived values of each customer, and 4) Embracing learning. In contrast, Nosrati et al. (2013) conducted study, which presented 5 steps of Inbound marketing process. These steps are: 1) Attracting traffic, 2) Converting visitors to leads, 3) Convert leads to sales, 4) Turn customers into long-term customers, 5) Analyze and improve.

Moreover, in both aforementioned studies, the importance of customers is extensive and included in each step of the processes.

2.5.2 Content Marketing

Creating content is essential for the inbound marketing to be effective. Content marketing is grounded on creating educational content, which is aimed at attracting or retaining customers. Well created content draws the customers to the company’s digital platform and provides possibility to further interact with the customers. (Holliman & Rowley, 2014) Content takes a fundamental part in inbound marketing approach, and hence the knowledge of how content can be applied in marketing (Holliman & Rowley, 2014, p. 270). More specifically, the content can be effective in engaging new and potential customers, which is
essential for developing an effective inbound marketing approach (Ibid). There is a variety of different ways how digital content marketing could be used, in both, B2B and B2C businesses. In this paper the main focus is on the new phenomenon of B2B digital content marketing. In B2B context, the digital content is utilized as an inbound marketing technique to “pull” customers to the website, and thus to create brand dynamics associated with the website (Pulizzi, 2013). Such content is provided for free by the organization to promote their products or services, and more widely to cultivate, build and retain relationships with the other organizations, which is considered as their customers (Ibid). The content could be defined as a “non-paid” content (Holliman and Rowley, 2014).

According to Smith and Chaffey (2013), the most common formats which digital content use are pictures, animations, e-books or shorter customer guides, white papers, webinars, infographics, blog texts and social media posts. It is discussed that the main goal of content marketing is to present the brand itself, to foster customer engagement, and to increase sales through customer acquisitions rather than simply to broadcast product-based messages to customers (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2016).

2.5.3 Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) utilization has become more familiar in start-ups, as it is relatively low-cost solution (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). According to the authors, SEO enables to improve the websites’ ranking in the search engine results page (SERP), which ERP shows the content and ads as an enquiry is made on the search engine page. The main SERP’s include Google, Baidu and Bing, whereas Google holds majority of the market share (Ibid). The results on the SERP can be either inorganic e.g. paid ads or organic e.g. unpaid content (Sharma et al. 2018). Search engines can also provide visibility for start-ups and thus compete with larger companies (Gupta, 2016). This is done by practicing SEO, as higher position on the ranking page allows customers to discover the company’s content, such as web page or another digital platform (Ibid). Additionally, SEO can increase the number of visitors on the digital platform, customer engagement, and sales (Tomasi & Xiaolin, cited in Gupta, 2016).
Practically, to attract customers to the company’s website or other digital platform, the content on the digital platform can be optimized by the word choices on the site (Gudivada, Rao & Paris, 2015). This is achieved by creating relevant and captivating content, which includes diverse keywords, which in turn can be found from the SERP when searched with the relevant keywords (Ibid). Moreover, the authors explained how SEO performance is possible to monitor through web analytics programs, which provide insights about the visitors of the website, how they have reached the website, and the visitors’ activities on the site.

2.5.4 Social Media Marketing

Social media networking has emerged and expanded rapidly over the years (Wang and Kim, 2017). This provoked managers to become interested in applying and using social networks as a part of the marketing communication (Ibid). There are different forms which social media can take such as social networking sites, blogs, etc. However, examples of one of the most common social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube (Cole, DeNardin & Clow, 2017). Some researchers describe social media as a method to connect or interact with current and potential customers with a main aim to maintain or build relationships (Felix, Rauschnabel & Hinsch, 2017), while other researchers explain it as a process which enhance the stakeholders’ value by integrating social platforms in marketing communication (Cole, DeNardin & Clow, 2017; Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Nevertheless, some of the similar components of SMM among those definitions are the use of social media platforms and encouraging users to spread SMM content via social media marketing activities (SMMA) such as interaction, information, personalization etc. Building and maintaining stakeholder relationships is an essence of social media marketing (Yadav & Rahman, 2017). Hence, Social Media Marketing (SMM) is an effective process by which companies build relationships, communicate to each other, and deliver online marketing offerings via social media platforms (Ibid). Companies apply social media marketing as a key tool in order to build and maintain stakeholder relationships that enhance stakeholders’ value (Wang & Kim, 2017). For example, by information sharing, offering personalized purchase recommendations or facilitating interaction (Ibid).
2.5.5 Email Marketing

Nowadays, it is essential for businesses to use email marketing when they attempt to reach new prospects for their business. It is important for businesses to know their target accounts to cut the spam and be sure that the message goes to the right customers (Chadwick & Doherty, 2012). Email marketing is an effective way that businesses use to promote online by sending emails to current or potential customers (Bates, 2012). It is one of the most accessible and effective forms of promoting today (Ibid), with immediate effect, on sales - short-term relationship, and in branding development - long-term relationship. For any company including small companies, maintaining a close and permanent relationship with customers is essential, and this is what exactly an email marketing does (Housh, 2015). Email marketing brings a fundamental contribution to companies, with minimal costs and efforts (Ibid). As it is the case with other marketing activities, email marketing requires establishing clear and significant objectives (Budac, 2016). For example, strengthening the relationship between customers and company; encouraging the business; revenue growth; increase online sales; branding; attracting new customers; customer information on certain changes and so on (Ibid). Due to considerations such as low costs, high conversion rate, better measurability, or personalized addressing, email marketing has a high efficiency (Ibid).

2.6 Platforms and Tools

Nowadays, the importance of digital platforms arises as a driver of distributed innovation and speed the creativity for future innovations (Esposito De Falco, Renzi, Orlando & Cucari, 2017, pp 1345). A platform is a stable form of a sharing an innovation network and its aim is to realize and measure innovations (Ibid). They discuss that there are two types of platforms which are leaders and complementors. Leaders could be those companies which drive and make innovations from different separate pieces of technology while implement one entire piece. Complementors are those who focus on developing a platforms’ market (Ibid).
Researchers as Sedera et al. (2016) explain that the digital platforms take an essential role in the IT background and their goal is to foster innovations to their characteristics including trial-ability, low cost, ease of maintenance or reducing the obstacles in connecting with other technologies. These initiated characteristics give the ability for organizations to utilize and attain innovations. They are also known as epitome of innovation-favoring technologies, where innovation barriers are expected to be at a minimal level. Example for innovation barriers could be financial or human resources (Ibid).

2.6.1 Facebook

Facebook is a social media tool where people and companies can exchange, share and evaluate information (Jin, 2015). Currently, it is estimated that Facebook is the most ranked website in the world with the approximate number of 1.1 billion users (Judd, 2014). In Facebook, people can also post information that can be liked, commented, or shared by other users registered in the same social platform (Schmidt, Zollo, Del Vicario, Bessi, Scala, Caldarelli, Stanley & Quattrociocchi, 2017). The likes, shares, and comments can be defined as a heavy-tailed distribution (Ibid). For example, by sharing, people show a desire to spread a news to other people in this platform. Simultaneously, a comment can open a collective debate where people can increase the interaction between each other. As a result, new relationships can be built (Ibid). According to Leek, Canning & Houghton (2016), Facebook is one of the most commonly used platforms in B2B market, whereas the B2B companies using the platform, often connect with people they know (Zsolt & Miklos, 2014).

2.6.2 LinkedIn

In LinkedIn, the same as in Facebook, people can comment, exchange information or search for people who can benefit the company. LinkedIn is a business tool where people and businesses have an opportunity to show their professional self-promotion skills (Baruffaldi, Di Maio & Landoni, 2017). Through LinkedIn, people can share and show their professional knowledge, education and skills. Based on this, they can engage and integrate their own professional network (ibid). According to Baruffaldi et al., (2017), LinkedIn is the most effective business tool for interacting with companies and building significant professional
network with them. Consequently, companies consider that LinkedIn is more effective and even more efficient platform than Facebook. They think so because LinkedIn is a convenient platform which highlights on the self-promotion and gives easier access to link to other real companies (Ibid).

### 2.6.3 Instagram

While Facebook and LinkedIn are digital platforms where companies search and target new business customers, Instagram is a platform where companies and customers exchange information mainly with pictures. However, Instagram is a site which purpose is to highlight on the effective pictures which people can use for expressing and sharing emotions to others (Tobin & Chulpaiboon, 2016). Instagram has millions of active users monthly with a couple of million shared pictures and videos. The same study assumed that Instagram visually can represents everything which one company wants to provide or express to its business customers. That is why, there are many companies which consider that Instagram is a meaningful tool which can attract customers and people can build relationships by sharing close interests and opinions (Ibid). However, in contrast Andersson and Wikström (2017) study explain how Instagram usage in B2B companies had been challenging due to controlling the brand of the company. Additionally, the same study discuss the importance of utilizing Instagram for sharing general content and then use the feedback from stakeholders to further create the shared content.

Overall, Facebook, LinkedIn and Instagram are the most common digital platforms where B2B companies attempt to acquire new customers (Judd 2014, cited in Baruffaldi et al., 2017). The reason of that comes due to the huge number of customers who show interest to operate in those three (3) digital tools (ibid). For example, Facebook allows people to have direct interaction to each other by easily sharing information and making comments (Schmidt et al., 2017). Simultaneously, LinkedIn is a business platform where people exchange business opinions to each other (Baruffaldi et al., 2017). Finally, Instagram gives an emotional feeling to the customers by sharing pictures and showing visually what the B2B company operates with (Tobin & Chulpaiboon, 2016). However, in general, the growth of digital platforms is indicated as an effective mechanism which reduce uncertainties and
standardized collaborative behaviors. (Esposito De Falco, et al., 2017). It is considered that digital platforms have the potential to trigger innovation in organizations, facilitated by their trial-ability and cost-effectiveness (Sedera et al., 2016).

3. Conceptualization

This section addresses how the presented concepts in chapter 2. are connected to the purpose of the study, and how the theories are applied in order to answer the presented research questions. Ultimately, in order to achieve this, the concepts are analyzed together with the empirical data presented in chapter 4.

The aim of the presented concepts is to follow the purpose of the study, which focuses on investigating the strategies and tools of digital marketing that benefit start-ups companies in acquiring and maintaining business customers. Therefore first, theories of Business-to-Business relationships are presented, in order to define what are the important factors that this study should investigate about building and maintaining business relationships. Secondly, it was important to define what a start-up is and address the most prominent attributes, as well as present the types of relationships start-up companies find essential for the business. Furthermore, to answer the research questions, the concepts of digital marketing in B2B context, as well as the benefits and challenges of it in start-ups were discussed. This further revealed why start-ups should utilize digital marketing and if they do, what can restrain them doing so. As the study focused further on how the digital tools could be utilized, it also required the discussion of strategies and more specifically, digital marketing strategies. Finally, this provided different strategies, to which the following concepts of the platforms and tools are connected with. Overall, these concepts further provide a foundation for analyzing the digital marketing elements that have been fore mostly discussed in the extant literature, with the acquired empirical data.
4. Methodology

This chapter will present how the information was conducted in order to strengthen the paper. It presents the research approach where it is explained what is the main structure of the paper. Then, data collection shows the whole process of initiated interviews. Further, ethical considerations are shown, where it is assessed if the paper take them into account or not. The whole chapter will provide in-depth information about the quality and methods applied in this paper which improve the whole paper.

4.1 Research Approach

According to Bryman & Bell (2011), research approach is a significant method for approaching a specific research problem. The research approach relates to inductive, deductive, qualitative and quantitative methods (Ibid).

4.1.1 Inductive and Deductive Approach

Inductive approach finds its application in the qualitative research, where researchers start with their observations and the theories and proposed in the end of the research method based on what observations they made (Bryman and Bell, 2011). In inductive research does not include theories and hypothesis in the beginning of the research, and the researcher can be willing to change or move the direction of the study after the research process has begun (Ibid).

Deductive approach represents the connection between the theory and research (Creswell, 2003). When the deductive research is applied, the hypothesis enables to improve based on the already existing theory and then the research strategy starts designing in order to test the hypothesis. The deductive approach is mostly used in quantitative researches to verify previous studies and based on their hypothesis to confirm or reject the existing theory (Ibid).
The literature on digital marketing usage in B2B start-up context is relatively limited and unexplored. Due to this fact, the paper is unable to present a hypothesis as the knowledge of the topic is inadequate.

Moreover, this paper adopts an inductive approach, by collecting data on the topic and developing a theory based on the data analysis. As this study is a case study and constructed on qualitative research strategy, the priority is on the quality of the data and little to none quantification of data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Additionally, while the qualitative research strategy emphasizes the inductive approach as well (Ibid), it in addition supports this study’s objective of understanding the phenomenon and allows to obtain data through practical and personal experiences (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Moreover, the case study strategy allows the authors to explore the subject of the study and gain deeper understanding of the context.
4.1.2 Qualitative Versus Quantitative research

There are two main research strategies, qualitative and quantitative research strategies, which help to analyze and collect the data (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). It is possible both research strategies to be combined in one paper which makes a mix between both (Ibid).

Quantitative research
Quantitative research is a systematic empirical investigation with a main focus on statistical or mathematical techniques. The main concept of quantitative research is to develop models, theories or hypotheses (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Moreover, quantitative data can be any data which is in a numerical form including percentages or statistics. Simultaneously, quantitative research is highly structured which make the investigator enable to examine the precise concepts and issues that are covered in the paper (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). There are other main factors which dominate in the quantitative research such as generalization, testing theories or bringing hard and reliable data (Creswell, 2003).

Qualitative research
Qualitative research is an exploratory research where researchers use words in the presentations of analyzing reasons, opinions and motivations (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Qualitative research goes deeper into the problem and it helps to improve ideas or hypotheses (ibid). If the quantitative research is highly structured, qualitative is completely unstructured research. There are other differences which occur between both strategies (Creswell, 2003). For example, as it is mentioned above, while quantitative research focus on generalization, testing theories or bringing hard and reliable data, qualitative focus on contextual understanding and bring rich and deep data (Ibid).
Table 1 presents the main difference between both research strategies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantitative research</th>
<th>Qualitative research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers</td>
<td>Words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Point of view researchers</td>
<td>Point of view of participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher distant</td>
<td>Researcher close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory testing</td>
<td>Theory emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Static</td>
<td>Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured</td>
<td>Unstructured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalization</td>
<td>Contextual understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard, reliable data</td>
<td>Rich, deep data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macro</td>
<td>Micro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artificial settings</td>
<td>Natural settings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.
**Qualitative vs. Quantitative Research**
Source: Bryman and Bell (2011, p. 410).

The paper will follow the qualitative research strategy where the information will be described by words and the data will be analyzed in-depth. This method was chosen due to the fact that during the interviews, there were additional questions which were asked in order to complete or improve the empirical findings. As a result, an unstructured method was used, which also indicates that the paper follows qualitative research.

**4.2 Research design**

Research design is described as linking the research question(s) and problems to data collection and analysis in a logical way (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Case study could be considered and chosen as a suitable research approach if it is exploratory, descriptive or explanatory (Yin, 2009). It is considered that exploratory, descriptive or explanatory affect generalization of the research question and the degree of which the purpose is particularly analyzed (Cassell & Symon, 2004). According to Bryman and Bell (2011), research design
is a simple technique for collecting data. Simultaneously, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009, pp.136) explain that the research design is a general plan which presents how the research question(s) will be answered. It is considered that it contains in itself clear objectives which are derived from the research question(s) and specify sources from which the data was collected (Ibid).

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), there are five dominated research designs including cross-sectional, longitudinal, experimental, case study, and comparative design.

For this paper, a case study was chosen as a research design. Based on the criteria, the paper focus its attention on business start-ups in the Swedish market. Additionally, this paper, chose explanatory design as the most relevant design for the research, however this will be explained more in-depth in the section 4.2.2.

4.2.1 Case Study

Case study entails in itself detailed and intensive analyses of a single study (Bryman and Bell, 2011). A case study can be a single organization, single location, a person or single event. For example, if the study emphasize on the single location, then the main interest will be focused on the factory, building or something else connected to localization (Ibid). The case(s) are tightened by time or activity where researchers collect detailed information by using different methods for collecting data, such as primary or secondary data, over specific period of time (Creswell, 2003). The aim of the case study is to illustrate processes focused on the theoretical issues in the given study (Hartley, 2004). According to Hartley (2004), case studies usually include multiple tactics due to strengthen the connection between research issues and the strategies. For example, it can be used participant observation, direct observation or interviews (semi-structured; relatively unstructured).

In this paper, there are five companies participating by giving semi-structured interviews. And therefore a multiple case study method was used. Moreover, all the companies that participated in this study, are located in Sweden, which is in the core of this thesis. Therefore,
It case study research was viewed as the most suitable research approach for the paper, as also the collected data is enough for providing valuable empirical data.

4.2.2 Exploratory Design

There exist three different classifications of the research design including casualty, descriptive and exploratory (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, the research question can combine two designs in one, for example, both descriptive and exploratory which could make the paper with more than one purpose (Saunders et al., 2009). Simultaneously, the case study strategy is often used in exploratory research. That is why, this study is conducted as an exploratory, as the primary data collection is conducted by interviews. There are three principal ways of conducting an exploratory study: by searching literature about the topic, by interviewing people with expertise in the subject, or by focus group interviews (Saunders et al., 2009). According to Saunders et al., (2009), a study could be counted as an exploratory when researchers attempt to explore some problem or topic where the main focus is on focus groups, observations, or interviews. The exploratory design is a flexible and adaptable for changes which gives the advantage for researcher to change the study direction if there is a new data taken prematurely (Ibid). Moreover, according to Yin (2009), exploratory design is used mainly by researchers who conduct case studies.

For this particular study, searching for relevant literature connected to the topic was essential. Simultaneously, the exploratory design has been applied by collecting data based on eight interviews. The main aim was to gather relevant information related to the topic and go in-depth into the research question(s).

4.3 Data Collection Method

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the collection of data is likely to be involved in the formulation of diagnosis of a problem and in the evaluation of a problem. In different situations, require data collection for solving the specific argument, or collection of
information related to the situation. Moreover, there are various places where the data can be gathered from such as interviews or surveys (Ibid).

4.3.1 Primary Data: Interviews

Interview is a conversation between more than one person who conduct a dialog by asking and responding to questions specified on a particular topic (Saunders et al., 2009). Sekaran & Bougie (2016) explain the importance for researchers to take interviews and that there exist different methods such as Email (by sending questions), face-to-face (physical meeting) or Skype. According to Bryman & Bell (2011), there are different interview variations such as structured or unstructured methods. For instance, for this paper, a semi-structured interview method was conducted. This method was considered as important for the paper because it allows interviewees to express their opinion and feel free to share information without being restricted or ethically harmed. There were two ways of taking interviews from the companies which was through Email (two respondents) and face-to-face (six respondents). The anonymity was guaranteed which made them feel safe and open to bring more exhaustive and detailed data regarding the topic.

Moreover, the questions in this study were constructed and presented to the interviewees in a specific order to guide the flow of the interviews. The interview structure included 22 open-ended questions, allowing the respondent to answer elaborately. However, additional questions may have been presented to acquire more specific information or a better understanding of the respondents’ answers. 17 min-1h 47 min, which were in the respondents’ permission recorded and later transcribed. The primary data was taken by conducting eight (8) interviews from five (5) different companies. The advantage of the primary data is that it gives beneficial and more detailed information about the purpose of the report.

4.3.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data is largely used in case studies. The data can be obtained from multiple sources including, books, journals, government publications, and industry statistics and reports.
The secondary data was utilized as it can provide data, which can give an essential knowledge related to the research question (Ibid). In this study, the secondary data was collected from Linnaeus University’s database and Google Scholar. The data was retrieved from published materials such as books, journals, and scientific articles conducted by academics. When searching for the literature, the following keywords were used: Digital Marketing, B2B relationships, Digital Marketing in Start-ups, Digital Marketing Strategies, and Digital Marketing Tools etc. Additionally, the data was selected based on the relevancy in the topic, the significance of the journals in which the articles were published, and which year the study had been conducted. These criteria, enabled to review whether the collected data is reliable, relevant and contemporary for this study.

4.4 Sampling

Sampling is relevant and essential in all types of researches and it does not have connection with the research question or research problem (Saunders et al., 2009). Additionally, it is inconsequential whether the source for the data is collected from interviews, observation or any other type of source (Ibid). Furthermore, sampling is time efficient, which can be beneficial for a paper with time constraints. According to Saunders et al., (2009), when there are fewer people involved the organization, the collection of data is more convenient and the results are presented quickly. There are two sample techniques which both Bryman and Bell (2011) and Saunders et al., (2009) emphasize on: Probability sampling and Non-probability sampling which will be presented in 4.4.1.

4.4.1 Sample Selection

Sample selection is essential in case studies, in order to obtain information related to the research question. Therefore, the study of a small sample of subjects might be more appropriate than a large number samples (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Non-probability sampling in the form of purposive sampling was chosen for this study, as it is
aimed to gather samples based on the relevancy to the research question (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The key informants were chosen based on their experience and expertise about digital marketing and start-up companies. Thus, the key informants were expected to be capable of providing information about how start-ups can utilize digital marketing, and whether certain strategies have in their experience enhanced the performance of acquiring and retaining customers.

4.4.2 Sample Size

Sample size varies on number of considerations and is never straightforward (Bryman and Bell, 2011). It is considered that larger the sample size is has lower likelihood for errors in the sample (Saunders et al., 2009). Simultaneously, the sample size could be influenced by the time and cost. Therefore, decisions about the sample size show a compromise between the time and cost (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Moreover, the sample size could be provoked by the concession between the finding accuracy and amount of time and capital which are invested in checking and analyzing all the collected data (Saunders et al., 2009). The choice of the sample size could be provoked by: the level of certainty based on the collected data which will be presented; the margin of errors; or the number of people from which the sample will be outlined (Ibid).

Additionally, due to the time constraints, a limited sample size was chosen. Since the amount of time is limited, it is a challenge for the paper to analyze and collect a considerable amount of respondents (e.g. 50 or more respondents). To decrease the sample errors and strengthen the empirical findings, the amount of more specific and broad questions increase. Thus, more efficient information was collected which gave a solid amount of knowledge which could be analyzed later.

4.4.3 Respondent Validation

Respondent validation is typically used in a qualitative research where the main focus is to ensure if there is a good connection between findings and the experiences of their research
participants (Bryman and Bell, 2011). In other words, it means the process where researchers show who are the participants in the research and give an overview about them (Ibid).

Table 2 provides an overall picture of the interviewees and their role in the company where they currently operate in.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sector/Activity/Department</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Interview Conduction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Company A</td>
<td>Anonymous 1</td>
<td>CEO/Co-founder</td>
<td>51 min.</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Company A</td>
<td>Anonymous 2</td>
<td>CEO/Co-founder</td>
<td>57 min.</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Company B</td>
<td>Anonymous 3</td>
<td>Creative producer</td>
<td>56 min.</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Company B</td>
<td>Anonymous 4</td>
<td>Head of life science division</td>
<td>1h 43 min.</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Company C</td>
<td>Anonymous 5</td>
<td>CEO/Co-founder</td>
<td>48 min.</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Company C</td>
<td>Anonymous 6</td>
<td>CEO/Co-founder</td>
<td></td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Company D</td>
<td>Anonymous 7</td>
<td>CEO/Co-founder</td>
<td>17 min.</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Company E</td>
<td>Anonymous 8</td>
<td>CEO/Co-founder</td>
<td></td>
<td>Email</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.
General Information of the Interviews
Source: Own illustration.

The paper does neither present the names of the companies or the respondents, due to the ethical reasons such as invasion of their privacy and the requested anonymity.

In total, eight (8) interviews were conducted within five (5) different companies. Six (6) interviews, were conducted face-to-face and later transcribed. Two interviews were conducted via email, due to the respondents’ willingness and time constraints. However, all respondents provided exhaustive answers and gave a clear understanding on the topic of this study. The interview questions can be found in the appendix (1).
4.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical consideration in a research, can be divided into four principles; Harm to participants, Lack of informed consent, Invasion of privacy, and Deception.

Harm to participants can be avoided by providing confidentiality and anonymity of individuals or organizations (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This requires cautious acts when the findings of the research are presented, in order to project the participants of being identified without their permission (Ibid). Bryman and Bell additionally presented the need for acquiring an informed consent, if there is any risk for harming the participant. According to Bryman and Bell A lack of informed consent, therefore means that the research participants must be provided with enough information about the research and the research process, for the participants to decide whether to participate or not. The authors argued how requesting an informed consent via form can be difficult in certain types of qualitative study methods. Therefore, the informed consent can be recorded via recording device, in the participants’ permission. Privacy matters are associated with the informed consent, and the participants should be given the right to refuse invasion of their privacy. Additionally, the ethical consideration includes principle of deception, which occurs when the research is represented in an untruthful manner. (Bryman & Bell, 2011)

This research paper has followed the ethical considerations presented by Bryman and Bell (2011). Firstly, following the code of conduct (Ibid), the data acquired for the empirical findings was recorded via recording equipment, with the respondents’ permission. This paper has provided the respondents information of the research, and allowing the participants to voluntarily participate in the study. Additionally, the respondents were provided with an option of anonymity. The present study was not viewed as opposing the respondents to any harmful situation, however the respondents had a full right to refuse answering any question that would be harmful or invade their privacy.
4.6 Data Analysis

While the secondary data was conducted, the empirical data was collected and compared to the theoretical findings. This is a fundamental process which measures and analyses if the collected data and the theory match to each other in order to answer to the research question(s). The process of analyzing the relevance between theories and data collection is called pattern matching (Yin, 2007). By gathering a relevant literature, the paper shows and analyses main concepts based on how researchers and academicians define and understand a single concept. For example, for this study, the literature and theories discuss the importance of digital marketing of acquiring and maintaining business relationships in B2B start-ups. Simultaneously, the empirical data was obtained by doing a case study and taking interviews from B2B start-ups. By doing this, the paper can compare the connection, reliability and validity between the theories and empirical data. The relevance and connection between theories and empirical data was continuously and repetitively compared with the clear aim to answer the research question(s).

This study begins with open coding of the collected primary data. This process includes examining and comparing the transcribed interviews, creating notes and keywords of the themes in the interviews (Strauss & Cobin, cited in Bryman & Bell, 2011). This will then be continued as axial coding, in which the open coded data will then be reviewed, compared, and put together into categories within the same contexts (Ibid). Finally, the data is compared to the theoretical framework, while any connection between is noted.

It was considered that taking at least eight interviews from eight different people would strengthen the paper and give a fundamental information for analyzing data and providing significant results later. In order to achieve that goal, there was a criteria which had to be followed, for example, interview duration for at least 1 hour long or all meetings to be conducted face-to-face and then transcribed. However, there were two interviews taken via email because as start-ups they had no time to give interviews face-to-face. As a result, both co-founders (Table 2) sent an email as they considered that as a fast and accessible way to present what they are doing in a B2B market. Simultaneously, one of the companies did not
want to answer to all questions because they considered that some questions were broad and was unnecessary to analyze them (e.g. What is the role of digital marketing in business relationships? How does digital marketing attract business customers?). As a result, the amount of questions reduces, which made the interview short with duration of 17 minutes.

4.7 Quality Criteria

It is considered that criteria for evaluating qualitative research are different from the criteria assessing the quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For example, for evaluating the qualitative research, there are two criteria which are proposed: trustworthiness and authenticity (Ibid). There are four criteria which shape the trustworthiness which are credibility; transferability; confirmability and dependability. For defending the paper trustworthiness and consistency, reliability and validity are presented.

4.7.1 Credibility

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), the credibility is connected to trustworthiness and how trustworthy the provided data is. In order to confirm the trustworthiness the findings are presented to the interviewees. This technique is also known as a respondent validation. Respondent validation is a process where the respondents show the participants of the research (detailed information about respondent validation could be found in 4.4.3).

4.7.2 Transferability

Transferability is established by providing readers with evidence that the findings could be applicable, for example, to other contexts or situations (Saunders et al., 2009). The researcher cannot prove that the findings will be applicable. However, they can provide evidence or examples that could be applicable (Ibid).
4.7.3 Confirmability

It is considered that confirmability is essential for researchers to be able to show that they have acted in a reasonable faith (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This means that researchers do not allow personal values influence the findings, and it is considered that confirmability is a main priority for the external auditors (Ibid).

4.7.4 Dependability

Dependability takes an essential part in the paper because it is connected to trustworthiness and it establishes the empirical findings as consistent and repeatable (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Researchers attempt to verify their empirical findings with the whole collected data. Moreover, there exists a technique which can establish dependability by conducting an inquiry audit (Saunders et al., 2009). An inquiry audit involves researchers who improve a valuable research process by examining the process of data collection, one of analyzing data, collecting data and bringing results of the research study (Ibid).

For this specific study, there were two external auditors including a tutor and examiner who bring dependability by conducting and supporting the paper until the deadline. Furthermore, to improve dependability of the paper, all taken and transcribed interviews are saved.

4.7.5 Reliability

The reliability depends on how consistent the findings are (Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to Yin (2007), in order to handle a reliability in a case study, it must be taken under consideration the study performance, its trustworthiness and consistency, and having somebody who constantly can check the updated version of the case study until its finalization. For this particular study, there were four (4) conducted seminars where the examiner gave advices and suggestions before the official deadline. Simultaneously, the tutor constantly checked and discussed the performance of the case study. To gain and improve the reliability, firstly, a literature review was conducted which helped for creating and structuring relevant interview questions. Thereafter, during the interviews (face-to-face) the
personal communications were recorded by a recording device. Later, the interviews were transcribed in order to improve the reliability as well as to eliminate misunderstandings. Thus, by using more than one person supporting the process of the study and having constant discussions, it is considered that the reliability of this paper increases.

4.7.6 Validity

Validity is “concerned with the integrity of the conclusions that are generated from a piece of research” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p. 42). There are four (4) main types of validity which could be outlined: measurement validity; internal validity; external validity; and ecological validity.

According to (Saunders et al., 2009), validity means that the truth of the theoretical framework is reliably established. To improve the validity, theoretical framework must be connected to the empirical findings by formulating the basic interview questions based on the literature (Ibid). To provide validity, the paper used a measurement validity which is tightly connected to reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This means that when the paper is reliably proved, then assessment of measurable validity could be considered as successful too (Ibid). According to Yin (2007), external validity helps to generalize the results of the study. Thus, the case study achieved external validity by studying the problem area of utilizing digital marketing for acquiring and maintaining business relationships. As a result, all five companies are applicable for the case study having a similar problem. This was motivated by conducting the case study at a B2B start-up companies.
5. Empirical Findings

This section presents the data gathered from semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with 8 professionals whom all have practical experience within start-ups or are working in a start-up. Due to requested anonymity, the respondents are presented as ‘A1’ to ‘A8’ (See section 4.4.3, Table 2).

5.1 Business Relationships in Start-ups

Business relationships for start-ups are vital, according to respondents A1, A2, A5 and A8. When it comes to the main attributes of business relationships, creating trust and value are essential (A1-A8). A6 believes in having close contact with the business customers and weekly meetings, to make the customers trust the start-up company, confident of it and feel safe. Therefore, constantly delivering and deploying what has been done, shows security to the business customer (A1). A8 considered trust as very important not only from customers side but from the start-ups side as well. As every project or campaign is risky for the start-ups limited resources, the trust will reduce the feeling of a risk.

Both A2 and A3 expressed, that the beginning of the relationship requires great investment of resources and is therefore costly. For this reason, start-ups must use the capital extremely wisely (A2), and therefore investing for example in perfecting the website, is irrelevant if the start-up does not have enough of paying customers (A1).

A1 considered short-term business relationships good, if they pay well. However, long-term business relationships’ importance was also stressed by all respondents, as the building phase can be lengthy time-wisely until both parties benefit from it (A3). A1 argued that long-term business relationships are more fruitful for the company as the return on investment rates can be very good, while A8 considered long-term business relationships creating efficiency and flexibility. For start-ups, building long-term business relationships can be especially challenging as the business customer can’t be charged until the work has produced profits (A3).
5.1.1 Acquiring Business Customers

When acquiring customers as a start-up, having expertise (A3) as well as showing how the company is professional (A7), is valued by the business customers. The company of A3, A7 and A8 approaches the business customers after researching the company and its stakeholders, and proposes on what their services would provide for the potential customer. A6 follows a similar process of acquiring customers and also considers the company’s portfolio of successful projects, as important to the business customers when acquiring them. Nevertheless, the aforementioned companies do not utilize digital tools when contacting the customers but rather contact personally by a phone call or such.

When acquiring business customers, A7 believes the acquiring process requires giving attention and providing something interesting to the potential customers. In turn, A8 stressed finding the key stakeholders and understanding the customers’ wants and needs is essential in acquiring customers. A1 and A2 both believe that it is essential to add value to the service by showing, that you care and will help solving the customer’s problem. Moreover, respondent A1 explained:

“The most important factor is to show how you will help them to solve their problems. If you only show what you’re good at, it is not interesting. It is always about adding value, it is about being able to translate their problems into words they understand. As in this business the customers often say, “I need a website”, and we tell them it is not what you need. They often have another problem, that the website might solve. But you need to understand the customer and be able to speak in their own terms, which is often difficult. But if we try to do anything else, we will fail”.

The respondent A2 further explained, how important it is to be truly interested in the customers’ businesses and have an idea what the target group is experiencing. Out of all the respondents, only A8 stressed the importance of customer satisfaction, which consequently
required availability, flexibility and delivering fast. Achieving customer satisfaction, requires also honesty when responding to customers’ expectations.

A3 and A5 consider personal networking really important for small companies, as in comparison all of their customers have been acquired through it. However, a combination of offline and online networking is a must to really connect with the business customers (A3). The respondents A1 and A2 also stressed the importance of offline networking, because the digital marketing is not a standalone activity and digital marketing alone seldom leads to any results (A1). A5 believes, that networking is also about sharing the knowledge, which will then engage and resonate in others, and will thus spread awareness of the company. Moreover, A1 believes that in start-ups, when the networking is done actively it is very important to simultaneously follow-up with blogs and LinkedIn articles.

5.1.2. Maintaining Business Customers

To maintain the business relationships with customers, it is essential to deliver what has been promised (A1 & A8). As customers want security, it must be given to them (A1). When discussing the maintaining of business relationships, respondent A6 explained that:

“We have continuous meetings with our customer through the whole project and we deliver parts of the system at reconciliation every week which is essential for keeping the customers and to let them see results quickly and be confident in the work we do”

A2 stated that when maintaining business relationship, it is important to be responsive, quick to act and present whenever the customer needs it, as this creates trust along the way. Additionally, continuing on delivering the value is essential, not only with the services or products but also with knowledge and marketing (A7).

Keeping in contact and building a personal relationship with the business customers and stakeholders, is done through weekly communications (A7) and contacting the customers from genuine interest in them (A8). On respondent A3’s experience, when they have befriended their business customers, the customers tend to return back to them again. Although, the company always aim on giving the customers what they want to keep them
happy, A3 questioned whether it was an error on their behalf and whether challenging the business customer would be better. According to A2, challenging the business customer is important for adding value to the service, by presenting solutions that customers haven’t specifically requested for. However, this is only possible in long-term business relationships, because the money is not a central issue then (A2).

5.1.3 Digital Marketing and Business Relationships in Start-ups

The main goal of digital marketing should be to make an impression on the business customers, to share a brand message which resonates the audience (A2). According to A2, for start-ups digital marketing is a way to reach out and attract customers. The respondent described how digital marketing is good for choosing who to reach, and using it as a tool to reach out personally, rather than having a wide reach. Therefore, it is essential to tailor a message to micro-groups, sub-groups, and unfold who is influencing who (A1 & A2). A6 in turn explained how digital marketing has a large impact on business relationships and the company’s trustworthiness. The respondent believes, if the company is not found from the platform where the customer tries to find it from, it may seem untrustworthy. A8 in turn believes digital marketing can show what the company has to offer and remarketing can work as a reminder of that.

The respondents pointed out changes they have experienced within business relationships and digital marketing. According to A1, the customer funnel does not have clear steps anymore. Nowadays, the funnel is merely nonexistent, while all points of contact must be held with customers (anon.1). Both A2 and A8 also pointed out how the future of digital marketing is changing. The respondent A2 explained, how digital marketing is changing from pushing the message out, to more relational sense. This can derive from the media evolving constantly, due to the people being exposed and involved in media. Additionally, A2 argued how compared to the old campaigns, digital marketing has become more about expressing who you are, being honest and upfront. This is due the audience being more cynical to all the media and information they are exposed to (A2). A8 instead explained how the changes show
due to the evolvement of technology, and new legislations such as General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

5.2 Digital Marketing Strategies in Start-ups

A2 argued, how it is essential to have a digital marketing strategy. In the company of A8, different strategies were used for different types of customers and campaigns. The respondent explained how the digital marketing strategies’ outcome is reviewed every 6 months and any required changed then. In contrast, A3 and A5 both explained how in their companies, there is no digital marketing strategy in use and the companies were not marketed through any channel. Although, A5 considers social media channels as very prominent for finding and communicating with people as well as helping the brand to reach customers, which the respondent thought could possibly be a strategy. Similarly, A1 found digital marketing strategy to be challenging due to time constraints. This argument was a reflection of the lack of resources, which in turn made A1 believe that everyone in the company should be involved with the digital marketing activities. The respondent explained, how it is impossible to manage the task alone, also because the employees are the brand of the company. A2 stated that:

“I would create a strategy, it would start with what clients we want to reach and where do we find them. Try to find those clients and figure out what we could help them with. Then we would have a couple hypotheses to test. And before doing that even, it we must know who we are and what our brand is, what do we stand for. Then finding the channels, and tailoring the messages to the customers in that channel. But everything comes back to the core message, which can be expressed in different ways”

Moreover, to create good content, all of the employees should be part of it and show the everyday life in the office (A1). The respondent considered this to create trust for the business customers as well. A3 also explained how in the start-up setting, the digital marketing of the business is not a focus. In the beginning, the digital marketing was done in the form of
blogging, which then lead to an interest in the company. However, the blogging was done as a person, not as a company. The respondent believes that blogging requires the creation of a personal brand, which also enforced the company’s presence in the industry. Most importantly, the blog posts were posted in an industry specific platform that had the right audience, thus creating a wider reach. Also, the created content must be relevant, showing the expertise of the writer and create discussion among the readers (A3). Moreover, the respondents A5 and A8 plan is to focus more on the blogging. A5 focus is more on creating content that is for the business colleagues. Their previous blog posts had generated good leads, and essentially the customers approached the company and no marketing was thus needed. The respondent A8 aims on creating valuable and genuine content which would help the customers, which would then ultimately create traffic and strengthen the company’s brand.

5.2.1 Benefits

A2 argued how digital marketing can be exceptionally cost-effective and powerful for start-ups, but it is mostly good for the involvement of the company. Additionally, A1 agreed that digital marketing can be done cost effectively, and it is very good for building trust for customers. A4 argued how, resource wisely, it is not hard to do if you have enough of knowledge. A6 argues that:

“The benefits are that you can reach out to a lot of people in a very short time. You can also pinpoint to whom the ads should be displayed for, which is great when you want to target your customer target group”.

A8 considered the measurability of digital marketing as the main benefit. With digital marketing it is possible to measure specifically, how much it costs to acquire a customer, what every purchase costs the company, and what channels work the best (A8).
5.2.2 Challenges

A7 explained how the utilization of digital marketing in start-ups depends on the resources and the priorities. Having the given limited resources, there is no reason for focusing the resources on digital marketing or marketing at all (A7). A3 additionally stated that it requires resources to learn and how to approach the customers. Nowadays, digital marketing is not really cost effective anymore if there’s a lack of resources (A1). You must pay in order to achieve a wide reach and for start-ups, digital marketing is not very good for the reach without paid content, according to A1. The respondent explained, when the content reach is not paid, the Instagram account for example, grows very slow compared to those who have sponsored posts. Additionally, good content is expensive to create because it takes time. According to A1, the challenges lie within the lack of time and how to break through the noise, as there are many similar companies doing the same the same. It is very easy to create noise and not any impact. Moreover, A5 agreed with this, and told how it has been challenging to deliver their core message out through social media.

A1 stated how different digital tools are invented and changing every day, which makes it difficult to keep up with. A3 also expressed the challenge in changing digital tools, and added how it is necessary to stay “on top” of them, in order to receive good return on investment. Moreover, as there is so much data, such as the client’s behavior on the website, and being able to understand and aggregate it, is challenging (A4). Moreover, A4 explain that:

“We find it challenging to find the right people to target. We need to shoot pretty wide, but it’s very hard to find the decision maker to target. For small companies, I think it’s hard to understand all the new tools, new services and new ways of doing business. You need to be on top of that, in order to get good return on investment (ROI)”.

Additionally, A8 agrees with this and considers it challenging to gain knowledge of the “back-end”-systems, and mastering advertises’ bidding on different platforms. According to A2 the challenges in digital marketing show within the internal involvement of the company. Additionally, it is important for the management to be adaptive for digital marketing, in order for it to be effective (A1). The respondent explained how the management
enforces the usage of digitalization in the marketing, and can thus promote its importance internally as well.

**5.3 Digital Marketing Tools**

Digital marketing is very important, but it is only one of the tools (A1). According to A2, inbound and outbound marketing work in tandem together. A3 believes that small companies must find their own ways of doing inbound marketing, to benefit from it money wisely. The respondent did not believe outbound marketing to be important for B2B companies, unless the services are specialized. A7 stated how the tools were chosen by individual preference, whereas the digital tools were not in active use for building or maintaining business relationships.

**5.3.1 Platforms Importance for Start-ups**

There are variety of platforms where the company can be present and be promoted (A1). A3 considers it important to research who are the target reach, because it is not possible to be present in every channel and the company must choose on which the time and energy is used on. Also according to A2, choosing the platforms depends on who are the target audience to reach. The respondents A1, A2, and A3, stressed how platforms that are industry specific, can be very beneficial and having a presence in those is very important (A1). A3 considered the company’s websites to be the most important, while A1 regarded having a website, creating video content in various platforms, and creating blogs, as effective. Not only does the company need their own platform presence, but also the employees should have their own, which is linked to the company’s platform (A1 & A2). According to A1, this will showcase the skills of the employees, and thus promote the company itself.
5.3.2 Content Creation

When accurate content is posted on the right platform, the reach will be very positive (A1). However, it varies on who creates the content and what kind of content is created (A1). Additionally, although the company’s product or service is good, to increase the trust in the potential customers, the company must present itself from within as it is (A1) and be transparent (A3).

A4 discussed that the type of content also depends on who is to be approached; the CEO of the company needs high-level information, whereas marketing people want information based on their needs. Consequently, if the platform is broad, such as LinkedIn, the company should have a strategy of what type of content is posted there (A1). Furthermore, the most important factor stressed by the respondents A1, A2, A3 and A3 was to have unfiltered content.

To create wider reach with the content, A1 would “boost” the content on different platforms instead of creating advertisements. A6 opinion aligned with this, considering ads as least useful digital marketing tool. For start-ups, everything often goes in short-periods, therefore it is important to plan the content in long-term to avoid inconsistency. This also includes the consistency within the company, all the employees should do the same thing (A6). On the other hand, respondent A8 stated that having a relevant content is crucial for engaging the business customers.

“For example, you could make a blog post about tips and tricks in sales or how to become an expert in SEO. This also depends greatly on how who your customers are” (A8).

The interviews with A1, A2, and A3, all stressed the prominence and increase of video content. To create value to the business customers, the company should create educative video content. An example of an informative and educative content, from which the customer learns, could be short a short video that is a tutorial for how to create a video (A1) or how to solve a problem the customer has (A3.). The respondents A1, A3, A4 additionally explained, how the videos would attract customers if the focus is on showing the company from within in an honest manner, such as daily office life, sharing current projects and presenting the
employees. Similarly, A6 start-up focuses on sharing funny, everyday-content that is not pretentious. YouTube especially, has become extremely effective as everything is turning into video marketing (A1). To gain exposure and reach, the respondent A6 explained how along with the aforementioned platform also Snapchat was utilized for creating video content, while A5 had considered the platform as well.

5.3.3 The Role of the Current Platforms

According to A8 discusses the most common platforms which the company uses, which are Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Snapchat. Moreover, the respondent A8 stated that the role of the current platforms:

“Depends on how good you are at using them, what your budget is like, and if what type of content you want to market. Pictures are better for Instagram, text and video for Facebook (although pictures work quite well), video for Snapchat, and specific offers for SEO and SEM. It really depends a lot on the ad and what you sell how well the platforms attract customers”.

A1 and A3 consider Facebook, as a platform that is not beneficial for reaching out to business customers, mainly because the audience there is not correct. Also A5 has an unused Facebook platform, which is not planned to be used either. In contrast, A5 and A6 considered Facebook as a great way to reach out to customers, because “everyone” is there (A6) and the targeting of people is convenient. Moreover, both respondents A1 and A3 also do not consider Instagram as important either, without paid content and also because it does not create money for the company (A3). A4 however considered Instagram was good for building brand awareness, and as a good platform to show both the clients and potential employees that the company is active and happy (A4). Moreover, A5 and A7 considered LinkedIn to be one of the most applicable for start-ups, where the company can react to other companies content (A5) and find people to build business relationships with (A7). Email-marketing should also include very high-quality content, instead of creating solely sales oriented newsletters (A3). The respondent thought, how emails that are educating and
sharing personal skills are one of the best ways of doing marketing. This is something that companies are missing on, although it would benefit them a lot (A3).

5.3.4 Tools for Acquiring Business Customers

Outbound marketing is important for acquiring customers according to A1, while A7 believes outbound is good for contacting the wanted potential customers but this is not done through digital tools. A2 argued, that although inbound marketing is increasing and growing, the inbound used today, such as content marketing, is changing its form to extreme inbound – the growth-hacker (A2). This is a tactic, which makes the most of the least money and is extremely influential.

Platform that suits well for reaching and acquiring customers, according to A1 is YouTube, whereas Twitter and Facebook, are rarely effective, because the audience is usually persons not companies. A6 believes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn the most applicable platforms, because these platforms were thought to be the most attractive to business customers. According to A3, LinkedIn is very important as personal networking is important for small companies, however it can be challenging as the competition is against large companies that have many followers. The respondent also believed Instagram to be the most applicable platform for start-ups, arguing that nowadays B2B customers are approached the same way as B2C customers. Additionally, on the followers a start-up has on Instagram, are often friends and family. They essentially become the ambassadors of the start-up (A1).

In contrast, A4 considered Facebook and Instagram rather better for retargeting potential customers. Additionally, in A8’s experience, Social Media, such as Facebook and Instagram, is the least useful for attracting business customers. Instead, LinkedIn and Search Engine Marketing (SEM) were thought to be useful (A8). Respondents A1, A4, and A6 all agreed how SEO is more important than ever, for attracting traffic to the website. Moreover, A3 believes that SEO can be very useful in blogs as well, however it requires a very niche sector for it to work.
5.3.5 Tools for Maintaining Business Customers

Most useful platforms are YouTube, Instagram, blogs and emails, though the least useful is content that is not paid (A1). LinkedIn is also important for connecting with the customers (A4). To keep in contact with the customers, channels like Slack was used in the company, which is a communication platform (A8).

A1 argued how digitalization has changed for business customers wanting to see who is behind the content, and get more personal view of the company. The respondents A1 and A2 also explained that in order to maintain business customers’ interest in the company, adding value to everything that is shared by the company, is a must. Therefore, the company must deliver value by sharing informative and educative content through videos, newsletters and articles through different platforms, as well as blogs and emails (A1-A8).

6. Data analysis

This chapter will present the connection between the Empirical Findings and Theoretical Framework. The purpose of this chapter is to strengthen the paper by discussing the main topics in order to answer to the particular research question(s).

6.1 Business Relationships Connected to Digital Marketing

As Ndubisi and Nataraajan (2016) stated, that building a customer base is vital for start-up companies, in order to continue the business (Ndubisi & Nataraajan, 2016). The empirical data of the present study also confirmed this statement, as the respondents A1, A2, A5 and A8 considered that having business relationships is a crucial component, especially for start-ups. Moreover, A5 explained that building relationship with business customers varies from customer to customer. For example, sometimes they are working on a project which requires short-term business relationships. Additionally, the importance of long-term relationships
was stressed, as they can strengthen the business further and create more return on investment (A1).

The theoretical framework presented the importance of four vital components of business relationships; communication, trust, loyalty, and satisfaction (e.g. Lancastre & Lages, 2006; Svensson, 2001). However, the respondents stressed mainly the communication and trust. Moreover, the most significant component that the respondents stressed was understanding the customers, delivering value to them and honesty.

Communication was considered as significant when building and acquiring business customers (Murphy and Sashi, 2018), as well as to the ability of competing in the market (Goneos-Malka, Grobler & Strasheim, 2013). New digital communication channels such as Facebook or Instagram are used to create a measurable communication process that aids companies to acquire and retain customers while build a relationship with them (Killian & McManus, 2015)

Hänninen and Karjaluoto (2017) expressed how the communication has changed its form into two-way interaction, in which information and feedback is exchanged, whereas Gruner and Power (2018) argued how social media has become a new way of communicating with customers due to digitalization. According to Järvinen et al. (2012) social media provides professionals an opportunity to interact and communicate on a more personal way with the potential customers. The respondents also expressed how digital marketing has changed the communication into more relational sense (A2 & A8). Additionally, the audience has changed to being more cynical to the media and information they are exposed to (A2).

According to Li et al. (2011), digitalization has affected the companies’ marketing strategies as new technologies have improved the communication process between businesses and customers. Also Lashgari (2018) explained, how B2B companies have become more aware of utilizing social media to reach different goals and should therefore be done strategically. The study proposed a multi-layer strategy, which included strategically viewing the content on the platforms, choosing the target group to which the content is for, and in which platform the content is shared on. A lack of strategy in turn, would cause the social media platforms unimportant and fruitless (Ibid). Similarly, the respondent A5 considered social media as
prominent strategy for finding and communicating with customers, as well as reaching out to them. However, the majority of respondents companies did not have a digital marketing strategy, except for respondent A8 and A2, who considered it essential. The lack of strategy in digital marketing was explained as challenging due to the limited resources (A7 & A3), and lack of time (A1), which also contributed to the need of internal coherence within the company (A1 & A2). In addition to A1 and A2, the respondents A3 and A4 also expressed how the company as a whole, should be involved in the digital marketing and sharing content on different platforms, to tackle the lack of time, create good content (A1) and represent the company (A2).

Studies concluded (e.g. Akrout et al. 2016; Svensson, 2001) how building trust is a fundamental for long-term business relationships, and especially important for start-ups to develop and maintain their business relationships (Akrout et al., 2016). The empirical findings concluded, that all respondents (A1-A8) considered having confidence as an essential component for building business relationships, while also believed that their potential customers require and search for trust. Moreover, providing security to the customers, by delivering what has been promised (A1 & A8), being responsive and present, essentially creates trust (A2).

The respondent A6 had experienced, that the business customer wants to trust to the start-up company and feel confident when establishing a business relationship, while also the company must express their trust to their business customers. According to the respondent A6, digital marketing also has a large impact on the company’s trustworthiness, whereas not being present in the online environment, may make the company seem untrustworthy.

In the literature, digital marketing has been referred often as cost-effective (e.g. Foroudi et al., 2017), as it can be practiced in variety of low-cost forms such as Search Engine Optimization (e.g. Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), email marketing (e.g. Budac, 2016) and digital platforms (Sedera et al., 2016). However, the respondents did not agree with this to the fullest extent. According to A1, digital marketing has the possibility of being low-cost, however nowadays it is not cost-effective anymore when company has a lack of resources. This is because companies must pay in order to achieve a wide reach, which for start-ups is not favorable (A1). Additionally, the respondent explained how the creation of good content
is expensive because it takes time. Digital marketing also requires resources to learn how to approach the customers (A3), while also learning to understand and aggregate the data is also challenging (A4 & A8).

6.2 Digital Marketing Strategies in Start-ups

Moreover, the majority of respondents companies did not have a digital marketing strategy, except for respondent A8 and A2, who considered it essential. The lack of strategy in digital marketing was explained as challenging due to the lack of resource such as time (A1), which also contributed to the need of internal coherence within the company (A1 & A2). In the literature, digital marketing has been referred often as cost-effective (e.g. Foroudi et al., 2017), as it can be practiced in variety of low-cost forms such as Search Engine Optimization (e.g. Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015), email marketing (e.g. Budac, 2016) and digital platforms (Sedera et al., 2016). Moreover, according to Smith (2012) platforms are utilized also for acquiring and retaining customers.

6.2.1 Digital Marketing Channels and Tools

According to Leeflang et al. (2014) the most common digital marketing channels and tools companies use are company homepages, email and social media platforms. Furthermore, Holliman & Rowley (2014) regarded B2B digital marketing as content marketing, which is in B2B context used as an inbound marketing. The authors explained, how inbound marketing is aimed at customers who already have an interest for the information, product or service (Ibid). The respondents A2 and A3 considered it important to choose in which channels the company is present, and it should be researched first where the target audience is.

Moreover, companies’ websites were regarded as important by A1 and A3. Although, studies (e.g. Jin, 2015; Leek, Canning & Houghton, 2016; Zsolt and Miklos, 2014) regarded
Facebook as a common platform used in companies, the usage of Facebook as a platform was contradicting among the respondents. It was considered among the respondents as both unbeneﬁcial and beneﬁcial. The respondents A1 and A3 believed that the audience is often not correct there, whereas A5 and A6 considered it to have the correct audience.

According to Baruffaldi et al., (2017), LinkedIn is the most effective business for interacting with companies and to build professional network in it. This was supported by A5 and A7, who considered the platform to be most applicable for start-ups, and finding people to build business relationships with (A7). Additionally, A3 considered LinkedIn as very important as personal networking is important for small companies. The study Andersson and Wikström (201) found that Instagram is challenging for B2B companies, especially with controlling the brand. In contrast the respondent A4 considered Instagram was good for building brand awareness, and as a good platform to show both the clients and potential employees that the company is active and happy. Additionally, the respondents A3 and A6 believed Instagram to be the most applicable platform for start-up companies, however according to A1 and A3 it does not create money for the company without paid content.

Furthermore, if the company does utilize broad platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Instagram, a strategy should be created for what type of content is shared (A1). Additionally, the respondents A1 and A2 stressed the importance of tailoring the messages to micro-groups, sub-groups, and unfold who is inﬂuencing who. Although, YouTube was not presented in the literature of this study, it was stressed as extremely effective platform when sharing video content (A1, A2, & A3). Also A6 mentioned how Snapchat had been used for creating video content, whereas A5 had considered it as well for the business.

6.2.2 Content

According to Pulizzi (2013), in B2B context the digital content is part of the inbound marketing technique, which “pulls” customers. The respondent A1 believed that when accurate content is posted on the right platform, the reach will be very positive. However, it
was emphasized that the created content should be presented in true manner and transparently (A1, A2, A3, & A4). Consistency was also essential, regarding to the representation of the company, which is why A6 and A2 suggested how all the employees should share coherent message. However, this also requires the management to be adaptive for digital marketing, in order to enforce its importance internally as well (A1). This aligned with Keinänen and Kuivalainen (2015) argument, that if the senior management does not value the social media tools, the usage of them is not beneficial either.

Smith and Chaffey (2013), described the most common formats which digital content use, as pictures, animations, e-books or shorter customer guides, white papers, webinars, infographics, blog texts and social media posts. Järvinen & Taiminen (2016) further discussed how the main goal of content marketing is to present the brand itself, get customers engaged, and to increase sales through customer acquisitions.

Moreover, content that is educational can be effective in engaging new and potential customers (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Moreover, Pulizzi (2013) stated that content that is provided for free by the organization to promote their products or services, is to acquire, build and retain relationships with other organizations. The empirical findings also highlighted the importance of creating informative and educational content. This content was suggested to be shared in industry specific blogs, articles on LinkedIn, and as video form such as tutorials (A1 & A3). This aligned with the multi-layer strategy proposed by Lashgari (2018), whereas the respondents had also gone through similar processes as the Selection Process and Adoption Process. However, the Integration Process was not fully supported by the respondents, as the respondents lacked resources on a digital marketing strategies. However, the respondents least regarded to creating ad-hoc content towards business customers.

Blogging had great influence on the companies in the respondents’ experience (A3 & A5). Sharing the knowledge in industry specific platform had created a wider reach, as the audience was correct and content relevant (A3).
Moreover, also showing the company from within through the content, was discussed by the respondents A1, A3, A4. The respondents referred this as showing daily office life, sharing current projects, and presenting the employees as attractive to business customers.

6.3 The Role of Digital Marketing

6.3.1 Acquiring Business Customers

According to Killian & McManus (2015) digital communication channels aid companies to acquire and retain customers. However referring to the empirical findings, the respondents didn’t regard digital marketing as the main tool when acquiring customers. Instead the respondents believed how having the expertise (A3), professionality (A7), and portfolio (A6) are the main factors when acquiring customers. Thus, this process requires finding the key stakeholders (A8), adding value to the service (A1 & A2), and understanding the customers wants and needs as well as challenging them (A1). Harrison-Walker & Neeley (2004) explained that based on digitalization, customers are willing to repeat transactions more frequently which automatically increase their satisfaction. However, only the respondent A8 focused regarded customer satisfaction as an essential factor for acquiring business customers.

According to Patrutiu-Baltes (2016) inbound marketing is a Digital Marketing strategy, which is focused on creating relationships with customers, through trust and loyalty (Patrutiu-Baltes, 2016). A3 believed that small companies must find their own ways of doing inbound marketing, to benefit from it money wisely. Additionally A2 argued that though inbound marketing is increasing and growing, its form is changing. According to the respondent there is a change in digital marketing, in which the inbound marketing will become “extreme inbound”, that is the most cost-effective solution.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) utilization has become more familiar in start-ups, as it is relatively low-cost solution (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). This was agreed on by the respondents A1, A4 and A6, who considered SEO as more important than ever in attracting traffic. Additionally, A3 believed it to be very useful in blogs that are in a niche sector.
Majority of the respondents regarded both offline and online networking as essential for start-ups that are acquiring customers. The respondent A3 argues, that the combination of the two are a must for small companies, in order to really connect with business customers. A1 and A2 explained this by digital marketing not being a standalone activity, that would alone lead to results. Additionally, networking is about sharing knowledge which can engages and spreads awareness of the company. Therefore, also A1 believed how active offline networking should be followed by online networking such as blogs or LinkedIn articles.

The respondents A1, A2 and A3 stressed the importance of having a presence on industry specific platforms, as well as creating blogs in these platforms. From the previous experience, the respondents A1, A3 and A5 had generated leads for the company by creating informational and educative content in their personal blogs. Additionally, also A8 aims creating valuable and genuine content for the customers to create traffic and strengthen the brand of the company.

Moreover, it is not only the company that should have a presence on these niche platforms, but also the employees should have one that is at the same time linked to the company’s platform (A1 & A2). According to A1 this would showcase the skills of the employees, which would promote the company simultaneously.

### 6.3.2 Maintaining Business Customers

If both parties receive value from each other, they will be motivated to build, maintain and strengthen a long-term relationship (Lancastre & Lages, 2006). All the respondents considered long-term business relationships as better than short-term, whereas an essential element in maintaining customers is to deliver added value to them and having an ongoing communication (A8). This was also regarded as being connected through digital platforms and tools that enable communicating with the customers (A4 & A8).

Holliman & Rowley (2014) study concluded, that educational content that is well created, can be aimed at retaining customers. Similarly, the importance of adding value through sharing informative and educative content was emphasized as a must (A1 & A2) and companies benefit from sharing personal skills (A3). All respondents considered this kind of
content to be shared through different platforms such as YouTube, LinkedIn and Instagram (A1, A4), as well as blogs and emails (A1-A8).

Moreover, Bates (2012) argued how email marketing is an effective way that businesses use to promote online by sending emails to current or potential customers. Whereas the respondents regarded, how emails can be effective, but the content should include very high-quality content, instead of creating solely sales oriented newsletters (A3).

Because of digitalization, business customers have shifted into wanting to see real and more personal view of their business partners, which also increases trust. Therefore, it is important to show who is behind the created content and the company must present itself from within as it is (A1) and be transparent (A3).

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the usage of digital marketing strategies and tools, when B2B start-up companies acquire and maintain business relationships. This study further examined the essential components for acquiring and maintaining business customers, the digital marketing strategies that are applicable in start-ups, as well as the channels and tools that were the most useful in start-ups.

This study found that start-up companies do not consider digital marketing as the main tool for acquiring customers and maintaining customers, however it has a large impact on business relationships and it is important for the start-up to be present in online digital environment. The best digital marketing strategy is to market the start-up indirectly through sharing informative and educational content through different channels and platforms, aimed at micro- and sub- target groups. The most beneficial form of content for start-ups, are blogs, articles and videos, especially when shared on industry specific platforms. As the usage of digital marketing has evolved, the cost-effectiveness has also changed to less due to paid content and the high number of companies’ presence in the online environment. This in turn leads start-up companies to not be able utilize general platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn as cost-effectively, whereas on industry specific platforms start-ups achieve a wider reach.
As start-ups often have limited resources, the digital marketing strategies should include the whole company in to the digital marketing activities. Internal coherence and participation within the company, will enforce the benefits of digital marketing when reaching to customers. Therefore, employees presence in industry specific platforms is important, to attract customers through presenting the knowledge and skills within the company.

When maintaining the customers, the digital marketing enables to connect with the customers through different tools and platforms. Additionally, creating content that is educational and informative, will add value to the customers. Moreover, this type of content can also generate new leads and expand the startups network, and thus help in acquiring customers as well.

To answer the research questions:

- RQ1: How digital marketing contributes to acquiring business customers in B2B start-up context?
- RQ2: How digital marketing contributes to maintaining business customers in B2B start-up context?

The benefit of utilizing digital marketing is to show the company, employees, knowledge and skills within the start-up company, which in B2B context attracts and retains the customers who desire valuable and genuine content. The importance of digital marketing was shown as more extensive when acquiring customers, as the digital marketing can create an image of the company based on the shared content as well as generate leads to business relationships.

While digital marketing showed importance in maintaining business relationships, the main contribution of it is in having a presence in the business customers’ online platforms, to create a share of mind and provide valuable knowledge through the companies’ expertise.

### 7.1 Limitations

The study is largely based on secondary data, consisting of several different studies from different years, with limited amount of studies about start-ups. Therefore, the analysis of primary and secondary data, can affect the generalization of the results.
Moreover, the primary data was based on start-up companies in Sweden, which can therefore provide different findings than findings from another country would. Additionally, the respondents of the start-ups were within different industries, which although gave diversity to the study, could possibly affect to the generalization of the study.

### 7.2 Managerial Implications

This study further suggests managerial implications based on the findings, which start-up companies may utilize. This study provides B2B start-ups the understanding of how important digital marketing is for businesses, and more specifically, how it can affect the business relationships. Moreover, this study will give B2B start-ups an idea how to integrate digital marketing into the business practices, which strategies are possible for start-ups to follow and implement. Essentially, this study presents what type of platforms should be utilized, which audiences to target audiences and what type of content should be created.

As the findings show the importance of digital marketing in B2B relationships, start-up companies are suggested to utilize it in their businesses as well. Therefore, the managerial implications first address how the digital marketing practices can be differentiated depending on whether it is aimed for new or existing customers. This requires a strategy that is threefold. Firstly, the created strategy should include the company as a whole, and engage the employees with the activities as well as encourage on showing their expertise. Secondly, the strategy should include the selection of the target audience and the platforms. As the resources are limited it is essential for start-ups, to choose the right platform, where the reach wide and it is easy to create impressions. Thirdly, the content should share and demonstrate the knowledge and skills of the company, as it indirectly markets the capabilities of the company e.g. employees. Therefore, the company as a whole should be actively participate in the digital marketing activities, to fully advantage of digital marketing when acquiring and maintaining business relationships.
Furthermore, based on these findings, the B2B start-up companies can decide whether the suggested strategies fit the company’s overall image and goals, as well as whether the resources should be allocated towards digital marketing.

### 7.3 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to extending the knowledge about how digital marketing strategies and tools are connected to acquiring and maintaining business relationships. The topic of digital marketing in B2B context is widely researched, whereas its relation on business relationships is rather limited. Furthermore, amount of researches on digital marketing usage in B2B start-ups context, is low. Therefore, there is no clear framework developed on the topic within the existing studies. This study aligns with previous studies, which have expressed the importance of digital marketing in B2B companies and how it affects business relationships. However, the cost-effectiveness of digital marketing, especially through social media, which has been argued in previous studies, is not fully supported by the findings of this study.

This paper aims to contribute further to the research field within the topic, by disclosing the importance of start-up companies presence in the online environment, and a how different platforms and content can affect the relationships with business customers. More specifically, focusing on the acquirement and maintaining aspect of business relationships, will provide insight and valuable knowledge on the existing studies about B2B start-ups and the challenges the companies experience.

### 7.4 Further Research

Although, digital marketing in B2B context has become widely researched, there is still unexplored areas within the topic that could be examined. Digital marketing can also be beneficial topic of study especially for start-ups, that may not otherwise have the resources to investigate the possibilities of digital marketing on its own. Therefore, it would be
interesting, to research the topic further with the aim of providing valuable insights to start-ups in B2B industry. The further studies could be conducted with larger sample, to achieve better generalization of the findings.

Furthermore, this study highlighted the importance of industry specific platforms and the type of content, and therefore this study suggests for the further research to investigate the benefits of industrial specific platforms. Further studies could further examine what kind of industries and companies are applicable to utilize these type of platforms, what kind of content should be created to further enforce the companies’ presence, and what type of audience is mostly influenced. It would be interesting to reveal, if industry specific platforms are becoming the main B2B digital channel for companies in the future, as Facebook and Instagram became in B2C sector.
References


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Appendix 1

An Overview of the Interview Questions

The following interview guide formed a foundation for the conducted interviews of this study. The questions were divided into themes, based on the discussed theories in the 2.0 Theoretical Framework section. Due to the semi-structured approach of this study, the questions were to guide the interviews and the subject of the discussion. Also, additional follow-up questions were presented to the respondents whenever they were considered as needed.

General Questions

- What is your the company specialized in? Sector/activity?
- How long has the company been established for?
- How many employees are there in the company?
- What is company’s target market?
- In which sectors are the customers operating in?
- What is your occupation or role in the company?

Semi-Structured Questions:

Business Relationships

- What type of business relationships do you have? Short-term/long-term?
- What kind of business relationship is the most beneficial for the company?
- What factors are considered the most essential in acquiring customers? (loyalty, customers satisfaction etc.)
- What factors are considered the most essential in maintaining the business customers? How are the business customers retained in your company?
- How important do you consider the business relationships to be for start-ups? If so, why are they important?
What strategies are used to acquire business customers? How did you attract the business customers?

**Digital Marketing**

- What is the role of digital marketing in business relationships? How does digital marketing attract business customers?
- Could you elaborate inbound versus outbound marketing (push/pull) benefits and challenges? How do these techniques work in B2B context?
- Is there digital marketing strategies your company uses? (e.g. Inbound marketing, social media marketing, content marketing)
- What benefits and challenges have you faced in digital marketing?
- Which digital media channels are used for digital marketing in your company?
- Which have been used since the start? (Websites, online ads, social network sites etc.) How they have changed?
- Can you specify which channels reach out the best to business customers?
- What digital media channels have you found least useful for attracting business customers? Which are most and least useful for maintaining business customers?
- Which digital platforms are currently used for your company? (LinkedIn, Facebook etc.) Which platforms are most applicable for start-up companies?
- What is the role of these platforms? (Exposure, reach, networking etc.) How well do these platforms attract customers?
- How are these platforms utilized to interact and engage with the customers?
- Which digital marketing tools are used in your company? (emails, newsletters, SEO) What are these tools aimed for?
- Which tools are most applicable for start-up companies?
- What content do you create and where is it presented? (Platforms, channels etc.)
- What kind of content engages the business customers? How do you believe you could improve the content, in order to engage more business customers?
- Which are the critical factors of digital marketing effectiveness on acquiring and retaining business customers?
- Do they work for any B2B company or only for companies in specific industry?
- How is the effectiveness of digital marketing, including the platforms and tools, measured? Is there monthly reports or statistics used to measure the effectiveness?
- Do you have internal capabilities to practice digital marketing or is it outsourced?

What are the plans for the future digital marketing in your company, how do you see it evolving? What are the plans for the future in developing the customer base?