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Developing a b-to-b marketing communications plan in the solar energy sector: a case study of Company X

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Developing a b-to-b marketing communications plan in the solar energy sector: a case study of Company X

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It is often difficult for companies to differentiate from their competitors since the distinctions between products and services are small. Successful companies create a competitive advantage through their communications. Smaller companies, in particular, often implement communications without effective planning. In order to utilise communications as part of their competitiveness, companies should plan and execute comprehensive communications as with any other business operations.

The purpose of the study is to plan efficient marketing communications for the case company in business-to-business (b-to-b) markets. Company X is a Finnish start-up company, which aims to provide sustainable energy solutions by designing solar panels and solar energy systems. Their current marketing communications are not consistent, and the methods used are based on instincts rather than an effectively planned strategy.

The objective of the study is to define the most effective marketing communications methods for the case company to use in Finland. The purpose of the research is to consider realistic communications methods for the case company in order to improve the company image and increase awareness in the minds of their interest groups. An additional purpose is to investigate potential target groups and their buying behaviour in b-to-b markets, and to select the most suitable groups for the marketing communications planning.

The theoretical background of the study concentrates on b-to-b markets, b-to-b marketing communications, different marketing communications methods, and marketing communications planning. The empirical study examines the operational environment of the case company, target group segmentation, and a SWOT-analysis.

The research was conducted using qualitative research methods. The research data was partly obtained through semi-structured interviews and partly through an action research. The objective of the semi-structured interviews was to survey experiences and perceptions concerning marketing communications in b-to-b markets. The action research enabled the researcher to be in close collaboration with the case company and to be a part of the practical problem solving during the process.

The outcome of the thesis is a preliminary marketing communications plan for the case company. The research concluded that a well planned and executed marketing communications strategy would enable a more comprehensive and consistent marketing communications effort.

Key words business-to-business markets, marketing communications methods, marketing communications planning

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Yritysten on usein hankala erottautua kilpailijoistaan, koska erot markkinoilla olevien tuotteiden ja palveluiden välillä ovat pieniä. Menestyneet yritykset ovat usein pystyneet parantamaan kilpailukykyään viestintäratkaisulla. Erityisesti pienten yritysten ongelmana on viestinnän toteuttaminen ilman tehokasta suunnittelua. Jotta pystyttäisiin kasvattamaan kilpailukykyä viestinnän avulla, tulisi sen suunnittelun ja toteutuksen olla kokonaisvaltaista ja osa yrityksen muita toimintoja.

Tämän työn tarkoituksena on suunnitella tehokas markkinointiviestintä kohdeyritykselle b-to-b markkinoilla. Yritys X on suomalainen start-up yritys, joka keskittyy aurinkopaneelien ja aurinkoenergiaratkaisujen tarjoamiseen. Tämän hetkinen markkinointiviestintä kohdeyrityksessä ei ole yhtenäistä ja eri keinojen käyttö perustuu henkilöstön omiin tottumuksiin.

Opinnäytetyön tavoitteena on määritellä tehokkaimmat markkinointiviestintäkeinot kohdeyritykselle, jotta he pystyvät saavuttamaan valitut kohderyhmät Suomen markkinoilla. Työn tarkoituksena on pohtia kohdeyrityksen kannalta realistisia markkinointiviestinnän keinoja. Yritys X haluaa markkinointiviestinnällään luoda selkeän yrityskuvan ja kasvattaa tunnettua sidosryhmiensä sisällä. Lisäksi työn tarkoituksena on tutkia mahdollisia kohderyhmiä ja heidän ostokäyttäytymistään b-to-b markkinoilla. Tällä hetkellä kohdeyritykselle suotuisimmat kohderyhmät on valittu markkinointiviestinnän suunnitteluun.

Tutkimus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisena tutkimuksena, jossa menetelmänä käytettiin teemahaastattelua. Tutkimus toteutettiin osittain toimintatutkimuksena, koska työn kirjoittajalla oli mahdollisuus tiiviiseen yhteistyöhön kohdeyrityksen kanssa. Kirjoittaja oli tiiviissä yhteistyössä yrityksen edustajan kanssa koko tutkimusprosessin ajan ja pystyi näin analysoimaan hyvin yrityksen tilannetta. Teemahaastattelun tarkoituksena oli tarkastella haastateltavien kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä markkinointiviestinnästä b-to-b markkinoilla.

Työn tuloksena kirjoittaja laati alustavan markkinointiviestintäsuunnitelman kohdeyritykselle. Tutkimuksen perusteella voidaan todeta, että hyvin suunniteltu ja toteutettu markkinointiviestintä parantaisi kohdeyrityksen nykyistä viestintää kohti yhtenäistä ja kokonaisvaltaista markkinointiviestintästrategiaa. Monipuolinen pohjustusviestintäkeinojen käyttö on avain tunnettuuden lisäämiseen ja yrityskuvan rakentamiseen.

Asiasanat b-to-b markkinat, markkinointiviestinnän keinot, markkinointiviestinnän suunnittelu

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1 Introduction

The operational environment of companies is changing continuously; competition is high, customers' needs change, and customers are asking for more and more. Nowadays, it is difficult to develop competitive advantage because the differences between products and services are small. The significance of networks is increasing. There is one issue that connects successful companies: building competitiveness with the help of communication. Effective communications is one way of building intangible capital. Communications is a unique way of building competitiveness, because it is hard to copy. (Isohookana 2007, 10.)

It is essential to have control over the images and messages companies send out. Companies should consider the kind of communications they want to implement, so that they will create images that are not accidental and uncontrolled. (Vuokko 2003, 11.) In order to have communication as part of competitiveness, companies should manage, plan, execute, and follow-up their comprehensive communications like any other business operations. Communication is a tool for companies to improve the company image and increase awareness in the minds of their interest groups. (Isohookana 2007, 10-11.)

Especially small companies might not have control over the images potential customers create when they interact. They might not realise that the behaviour of personnel or the company webpages has a certain influence on the receiver. Communications is often based on instincts and implemented without effective planning. Nowadays, the emphasis in communication is in digital methods, and therefore, personal communication has an essential role. Most of the messages are digital, and it is hard to stand out. Every company should realise that effectively planned marketing communications pay off, and is a key to success.

This section is the introduction to the study. The section includes the scope and purpose of the research, the research problem, and the structure of the research.

1.1 Scope of the study

In modern business-to-business (b-to-b) markets, developing marketing communications has become one of the key factors. Especially if a company is small and unknown in the market, it is essential to build a company image and increase awareness in the minds of their interest groups.

The topic of the thesis is to plan effective marketing communications for the case company in b-to-b markets. Company X is a Finnish start-up company, which aims to provide sustainable energy solutions by designing solar panels and solar energy systems. They now concentrate on

taking root in the Finnish market, and strive to achieve strong customer references in order to create an image of a trustworthy partner. Since the case company is in the development stage, they have decided that the company's name is not published in this thesis.

The theoretical framework of the thesis consists of the following themes: b-to-b markets, b-to-b marketing communications, different marketing communications methods, and marketing communications planning.

The present state of the company and current marketing communications were investigated during the research process. The outcome of the thesis is a preliminary marketing communications plan for the case company. The plan will be a tool for the case company, eventually, to execute the plan. Moreover, the conclusions and recommendations were made at the end of the process.

There are some delimitations for the research. The theoretical framework is delimited to b-to-b marketing communications, and the emphasis is on the groundwork and sales communications. The selection of methods in the theoretical background is based on the objectives of the case company. The research approach is delimited to consider only solar panels, not other products and services. In addition, the case company wanted to exclude budget from the marketing communications plan.

1.2 Purpose of the study

The objective of the thesis is to define the most effective marketing communications methods for the case company in order to approach the selected target groups in Finland. The purpose is to investigate the potential target groups in b-to-b markets, and select the most suitable ones for the marketing communication planning. An additional purpose is to consider realistic communications methods for the case company, and the ways of utilising those methods in order to improve the company image and increase awareness in the minds of their interest groups.

The company hired a new marketing and sales manager for the Finnish market, and the outcome of the thesis will be a tool for her to reach the potential customers in the selected target groups. In the future, the objective is to reach the potential customers, such as building companies and developers, in the Finnish market.

Company X does not have planned marketing communications, and currently the different communications efforts in the company are fragmented. The case company has a need for planned and consistent marketing communications, in order to form a practical unity.

The case company requested for new and innovative ideas regarding their marketing communications. The company wanted help with acquiring new customers, and building a company image among the potential customers. The outcome of the thesis should be a preliminary plan that can be developed and eventually executed. Planned marketing communications is an opportunity for the case company, because the current marketing communications is only based on instincts rather than an effectively planned strategy.

1.3 The research problem

The research problem of the thesis is "which communications methods would be the most efficient for the selected target groups?" The thesis also strives to answer sub questions, such as "who makes the buying decision in the buyer organisation?", "which communications methods are the most efficient from a groundwork communications and new customer acquisition perspective?", "what kind of messages would the organisations find the most attractive?", and "when is the best time of the year to implement groundwork / sales communications?".

The research is conducted using qualitative research methods. The research data is partly obtained through semi-structured interviews and partly through an action research.

Action research was chosen, since the writer had the possibility to be in close collaboration with the case company. During the research process, the researcher has been able to be part of practical problem solving, and it has enabled the access to inside information. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to survey experiences and perceptions concerning marketing communications in b-to-b markets.

1.4 Structure of the study

The research consists of five main sections. The introduction of the thesis describes the scope and purpose of the study, as well as the research problem and research approach. The theoretical background is a generalised framework of b-to-b markets, marketing communications methods, and marketing communications plan.

The research approach consists of an introduction to different research methods, a description of methods used in the research, and the methodology of the study. There is also discussion of the reliability and validity of the research.

The empirical study of the research consists of an introduction of the case company, SWOT analysis, target group segmentation, and research results. In addition, the outcome of the study, the marketing communications plan, is presented at the end of this section. Finally, there are conclusions and recommendations at the end of the study.

The structure of the thesis is demonstrated in Figure 1. The structure of the study presents the entire thesis process.



Figure 1: Structure of the study

2 Theoretical background

In research, new information is built upon existing theory. In a literature review, theory and concepts used in the research are discussed as a theoretical framework. There is an interaction between the theoretical framework and empirical study, since the theoretical framework is the primary perspective to study the research data. Theory and empirical study together help one solve the set research problem. Theory is utilised in different stages of the study, so that the consistency of the research is ensured. (Vilkkä 2005, 24-27.)

In this study, the theoretical framework consists of the following themes: business-to-business markets, business-to-business marketing communications and methods, and marketing communications planning. In the end of this section, the theoretical framework is illustrated as a figure.

2.1 Business-to-business markets

B-to-b marketing differs from the business-to-consumer (b-to-c) marketing. In a b-to-b market, the buyer is another company or organisation, not a consumer. On the other hand, it is important to remember that the same consumers that make the buying decisions on their leisure time work in those organisations and may influence the organisational buying decision. However, the differences between b-to-b and b-to-c markets are mainly in the buying process. B-to-b markets are not visible for a regular consumer, but essential part of the cash flow in the market is from b-to-b business. (Isohookana 2007, 81.)

An organisational buying process is not unlike a consumer buying process. Theoretically, the stages of an organisational process are thought to be clearly defined and more visible. When an organisation makes a buying decision, they must think of the most rational, low-cost, and profitable opportunities. Therefore, the price of a product or service is not the only element, but only a part of the delivered value. Organisational buying requires inputs from many stakeholders. Decision makers at many levels influence the buying decision. There is rarely only one individual responsible for the whole decision. (Vitale & Giglierano 2002, 61.)

There are several characteristics in b-to-b markets that differ fundamentally from the consumer markets. As mentioned before, the major differences are in the buying process. In b-to-b markets, there are fewer buyers, and the buying process is more professional and systematic. All purchases are strictly budgeted beforehand and then followed-up. Several phone calls, meetings, and negotiations are required before the buying decision, which is justified with rational arguments. Since there are many stages in the buying process, there are also many parties affecting the buying decision through the whole process. (Isohookana 2007, 81-82.)

When planning marketing and marketing communications for the target groups, it is vital to take into consideration all the parties that affect organisational buying decisions. The role of networking and different interest groups is emphasised in the companies' buying decisions. The buying process in b-to-b markets depends on many issues, for instance on industries and products or services. Therefore, the level of required information also varies. (Isohookana 2007, 82-83.)

American Marketing association (2012) defines organisational marketing as "marketing of goods and services to industrial markets", namely business markets. According to Vitale and Giglierano (202, 5) b-to-b marketing is "the process of matching and combining the capabilities of the supplier with the desired outcomes of the customer to create value for the

“customer’s customer” and, hence, for both organisations”. When planning organisational marketing communications, companies should bear in mind those definitions.

2.1.1 Organisational buying behaviour

There are many factors both inside and outside of the organisation that influence the organisational buyer (Hutt & Speh 2010, 65). Understanding organisational buying behaviour provides the marketer a base for successful marketing strategies. When the marketer understands the b-to-b buying process, he or she is able to identify cost-effective market segments, reach organisational buyers, and respond effectively to their needs. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 65-66.)

Hutt and Speh (2010, 65) emphasise that “organisational buying behaviour is a process, not an isolated act or event”. Organisational buying process traditionally involves eight stages, which are:

1. Problem recognition
2. General description of need
3. Product specification
4. Supplier search
5. Acquisition and analysis of proposals
6. Supplier selection
7. Selection of order routine
8. Performance review

(Hutt & Speh 2010, 65.)

The first stage in the buying process begins when someone in the company recognises a problem that may be solved with a specific product. The problem may also be an opportunity that is not yet utilised or a business activity that could be improved by the product. The problem may be recognised by the stakeholders from inside or outside the organisation. After the problem has been recognised, the company must define the needs for a product, and critically describe and develop them to a precise description. For instance, a company might need new packaging equipment to support their product launch. After they have defined the need, managers in the company should describe the specific features needed in the new packaging system. In this case, production managers should work with the purchasing manager to define the specific needs. The purchasing manager might not know all the features needed, and they need to work together to find a suitable packaging system. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 65-66.)

When the company has identified the product that meets their requirements, they need to find out all the alternative suppliers for the product. From a marketing point of view, this means that a company must be known within the buyers, in order to be seen as one of the potential suppliers. If the company is well known in the market and has a good reputation, it is more likely that other organisations see it as a strong supplier. Companies need to invest time and energy in the supplier search, especially if the proposed product is strongly connected to their organisational performance. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 66; Rope 2004, 22.)

The next stage is to acquire and analyse the proposals they have got from the potential suppliers. Especially if the information needs for the product are high, it is important to involve people from different organisational levels, such as purchasing manager and members of production department, when analysing the proposals. Traditionally, a company has negotiations with two most suitable suppliers and after that the decision is made. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 66.)

In the selection process, the company looks for a solution that is best for their needs. They need to select the most suitable supplier and order routine. Even in organisational buying it is important to remember that the company is not making the buying decision, but people in the company are. People working in the organisation have their own personal preferences, which affect the decision of suppliers. (Rope 2004, 23.)

The final step of the purchasing process is a performance review. From the marketers' point of view, it is critical that customers' needs have been fully satisfied. If the product fails to meet the customer needs, it may be difficult for the marketer to keep the new customer. If the buyer organisation is not satisfied with the product, they will look for a new supplier. (Hutt & Speh, 66.) In a performance review, the company estimates how good the product is compared to their expectations. Therefore, an essential part of marketing is to ensure the positive impact of the product experience. A positive attitude towards the product affects the image of the supplier organisation and eventually has an effect on the possibility to bring about additional sales with the same customer. (Rope 2004, 24.)

The stages of the buying behaviour model may vary depending on the organisations involved, the type of industry, and complexity of the purchasing situation. For instance, organisations in routine buying processes may leave behind some stages. The buying process may also change due to changes in the external environment. For example, changes in economic or competitive conditions may lead to alternative options in the buying process. However, these eight stages provide a good overall understanding of organisational buying process. (Hutt & Speh, 66.)

In b-to-b markets, individualistic marketing and networking are essential courses of action. In many cases, the products and additional services are tailored according to the customer need. Since the buyers in the organisations are professionals, the marketer should master different negotiation tactics and methods. In smaller organisations, there are not always a separate purchase department or a purchasing manager, and also the experience in the buying process might be low. The marketer should perceive the buying behaviour in each case, so that the customer is provided with the most suitable solution. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 127.)

Marketing communication has an important role when an organisation is making a buying decision. A good marketer is familiar with the buying process and knows the information to offer in every step of the process. There are some important elements that have an influence on the decision-making process. The supplier must be trustworthy, and provide a suitable price level and terms of business for the customer. If the supplier is familiar, competent customer service is an important factor and has an influence on the decision. Other important factors in the b-to-b buying process are the availability of the product, airtight deliveries, and the product offering as a whole. If the company considers a new supplier, they will gather information from associates, get familiar with the webpages, and contact the possible supplier. On the other hand, if the company is familiar with the supplier, they estimate how well the supplier has dealt with the customer relationship. Therefore, marketing communication should be planned so that it will offer the right information in right places at right times. (Isohookana 2007, 83.)

2.1.2 Market segmentation

Key factors for operational decision-making are choosing, defining, and describing the customer target groups carefully. Target group segmentation is a base for the realisation of other marketing related decisions. The realisation of thorough segmentation and successful decision is a prerequisite for all the other marketing solutions. In b-to-b market organisational buying, the buying process, and the number of customers substantially affect the realisation of segmentation. (Rope 2004, 56.)

Fill (2009, 291) defines market segmentation as "a division of a mass market into identifiable and distinct groups or segments, each of which has common characteristics, needs and display similar responses to marketing actions". After selecting the target segments, a company develops their marketing to meet the needs of potential customers within the segments. (Fill 2009, 291.)

The objective of segmentation is to find and select the target groups that are suitable for the company's resources and enables the best commercial results. A company's supply and marketing are directed for those target groups, namely segments. The market segmentation is based on the idea that a company should not deal with the heterogeneous market as a whole, but to find sub-markets that are smaller and relatively homogeneous. Moreover, those homogeneous groups are more favourable for a company's marketing operations. When a company targets their actions at the selected target groups, they generally achieve better results than by striving to serve all the potential customers. (Rope 2004, 57.)

The identification of segments is an opportunity for a small company with limited resources. As Beane and Ennis (1987) indicates, "a company with limited resources needs to pick only the best opportunities to pursue".

The starting point for market segmentation is always a customer-oriented focus. It is vital for a company to take into account target groups' expectations and hopes, in order to adapt their marketing and product offering to their customers' needs. When a company is familiar with the target groups, it is easy to adapt their product offering and marketing in order to reach different groups. Successful segmentation is especially important in b-to-b markets, because of the limited number of potential customers. (Rope 2004, 58.) However, marketers have a major challenge when trying to identify customer needs. Occasionally it is hard to develop b-to-b market segments, since it is not easy to identify the actual company needs and preferences. (Powers and Sterling 2008.) Powers and Sterling (2008) emphasise "that is not only the identification of customer needs, but also serving and building the value for each customer segment".

Segmentation is successful when it has been realised effectively. There are some prerequisites of segmentation that should be taken into account before identifying the segments. (Rope 2004, 58-60.) In a market segment, potential customers have common characteristics, which define their preferences and how they will act on various marketing activities. The marketer needs to decide which characteristics best define one market segment. The success of market segmentation depends how well a company manages to identify groups of customers. The groups need to be unique enough to justify a different market strategy. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 125.) As Hutt & Speh (2010, 125) emphasise, "the ultimate goal is to have the greatest amount of difference between segments and high similarities within them".

The concept of market segmentation is in a central role when planning a target market strategy. In b-to-b markets, marketers too often use the trade sectors or product groups in the basis of market segmentation. Marketers should utilise more the customers'

characteristics and buying behaviour, and implement the genuine market segmentation. (Simkin 2008.)

There are four criteria for evaluating the market segments. Firstly, it is important to concentrate on the substantiality of a segment. A segment needs to be sufficiently large to justify the time and resources spent on marketing. A segment is normally profitable if the differences between the buying criteria are notable in different segments and there is enough buying potential in each segment. Secondly, a segment should be measurable, which means that the characteristics of the potential customers should be easily defined and classified. In a b-to-b market, it is relatively easy to implement segmentation, because organisations can be classified by their industry, size, and location. However, when the segmentation is extended into the company's personnel, the classification into segments is more difficult to make. Thirdly, it is vital to emphasise the accessibility of a segment. Companies need to be able to focus marketing efforts on certain segments and communicate the correct information to each segment. Therefore, the segments should be clearly separated. (Rope 2004, 58-60.) The fourth criterion is responsiveness, which means that marketers need to find out how the different segments respond to different marketing mix elements, such as pricing and promotion. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 125.)

There are some additional benefits for the company if the marketer has invested enough time in market segmentation and has managed to achieve the set goals. The more time a marketer has spent on market segmentation, the more knowledge the firm has on the needs of customer segments. Moreover, when the needs of particular market segments are known, it helps the marketer in other business operations, such as developing profitable pricing strategies, selecting appropriate channels of distribution, and training the sales force. Finally, properly identified market segments guide the marketer to allocate their marketing resources effectively. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 125-126.)

There are three different market segmentation strategies that a company can choose when planning their marketing: undifferentiated marketing, selective marketing, and concentration marketing (see Figure 2). (Rope 2004, 60.)

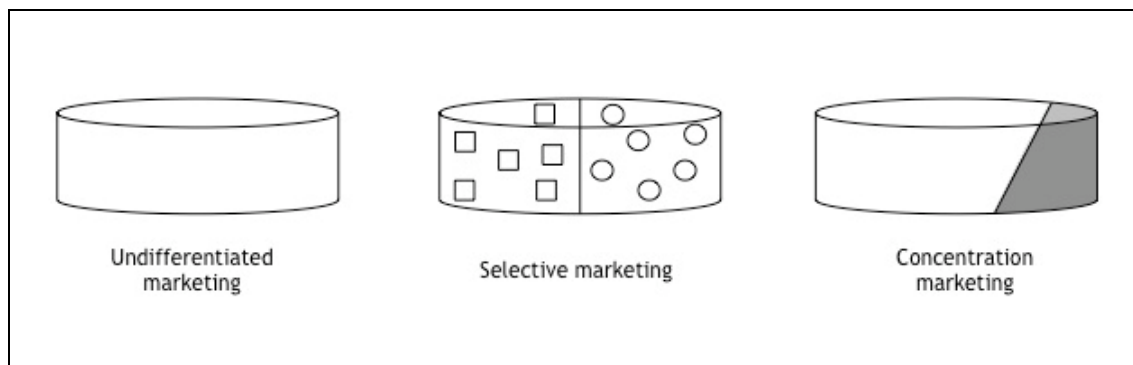


Figure 2: Market segmentation strategies (Rope 2004, 60)

Selecting a market segmentation strategy is a critical decision, which will give a direction to the marketing strategy and the marketing communications strategy. There are several issues that should be surveyed before selecting one of the three strategies: a company's resources, homogeneity of products and the market, product's life cycle, competitor's strategies, and the size of the market. Furthermore, marketers need to estimate the scale of sales they expect to achieve. When marketers know all the factors that affect the segmentation strategy, they are able to choose a strategy that supports other business operations. (Rope 2004, 60-65.)

Undifferentiated marketing means that the company is concentrating on the market as a whole. A product and its marketing are planned so that they appeal to a majority of potential customers. Therefore, marketing concentrates on the most common customer needs, less popular needs are ignored. Undifferentiated marketing is especially used for a good that is not easily differentiated from the competitors' products. However, the company must have enough resources to cover the whole market. In a b-to-b market, this strategy is not a viable option, because of the limited size of the market and segmentation strategies of competitors. Therefore, the company with undifferentiated marketing does not have a competitive advantage in any of the segments. (Rope 2004, 63-65.)

Selective marketing means that a company operates in all the segments, but has customised marketing strategies for each segment. Furthermore, they strive to meet customer needs in each segment. The objective is to achieve a steady position in each market segment. This strategy requires a great deal of resources; hence it is a common strategy for big companies. (Rope 2004, 63-65.)

Concentration marketing means that a company selects one or two segments, in which they will concentrate all their business operations. If a company selects this strategy, they need to gather a good knowledge of customer needs in the segment. By doing this, the company can

achieve a steady market position in the segment. For instance, subcontractors use concentration marketing because they are conventionally specialised in one product component and have limited resources. A benefit of this strategy is that the company can specialise in production, delivery and promotion, and they can use their resources effectively. Concentration marketing is a good strategy for companies with limited resources; however, it is important to implement the segmentation strategy carefully and concentrate on the most favourable segment. It has to be taken into consideration that this strategy can be risky; increasing competition in the selected segment can affect the situation significantly. Despite these risks, concentration marketing is still the most common strategy in b-to-b markets. (Rope 2004, 63-65.)

After companies have chosen the segmentation strategy, in other words decided how many segments to target, they will decide which segments are the most attractive to their strategy. When evaluating segments, companies need to take into consideration four elements: size and growth of segments, structural attractiveness of segments, objectives and budgets of the company, and stability of market segments. For small companies, it may be realistic to target smaller or less attractive niche segments, especially if the competition is strong in the large segments. (Pelsmacker, Geuens & Van den Bergh 2004, 109 & 110.)

2.2 Business-to-business marketing communications

Comprehensive communications consists of internal, marketing, and corporate communications. A company must perceive all the different directions in their communications and build a practical interdependency. Furthermore, all the three communication directions should have one voice and build a comprehensive framework for the company's communications. (Isohookana 2007, 15.)

Marketing communications is one of the four elements of the marketing mix (often referred to four 'P's), which consists of product, price, place, and promotion. (Isohookana 2007, 48.) All the four elements in the marketing mix support each other. The role of promotion, namely marketing communications, is to inform all the interest groups about the three other elements. The mission of marketing communications is to promote the product, product's price and where to buy it. However, marketing communication is not the only element that communicates the features of products to all the interest groups. For instance, the price of a product communicates the product's quality. (Vuokko 2003, 24.)

Marketing communications is an umbrella for all those communications methods that help a company to inform their customer target groups and other target groups about their products and operations. The assortment of methods that a company has chosen to use in their

communication is called a marketing communications mix. A company's marketing communications mix includes all the methods they use to achieve the communicative objectives. (Rope 2005, 277.)

Karjaluoto (2010, 194) argues that most of the marketing communications activities occur between companies. However, the literature in general concentrates on b-to-c marketing communications. This is because b-to-c marketing communications traditionally covers advertising, which is not in an essential role in b-to-b marketing communications. Generally speaking, in b-to-b marketing the communications methods are different compared to the ones used in consumer marketing communications. (Karjaluoto 2010, 194.)

Karjaluoto (2010, 194) claims that the focus in b-to-b marketing communications is on personal selling, trade fairs and exhibitions, and public relations. Bergström and Leppänen (2003, 274) on the other hand argue that accurately targeted direct mail and personal selling are commonly used in b-to-b marketing communications. They also emphasise that sales promotion is in an important role. However, Rope (2004, 17) has a different approach to b-to-b marketing communications, and it will be discussed later more in detail.

Pelsmacker et al. (2004, 520) summarise the distinct characteristics of b-to-b communications. They indicate that personal communication methods are commonly used, and play an important role in marketing communications. Not only personal selling but also trade fairs are considered personal communications. B-to-b marketing communications is not only personal but also individualised communications. Therefore, direct mail can also be added to the group of b-to-b communication methods. As mentioned before, in b-to-b markets it is important to identify customer needs, but also to offer tailor-made solutions to different segments. Compared to consumer markets, customers in b-to-b markets are more interactive. Especially by direct mail, personal selling and trade shows customers can be approached individually, and they can also respond to the communications. All in all, one of the most important characteristics of b-to-b markets is the complexity of the customers' decision-making process. (Pelsmacker et al. 2004, 520.)

2.2.1 The purpose

The word 'communication' originates from a Latin word 'communis', which means common. The aim of communication is to bring the parties viewpoints closer to each other (see Figure 3). According to Vuokko (2003, 13), the purpose of marketing communication is to create something common between the sender and receiver; a common understanding of the product, company or business practices. Marketing communication strives to give the necessary information to all the interest groups. However, the aim of marketing

communication is not to give all the company related information, but to convey the relevant information when an interest group acts with the company. Therefore, it is important to plan marketing communications properly and define the desired common understanding with each interest group. (Vuokko 2003, 12.)

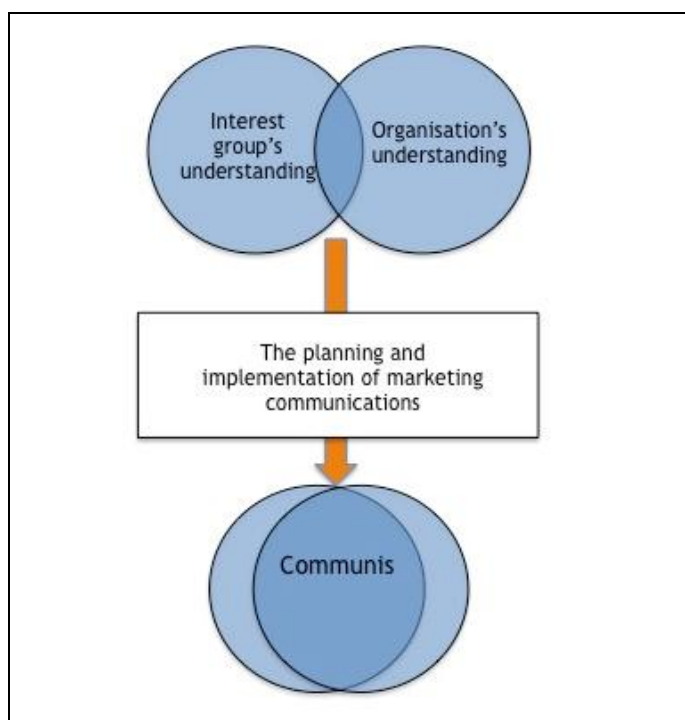


Figure 3: The aim of communications (Vuokko 2003, 13)

When planning a company's marketing communications, it is vital to have knowledge on the target group and their needs. As illustrated in Figure 3, the aim of marketing communications is not only to get target group's understanding closer to organisation's, but also to get organisation's understanding closer to target group's needs. There are situations when the company's and a target group's understandings are far away from each other. If a company expands to a new market, they might have to introduce their products or services to someone who has never heard of the company. Therefore, marketing communication should be implemented to the target group so that the area of common understanding expands. (Vuokko 2003, 13-14.)

Marketing communications is part of marketing: it supports the selling of products or services and the administration of customer relationships (Isohookana 2007, 16). Isohookana (2007, 63) emphasises that the purpose of marketing communication is to communicate with the market, not to the market. The purpose is to affect the market's awareness of the products. Organisations create, maintain and strengthen their customer relationships with marketing

communications, and the aim is to affect the sales of products or services either directly or indirectly. (Isohookana 2007, 62-63.)

Marketing communications can be divided into two different aims: increase awareness and strengthen their customer relationships. Marketing communications is a way to make the company and its product offering visible in the market, and that is why marketing communication has a big role in the creation of an image. A company can create awareness and differentiate themselves from the competitors with well-planned marketing communications. It is vital for a company to create positive attitudes and interest towards the company. If a company manages to activate the potential customers and achieve sales, they can build customer relationships. However, marketing communications should continue to maintain the relationship, once it has been created. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 273.)

When planning marketing communications for a company, one should always take into account the situation, in which the communication is taking place. For instance, if the products are not known by the potential buyers, the company should first inform them about the new product. The aim is to get customers to try the new product as soon as possible. The communication in this phase is called launch communication. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 274.)

2.2.2 The objectives

When making decisions on marketing communications, it is important to determine the reasons to communicate and establish the objectives. Without setting goals, it is not possible to estimate the needed resources, and measure if the set goals were achieved. (Isohookana 2007, 98.)

According to Rope (2005, 279-280) the best way to analyse the objectives of marketing communications is through certain models. The idea of those models is to have a communicational aim in each stage of the process, and get the prospect step by step towards the buying decision and eventually loyalty. The most common models are AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, Action) and DAGMAR (Defining Advertising Goals for Measured Results). In both of the models, the process moves through unawareness and awareness towards a first purchase. (Rope 2005, 279.)

Rope (2005, 279) has applied the AIDA and DAGMAR models and created his own model (see Figure 4), which illustrates how marketing communications affect customers.

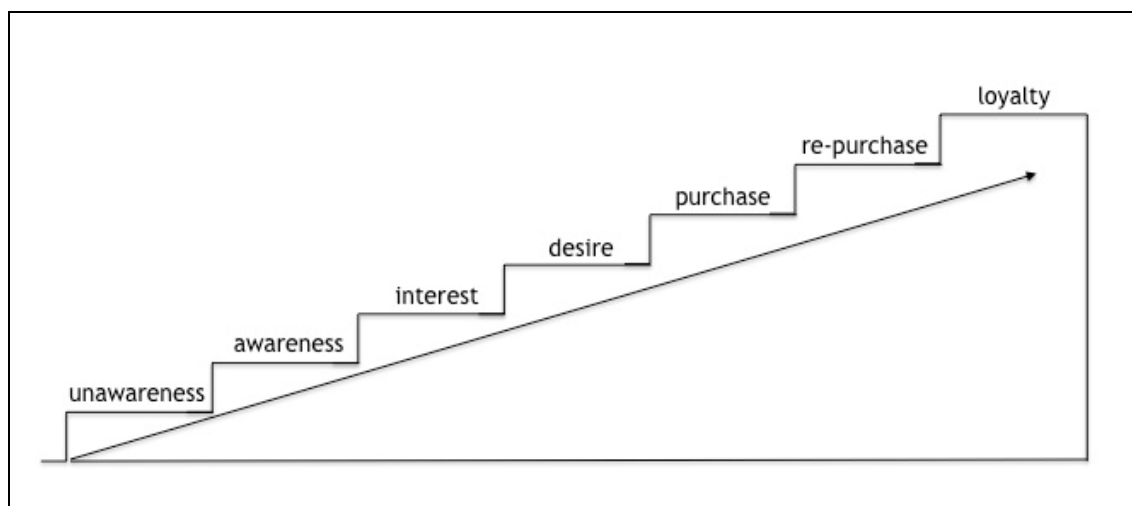


Figure 4: The six steps from unawareness to loyalty (Rope 2005, 280)

As demonstrated in Figure 4, there are six steps from unawareness to loyalty. The first step is to build awareness, where the potential buyer becomes familiar with the product and knows the product or service by its name. The second step is to get the target group interested in the product and find out about some features of the product. After that is the desire stage, in which the target group connects positive images to the product and is seeking to try the product. In order to keep the potential customers interested, companies need to provide enough information. Action begins in the purchase stage, where the aim is to get the potential customers to purchase and try the product. The next stage is to get the customer to purchase repeatedly through satisfaction. The final step is to build a loyal relationship, in which the customer has committed to using the company's products and recommends them with pleasure to other potential customers. (Rope 2005, 280.)

The aim of a marketing communication process is to have a certain influence on the receiver. The prerequisite for communication is the sender's ability to communicate. Before the sender is able to communicate with the receiver, they have to be familiar with the target group. Another requirement is to form and communicate the message so that the target group will receive and assimilate it. (Vuokko 2003, 29.)

2.3 Marketing communications methods

Traditionally, marketing communications is divided into four categories: personal selling, advertising, sales promotion, and public relations (Isohookana 2007, 132). Personal selling and sales promotion focus on selling a company's products. Advertising, on the other hand, strives to inform the customer about the products, create a positive image, and attract potential

customers. With public relations, a company strives to achieve and maintain the understanding and support of important interest groups. (Vuokko 2003, 168 - 278.)

There are many different marketing communications methods under those four categories, and a company determines the suitable marketing communications mix (strategy) depending on their field of business, products, services, and the stage of life cycle. Each method should be carefully considered and justified. It is a challenge to choose a marketing communications combination that will produce the best possible results with the available resources. Furthermore, communications methods and channels for each target group should be carefully chosen, in order to achieve effectively the set goals. (Isohookana 2007, 131 & 132.)

As mentioned above, marketing communications methods are generally grouped into four categories. However, in b-to-b marketing, there are forms of communication that break down such categorisation. Vitale and Giglierano (2002, 419) claim that there are communications methods that do not fit into one single category. Participation in industry trade shows is a good example of a method that fits into all four categories of communication: sales people are communicating with the customers (personal selling), brochures and other marketing material are distributed (advertising), promotional items are handed out (sales promotion), and a company representative may be giving a seminar on the company's vision for the future of the industry (public relations). With all this communication, a company helps the potential customers to go through their buying decision process. (Vitale & Giglierano 2002, 419.)

The marketing communications mix and the emphasis on certain methods depend on the target group, company, field of business, and product. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 274.)

Rope (2004, 141) describes the marketing communications process through the organisational buying process, since it is the counterpart for marketing communications. Marketing communications strives to encourage buying, and different groups of marketing communication methods can be illustrated by the stages of the organisational buying process (see Figure 5). (Rope 2004, 141.)

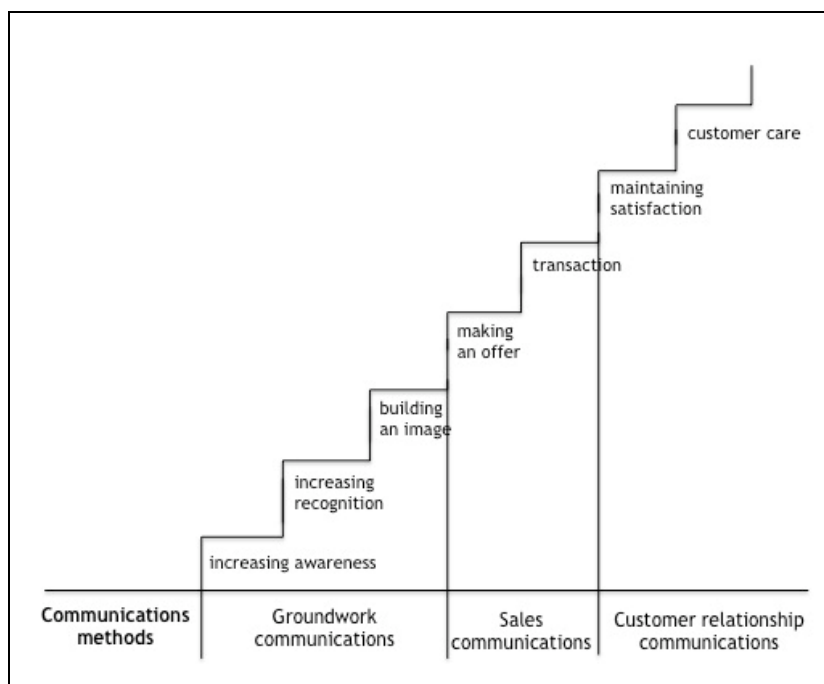


Figure 5: Methods in the organisational buying process

Marketing communication attempts to lead the customer step-by-step from unawareness towards purchase and eventually towards a customer relationship. As illustrated in Figure 4, there are six stages from unawareness to loyalty. Therefore, marketers need to use different marketing communications methods to achieve each step. All the different marketing communication methods should work as a continuous process, which leads the customer towards loyalty. The efficiency of marketing communications depends on the objective-orientation and how successfully the methods are used as a process. (Rope 2004, 141-145.)

According to Rope (2004, 17), b-to-b marketing communications methods are divided into three categories: groundwork communication, sales communication, and customer relationship communication. Groundwork communications includes all the communication methods before purchase. The purpose of groundwork communications is to be a base for the first purchase. For instance, attending trade fairs is one of the groundwork communications methods. Sales communications, on the other hand, includes all the action through which the actual trading is done. An example of a sales communication method is personal sales work. Customer relationship communications is important when a company has gained established customers, and they want to maintain and strengthen the relationships with these customers. (Rope 2004, 147.)

In this research, marketing communication is studied through the structure of a buying process and the methods divided into Rope's (2004, 17) three categories. The focus is on the

b-to-b perspective and especially on the groundwork and sales communications methods. In addition, sales communications methods are discussed in terms of a first purchase.

2.3.1 Groundwork communications

Groundwork communications is all the communication before the actual selling process. The purpose of groundwork communications is to be a base for trading. The key objectives of groundwork communications are structured upon three areas: increasing awareness, building an image, and gaining interest groups' support. As it can be seen in Figure 5, groundwork communications' focus in the organisational buying process is increasing awareness, increasing recognition, and building an image. (Rope 2004, 141 & 147-148.)

Firstly, groundwork communications strives to increase the awareness of a product in the selected target groups. With groundwork communications, companies should give a good and easy base for the selling process. Secondly, companies should build an image of their company or products and strive to communicate this vision to their selected target groups. Thirdly, in order to support their business operations, companies should attract all the key interest groups. These interest groups may be their own personnel, distribution channels, media, or company references. There are several marketing communications methods included in groundwork communications, such as trade fairs, online communications, and interest group communications. (Rope 2004, 147-148.) The groundwork communications methods that are important in relation to this study are introduced as follows.

2.3.1.1 Publicity management

Publicity management, in relation to marketing communications, refer to informing potential customers and other stakeholders of the company's products or services. The target of product and service informing is the customers, distribution channels, partners in cooperation, and other target groups. The objective of publicity management is to inform the stakeholders about new products, product development, changes in the organisation, or other interesting and necessary issues. Companies often communicate directly with their target groups in order to have a stronger influence over the message and timing. However, sometimes journalists and media act as mediators, and then the company has less power over the variables of the message. (Isohookana 2007, 176-177.)

Rope (2004, 148) claims that publicity management is important especially during a product launch. The more coverage for the company or the product during a product launch, the easier it is to achieve awareness in professional markets.

The main objective of informing is to affect the market's awareness of the company and the sales. Informing should have a positive effect on the opinions and attitudes towards the company, and increase the knowledge about the company and its products (Isohookana 2007, 177.) Isohookana (2007, 177) emphasises that publicity management is suitable for all the different stages of customer relationships and supports all the other marketing communication activities.

The informing methods that support marketing is:

- customer magazines and other publications directed to the customers
- press releases and newsletters
- events organised for the customers, such as product launches or company visits
- promotional gifts
- news and articles about products and services
- webpages exhibiting products or services

(Isohookana 2007, 177).

In b-to-b markets, professional magazines often have a crucial role when trying to achieve publicity. There are two options when using professional magazines as marketing communications media: press releases or professional articles. (Rope 2004, 148-150.)

Press releases strive to gain publicity for the company or their products in the media. In practise, press releases are often seen as news. A company prepares the press release so that is almost ready to publish and distributes it to appropriate media. A press release should be directed to a certain journalist. The best journalist in this case would be someone who knows the field of business, and possibly the company, beforehand. Therefore, good relations with the press are an advantage. A press release is always informative, factual, and announces a contact person for further information. (Rope 2004, 148-150.)

Professional articles include the ones written by a company representative or the ones written by a journalist. Especially if a company representative writes a professional article, it is important to remember that it is not an advertisement. Moreover, the content should be interesting in the reader's opinion. Professional articles are about current issues and gain positive publicity for the company. (Rope 2004, 148-150.)

2.3.1.2 Trade fairs

Rope (2004, 150) emphasises that the primary task for trade fairs is to promote and be the base for trading. In other words, a trade fair is primarily not a place for trading. (Rope 2004, 150.) A trade fair is a good communications method for different kinds of organisations and

for various products from consumer goods to services. There are diverse trade fairs that are categorised in terms of levels of localisation and target groups. For instance, trade fairs could be divided into international, national, and local, or into general, specialised, and professional trade fairs. Major trade fairs are normally divided into separate days for professionals and for the public. (Isohookana 2007, 166.)

It is vital that taking part in trade fairs is part of the complete marketing communications plan and has its own objectives. There are different reasons for companies to take part into trade fairs. The objective may be to exhibit new products, create new customer relationships, improve company image, or create contacts with other interest groups. When a company considers their contribution in a trade fair, they should think through several issues:

- type of trade fair: attendance, profile and prices
- do they reach the right target groups by attending?
- what is the role of the trade fair in their marketing communications?
- what are the objectives?
- what are the costs in relation to benefits?

(Isohookana 2007, 166.)

In order to achieve the objectives, companies need to plan all three stages of the trade fair attendance: what activities to run before, during, and after the trade fair. It is recommended to compile a plan with all the actions and schedules, project team, and budget. A trade fair is an event that requires a target-oriented communication plan. For example, companies need to decide which interest groups to invite to their stand and why, who is the person representing the company in the stand, and what is the appropriate material they want to provide to the interest groups. In addition, it is important for the company to reserve enough time to plan the stand in the trade fair and decide the best area to locate it at. (Isohookana 2007, 168.) Rope (2004, 151-152) emphasises that a stand in a trade fair should have a positive event with some activities, such as music and product demonstrations. Therefore, companies need to remember that a brilliant product by itself is not interesting enough to get people to their stand. (Rope 2004, 151-152.)

All the important players in a given market segment are expected to attend industry trade shows. Companies should choose the right trade fairs carefully. Vitale and Giglierano (2002, 440) emphasise that “without visibility at the industry show, it is far more difficult to build awareness among potential customers”.

Rope (2004, 151) claims that the best way to utilise trade fairs is to raise company awareness and get contacts. Instead of merely distributing their own brochures, companies should concentrate on collecting the contact information from the potential customers. (Rope 2004,

151.) After the trade fair, a company estimates how well they achieved their objectives, if the project was on budget, and how to develop their attendance in the next trade fair (Isohookana 2007, 168).

2.3.1.3 Online communications

Online communications is an important method for groundwork communications, but it is also a marketing channel and may be used in sales communications (Rope 2004, 159-160).

The Internet is in an essential part of modern-day marketing communications. In general, the saving graces of online advertising are good allocation, interaction, extravagance, diversity, and quantifiable results. There are, however, some downsides to online communications, such as difficulty to stand out and rapid turnover of information. However, most of the marketing policy-makers agree that it is important for companies to be on the Internet and use it as an advertising channel. The problem is that companies hardly ever have a clear idea how exactly to implement online communications and how much time, money and resources to use for it. (Karjaluo 2010, 128.)

The Internet as a marketing communication method should be validated like all the other methods. Online communication should have a role in a company's marketing communications strategy and give some additional value to it. It is important for companies to define the objectives and target groups for online communications. The next step is to choose between different online methods. (Isohookana 2007, 261-263.)

Online communications is efficient when its objective is to:

- increase brand awareness
- change brand image and brand attitude
- bring about experiments
- increase the number of loyal customers

(Karjaluo 2010, 129.)

There are different online communications methods that a company can choose into their marketing communications strategy, such as:

- the company website
- brand website
- online advertising (banners, pop-ups, advertorials etc.)
- search engine marketing
- online sponsorship and product placement
- email

(Isohookana 2007, 262 & Karjaluoto 2010, 129.)

The most common method of online communications for companies is their webpages. The webpages may be simple introductory webpages or more complex ones, which service many stakeholders. The role and objectives of the webpages should be defined clearly to fit the marketing communications strategy together with other methods. Even though the Internet is an essential marketing communications method, it is not a substitute for other methods; there is still need for personal and print communications. (Isohookana 2007, 273.)

When a company designs their webpages, they should evaluate who the potential users will be, reasons for coming to the site, the information the users look for, and how to win over so they will want to revisit the webpages. (Isohookana 2007, 274.) Virtsonis and Harridge-March (2008) emphasise "websites, even in their most basic forms, aim to provide information or contacts in one way or another". Potential and existing customers collect information about potential suppliers online. When a potential customer accesses the website, he or she is searching for information regarding the company or its products. If there is insufficient information on the website, a potential customer may switch to a competitor's website which includes the appropriate information. (Virtsonis & Harridge-March 2008.) The marketer should also think of the usability of the webpages, because complex and difficult to perceive webpages are not tempting. Generally speaking, users appreciate usability and simple design (Isohookana 2007, 274).

The primary purpose of a brand website is to introduce a product or service, create a brand image, and increase sales. A brand website is the digital connection between a company and the customer. It traditionally includes information about the brand, and there are often interactive elements, such as downloads and discussion boards. Brand websites are normally permanent, but a company may also have a campaign website, which exists only for a limited time. The aim of campaign and brand websites is to speed up sales. (Isohookana 2007, 262 & Karjaluoto 2010, 129.)

UPM is a good example of a company, who has created a brand website for their b-to-b customers and interest groups. UPM is a Finnish company and a frontrunner in the new forest industry (UPM 2011). UPM's brand website (www.upmforestlife.com) is especially targeted to their b-to-b customers. The main objective of the website is to introduce present-day forestry by utilising visual imagery and sounds. The reason for this illustration is that UPM's biggest customers and many target groups are unaware of what present day forestry is because they do not have any interaction with Finnish forests. That is why UPM created a virtual forest, which is a way of communicating their business in understandable and substantive way. (Karjaluoto 2010, 131.)

Email is a fast and widely used method in marketing communications. Traditionally, companies see email only as a way of delivering messages to their interest groups or stakeholders. However, they should bear in mind that it is also a way of creating positive images about the company. For instance, text and style of an email create images of the sender. Therefore, messages should be designed properly and with deep attention. The message should be clear and compact and well structured. In addition, a good email includes a representative title, which informs the reader of the core of the message. Companies need to understand the different stages of the communication process in order to use email as an effective method. It is important to use email only for certain information. Permanent and public information should rather be published on the company webpage. (Isohookana 2007, 276.)

Information retrieval mainly takes place via search engines, such as Google. Search engine marketing is a useful way to advertise, since Internet users search almost all the information through those search engines. The main objective of search engine marketing is to improve coverage and to make companies and products easier to find. Karjaluoto (2010, 133) emphasises that there are two important reasons for companies to be visible in the lists of search results. Firstly, coverage at the right moment in search results leads potential customers to the company's webpages. The websites that are on the top of the list normally get a lion's share of the users. The number of users visiting one's website decreases if the website is not listed in the first page of the search results. When the company is seen at top of the search results, the potential of the Internet is totally utilised as a marketing channel. Secondly, because the search engine is used on one's own accord, it is not experienced as advertising in its negative meaning. (Karjaluoto 2010, 133.)

Online communications has some special characteristics compared to other communications channels. Communication on the Internet is interactive, fast, up to date, and continuously available. On the other hand, the interactivity of online communications is also an advantage, because it gives the potential customer a possibility to interact with the company and vice versa. (Isohookana 2007, 273 & 274.)

2.3.1.4 Customer reference acquisition

Customer reference acquisition is a groundwork communications method. If a company has customer references, it is a good base for the realisation of sales communications. A customer reference is traditionally one of the company's current customers. The reference should be a quality reference, which is a worthwhile example for the potential customers. A

company has a strong reference if it can show the potential customers that the product is of good quality and works in practice as announced. (Rope 2004, 161-162.)

Rope (2004, 161) emphasises that there should be at least one reference in each market, and the reference should be from the same market area in which the potential customer is operating. For instance, a European reference might not guarantee an American customer. Customer reference acquisition is cooperation between the company and the reference company. A customer reference can also act as a customer example and a test subject for a new product. (Rope 2004, 161-162.)

According to Rope (2004, 161-162) a customer reference in general

- is a current customer of the company
- has a positive attitude towards the company
- is just about to buy or is in need of the product that is developed or launched in the market
- is willing to be involved with testing and developing the product
- volunteers to tell about the product and collaboration with the company when needed and/or
- agrees to give a positive expert opinion if needed.

In practice, it should not be difficult to acquire customer references. When a company acquires a suitable pilot customer, they should also negotiate about the reference agreement. Consequently, the piloting of a product is not only for product testing and development, but also an essential base for the company's marketing communication process. (Rope 2004, 162.)

2.3.1.5 Word of mouth

Organisations, products and services are often a source of conversation. Nowadays, it is not only the organisations and their products themselves, but also the marketing communications methods they use are discussed. In every company, own personnel and sales people discuss and inform their potential and current customers about the organisation and their products. If a friend or colleague recommends or criticises a particular product, the expert selling and advertising of that product loses some of its significance. (Smith & Taylor 2001, 555-557.)

Marketing communications methods themselves can generate word of mouth. Different methods used and interesting messages created encourage discussion among the current and potential customers. In addition to personal word of mouth, the Internet also opens new possibilities and opportunities to accelerate word of mouth with discussion forums or

networks of news groups. The most important aspect to utilise word of mouth is to listen the audience, and understand the opinions and experiences. (Smith & Taylor 2001, 555-557.)

The level of customer service and the level of product quality have an impact on word of mouth. There are some opinion leaders and opinion formers in the market. These can be influential organisations or journalists. Bad word of mouth travels faster and further than good word of mouth, because satisfied customers tend not to tell about their experiences to many other people. Therefore, it is extremely important to strive to satisfy every customer. (Smith & Taylor 2001, 555-557.)

2.3.2 Sales communications

Sales communications includes the communication methods that are used after groundwork communications and leads the buying process towards trading. (Rope 2004, 166-167.) As mentioned before (see Figure 5), the main objective of sales communications is to make an offer and eventually lead the process towards a business transaction (Rope 2004, 141). In this research, sales communications is discussed in terms of a first purchase, namely new customer acquisition, and the methods that are already discussed in groundwork communications are excluded.

Sales communications is often seen only as personal sales work. Personal selling is in an important role, but sales communications process normally consists of direct mail, telephone marketing, and personal selling (see figure 6). As it can be seen in the figure, all three parts of the process have their own roles. (Rope 2004, 167-168.)

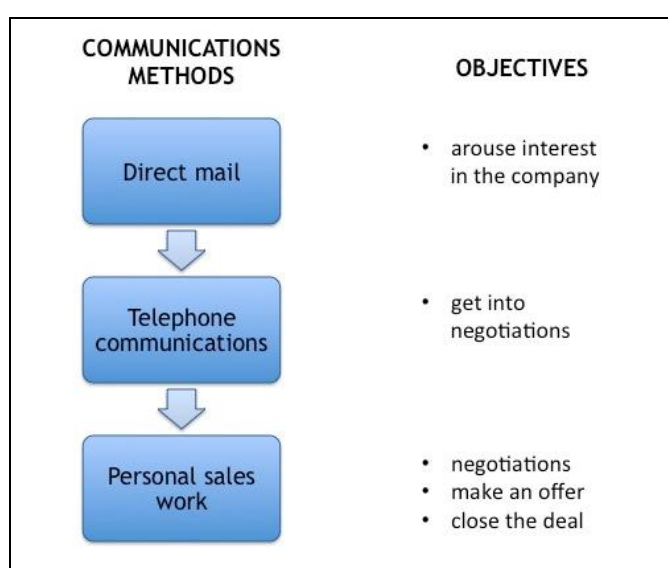


Figure 6: B-to-b sales communications (based on Rope 2004, 167 & Rope 2005, 287)

The process of sales communications is always individual with each customer but often follows the basic steps seen in Figure 6. The process begins when the company sends out direct mail, and after that the telephone communication begins. The sales person calls the customer and strives to get into sales negotiations and finally to close the deal. This is not the only way of going through the sales communication process. It may be possible to call to the potential customer and try to sell the product without using any groundwork. On the other hand, it is unlikely that a sales person walks in to the potential customer without arranging a negotiation. Therefore, the process introduced is not the only possible option, but it is logical and often used. (Rope 2004, 168.) In this study, the sales communication is discussed through the introduced process.

2.3.2.1 Direct mail

Direct mail is part of direct marketing. Direct mail supports sales before and after the sales visit. In other words, direct mail opens the door and acts as a reminder. (Isohookana 2007, 158.) As illustrated in Figure 6, the role of direct mail in sales communication is to arouse interest in the potential customer. In other words, direct mail can also be seen as groundwork of sales communication.

Rope (2004, 168) defines direct mail as a possibility to send personal and targeted communications to the receiver. On the other hand, Isohookana (2007, 157) emphasises the objective of direct mail, which is the customer's reaction, for instance asking additional information or making an order. However, they both state the importance of strictly targeting the communications to the selected target groups. The timing of direct mail is flexible, but it should be planned to support other marketing communications activities. It is important to target direct mail to a company or a person. In b-to-b markets, direct mail gives a possibility to approach several target groups with tailored messages. (Isohookana 2007, 157-158.)

The objective of direct mail is to begin a customership or strengthen a customership towards a customer relationship. Therefore, direct mail can also be utilised in customer relationship communications. The benefit of direct mail is the possibility to choose strictly the receivers and to design individual messages. Another benefit is that direct mail is the possibility for personal communications. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 328-330.)

There are several forms of direct mail, such as a letters, brochures, newsletters, or emails. In b-to-b markets companies may use special delivery, like a parcel. Furthermore, direct mail can be sent with or without an address. This means that it is either targeted to a specific

receiver or not. In b-to-b markets, the direct mail with an address is more commonly in use. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 328-334.)

When direct marketing is used as a sales communications method, it is important to take into account several issues. First, a company needs to determine the objectives of direct mail in their marketing communications and plan the follow-up. The objective may be to get the potential customers familiar with the product. In addition, companies need to decide to whom and how to target the direct mail. As mentioned before, the timing of direct mail is flexible, but it should support other marketing communications activities. However, in b-to-b markets, direct mail is often sent around in the turn of the year, when companies turn into a new budget period. There are different forms of direct mail, and depending on the sender and the objectives, companies determine the most suitable ones for their needs. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 334-338.)

After a company has gone through all those mentioned issues, they need to consider continuity of the direct mail. If the company sends a letter to an unknown customer, they might not achieve any results. Bergström and Leppänen (2003, 338) argue that a multiphase strategy is efficient when acquiring new customers in b-to-b markets. The multiphase strategy means that a company may first send out a letter, then use telephone marketing, and after that send another letter with additional information. The idea is basically the same as in Rope's basic steps of b-to-b sales communications (see figure 6). However, Rope (2004, 167-168) suggests companies should use several sales communications methods, rather than using direct mail twice, to get the best results (direct mail, telephone marketing, personal selling).

In b-to-b markets, face-to-face personal selling and customer service is in an important role. Nevertheless, those communications methods should be greatly supported with well-planned and executed printed materials. As mentioned before, these materials are useful especially in the beginning of the buying process. In addition, direct mail is practical in the end of the buying process, when the buyer is considering next purchases. (Vitale & Giglierano 2002, 436.) Especially small companies may only send out direct mail when the company is new, and they have to get customers to try their products. Companies should remember to remind their existence to their current and potential customers also after the business transaction. (Bergström & Leppänen 2003, 338.)

2.3.2.2 Telephone communications

Traditionally there are two different levels of telephone communications: enabling communications and sales communications. Enabling telephone communications is illustrated in Figure 6, and the role of it is to get into negotiations. (Rope 2004, 189.)

Enabling communications is the communications that enable the sales process as a practical unity with two other methods, direct mail and personal selling. The main objective of telephone communications is to arrange a meeting with the potential customer for sales negotiations. Therefore, enabling telephone communications is not necessarily meant to be a sales method. In this case, if there needs to be selling on the telephone, it is a result of failed direct mail. (Rope 2004, 189-190.)

Telephone marketing can also be a sales communication method, namely telesales. Telesales is normally used when the customer relationship has advanced and the customer already knows the product, or when the product is simple. In these situations, the buying process does not require thorough consideration from the customer. Nevertheless, the customer has received an offer or the product catalogue with prices, before the telesales. (Rope 2004, 190.)

2.3.2.3 Personal selling

As illustrated in Figure 6, the role of personal sales work is to make an offer and furthermore close the deal.

The goal of business is to bring about cost-effective sales, in order to achieve the set goals for return, profitability, and customer satisfaction. Personal selling has an important role in achieving these objectives, since the sales personnel is in a key role in the relationship between the company and the customer. Personal selling is the base for communication in b-to-b markets, because it is hard to close a deal without any personal selling. Even though personal sales work is significant, groundwork communications and other sales communications methods still build an essential basis for personal selling. Like Rope (2004, 191) states, the idea according to which personal selling is the only method for sales communications is definitely wrong. Personal selling needs support from other methods to create positive images above and beyond personal selling. Moreover, when using other methods along with personal selling, it decreases the need for personal influencing in every step of the buying process. (Rope 2004, 191; Vuokko 2003, 169; Isohookana 2007, 133.)

Personal selling is a communication process, which helps the company to communicate tailored messages in context to one or a few receivers (Vuokko 2003, 169). It is vital for the seller to know the customer and his needs in the selling situation; otherwise it might be hard

to sell the product or service. Selling is not a single sale, but customer relationship activities in a long run. Personal sales work is intensive and it requires a lot of resources. (Isohookana 2007, 133-135.)

Personal sales work is important especially if the information need is high and, for example, concerning characteristics of a product or a service, features of the clientele, the distributions channels or the price. For instance, personal selling is recommended if the product is complex or tailored to the customer. Personal selling is efficient, if there is personal influencing and interaction between the customer and the seller. (Vuokko 2003, 171 & 172.)

Hutt and Speh (2010, 429) emphasise that "personal selling is a significant demand-stimulating force in the business market". Since the resources invested in personal selling are huge, the marketer must be able to manage this function and take full advantage of suitable technology to strengthen the productivity of the sales personnel. Personal sales work must have a defined role in the comprehensive marketing strategy, and the marketer must clearly communicate it to the sales personnel. The whole sales organisation should be structured so that everyone knows his or her roles and objectives. It is the marketer's role to make sure that the sales personnel is motivated and controlled properly. (Hutt & Speh 2010, 429.)

The strength of personal sales work is that it offers a two-way communication between the potential customer and the company. The sales person in question is able to clarify points, answer possible questions, and raise the profile of issues that appear to be important to the potential customer. If personal selling is supported by other methods, it is easier for the sales person to call on potential customers. This is because the potential customers already know something about the company, and the sales person probably knows something about their needs. Especially then the sales person is able interact with the potential customer. (Blythe 2006, 254-255.)

2.3.3 Customer relationship communications

After a first purchase, the company has a customership. When the customer makes a repurchase the company has gained a customer relationship. According to Rope (2004, 228), customer relationship communications can be defined by all those communications methods that help to develop and deepen the customership towards a successful customer relationship. In other words, customer relationship communications are all those communications methods used after the first purchase. Traditionally, customer relationship communications includes a wide range of different methods, from all the four categories; personal selling and customer service, advertising, sales promotion, and public relations. The

methods include for instance customer magazines, company events, and greetings. (Rope 2004, 228.)

In this study, customer relationship communications is only introduced, since it is not relevant in terms of the research problem.

2.4 Marketing communications plan

Marketing communications require a great deal of resources: time, money, work contribution, and technical resources. The profitability of marketing communications calls for extensive planning. The key issues in marketing communications are the objectives, target groups, message and choosing the right methods. The marketing communications planning is a process, which includes the present state analysis, strategic planning, execution, and follow-up. The follow-up is an essential part of the planning process, since the gathered information will be used during the next present state analysis. (Isohookana 2007, 91.)

Marketing communications planning is part of company's comprehensive planning (see Figure 7). Marketing communications plan should be based on the marketing strategy, which for one's part is based on the overall business strategy. Therefore, the company's vision, business idea, and values are also visible in the marketing communications. Marketing communications is part of marketing, and the planning process should go hand in hand with the marketing plan. In addition, complete communications require that marketing, internal, and corporate communications are supporting each other. By planning a company prepares for the future and strives to maintain and strengthen their market position. In other words, the company strives to ensure that they are doing right things at right times. (Isohookana 2007, 92; Vuokko 2003, 132.)



Figure 7: Different levels of planning (based on Isohookana 2007, 92)

2.4.1 The planning process

The planning of marketing communications begins with strategic planning and ends up with the planning of individual communications methods. However, marketing communications is not a mix of individual actions and campaigns, but part of the company's comprehensive strategy. The planning process includes continuous following and analysing of the operational environment. (Isohookana 2007, 93 & 94.) The process consists of four main stages that are demonstrated in Figure 8.

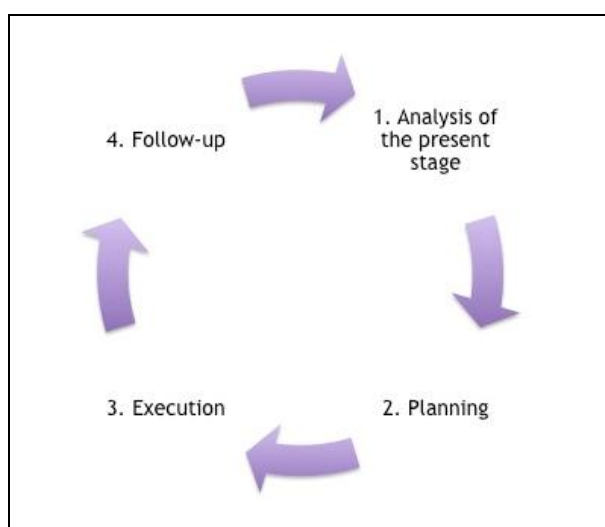


Figure 8: Planning process (Isohookana 2007, 94)

The first stage of the process is the description and analysis of the present stage. This stage requires the company to do continuous information retrieval and analysis of the information collected to support their policymaking. In this stage, it is important that all the members of the planning team have a common vision of the starting point and the role of communications in their business operations. When the team has a common vision of the present stage, they can make decisions for the future. (Isohookana 2007, 94; Vuokko 2003, 134.)

In the planning stage, the company defines the objectives and determines a strategy to achieve those objectives. After that the company will formulate a concrete execution plan, which includes the target groups, budget, schedules and the person in charge. In other words, the execution plan will clarify the disposable resources. (Isohookana 2007, 94; Vuokko 2003, 134.)

The last stage will define the follow-up methods. This means that the company must determine the areas of follow-up and how to measure the success. When the marketing

communications is completely implemented, and the follow-up carried out, the information will be utilised in the next round's present stage analysis. (Isohookana 2007, 94.)

2.4.2 Analysis of the present stage

As mentioned in chapter 2.4.1, the planning of marketing communications begins with a clear description and analysis of the present stage. The analysis includes two different areas: internal and external factors. Internal factors include all the factors related to the company or the product. External factors, on the other hand, include the target group, competition, and the operational environment now and in the future. In addition, it is also important to analyse current and potential customers. The company decides their need for the analysis and how many factors they will include to it. However, when a product or a market is new, the planning requires an in-depth analysis of the present stage. (Isohookana 2007, 95; Vuokko 2003, 134-136.)

Internal and external operational environments can be analysed with the SWOT -analysis. The SWOT -analysis includes strengths and weaknesses of the internal operational environment, and opportunities and threats of the external environment. (Isohookana 2007, 95.)

2.4.3 Defining the target groups

Defining the target groups is one of the key issues when planning marketing communications. The prerequisite for tailored marketing communications is strictly defined target groups. It is vital to define and be familiar with the target groups, so that the marketing communication messages meet their requirements. The aim is to find and define a segment or a few segments, which are achievable with different marketing communications methods. Therefore, the objective of the target group definition is help to choose which methods to use and how, so that it will affect the target groups in question. (Isohookana 2007, 102 & 103; Vuokko 2003, 142-144.)

Different marketing communications methods may be used for different target groups. If target groups are clearly separated as different segments, it is easier to choose the most effective communications methods for each segment. Moreover, the marketer must know the target groups thoroughly; otherwise it might be difficult to achieve the wanted effect. (Vuokko 2003, 142-144.)

In the planning stage of marketing communications, it is useful to divide the customer relationships in different groups. This is because the need for knowledge and expectations differ in different stages of the customer relationship. In addition, by analysing the product's

life cycle, a company may find new target groups to support the planning process. For instance, when launching a new product, the company's own personnel and partners in cooperation are important target groups. (Isohookana 2007, 102-104.)

2.4.4 Budgeting

The scope of execution depends on the disposable budget, which is the amount of money indicated to marketing communications from the company's entire budget. Isohookana (2007, 110) defines a budget as a plan of action, which is defined to a certain period and announced in money. A budget is the base for action, the coordinator and the distributor for resources. The content of marketing communications budget depends greatly on the company, the scale of operations and the field of business. (Isohookana 2007, 110 & 111.)

A marketing communications budget is a tool for planning, and it will help to allocate resources to different objectives, target groups, methods, and occasions. Furthermore, the budget is a tool for follow-up. The actual costs will be compared to the budgeted costs, and it is easier to control the use of resources within the budget period. It is important that the budget is flexible, because both environmental factors and internal circumstantial factors may change during the budget period. (Isohookana 2007, 111.)

Vuokko (2003, 145) emphasise that the costs of marketing communications should not be seen as costs, but more as an investment. The general effect of marketing communications may only be seen in the long run. Defining a budget is an important part of marketing communications planning. However, the most important issue in budgeting is how the budgeted amount of money will finally be used. The effective ways of using the budget are usually worth of an investment. (Vuokko 2003, 147.)

The costs of marketing communications can be divided into three categories. Firstly, the planning costs include all the resources used in planning. Both the time used by the company's personnel and the costs of planning services bought from a communications agency should be included in this category. Secondly, execution costs can include the materials used, or trade fair costs. Thirdly, examples of possible follow-up expenses are costs from surveys and different kinds of reports. (Isohookana 2007, 111.)

2.4.5 Execution and follow-up

When a company has finished compiling their marketing communications plan, the next step is to execute the plan. There are two keystones for executing the marketing communications

plan: organisation and resource allocation of marketing communications, and organising external partners of cooperation and subcontractors. (Isohookana 2007, 112.)

Organisation is a question of concretising all that has been determined in the earlier stages of planning into an action plan. The action plan includes detailed information of further execution, such as the printing places of marketing material and people in charge of each assignment. In addition, organisation often means that the marketer must think what kind of resources they have within the organisation and what the needs for external resources are. (Vuokko 2003, 160.)

Vuokko (2003, 161) claims that resource allocation means the organization of resources that enable the execution. The execution of marketing communications plan requires resources, including the personnel, technology, and money. The level of know-how of the personnel is a crucial point for the success of marketing communication. However, the organisation should also have strategic know-how, so that marketing communications will support the objectives. (Isohookana 2007, 113.)

The follow-up of a planning process can be divided into two stages. First, results of the follow-up will be measured, estimated and utilised. The information as such is not adequate, further analysis is needed in order to draw some conclusions according to the results. As mentioned before, the objective of follow-up is to be able to utilise the information in the next planning process. Examples of analyses that are useful for marketing communications are the analysis of competitors, company image or the reader surveys of a customer magazine. (Isohookana 2007, 116-118.)

2.4.6 Planning the marketing communications mix

The mix of different marketing communications methods is called marketing communications strategy or marketing communications mix. The marketing communications mix depends on several factors, such as the characteristics of a business, situation, or the product's life cycle. The planning of marketing communications mix is a question of which communication methods will be used in a certain target group. Traditionally companies use a mix of marketing communications methods to support their objectives. Different communications methods supplement each other and some methods compensate the weaknesses of the other. (Vuokko 2003, 148.)

Vuokko (2003, 151) emphasises that companies should begin with their objectives, not from the choice of methods. After that, the company will decide whether they need marketing communications to achieve their objectives. If there is a need for marketing communications,

the next step is to consider different methods. Within a marketing communication mix, each method is used to reach different objectives. One method can be for information collection, one for creating images, as well as one is used for achieving a trial run or first purchase. (Vuokko 2003, 151.)

Isohookana (2007, 108) argues that the only way to stand out from the competitors is to have distinct and creative combination of methods. Marketing communications strategy and different combinations can be examined through so-called customer contact points (Scultz, Tunnenbaum & Lauternborn 1993, 83). The customer contact points are places in which marketing communication should be present. The contact points can be surveyed through several questions, such as:

- Where are the potential customers?
- What kind of media are the potential customers using?
- Which media do the potential customers follow?

In other words, the company must be present in places, which are affecting the buying process and the customer relationship. The customer contact points support the company when choosing the communication methods. In order to define customer contact points, the company must be familiar with their current and potential customers. (Isohookana 2007, 109-110.)

In conclusion, companies determine the most practical combination from all the marketing communications methods in order to achieve their objectives. All the methods in the chosen marketing communications mix support each other, and one method alone is not able to achieve desired results. It is not necessary to choose all the available marketing communications methods, but to choose the most suitable combination in each situation. The objectives of marketing communications define the methods needed. (Vuokko 2003, 148-151.)

2.5 Summary of the theoretical background

In b-to-b markets, the buyer is another company or organisation. On the other hand, the same consumers that make buying decisions in b-to-c markets work in those organisations and influence the buying decision. There are many parties affecting the buying behaviour in companies, and decision makers are needed in many organisational levels.

Understanding organisational buying behaviour provides the marketer with a good basis for successful marketing communications. An organisational buying process may vary depending on the organisation's size, industry, and the complexity of the purchasing situation. However, the understanding of the basic steps provides a good overall understanding of the organisational buying process. When the marketer is familiar with the organisational buying

process, it is easier to provide the right information in each stage of the process. Therefore, marketing communications is in an essential role when the potential customer is making a buying decision.

The key factors of operational decision-making require choosing, defining, and analysing the customer target groups carefully. Market segmentation is a prerequisite for all the marketing activities. The objective of segmentation is to find relatively homogeneous submarkets that are suitable for a company's operations. Companies should target their actions at the most suitable segments, in order to achieve the best commercial results. Especially for small companies, the identification of segments is an opportunity. The success of market segmentation depends on how well the company manages to identify groups of customers and their needs. There are three different segmentation strategies: undifferentiated marketing, selective marketing and concentration marketing. After the marketer has selected the strategy, the company will select the most attractive segments to their strategy.

Marketing communications is one of four elements in the marketing mix. B-to-b marketing communication methods are tools for a company to inform their customers and other target groups about their products and other operations. The purpose of communications is to create something common between the sender and receiver, and eventually have a certain influence on the receiver. When planning marketing communications, it is important to define the reasons to communicate and indicate the objectives. Before companies are able to communicate with the potential customers, they need to be familiar with the target groups. In addition, it is essential to communicate the message in a way that the target group will receive and assimilate it.

There are a great number of different marketing communications methods, and a company determines the suitable marketing communications mix depending on their field of business, their products, and stage in the life cycle. It is a challenge to choose a combination that will produce the best results with the available resources. In this study, b-to-b marketing communications is divided into groundwork, sales, and customer relationship communications. The focus is on groundwork and sales communications.

The objective of groundwork communications is to increase awareness, increase recognition, and build an image of the company. The purpose is to be a base for trading. There are several communications methods included in groundwork communications, such as trade fairs, publicity management, online communications, customer reference acquisition, and word of mouth.

Sales communication contains all the methods that are used after groundwork communications and used in order to achieve a business transaction. The objective of sales communications is to make an offer and eventually lead towards a business transaction. A successful sales communications process should consist of direct mail, telephone marketing, and personal selling. All three methods have their own roles in the process.

Successful marketing communications requires extensive planning. The key issues in the planning process are the objectives, target groups, message and the right methods. Planning of marketing communications is a process that consists of the present state analysis, strategic planning, execution, and follow-up. Especially when the product or market is new, the planning requires in-depth analysis of the present state. The starting point of marketing communications is the objectives, not the choice of methods. In conclusion, companies define the most functional communications mix from all the methods in order to achieve their objectives. The only way to stand out from the competitors is to have a distinct and creative combination of methods.

2.6 Theoretical framework

Figure 9 below illustrates the key theoretical themes linked together as a theoretical framework.

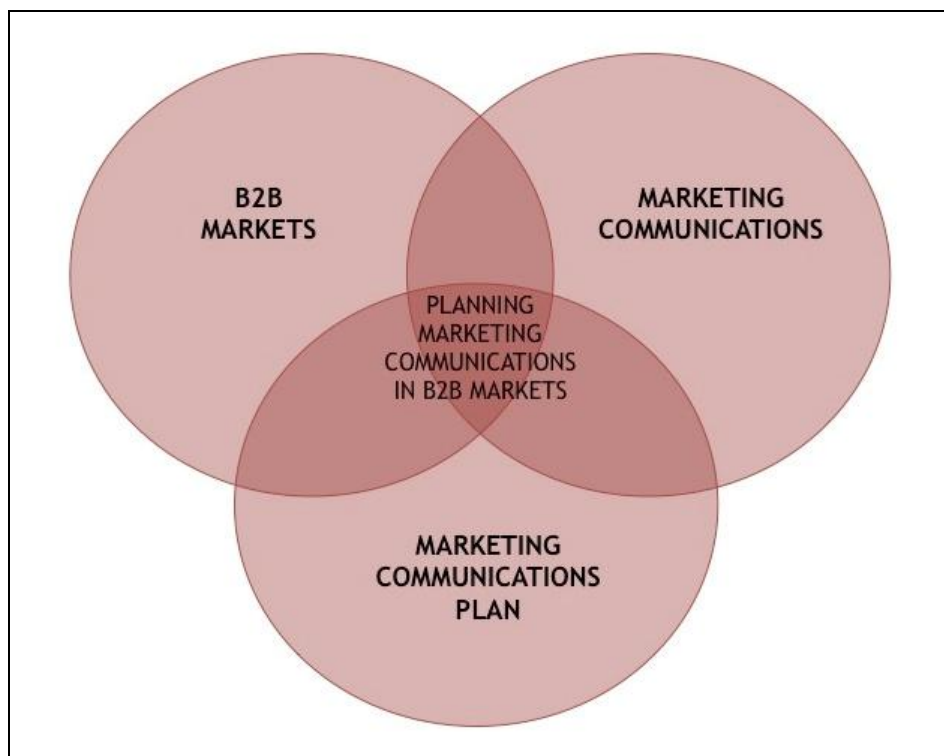


Figure 9: Theoretical framework

3 Research approach

This section covers the overall research approach of the study and describes how the research and data gathering methods were selected. It also focuses on the research methodology; how the study was carried out and how was the data processed. At the end of this section, the validity and reliability of this study are evaluated and discussed.

3.1 Research methods

There are two different kinds of research methods: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research strives to answer to questions how many, how much, how often, and how important a certain issue is. Quantitative research is based on an accurate sample, and the results are represented as numeric values. On the other hand, qualitative research surveys the why and how of decision-making. Qualitative research is based on smaller and more focused samples than in quantitative research, and the results strive to represent the in-depth understanding of human behaviour and thoughts. (Lotti 1998, 42.)

The differences between qualitative and quantitative research are often discussed in the literature. This is because it is easier to compare qualitative and quantitative methods than to define them. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4.) Riley et al. (2000, 40) represented the distinction between those two research method in an interesting way: "qualitative techniques rely on the skills of the researcher as an interviewer or observer in gathering data whereas quantitative methods place reliance upon the research instruments employed to gather data and analyse it". This is an understandable and practical distinction.

In qualitative research, the data may be collected in different ways. There are several qualitative research methods, but qualitative research is often conducted as an interview. Even though interviews are the most common way of collecting the research data, there are also other suitable methods to collect the data, such as an image and print documents, diaries, newspapers, professional magazines, and advertisements. In other words, all the material produced by people, say much about their experiences. (Vilka 2005, 100 & 101.)

A semi-structured interview is the most commonly used method of an interview study. It is a method between a structured and an open interview. A semi-structured interview is often referred to a themed interview. This is because in a semi-structured interview the research problem is divided into key themes, and the interview is built upon those themes. The interviewer has the possibility to vary the wording or order of the questions. The main

objective is that the interviewees give their own descriptions of each theme. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 80-83; Viikka 2005, 101-104.)

An action research is one way of conducting qualitative research. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008, 193) state that, "close collaboration with the research object and its practical problem solving is part of the research process". An action study is a participatory research, and the objective is to solve a problem in an organisation, and at the same time create new information and understanding on the event. The action research strives to develop and improve practices in the organisation. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 195) emphasise that "action research strongly involves active participation and improvement of social situations and problems". (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 193-195; Ojasalo, Moilanen & Ritalahti 2009, 58-61.)

3.2 Methods used

This research is examined as a qualitative research, and qualitative methods are used in data gathering. The research data is partly obtained through semi-structured interviews and partly through an action research.

A semi-structured interview, namely a themed interview, was chosen as a research method, because the objective is to survey experiences and perceptions concerning marketing communications and buying behaviour in b-to-b markets. In a semi-structured interview, it is possible to deepen the information with additional questions and clarify the motives behind the answers. Since the discussion is divided into key themes, it gives interviewees the possibility to discuss their experiences in their own words. The interviewer should not direct the respondents or present delimited questions, in order to get the best possible results. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 36-37.)

In addition, the research data was partly obtained through an action research. The method was chosen, because the writer had the possibility to be in a close co-operation with the case company. During the research process, the writer has been able to be part of practical problem solving, and it has enabled the access to inside information. The researcher has been in close collaboration with the research object and acts as an essential player in the development process. (Ojasalo et al. 2009, 58-61; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 193.)

3.3 Methodology

The research started in October 2011, when the researcher began co-operation with the case company. From the first meeting in October, the researcher was in continuous discussion with the company representatives.

The second part of the research started with interviews in the beginning of 2012. All three interviews were held in February and March in arranged meetings. The key themes and defined questions were planned before the interviews, and the interviewer also thought of additional questions beforehand in order to concentrate only on the discussion in the interviews. The key themes of interviews are: b-to-b buying behaviour, marketing communications methods, the message of marketing communication, and the timing of marketing communications. The key themes were chosen according to the research problem and the interview questions are based on those themes. The interview structure is represented in Appendix 1.

When conducting qualitative research, the objective is to understand and get in-depth information about a certain action. Therefore, it is relevant to have a discretionary sample of respondents. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 59.) Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2001, 59) emphasise that it is possible to gather significant information by interviewing only a few individuals. In this research, there were three respondents: two company representatives from the Company X, and one partner in cooperation. Both of the company representatives have experiences with marketing communications methods and buying behaviour in b-to-b markets. The partner of cooperation is widely experienced in the field of business and in b-to-b markets and also gives an outside perspective in the study. Therefore, the research results are based on the respondent's experiences.

All the interviews were recorded with the permissions of the interviewees. Each interview was recorded as separate audio files, and the files were copied to a computer afterwards. Recording facilitated the interviewer to take part into conversation, and it also eases the analysis process. All the recordings were transcribed, which means that the recordings were written up. The discussions in the interviews were colloquial, and therefore the interviews were not transcribed word for word. Research-wise it is not essential to write up the interviews in exact words. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 138-141.)

When the interviews were held and the recordings transcribed, the gathered data was read through several times. The data was then divided under the key themes, which means that each discussion concerning one theme was saved as a separate file. Each theme was then analysed, and finally concluded as recommendations. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 141-146.) Some of the respondents' direct citations were used in the research results anonymously.

As an outcome of the thesis, the researcher forms a preliminary marketing communications plan for Company X. The marketing communications plan is part of the conclusions. Conclusions of the study strive to answer to the research problem "which communication methods would be the most efficient for the selected target groups?". The conclusions and recommendations section at the end of the study concludes the answer to the research problem and presents future research challenges.

3.4 Reliability and validity

There are several methods that can be used to estimate the reliability and validity of research. (Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 231.) Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 291) argue that, "the concepts of reliability and validity... provide a basic framework for the evaluation of research in social sciences as well as in business research".

The reliability of a research refers to the repeatability of the research results. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 292) define reliability as "the extent to which a measure, procedure or instrument yields the same result on repeated trials". In other words, a reliable research is one which can be replicated to introduce similar findings. Consequently it represents the research's ability to produce non-coincidental results. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 292; Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 231.)

Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 292) define validity as "the extent to which conclusions drawn in research give an accurate description or explanation of what happened". That is the ability of the chosen research method to end up with findings that are valid, i.e. true and certain. In this case, valid means that the findings stand for the phenomenon referred to and are confirmed by evidence. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 292.)

In this study, the reliability is somewhat difficult to estimate, mainly because of the small amount of research data collected. However, Vilkkä (2005, 126) emphasises that in qualitative research the researcher is able to reach the objectives with a smaller amount of research data, if in-depth analyses are made. In this research, the writer has utilised a small amount of research data but made some in-depth analysis. Since the writer is the only person estimating the research and the research results are based on one time investigation, there is a risk of coincidental results (Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 231).

Three respondents in the semi-structured interviews were reasonable, and the discussions produced enough research data to analyse the topic. The respondents were justifiable, since the writer did not have a possibility to interview any potential customers in the selected

target groups, or companies that are currently piloting the case company's products. One external respondent was enough to confirm the internal experiences and perceptions.

In order to ensure validity, the researcher looked through the interview structure with the company representative. The key themes in semi-structured interviews were based on the theoretical framework, discussions with the company representative, and the research problem. Semi-structured interview were a valid method in this case, since the objective was to survey experiences and perceptions concerning marketing communications in b-to-b markets. The research methods in this study were valid, because the findings are equivalent for the phenomenon.

4 Empirical study

The purpose of empirical study is to solve the research problem and thus present the marketing communications plan for the case company at the end of this section. The objective is to define the marketing communications methods that would be the most efficient for reaching the selected target groups in Finland.

The empirical study consists of the case company's presentation including the present stage analysis, SWOT analysis of the case company, target group segmentation, results of the study, and the marketing communications plan for the selected target groups.

4.1 Case: Company X

Company X is a Finnish start-up company, which aims to provide sustainable energy solutions by designing solar panels and solar energy systems. Company X was founded in 2009, and it is still in the development stage.

Company X is specialised in the application of cost-effective solar energy solutions, and the objective is to create and deliver value for both developing and developed countries through their solutions. The company aims to operate globally, but they are now concentrating on taking root in the Finnish market. The objective is first to achieve strong customer references in the Finnish market, and then start to operate globally. The company focuses on long-term customer satisfaction with quality, cost-efficiency, and energy saving. (Alanko 2011.)

Company X is in their development stage, and it is not certain who will eventually be the key people in the company. The company is small and has limited resources, but they believe they have the know-how and expertise in the field of business. The current personnel consist of people from different cultural backgrounds: Finland, Nigeria, China, and Ghana. (Alanko

2011.)

Company X has suppliers in China and Germany, and they are able to supply panels for special needs. Consequently, Company X hopes to design and offer custom-made panels for different needs. The solar panels they offer are tested in a long-term use and confirmed to be of good quality. The company's objective is to offer the whole solar energy solution; the panels and the installation. (Alanko 2012.)

The case company does not have proper customers at the moment. There are few customer relationships that are in the experimental stage. Company X has some pilot customers that are currently testing the solar panels and sharing their experiences. (Alanko 2012.) This is a good opportunity for the case company, since they are able to develop their products according to the feedback.

4.1.1 Current marketing communications

Company X's current marketing communications are based on online communications and personal selling. Since Company X is a start-up company and has only limited resources, there has been no marketing communications plan so far. The company hired a new sales and marketing manager in autumn 2011 to concentrate on the Finnish market. The only marketing communication methods used so far have been email, telephone, personal selling and the company webpages. The sales and marketing manager has used email with an introduction about the company and products when contacting certain parties. All in all, there is no consistence in the current marketing communications, but it has paid off few contacts. (Alanko 2012.)

Through marketing communications, Company X is trying to send out a message that the company is a worthy partner within the renewable energy market. Company X is willing to be a convincing company and get a foothold in the market, and to get into competitive biddings. When the company has a foothold in the market, they have an opportunity to offer competitive solutions and with prices comparable to their competitors. (Alanko 2012.)

Since the company and its product are still unknown in the market, marketing communications is in an essential role. With the help of better marketing communications, the company is able to create a requisite company image and attract potential customers.

4.1.2 Field of business

In Finland, solar panels are for the most part utilised in summerhouses. The solar energy industry is not very developed, since the government does not support the small-scale use of renewable energy solutions. Feed-In Tariff is a policy mechanism that accelerates investments in renewable energy technologies. The objective is to pay the renewable energy producers a guarantee price for the surplus energy produced. For instance, the owner of solar panels has a possibility to sell the surplus energy to the grid. Currently the Feed-In Tariff does not include small-scale solar electricity producers in Finland. (Berner 2012; Lohi 2011.)

Solar energy technology has been a hot topic for past years. Germany is a forerunner in solar electricity systems in Europe; approximately 40 per cent of the world's solar electricity is produced in Germany (Isomäki 2012). In Germany, two per cent of the total electrical energy was produced by solar power in 2010. If Finland is willing to reach one per cent produced by solar power by year 2022, it would need 100 000 new solar energy system installations annually. (Ahola & Lindh 2012.) Competition in the field is expected to grow rapidly in the future.

The competition grows when Finland puts the Feed-In Tariff into operation also in small-scale production. The Finnish renewable energy market requires similar system as in Germany, where also small producers get guarantee price for surplus energy. (Berner 2012.) Since solar energy solutions are not properly utilised in Finland, the potential in the market is high in the future.

There is potential in both b-to-b and b-to-c markets in the renewable energy sector. This study only concentrates on the b-to-b markets. However, the case company should take consumers into account in their marketing communications. When consumers know the benefits of solar electricity solutions, they might demand those solutions from the developers and building firms.

Competition in the solar energy industry is growing, and there are many small and larger players in the field of business. The competition is high and therefore it is important to achieve a foothold in the market, and gain several references, in order to build a trustworthy image. There are a few larger players in the Finnish market, such as Naps, and as a small and unknown company it is hard to compete among those pioneers. Naps is one of the most established names in the solar energy sector and well known both within consumers and the solar electricity industry (Naps 2012). Finnwind is one of the smaller players in the industry, but has managed to build a trustworthy company image. The company has a small team, but they are able to serve customers around Finland because of their wide networks. (Finnwind Oy 2012.) In b-to-b markets, it is hard to evaluate all the strong players in the field of business.

4.2 SWOT analysis

A SWOT analysis is a useful tool to present and analyse the case company's current situation in the Finnish market, and evaluate the strategic courses of action. The analysis is the interface between the company's current situation and the research problem. The SWOT analysis is based on discussions and further co-operation with the company representative and on the writer's own observations.

The SWOT analysis is illustrated in Figure 10. It represents strengths and weaknesses of the internal operational environment, and opportunities and threats of the external environment.

<p style="text-align: center;">STRENGTHS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. competitive suppliers (quality) 2. product unity (product + service) 3. the ability to deliver custom made high quality products 4. young and enthusiastic team 5. belief in their own products and the company 6. knowhow and expertise 7. hit product 8. concentration on the quality 9. internationality (contact to china) 	<p style="text-align: center;">WEAKNESSES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. no references yet / unknown in the market 2. limited resources 3. lack of distribution channels 4. company webpages 5. complexity of the product 6. current marketing communications 7. lack of knowledge of the construction industry 8. luxury product
<p style="text-align: center;">OPPORTUNITIES</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. feed-in tariff in the future 2. rapidly growing industry 3. people more interested in renewable energy solutions 4. solution sufficient for the customer needs 5. marketing communications plan 6. hot topic now and in the future 7. wide networks in different fields of businesses 8. building trade 9. companies that are willing to improve their image 10. potential product (existing and new buildings) 	<p style="text-align: center;">THREATS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. rising competition in the market 2. fragile economic situation 3. big, well-known competitors 4. potential customers have subcontractors in their interest groups 5. the amount of sunlight in Finland 6. the competition with grid / power companies 7. the research results are not desired 8. knowledge about the benefits of solar energy is relatively low 9. the industry is growing but still non-existent in Finland 10. renewable energy solutions are expensive

Figure 10: SWOT analysis

4.2.1 Strengths

The strengths of the company lie mainly in the product and the personnel. Company X has competitive suppliers that are able to produce high quality products. Their suppliers are in China and Germany. Most of the panels are produced in China, and batteries and other add-ons in Germany. If customers have special requirements regarding solar panels, the suppliers are able to produce custom made panels for their needs. Company X is able to offer the product with additional services. They are able to offer installation and manuals for panels. The objective is to offer turnkey delivery with their products. In the foreseeable future solar panels could be hit products, and therefore this is a good time to get a foothold in the market.

The current personnel consist of young and enthusiastic team that have the right knowhow and expertise in the field of business. The personnel consist of people with different cultural backgrounds, which will be an advantage for Company X when they start to operate globally. One of the case company's key people has a reliable contact in China. That is a benefit that the case company's competitors might not have.

4.2.2 Weaknesses

Company X is a small start-up company, and has limited resources. The company is still unknown in the market and has no references. With the help of this marketing communications plan, the case company will hopefully manage to leave some of these weaknesses behind them.

Solar panels are still luxury products, and are not something consumers and companies in Finland desperately need. There is no Feed-In tariff yet in Finland, and before the tariff is put into action it might be difficult to persuade consumers to think solar panels are worthwhile investments. Solar energy solutions are seen as complex products, and require a deeper understanding in order to understand their long-term benefits.

Company X believes that they need to be known within the building industry and believe there are many potential customers in the business sector. However, they need more knowledge on the industry in order to approach it. The case company does not have any distribution channels in Finland, and in the future it will be necessary to have good distribution channels and other networks within the country.

Currently, marketing communications in the case company are not planned, and they do not have a common perception of the methods that should be used. Company X is only using a few communications methods, and the methods they are using are not planned well. For instance, the company webpages are poor and should include more information.

4.2.3 Opportunities

The biggest opportunity for the Company X is the Feed-In Tariff in the future. It has already paid off in Germany, and solar energy solutions are common in everyday life. When the Feed-In Tariff is topical in Finland, the industry could grow rapidly. Renewable energy solutions are growing in popularity every day, and people are generally more and more interested in the topic.

By planning marketing communications properly, the case company should be able to build wide networks. Their potential customers, especially in the construction segment, need to be aware of Company X in order to succeed. Solar panels are a potential solution for many consumers and companies, because they can be utilised in both existing and new buildings. In addition, there are other places in addition to buildings where solar panels can be utilised, such as traffic lights and traffic signs.

4.2.4 Threats

Since the Feed-In Tariff has been in discussion, there are many companies that have understood the potential of solar energy solutions as a business. Consequently, the amount of competition is rising in the market. There are already some established and well-known companies, such as Naps, in the Finnish market, and it might be hard to compete with them. In addition, some potential customers might already have solar energy subcontractors in their own interest groups. Solar panels cannot produce enough electricity to be self-supporting, and therefore the case company is also competing with the grid and power companies.

Even if there are many benefits of solar energy solutions, the general knowledge on the benefits of solar panels is relatively low. Summers are bright, but winters are dark in Finland, and it might be hard to convince potential customers. However, the average amount of sunlight in Finland is the same as the average amount of sunlight in Germany, but it is not always enough to convince potential customers. Renewable energy solutions are expensive investments, and without the Feed-In Tariff, it will take a long time for the investment to pay itself back.

4.3 Target group segmentation

In b-to-b markets, the case company has three different categories of potential target groups: new construction sites, existing buildings, and electronic traffic signs. Within these three categories, there are several potential targets groups, which the writer defined with the company representative during the research process. The target group determination is necessary in order to plan effective marketing communications for the selected target groups. In the end of this section, two suitable target groups are selected for the purposes of marketing communications planning.

As mentioned before, the objective of the target group segmentation is to find and select the target groups that are the most suitable for the case company and enable the best commercial results. The objective is to find smaller sub-markets that are relatively homogenous, in order to reach them with marketing communications. The case company's

resources are limited. It is more likely to achieve better results by targeting marketing communications at the selected target groups, than by striving to serve all the potential customers and target groups. According to the concentration strategy, Company X should select one or two segments, towards which they will concentrate all their business operations.

After thorough research in the topic and discussions with the case company, the conclusion was that there are several potential target groups for Company X in b-to-b markets. This section is a short introduction to the potential target groups.

4.3.1 New construction

New construction includes all the not yet built buildings and houses. In the field of new construction, there are three potential target groups: real estate developers, building firms, and house package producers.

Real estate developers are parties that make orders on the construction projects. It is an important target group since developers need contractors in different fields in their construction projects. It is essential that building developers are aware of Company X, since those companies have wide networks in the building trade. For instance, developer organisations like Järvenpään Mestariasunnot Oy and The public works department of Helsinki could be included in this target group. Järvenpään Mestariasunnot Oy was a developer of a zero-energy building in Järvenpää in 2011 and is also involved with other energy conservation pilot studies (Järvenpään Mestariasunnot Oy 2012). The public works department of Helsinki is responsible for the planning and commissioning of City premises, and one of their special areas of expertise is energy conservation (HKR-Rakennuttaja 2011).

Building firms are one of the potential target groups for Company X. The emphasis should be in small and medium sized building firms, and in building companies that are possibly interested in solar energy solutions. Building firms are potential customers, because many different parties are planning to utilise solar energy solutions in their buildings and houses. Bigger building companies might already have contractors in their own stakeholders, and that is why the emphasis should be in small and medium sized companies. For instance, Lujatalo Oy and Rakennusliike Reponen are companies in this target group. Lujatalo Oy has built the first zero-energy block in Finland, and they also concentrate on energy conservation (Lujatalo Oy 2012). Rakennusliike Reponen, on the other hand, concentrates on building low-energy houses, and mainly operates in the Helsinki metropolitan area (RKL Reponen Oy 2012). There are also companies that are responsible for the planning and construction of single-family houses. The objective is to provide housing solutions according to customers' needs from a

planning stage to turnkey solutions. For instance, Rakennustoimisto Piipponen and Leijonatalo offer these turnkey solutions. (Rakennustoimisto Piipponen 2012 & Leijonatalo 2012.)

One potential target group is the companies that sell prefabricated houses. Some of the companies may plan to have house packages that include solar energy solutions. These companies include for instance Jämerä, Kimara and Kastelli.

4.3.2 Existing buildings

Existing buildings include all the houses and buildings that are already built, but could still take advantage of solar energy solutions. In the field of existing buildings and houses there are two potential target groups: the public sector and SMEs that are interested in the renewable energy solutions.

The public sector is one potential target group for the case company. However, the public sector could also be categorised under new construction. There are several public buildings that are built so that they utilise renewable energy solutions. There are few sheltered accommodations that are either zero or low-energy buildings. Cost-effectiveness is an important factor when building public buildings and renewable energy solutions are relevant investments. Solar energy solutions could also be added to existing public buildings. It is in Company X's interest to know how they could get invited to tender for the building contracts in the public sector.

Many companies are willing to improve their image by taking environmental issues into consideration. Company X could target SMEs that are willing to improve their corporate social responsibility by using solar energy as part of their energy solutions. Those companies may be SMEs that advertise to be environmental friendly. Targeted SMEs could operate in different fields of businesses, but Company X should, with their marketing communications, try to put forward the idea that their products and services are worthy investments with concrete benefits.

4.3.3 Traffic lights and traffic signs

One potential target group is companies that offer electronic traffic lights, traffic signs, and speed screens. Since Company X is able to offer solar panels for special needs, their panels could be utilised in traffic-related solutions. There are not many companies operating in this field, but Company X could target government officials and city planning departments that order these products.

4.3.4 Defining the target groups

There are only few company examples in each target group to give a rough idea of the potential customer groups. However, the researcher has discussed other potential customers more in detail with the company representative. There are also other potential target groups, but these are considered to be the most relevant in the current situation.

The researcher has decided, together with the company representative, that focus is on the new construction segment in this research. The most potential target groups in this field are real estate developers and building firms. Therefore, the marketing communications in this thesis is planned for those two target groups.

The objective of the case company is to get into construction projects, and eventually widen their networks in that field of business. These target groups were chosen, because Company X believes that they are able to attract them with the same marketing communications methods. The selected target groups could benefit in reality from solar energy solutions. It could be a concrete benefit for them, not only a way to improve their image. Solar panels are relatively simple to integrate in the energy solutions of every building.

4.4 Research results

This section focuses on the analysis of the research findings in the interviews. There are also some anonymous citations from the interviewees. The results are divided into key themes according to the interview structure, which is illustrated in Appendix 1.

The research findings are discussed anonymously as requested by the case company. For the purposes of this research the respondents are identified as Respondent A, B and C.

Respondent A is a partner in cooperation, who has shared his own corporate contacts with Company X. Respondent A also has a long experience in b-to-b markets and in this specific business sector. Respondent B is employed by Company X, and has been in the case company from its beginning. Respondent C is the marketing and sales manager in Company X, and has gained previous experience from the solar energy business sector before joining the case company.

4.4.1 Buying behaviour in business-to-business markets

The objective of this theme is to clarify the respondents' opinions about the buying behaviour in b-to-b markets in the selected target groups. The discussion concentrates on the factors they think affect buying decisions, the people that make the buying decisions in the buyer

organisations, to whom the marketing communication should be targeted at, and how interested the target groups are in solar panels.

All the interviewees agreed that buying behaviour depends on the company, and especially on the size of the company. They all divided the companies into large companies and SMEs. In larger companies, it seems that they always have a purchasing department or at least a person that is responsible for all purchases. In SMEs or micro enterprises, it is not always clear who makes the buying decision. Especially in the micro companies, there is not a specific person that makes the buying decision. However, in many cases it is the CEO or the owner of the business who makes the final decision. Therefore, it is important to convince the person in question in order to close the deal. Based on the respondent's experiences, there are no differences in buying behaviour between the companies in different target groups, but there are differences between companies of different sizes.

All the respondents agreed that the marketing communications should be targeted at those departments or people that make the final decision in the companies. When approaching larger companies, marketing communications should be targeted at the purchasing department, or purchasing manager. In the cases of SMEs and micro companies, marketing communications should be targeted at the CEO or the owner of the business. Even if there is a purchasing manager in the company, the CEO makes the final decision. Respondent B emphasised the importance of networking:

"... when you have a wide network, you can target the marketing communications at your own personal contacts, and that's efficient."

Respondent C had an interesting approach:

"... in my opinion it would be good to target the marketing communications directly at the person whose work will be the most facilitated with the product. For instance, at the engineer who is responsible for the energy planning."

All the interviewees agreed that Company X should have an active role when contacting potential customers. Company X has had luck in the beginning of their business, and some customers have found their products by themselves. However, the respondents realise that it has been mostly luck that those customers found them through word of mouth.

When the discussion turned into the factors that affect the organisational buying decision, they all agreed that customer references are essential. With customer references, it is easier to convince the potential customers of the Company's product and service quality. The third

influential factor, after customer references and quality, is often the price. Respondent C has also noticed that, since there is not that much difference in solar panels in the market, additional services provided also affect the buying decision.

All the interviewees believe that solar panels will be an interesting product in the future in Finland. When Finland includes the solar energy Feed-in Tariff in the policy framework, the use of solar panels will increase.

4.4.2 B-to-b marketing communications methods

The objective of this theme is to define the most effective marketing communications methods in opinions of the respondents. The discussion concentrates on different marketing communications methods in b-to-b markets, and especially on the groundwork communications and methods upon first contact.

The discussion in this theme begun with the interviewees' opinions on how the potential customers currently find Company X. It was interesting to notice that all the respondents had a different perception. Respondent A said that the potential customers do not find Company X, but Company X needs to find the right customers by themselves. Respondent B believes that the potential customers find them by word of mouth, and with the help of their personal contacts. Respondent C claimed that:

"The Internet is currently the most popular method to find us, but I believe that the potential customers attend trade fairs, where Company X should be an exhibitor."

Respondent C emphasised the importance of trade fairs. Respondent B and C agreed that there are two sides to attending trade fairs.

"There are two sides in it... It is always a huge risk. The total cost might be 3000-5000 euros, and you might not gain anything... I would invest the same amount of money to other marketing activities." (Respondent A)

"When we estimated all the time used in preparations, how much money you need, how much time you need... How much time and money in the actual trade fair, how much after the trade fairs... We estimated all that, and made a conclusion that benefit from it is relatively small for a SME." (Respondent B)

During the interviews, it was clearly outlined that the biggest reason why Company X has not attended trade fairs were the costs. However, if they had more resources, they would see trade fairs as more of an opportunity.

The interviews revealed that customer reference acquisition is an essential marketing communications method, and necessary in order to get new customers. All three interviewees agreed that they have been asked for customer references every time they have contacted a new potential customer. It was pleasant to notice that companies in general accept to be a customer reference if they are satisfied with the product and service. Customer reference relationship is often seen as a mutual benefit.

“It is normally a proud boast for companies, especially in the field of solar energy, that they use renewable energy solutions. It is like a proud boast for companies to use solar panels. They accept to be a customer reference with pleasure.” (Respondent A)

All the respondents agreed that it is extremely important to follow all the media in the field of business. They mentioned construction trade journals and other professional magazines as the most important medium to follow. Other important media are the Internet, newspapers, and news. Only by following the media, can they know how their competitors and other players in the field act. It is also essential to know the latest trends in the business sector, especially the progression of the Feed-in Tariff.

“There is not a specific media only for renewable energy, but you need to use your imagination to look at right places for the right information. Of course we follow the latest news and developments in the field of business, and look for partners in cooperation and new projects.” (Respondent A)

“This is still an interesting field of business, and regardless a small field in Finland... The press is quite enthusiastic to write about this kind of thing. And I can directly say that we have found a couple of our mechanics through media.” (Respondent B)

It would be desirable to have connections with the press. Respondent C mentioned that even one article about Company X in a professional magazine would increase their coverage significantly.

“It would be useful to even advertise in professional magazines, if we are not able to get there in a form of an article.”

The interviews brought up that a company website is a compulsory marketing communications method. However, all the interviewees were not sure about the benefits. When the discussion turned towards webpages, they all agreed that it is essential to introduce shortly the company history, as well as their products and possible references.

“The first thing our customers want to know is the references, and they want to know if we are a trustworthy partner. Firstly, we want to introduce our company. We want to create an image that we have a certain history and we know what we are talking about.” (Respondent B)

Nevertheless, it was surprising to hear that Respondent B perceives the information on the webpages as unimportant. Respondent B also claims that Company X should have webpages, but the content on the website is irrelevant.

The interviewees had different opinions on the methods that should be used upon first contact. Respondent A and B thought that a phone call is the best method upon a first contact. However, Respondent A thought that the relationship should continue via email with additional information, and Respondent B emphasised the importance of face-to-face meetings as soon as possible after the phone call. Respondent C had a totally different opinion:

“In my opinion, email as a first contact is reasonable. In an email, it is easy to introduce the company and products. The risk of an email is that the recipient does not read it. Therefore, it is important, that the second contact is via phone call.”

As a result of the interviews, it can be said that Company X does not have knowledge on the most efficient groundwork communications methods in their case. They have not used effective groundwork communications methods as a base for their sales communications, and their knowledge on groundwork communications is relatively low.

“That’s the problem, in this field of business it is the most difficult thing... It is really difficult to preface your own work.” (Respondent A)

All the respondents mentioned the same methods as the most efficient for groundwork communications. In their opinion, webpages and networking are essential for groundwork communications. Respondent C also added trade fairs:

“It is important to be visible for competitors and for all the players in the field of business. It is a way to familiarise them with the name of our company.”

In the end, the discussion turned into the marketing communications methods that their competitors use. In their opinion, competitors use the same methods that they are using, and the methods they believe Company X should use. They all mentioned the Internet, personal contacts, word of mouth, and company webpages. Respondent C gave a company example:

"I believe that I know that the competitors use the methods, that Company X should also use. For instance, FinnWind has impressive webpages, where you can find useful information about the company and products. In addition, they have managed to get people to know them, even though they also started as a small company. They have managed to build up credibility in the market."

4.4.3 The message of marketing communications

The objective of this theme is to find out the message that should be communicated to the potential customers through communications methods. The discussion is based on the respondents' opinions about the most important information. In addition, the respondents give their view on the information that is normally asked by the potential customers when approaching them first time.

All three interviewees are of the same opinion that it is essential to find out the customer's needs upon first contact. This makes it easier to attempt to solve the customer's problem with a product of theirs, thus eventually fulfilling the customer's need.

"... we first need to convince the customer how our solar panels will solve their problem. First of course, we need to know the problem, and that is easy to find out by listening the customer and talking with them." (Respondent A)

According to the interviewees' experiences, the first issues that come up from the potential customers are the price and the origin of products. These are the issues that the potential customers ask upon first contact. The origin of products reflects on the perceived reliability and quality of the solar panels. Since the case company's panels are mainly made in China, it might be a substantial issue for some potential customers.

"... someone says that there is really bad quality in China, and someone likes that it (the product) should come from Europe." (Respondent A)

"... so general image of these solar panels according to our market research is that, most of the people does not trust in the quality, even if they know that they are good products... the reason is that the panels are made in China..." (Respondent B)

Respondent B also emphasised that potential customers often want to know the actual benefit of solar panels in their particular situation.

"...simply how much electricity the panels are able to produce. If they buy one panel, two panels, ten panels.. Everyone is interested in the total benefit, if it is worth of the investment." (Respondent B)

4.4.4 The timing of marketing communications

The objective of this theme is to define the most appropriate time for groundwork communications and how soon or often the potential customer should be contacted after a first contact or after certain business actions.

All the interviewees agreed that the most favourable time for first contact is late winter or early spring, because that is the time in Finland when the sun starts to shine for a longer period of time. They have noticed that this is typically the active time in the building trade, since that is when building firms begin construction. In winter, when it is mainly dark in Finland, it is especially hard to sell solar panels. However, larger companies seem to have on-going projects around the year.

"...big budgets are nailed down at certain times in larger companies, but there are construction projects constantly all the time." (Respondent A)

"Construction projects on the next season will be decided in spring time, so that the construction work starts in autumn. Therefore, winter and spring are the best times to contact building firms." (Respondent C)

Based on the experiences of respondents, they have not thought of specific times or weekdays for contacting potential target groups. Since they have not thought of these issues, they are not able to estimate the differences in the timing of marketing communications. However, they all agreed that the messaging might be most efficient in the mornings. Respondent B emphasised that if a small company contacts in the morning or evening, it gives an image that they are working energetically the whole day. Respondent B had a different view on that:

“In my opinion, a company is not well organised if they need to work in the evenings. But it is really difficult to say the most suitable time for everyone.”

As mentioned before, the respondent's have different opinions on the methods that should be used upon first contact. However, they all agreed that after the first contact, the potential customer should be contacted as soon as possible.

“Like I said before, phone call is my method for a first contact... If I call upon first contact, I try to arrange a meeting as soon as possible. I try to go forward straight away.”

All three interviewees concurred that after a business transaction, it is essential to contact the customer on a regular basis. The first contact after a business transaction should be as soon as possible, but always within one week. After that it should be on a regular basis, depending on the customer relationship.

“This is something I learned in a hard way. We had a good relationship with a customer until the business transaction, and after that we forgot the customer. And that is a really bad thing to do.” (Respondent B)

“It is important to contact the customer afterwards, and ask if they have been satisfied with the product. It is also a possibility to survey if there is a possibility for additional sales.” (Respondent C)

4.5 Marketing communications plan for Company X

The preliminary marketing communications plan for Company X is introduced in this section. The marketing communications plan is the outcome of the entire thesis process.

The compilations of the marketing communications plan begun with the present state analysis. The researcher analysed, together with the company representative, Company X's present stage and current marketing communications. After the discussions, the researcher analysed the present stage in the form of a SWOT, and used some time on dissecting the operational environment (see chapters 4.1 and 4.2). The process continued by defining the target groups (see 4.3). The research data was partly obtained through semi-structured interviews, and the research findings of the interviews were used as a base for the marketing communications plan. According to the information in the theoretical framework and the research findings, the researcher compiled a preliminary marketing communications plan.

The emphasis of Company X's strategy is now on new customer acquisition, and getting a foothold in the Finnish market. Thus, the focus in the marketing communications strategy is on the same issues. The objectives of marketing communications are discussed later more in detail. Since Company X is yet a small company, and has limited resources, they need to focus on the selected target groups in order to achieve the best possible results with their communication efforts. Their marketing communications is planned for the selected target groups.

The marketing communications plan is based on the structure of Rope, in which the marketing communications strategy is divided into three categories: groundwork communications, sales communications, and customer relationship communications. However, the marketing communications plan in question only concentrates on groundwork and sales communications. The marketing communications plan is realised according to these two categories with the methods that belong to those categories. As mentioned before, the budget of marketing communications is excluded from the plan.

The follow-up is introduced in the end of this section. The writer has suggested separate metrics for each communication method, and those metrics can be utilised in the follow-up. The objective of the follow-up is to utilise the information in the next planning process.

4.5.1 The objectives and message

The objective of marketing communications is to increase the market's awareness of the company and products, and get a foothold in the Finnish market. Company X wants to send out a message that it is a worthy partner within the renewable energy market. The purpose of marketing communications is also to facilitate new customer acquisition. The objective is to differentiate from the competitors' products with a comprehensive solution (the product and installation). Company X should build their marketing communication message according to their objectives.

In general, solar energy solutions are seen as luxury products. Company X is willing to attempt changing the view of the general public, so that people would see solar panels more as functional products. Marketing communications has an important role in changing the way people think, and increasing demand. If there is no demand in the market, they need to create the demand somehow. Making solar panels a more functional option might increase demand. Therefore, the company needs to have a different approach in their marketing communications message.

The message of marketing communications should be planned carefully. Especially with groundwork communications, Company X should build an image they want to achieve. According to the research results, traditionally the customers are eager to know the price and origin of the product upon first contact. The origin of products is often questioned, since it reflects the product quality. Customer references have a huge impact on consumers' buying decisions, and therefore references should be included in the marketing communications message. With the help of customer references, a company is able to guarantee the potential customers of their quality products and services.

As mentioned before, solar panels are often seen as luxury products. In most of the cases, companies need to know the actual benefits of solar panels before they are willing to consider the purchase. For instance, a construction company wants to know how much money different solar panel solutions could save on the electricity bills of the building in question. Customer references have an important role in this case, since potential customers feel they are buying something useful when they see a concrete case example.

4.5.2 Target groups

Currently the case company has not segmented markets, but shot in the dark by targeting different kinds of companies. Because of the limited resources, the case company should implement concentration strategy in their marketing operations, and concentrate on the selected target groups. There is no point to target at the entire market if they are eager to achieve the best possible results.

As defined before, the marketing communications plan is targeted at real estate developers and building firms. These target groups are selected, since it is not only important to get those companies to be familiar with Company X and to buy their products, but also to widen the network within the industry. In addition, Company X believes that they need to be known in the building trade.

Marketing communications is in an essential role when an organisation is making a buying decision. Marketing communications should be targeted at the selected target groups, especially when the resources are limited. Then the message is tailored to the needs of those target groups.

After selecting the target groups, the next thing is to decide to whom in the companies the marketing communications should be targeted at. Based on the research results, there are differences between small and large companies. In large companies, the marketing communications should be targeted at purchasing departments or purchasing managers. In

smaller companies, on the other hand, the marketing communications should be targeted at the CEOs or the owners of businesses. If the marketing communications is targeted at the wrong people, it is of no use.

All in all, Company X should first concentrate on SMEs. So far they have more experience in working with smaller companies, and it is easier to identify themselves with companies that have similar organisational structures.

4.5.3 Marketing communications mix

The marketing communications mix depends on several factors: the objectives, situation, message, and objects of communications. Planning the communications mix is a question of which communications methods will be used in the selected target groups. Chosen communication methods should be reasonable, and the starting point of selection is the objectives of the case company.

Rope's structure and the desires of the case company affected the selection of the communications mix. The marketing communications plan is compiled in cooperation with the company representative. The objective was to find the most effective marketing communications methods for the selected target groups, and the most suitable methods to achieve their objectives. Since Company X is in the development stage and resources are limited, the focus is on the methods that do not require that many resources. This plan also includes some suggestions that may be useful in the future.

In the communications mix, each method is used to accomplish a different objective. The researcher has tried to compile a distinct and creative combination of methods in order to achieve the case company's objectives.

4.5.3.1 Groundwork communications

Currently the case company has no planned groundwork communications. According to the research results, Company X does not have a clear idea of the information that should be conveyed during groundwork communications. Since the case company is still in the development stage and they are now focusing on new customer acquisition, they should invest more time and effort in groundwork communications.

The purpose of groundwork communications is to support trading. With groundwork communications, the case company strives to increase awareness, increase recognition, build a company image, and widen their contact network.

The most suitable groundwork communications methods for Company X's purposes are chosen for the communications mix. The selection is based on the research results, researcher's own reasoning, and on the cooperation with the case company. The selected methods are presented as follows.

Publicity management

The objective of publicity management is to increase the awareness in the minds of interest groups. Informing is important in companies, and it normally has a positive effect on attitudes towards the company. Since the case company is still small and unknown in the market, it might be difficult to bring about results by informing. The case company should not invest too much in informing, because the media might not be interested in the small company's news. However, if the case company is attending trade fairs, they should try to use this as a platform to inform different interest groups about their topical and upcoming news. This might attract the professional magazines that are present in trade fairs, and result as an article in the magazine. Articles in professional magazines create confidence towards the company, since they are not paid advertisements.

As soon as the case company has something to inform, they should prepare a press release and distribute it to appropriate media. This could be a professional magazine in the field of business. A press release should be informative, factual, and announce a contact person for further information. Press releases can also be published on the company webpage.

Trade fairs

The objectives of attending trade fairs are to increase the awareness among the industry and widen and create networks. Even though the research findings concerning trade fairs were contradictory, the researcher came to the conclusion that the case company should invest in professional trade fairs. Trade fairs are good coverage for the company. By attending trade fairs, the case company increases awareness within their potential customers and other important players in their business sector.

Company X should attend professional trade fairs and happenings in the construction industry. There are many trade fairs around the year, for instance Vasara Pohjanmaan Rakennusmessut 2012 or Omakoti-2012 Messut in October. Those are both organised every year, and it is easy to find information of past years trade fairs, and see the type of companies that are normally attending. When attending trade fairs, it is essential to target the stand at the audience. The

case company could begin by attending a carefully selected professional trade fair once every year.

The best way to utilise professional trade fairs is to raise company awareness and get contacts. Instead of only distributing their own brochures, Company X should concentrate on collecting contact information from the potential customers. By attending trade fairs, the case company might widen their networks in a way that would not be possible otherwise. Therefore, trade fairs are the best way to raise company awareness and widen networks. The attendance in professional trade fairs should be well prepared, and the company representatives need to be active during the trade fairs.

The press is also present in trade fairs, and professional magazines are interested in new and innovative exhibitors. Press releases and introductions to journalists in this connection are often efficient. Therefore, trade fairs are also right places to get articles or adverts into professional magazines. Company X could also create updated content to their webpages by informing of their attendance in trade fairs.

Metrics: the amount of new contacts during and after the trade fairs, possible articles, the visitors on the company webpage

Online communications

The objective of online communications is to build an image of the company. Online communications is an important method for groundwork communications, since the Internet has an essential role in everyday marketing communications. Companies hardly ever have a clear idea how to implement online communications, and how much time, money and resources to use for it. According to the research findings, that is also the case with Company X.

The most important online communications method for the case company is now their own webpages. This is because they do not have much time or other resources. Webpages are relatively easy to maintain, but Company X should concentrate more on the content. The case company's current webpages are poor, and there should be more information on the company, products and renewable energy industry in general. In addition, Company X should update the webpages more often.

Based on the research results, every company should nowadays have webpages. When a company has a website, they are often perceived to be a more reliable company. The interviews revealed that the information on the company webpage should first and foremost

include the information potential customers traditionally first want to know. When the case company designs their webpages, they should evaluate who the potential users will be, reasons for coming to the site, the information they are looking for, and how to win over the revisit. Therefore, it is important to introduce the company in a way that it creates an image that they have a certain history and their operations look professional. The products should be introduced, but not in too much detail. There should also be customer references in order to create an image that the company is a trustworthy partner.

In addition to the company and product information, the webpages should include general information about solar energy solutions and solar panels. The webpages could include information on the Feed-In Tariff and other developments in the industry. The case company could also include case examples on how much electricity the panels are able to produce, and define the concrete benefits of solar panels. This is because the people working in the buyer organisations and making the buying decision might not have enough knowledge on solar energy solution.

According to research findings, potential customers do not find Company X themselves, but the case company should be in an active role in finding the right potential customers. Potential customers might not find Company X and their webpages by themselves, but that is why the groundwork communications is in an essential role. When Company X contacts a potential customer for a first time, the first information many potential customers seek after the contact is the company's webpages. Therefore, the information and message on the webpage is especially important. If there is insufficient information on the website, there is a risk that the potential customer might switch to a competitor's website which includes the appropriate information.

In general, users appreciate usability and simple design in webpages. It was also revealed during the interviews that the webpages should be easy to perceive. One of the interviewees also gave an example of a good company webpage, that is easy to perceive and has all the information needed. The company is still very small, but has managed to build a trustworthy company image.

In addition to the webpages, the case company should bear in mind that email is also part of their online communications. Even if it is not used as a planned marketing communications method, Company X should remember that every email sent by the member of their company is part of their communication. Therefore, it is a way of creating images of the company and the messages should be designed properly. They could always use the same font in each email and have common rules of the style. Permanent and public information should rather be

published on the company webpage than in an email. These are small things, but can give a more professional image of the company.

All in all, online communications should not be a substitute for other methods, but should support other marketing communications methods. There is still a need for personal and print communications.

Metrics: the number of visitors on the webpages (view counter or Google Analytics)

Customer reference acquisition

The objective of customer reference acquisition is to create an image of a trustworthy partner and perception of product quality. Based on the research findings, customer references are essential and potential customers ask references in every occasion. Currently the case company does not have any customer references in Finland, but there are some pilot customers that are testing their products. Company X should acquire at least one quality reference in order to attract more customers and eventually more customer references.

According to research findings, it should not be difficult to acquire customer references. In general, companies often agree to be customer references. It is seen as a mutual benefit, since the customer also gains more coverage. Especially renewable energy solutions are often seen as positive issues, and Company X's customers might improve their images by using solar energy solutions in their operations. Customer reference acquisition should be cooperation between the company and the reference company. Consequently, if the case company manages to acquire customer references, the cooperation might deepen the customer relationship, and eventually result in a repurchase.

When the case company acquires a suitable pilot customer, they should also try to negotiate a reference agreement. There are several issues that the case company should take into account when acquiring customer references. The customer should have a positive attitude towards the company, volunteer to tell about the product and cooperate with the case company, and agree to give a positive expert opinion if needed. With these issues in mind, the case company should manage to acquire a quality reference in the Finnish market.

Metrics: the number of customer references versus the number of new customers

Word of Mouth

The objective of word of mouth is to build wide networks. According to the research findings, wide networks and personal contacts are essential when operating in small companies. When the key people in companies have wide networks, it is more likely that potential customers hear about the company through word of mouth. Since the case company is a small and unknown company, they should deal with each customer and pilot customer properly, and convince them of the quality their operations.

Marketing communications methods themselves are able to generate word of mouth. Combination of different methods and interesting messages may encourage discussion among current and potential customers.

Word of mouth is important to bear in mind, and especially the results of it. Key people in the case company should be active and inform stakeholders about their company on different occasions. In addition, they should listen to possible feedback and experiences from their pilot customers, and react accordingly.

4.5.3.2 Sales communications

The case company is currently focusing only on their sales communications. There should, however, be well-planned groundwork communications before that. Sales communications includes methods that are used after groundwork communications, and leads eventually towards the buying decision. Based on the research findings, Company X does not have a collective view on the methods that should be used in sales communications.

With sales communications, the case company is aiming at achieving a first purchase. If groundwork communications have been successful, it is more likely that the sales communications is also successful. Company X is currently using email, telephone and personal sales work as separate methods. According to the interviewees' experiences, there are some differences in the efficiency of different methods. However, the case company should utilise the benefits of each method, and define objectives for them.

The most suitable sales communications methods are chosen for the case company's marketing communications mix to form a practical unity. The selection of methods is based on the research findings, researcher's own reasoning, and Rope's multiphase model of b-to-b sales communications. Sales communications consist of direct mail, telephone marketing and personal selling. All three parts of the process have their own objectives and roles to support the marketing communications mix.

Direct mail

Based on the research findings, the opinions of the efficiency of direct mail are contradictory. Nevertheless it should be included in sales communications, to support groundwork communications and the selling process. Direct mail can also be seen as groundwork for sales communications. Since the resources of the case company are limited, the most suitable direct mail method would be email.

The role of direct mail in sales communications is to arouse interest in the potential customer. Direct mail should be tailored to the selected target groups and the message well structured. As mentioned before (see 4.5.2), it is important to target the direct mail to a specific person in the company. The timing of direct mail is important, because otherwise it will not support other sales communications methods. If the time period for sales communication is planned to be from January to April, the direct mail should be sent out in the beginning of the year.

The objective of direct mail is to arouse the interest in the potential buyer and get them familiar with the products. Company X's potential customers should be familiar with the company because of the groundwork communications, but direct mail is a good opportunity to give additional information on the products.

According to the interviews, it is important to have continuous relationship with current and potential customers. Direct mail is easy to send out several times a year, in order to remind potential and current customers of their existence. Some potential customers that were not interested in the products last time might have changed their minds, and current customers might be considering their next purchases. When Company X has more resources, they could also use print documents as direct mail.

Metrics: the amount of visitors on the webpage after direct mail, the amount of new contacts after direct mail

Telephone communications

According to the research findings, telephone is often seen as an efficient communication method. It is the most effective way of making first personal contact. In a phone call, Company X can instantly introduce the subject and clarify the need of a potential customer. If the phone call is prefaced by groundwork communications and direct mail, it is easier to convince the potential customer.

The objective of telephone communications is to arrange a meeting with the potential customer for sales negotiations. It is not necessarily meant to be a sales method, but a tool for arranging sales negotiations. The message of telephone communications should be supported by direct mail, and it is a possibility for Company X to define the needs of potential customers. When the case company has managed to define the needs and arrange a meeting, the groundwork for personal selling is properly done.

If it seems that the potential customer still needs some additional information before the sales negotiations, the case company could use another direct mail before the meeting. It is important to define the customer need, in order to offer the most suitable solution and price for their needs.

Metrics: the number of business meetings versus the number of phone calls

Personal selling

Personal sales work in the sales negotiations is relatively easy if all the other communications methods have succeeded. Groundwork communications and other sales communications methods build an essential basis for personal selling. Company X has currently concentrated on using only one sales communications method at a time. Personal selling needs support from other methods to create positive images above and beyond personal selling.

As the research results revealed, that the most important thing is to arrange the face-to-face meeting as soon as possible, because the competition is high and a competitor might otherwise intervene between the company and the customer. Based on the research findings, face-to-face meeting is the most efficient communications for a small company. With personal sales work, it is easier to convince the customer of the products.

The objective of personal sales work is to make an offer for the customer and eventually close the deal. Personal selling has an important role in achieving the objectives of the whole business. When the sales person knows the customer's needs, it is easier to close the deal. Since the case company's product is complex and tailored to the customer needs, the information need is high. The sales person must be able to answer questions and raise the profile of issues that seem to be important to the potential customer. Therefore, the sales person must also know the product details thoroughly.

Personal selling requires resources, but it is worth the investment. Especially for the case company, personal selling is an important investment. It is very rare that a business

transaction is made without personal selling. If personal selling is not thoroughly planned and preparations properly made, there is a risk of failure.

Metrics: how often do sales negotiations result as a closed deal?

4.5.4 Scheduling

The following is a preliminary schedule for the marketing communications mix. The schedule is validated by the research results. Based on this schedule, Company X can develop a stricter schedule.

The timing of marketing communications should be properly planned, in order to get most out of it. According to the research results, the sales communications should begin late in the winter or in early spring. Therefore, groundwork communications should be done during autumn and winter. Even though autumn and winter are dark in Finland, it is the best time to affect the market's awareness of the company. When the sun comes up, in the late winter and spring, it is the time to begin the sales communications.

Groundwork communications

- around the year
- emphasis on autumn / winter (September to December)

Sales communications

- begins in the late winter (January to April)
- email to target groups in the beginning of the year
- phone call as soon as possible after the email

Marketing communications should operate year-round. It is essential to remember to continue the marketing communications process also when the company starts to get customers, since they need customers also for the next year.

4.5.5 Follow-up

The aim of this section is to give a rough idea on how the case company should implement follow-up. The case company should follow-up their marketing communications, since it is an important tool for the next planning process. The objective of follow-up is to collect and analyse information that can be utilised when planning marketing communications next time.

There are some metrics presented after each communications method. Company X should collect information when using different communications methods. The collected information is useful, since they can estimate the success of different methods and messages. After each year, Company X is able to measure and analyse the information, and make conclusions of it. The results will, with the help of their experiences, give a comprehensive image of what should be changed in their marketing communications in the years to come.

5 Conclusions and recommendations

The answer to the research problem “which communications methods would be the most efficient in the selected target groups?” is presented above in the marketing communications plan. The plan defines the most effective marketing communications mix in the selected target groups. One can conclude that a marketing communications that is compounded of versatile groundwork and sales communications methods would service the case company. The versatile use of different marketing communications methods would support their objectives of acquiring new customers, improving a company image, and increasing awareness in the minds of their interest groups.

Well-executed and comprehensive marketing communications would support the case company's other business operations. Different groundwork and sales communications methods divided into separate periods would support their objectives to acquire new customers and customer references.

Diverse selection of groundwork communications methods increases the market's awareness of the case company and their products, and eventually builds an image of a trustworthy company. Groundwork communications is in an essential role, since it is the base for sales communications. Effective and well-structured sales communication should include different communications methods. By using a multiphase strategy in sales communications, the case company increases the possibility of closed deals.

Marketing communications should be a continuous process, and a single planning effort is not enough to build a comprehensive marketing communications strategy. The case company should invest more in marketing communications in the future, in order to have communications as part of their everyday business operations. Effective marketing communications require continuity. When executing the marketing communications plan, the case company should evaluate the functionality of separate communications methods, and the effectiveness of the plan in its entirety. Follow-up is an essential part of the process, since it is a base for the next marketing communications strategy.

The writer has presented concrete actions on how the marketing communications should be implemented in the case company. It is the case company's responsibility to execute the plan and implement the follow-up.

The writer recommends that the case company should further develop their marketing communications, by utilising the variety of methods. The case company could utilise more online communications, because it is relatively cheap way of using different methods. Search engine marketing and electronic publications could be added to the marketing communications mix to support other groundwork communications methods. In addition, advertisements in specific professional magazines could also be added to the marketing communications mix when the financial resources increase. The researcher also suggests the case company could include customer relationship communications in their communication mix after they have acquired some customers.

Since the research findings were only based on interviewees' experiences and the researcher's own reasoning, there is a need for further studies. The writer recommends that the case company will execute further studies when they have acquired customers. They could then define the opinions of their current and potential customers on different marketing communications methods. The research findings could then be utilised in the next planning process.

The writer suggests that the case company will devote more resources to plan patiently marketing communications in order to build a company image and acquire new customers. The case company should see marketing communications as part of their everyday operations. Every member of the organisation should be conscious of the objectives of each marketing communications method. Although the resources in the case company are limited, they should particularly invest more in groundwork communications. The prerequisite of success in marketing communication is long-term investment.

6 Theoretical linkage

The theoretical background was compiled based on the research problem and the sub questions. Examination and throughout analysis of b-to-b marketing communications was a strong base for the empirical study. Understanding organisational buying behaviour, marketing communications, and different b-to-b marketing communications methods created a basis for the theory on marketing communications planning used in the study. By studying theory on marketing communications planning processes, the researcher was able to compile a comprehensive marketing communications plan for the case company. Compilation of the

theoretical background provided the researcher with the right methods and tools for solving the research problem.

7 Final words

The writer of the study is satisfied with the research results and believes that the outcome of the study meets the objectives. The marketing communications plan for the case company strives to answer the research problem "which communications methods would be the most efficient for the selected target groups?". In the future, a way to measure the final results is establishing how thoroughly the case company has been able to utilise the results and to what extent they have executed the plan.

The thesis process has required a lot of resources from the writer. Strong cooperation with the company representative has been helpful during the research process. It has been interesting to collaborate with a start-up company, and see the challenges in their business operations. From a student's perspective, the research process has enabled wider understanding of entireties in the subject areas. Hopefully the outcome of the study is beneficial and gives additional value for the case company.

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The interview structure

Theme 1: Buying behaviour in b-to-b markets

- Who makes the buying decision in the buyer organisations?
- In your experience, what factors affect the buying decision?
- To whom in the organisation should the marketing communications be targeted at?
- Has Company X been in an active role when contacting potential customers or have potential customers directly contacted you?
- What solar panel features are the most important from the customer's point of view?
- Do you believe that interest towards solar panels will increase in the future?

Theme 2: Marketing communications methods in b-to-b markets

- In your opinion, what is the most likely way a potential customer will find Company X?
- Do you attend trade fairs? Have you acquired any new contacts by attending trade fairs?
- How important it is to have customer references? Do you believe that companies agree to be your customer references if they are satisfied with your performance?
- How often do you read professional magazines or other media in the field of business?
- In your opinion, what is the most efficient marketing communications method upon first contact?
- How often do companies contact you via your webpages? Which features on the company webpage do you consider to be most important?
- In your opinion, which groundwork communications methods are the most efficient?
- Do you know what marketing communications methods your competitors use?

Theme 3: The message of marketing communications

- In your opinion, what is the most important information upon first contact from the customer's point of view?
- What do companies usually want to know upon first contact?

Theme 4: The timing of marketing communications

- When is the best time for a first contact? (season, day of the week, moment of the day)
- How frequently after the first contact would you contact the potential customer? How about after a business transaction?
- How soon after a business meeting would you contact the company again?
- In your opinion, who are the potential customers for this product?
- Is there still something you want to say?

Teemahaastattelurunko

Teema 1: Ostokäyttäytyminen B2B-markkinoilla

- Kokemuksesi mukaan, kuka tekee ostajayrityksissä ostopäätöksen?
- Mitkä olet huomannut olevan ostopäätökseen vaikuttavia tekijöitä?
- Kenelle mielestäsi yrityksessä markkinointiviestintä tulisi kohdistaa?
- Onko Yritys X saanut potentiaalisia asiakaskontakteja niin, että yritykset ovat itse ottaneet yhteyttä vai onko yritys ollut itse aktiivisessa roolissa?
- Mitkä olet huomannut olevan asiakkaalle tärkeimpiä ominaisuuksia aurinkopaneeleissa?
- Uskotteko aurinkopaneelien olevan tulevaisuudessa kiinnostava tuote?

Teema 2: B2B-markkinointiviestinnän keinot

- Miten uskotte potentiaalisten asiakkaiden löytävän teidät?
- Osallistutteko messuille? Jos kyllä, oletteko saaneet sieltä uusia kontakteja?
- Onko teiltä kysytty asiakasreferenssejä? Uskotteko yritysten suostuvan asiakasreferensseiksi, mikäli he ovat tyytyväisiä tuotteisiin?
- Luetteko alan ammattilehtiä tai muuta alan mediaa? Löytyykö sitä kautta mahdollisia yhteistyökumppaneita, yrityksiä yms.?
- Minkä olet kokenut olevan hyvä keino tehdä ensikontakti?
- Onko teihin otettu yhteyttä nettisivujen perusteella?
- Mitkä pohjustusviestinnän keinot ovat mielestänne tehokkaimpia?
- Tiedättekö mitä markkinointiviestinnän keinoja kilpailijat käyttävät?

Teema 3: Markkinointiviestinnän sisältö

- Mitkä uskot olevan tärkeimmät tiedot, kun ollaan ensimmäistä kertaa uuteen asiakkaaseen yhteydessä?
- Mitä yritykset haluavat ensimmäisenä tietää yrityksestänne tai tuotteistanne?

Teema 4: Markkinointiviestinnän ajoitus

- Minkä koet hyväksi ajankohdaksi ensikontaktille? (vuodenaika, viikonpäivä, kellonaika)
- Kuinka usein/pian ensikontaktin jälkeen olisi mielestäsi sopivaa olla yhteydessä? Entä kaupan tekemisen jälkeen?
- Kuinka pian myyntitapaaminen jälkeen kannattaa kokemuksesi mukaan olla yhteydessä?
- Mitkä ovat mielestänne potentiaalisia asiakkaita kyseiselle tuotteelle?
- Haluatko vielä sanoa jotain, mitä minä en huomannut sanoa?