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Customer Experience in B2B Virtual Sales Meeting



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Since March 2020, B2B customer meetings have faced major changes, as the sudden Covid-19 pandemic caused face to face meetings to move into a fully virtual world. Customers as well as salespeople have both had to learn new ways to work together and communicate in a virtual environment. The change has affected the customer experience, the purchasing process and enabled different practices between both the customer and the salespeople.

The objective of this thesis was to study the customer experience in virtual B2B sales meetings. The aim was to find out how do the B2B customers experience virtual sales meetings, what customers expect before the virtual sales meeting, what are the experiences of B2B customers during a virtual sales meeting and what are the B2B customers`future expectations. In addition to the theoretical part, the answers to these were sought by interviewing the experiences of business decision makers made during October and November 2021.

The end result of the thesis is the factors that have emerged from the interviews, which affect the customer experience and on the basis of which salespeople can improve the success of a virtual sales meeting.

Keywords:

Customer experience, virtual meeting, virtual sales

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Asiakaskokemus virtuaalisissa B2B-myyntitapaamisissa

Maaliskuun 2020 jälkeen B2B-asiakastapaamiset ovat olleet murroksessa, sillä Covid-19 pandemian aiheuttama äkillinen muutos sai asiakastapaamiset siirtymään kokonaan virtuaaliseen maailmaan. Asiakkaat sekä myyjät ovat joutuneet opettelemaan uusia tapoja työskennellä yhdessä virtuaalisesti. Muutos on vaikuttanut asiakaskokemukseen, ostoprosessiin sekä mahdollistanut erilaisten käytäntöjen syntyminen niin asiakkaan kuin myyjän välille.

Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli tutkia asiakaskokemusta virtuaalisissa B2B-myyntitapaamisissa. Opinnäytetyössä selvitettiin, miten B2B asiakkaat kokevat virtuaaliset myyntitapaamiset, mitä B2B-asiakkaat odottavat ennen virtuaalista myyntitapaamista, millaisia kokemuksia B2B-asiakkailla on syntynyt virtuaalisten myyntitapaamisten aikana sekä millaisia odotuksia B2B-asiakkailla on tulevaisuuden virtuaalisista myyntitapaamisista. Näihin kysymyksiin haettiin vastauksia teoriaosuuden lisäksi haastattelemalla yritysten päättäjien kokemuksia, haastattelut toteutettiin lokakuussa ja marraskuussa 2021.

Työn lopputuloksena osoitetaan ne asiakaskokemukseen vaikuttavat tekijät, jotka nousivat haastatteluissa esille ja joiden pohjalta myyjät voivat parantaa virtuaalisen myyntitapaamisen onnistumista asiakkaiden kanssa.

Asiasanat:

Asiakaskokemus, virtuaalinen myyntitapaaminen, virtuaalinen myynti

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List of abbreviations (or) symbols

Abbreviation	Explanation of abbreviation (Source)
B2B	Business-to-Business
Covid-19	Coronavirus disease 2019 (European Medicines Agency)

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and the Case Company X

The Covid-19 pandemic has been one of the most topical issues since March 2020. Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March 2020 and a recommendation from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health recommended moving to work remotely and avoiding social contacts to prevent a pandemic. (THL, 2020) According to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2021), the nationwide recommendation on remote work ended in October 2021. However, the Covid-19 impact on the business world has been significant from an economic point of view, but it has also affected the way we work. The change caused by the pandemic happened so quickly that it was not possible to prepare for it in advance. As a result, companies had to find new ways to adapt to the situation and continue their business.

Digitization is present in our daily work in the business world. With the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the B2B customer meetings have turned into virtual meetings in digital environment. The digital environment offers both the customer and the salespeople the opportunity to hold virtual meetings. In B2B sales, the digital environment is most often provided by Microsoft Teams (later Teams), Zoom, Skype, or Google Meets, where the interaction between the customer and the salespeople takes place.

I have been working in B2B sales for the past 14 years and I have seen a lot of change in both buying behavior and working habits. The latest change is that I have only recently met my customers in virtual meetings. Kvedare & Nymand (2021) have found a lot of positive effects related to virtual meetings, such as health effects, eco-friendly effects and efficiency effects. According to Kvedare & Nymand (2021) 70% of companies plan to hold customer meetings virtually in the future. In my opinion, in order to be able to hold on to the benefits of these virtual meetings in the future, we must also consider a good customer experience in virtual interaction.

The commissioner of the thesis is Company X Oy. Company X Oy is part of Company Group and is one of the largest credit management service provider in Europe. Service portfolio consists of information management services, invoicing and ledger services, debt collection services and debt purchase. The industry is characterized by customized service packages that are outsourced by customers.

I have worked for the Company X Oy for the last three years in B2B sales as a Sales Executive. In my experience in this business sector, the customer journey from prospect to customer can take from four months to a few years. The customer journey includes several meetings where we deepen our understanding of the customer's business, identify needs, build trust and build value-creating solutions for customer credit management. In this industry, sales are therefore consultative selling. According to Hicks (2008), consultative selling is helping the customer, where the salesperson and the customer work together to solve problems through dialogue, whereby cooperation is based on sincerity and trust between the parties. In addition, according to Hanan (2004), consultative selling is the way to deliver value to the customer. From a value perspective, price is seen as an investment in current operations and the future that bring added value to the customer's business.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most of the face-to-face meetings with customers became virtual in Company X and all Company X salespeople have since met their customers and prospects in virtual meetings. In the Company X virtual meetings play a significant role and are important to the success of the entire customer journey. Company X wants to find out what kind of virtual sales meeting customers and prospects expect today and what their customer experience is in virtual sales meetings. Based on this research, Company X can develop customer satisfaction in virtual sales meetings and salespeople can develop their sales method to meet customer expectations.

1.2 The objective of the thesis and the research question

The purpose of this thesis is to help to understand customer experiences and expectations in B2B sales from the perspective of a virtual sales meeting. The results of the thesis can be utilized both in prospecting new customers and in customer relationship management. The thesis is limited to the customer experience in a virtual B2B sales meeting.

The aim of the study is to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the B2B customers experience virtual sales meetings?
2. What B2B customers expect before the virtual sales meeting?
3. What are the experiences of B2B customers during a virtual sales meeting?
4. What are the B2B customers' future expectations for virtual sales meetings?

1.3 The research method

The research method was a qualitative method, which were carried out in the form of virtual thematic interviews. The thematic interview was semi-structured and recorded for the analyzing phase. The interviewees will be corporate decision makers who meet suppliers virtually because of working remotely. There will be 8 people to be interviewed.

A qualitative method is a valuable and effective way to get information gathered. The questions are mostly open-ended. Gathering data gives an opportunity to understand more multidimensional experiences. A qualitative research enables researcher establish specific and conscious goals. (Walle, 2015.)

2 VIRTUAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

2.1 The digital revolution in B2B sales

In the early 2000s, B2B salespeople almost always met their customer face-to-face. With the expansion and exploitation of the Internet, the world became very multi-channel. Today`s B2B customers use the channel of their choice at various stages of the buying process. (Angevine et al., 2018). With digitalisation, different technologies have entered the buying and selling processes, which has changed the interaction between sellers and B2B customers in the business environment. In addition, social media and artificial intelligence make their own impact on interaction. This has brought new challenges to B2B sales as the interaction becomes more diverse. (Rusthollkarhu et al., 2020.)

Companies are undergoing a digital transformation, using technology to move to a business model and strategy based on digitalisation. The digital transformation requires that new or existing business-related processes meet changing requirements from a business and market perspective. (Mattila et al., 2021.)

The biggest drivers of digital change are the change in buying behavior, as B2B customers have made 60% of their buying decision before meeting a salesperson. The digital change has also affected marketing to communicate with both customers and salespeople. By 2025, about 80% of B2B sales interactions will take place through digital channels. (Alamäki & Korpela, 2021.)

When we talk about a virtual business environment, the channels of virtual sales are calls, video messaging and meeting, telephone calls, interactive chat, text messaging, email, voicemail and audio messaging, social media, direct messaging and snail mail. Many of these channels are already familiar to salespeople and customers, as the technology has already existed. It is mainly about salespeople and customers adopting new ways and utilizing them in the business culture and environment. (Blount, 2020.)

There is a lot of potential in virtual selling and positive experiences with virtual sales will help virtual sales establish its position in the business world. This is supported by studies of positive effects by Kvedare & Nymand (2021). From the perspective of salespeople, virtual sales have many positive effects, the most important of which are time use, productivity, and results. In addition, virtual sales increase opportunities to promote health and well-being. From the customer's perspective, the benefits of virtual sales are the ability to hold virtual meetings more often and more efficiently whenever there is a need. High efficiency and productivity have been studied to increase customer satisfaction. 75% of B2B buyers believe that virtual sales appointments are more effective than physical ones (Kvedare & Nymand, 2021.)

This study focuses on virtual B2B sales meetings, where a virtual sales meeting takes place using an application, e.g., Teams, Google meets, or Zoom. In this context, it is also good to clarify the definition of a meeting. The definition of a meeting in B2B context is that the purpose of the meeting is usually at least one of these; to influence others, to make decisions, to solve problems or to strengthen relationships. (Kvedare & Nymand, 2021.)

Interaction in a virtual B2B environment

In a virtual B2B environment, interactive communication is a two-way dialogue between buyers and salespeople. Communication can be personal, digital or impersonal and these different ways affect the B2B customer experience. (Murphy & Sashi, 2018). Bolton et al. (2018) have identified three factors in the dimension of customer experience, digital, physical, and social. In this dimension, digitality and physicality are either opposites of each other or can be a combination of each other, and both can have varying degrees of social presence. In both physical and virtual environments, the emergence of social presence is influenced by the interaction between humans and non-human ones, such as chat robots. In the dimension of customer experience, it is essential to combine these three factors so that they create a superior experience for the customer.

Bharadwaj & Shipley (2020) have investigated the impact of digital sales interaction (DSI) on technology-driven, face-to-face interaction between buyer and seller. At different stages of a customer's buying journey, digital sales interaction can occur at any stage, so the customer experience can change with digitalization and technology.

Most of the B2B customers want great digital interactions and the human connection, this varies depending on what stage the customer is on their purchasing path. It has been found that when getting known with a new supplier or service, 2/3 of the customers wants to have a face-to-face discussions and further negotiations can be continued virtually. The observation of the McKinsey research was that sales organization should understand where the customer wants virtual and where human interaction. After the purchase, 85 percent of customers want to prefer digital interaction. The optimal combination of interaction and process in B2B sales would be speed, transparency and expertise for the customer. In other words "Customers want a great digital experience and a great human experience." (Angevine et al., 2018, 4.)

Hybrid Model

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed B2B sales and forced both salespeople and customers to change their practices. As organizations have developed their digital channels and capabilities during the Covid-19 pandemic, customers have also begun to rely on digital interaction. The change caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has led companies to question old habits and consider whether in the future they could opt for virtual interaction instead of traditional face-to-face sales. The most important part of the future sales model is the adaptation of B2B sales and the new hybrid sales model that will result from it. (Rangarajan et al., 2021.)

According to Kvedare & Nymand (2021), in the future we will probably end up with a hybrid model (Figure 1) in the business world.

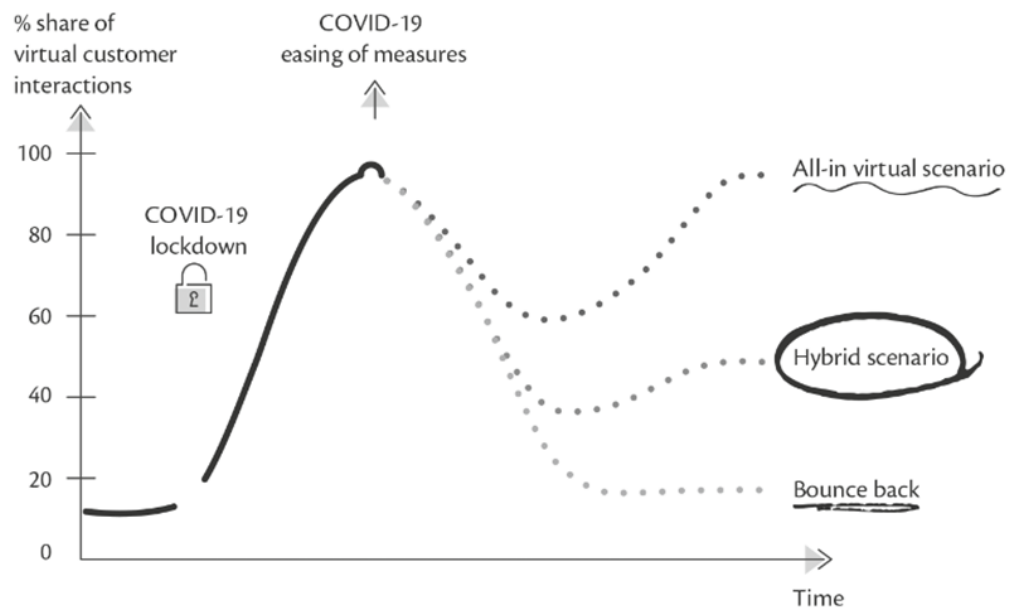


Figure 1. The hybrid sales model after Covid 19 (Kvedare & Nymand, 2021).

Hybrid sales model is a model that combines the best aspect of both a virtual and a face-to-face meeting, i.e., selects the method for the meeting that is best suited to the situation at any given time and suitable for both parties. The hybrid model is also supported by the view of salespeople and customers, with 60% of salespeople and customers believing that virtual appointments replace face-to-face meetings. However, the exact future of the hybrid model is not yet known to which level it will return, so at this stage the scenario is still being discussed. (Kvedare & Nymand, 2021.)

2.2 Elements of the virtual selling

Blount (2020, 19.) defines virtual sales as; "Virtual selling is simply leveraging virtual communication channels in place of physical, face-to-face interaction.". According Kvedare & Nymand (2021) there are many things from the perspective of both salespeople and customers after face-to-face meetings become virtual. From the point of view of salespeople, salespeople have about 34 more free hours per month, 40% of salespeople feel that the sales process has been shortened and in addition, 57% of salespeople experience an increase in sales

success rate due to virtual sales presentations. On the other hand, from the customer's point of view 63% of customers feel that a virtual sales meeting is shorter and more relevant.

Virtual sales features from a salesperson perspective

Schultz et al. (2020) has recognized, that virtual selling can be divided into four different areas (Figure 2) that stand out the most when compared to face-to-face selling. The four areas that salespeople have to do and success are connect, engage, collaborate and influence.

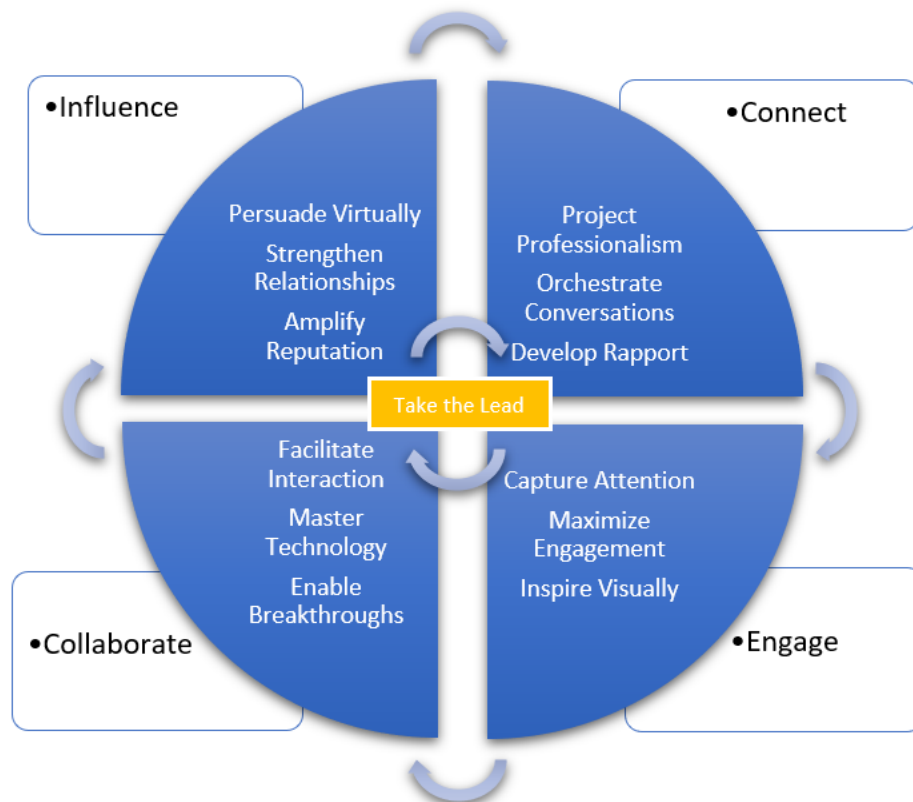


Figure 2. 4 Virtual Selling Imperatives (Schultz et al., 2020).

At the center of it all is that the salesperson takes responsibility and leadership at every point. In the first phase of Connect, the salesperson's job is to bring out their own expertise, convince the customer by building and strengthening the relationship, and thus take the conversation to the next stage. In the second

phase of Engage, the salesperson's job is to engage the customer by arousing the customer's interest and ensuring the customer's engagement. Virtual interaction makes it possible to arouse the customer's interest by visual ways. In the Collaboration phase, the salesperson should maintain discussion and collaboration, consider the opportunities offered by technology at different stages of the virtual purchasing process, and give the customer space to reflect on themselves for a moment. The fourth stage of Influence promotes the customer's change process and improves customer confidence through case studies, strengthens cooperation and the supplier's reputation as an expert player. These four virtual selling imperatives focus on the salesperson's ability to make strategic and tactical sales. In a virtual environment, the salesperson's own personality and passion for making sales virtually are emphasized. (Schultz et al., 2020.)

Virtual selling journey

Blount (2020) has studied the journey of virtual selling and what elements it contains. The journey of virtual sales digitizes both the journey of the buyer and the sales process of the company. This shortens sales cycles for the benefit of all. The virtual selling journey can be divided into three parts (Figure 3), qualifying journey, sales, buying, decision journey and customer experience journey.



Figure 3. Virtual Selling Journey (Blount, 2020).

In the first familiarity journey phase desired customers are planned and targeted. The second qualifying journey phase involves sales-related activities and contacts with desired customers. The third sales, buying, decision journey phase is the biggest factor in the virtual sales journey and usually involves multiple encounters and interaction with the customer. The fourth customer experience journey focuses more on customer service and its management. Marketing is involved in every phase of virtual selling journey and marketing can have different goals depending on which is the phase. During the virtual sales process, different options from multiple virtual channels can be used. One of the biggest requirements for the success of virtual selling journey is how to move from the next step in the sales process to another and keep the sales process active. (Blount, 2020.)

2.3 The virtual customer experience

Digitalization has enabled and made the customer journey even more diverse, so that the customer journey includes several different touchpoints. This, on the other hand, brings challenges but also opportunities for sales organizations. Customer experience is a diverse combination of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, and social components of throughout the buying journey. The customer experience can also be considered to consist of customer satisfaction, service quality, trust and customer engagement. (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016.)

In B2B collaboration, trust is particularly important and can be divided into both affective and cognitive trust. Affective trust is based on a positive, emotion-based experience that fosters the relationship between the buyer and the seller. Cognitive trust is based on the knowledge and experience that comes from the other party's skills and competencies. (Akrouf et al. 2016.)

The features of the B2B customer experience are a very diverse in big picture. Most often, the customer experience in sales consists of long sales cycles involving several different people from the organization. On average, 5-7 people participate in a purchase, the purchase often has multiple priorities, a goal-oriented perspective, and a complex structure. In addition, developing and effective cooperation is a prerequisite for success. The B2B customer experience is the experience that arises from the interaction between companies, such as the brand image, reputation, value gained from the service, and the experiences of the customer's networks. However, the background of the B2B customer experience is significantly influenced by human interaction, which emphasizes listening and understanding the customer. (Holma et al., 2021.)

The basis of a good customer experience

According to Holma et al. (2021), the importance of generating value is one of the biggest starting points for a good customer experience, in which case the customer benefits from the cooperation and it is a prerequisite for a profitable

business. The role of the salesperson is to give the customer the opportunity to get value, which consists of the benefit that the customer receives when using the service or product. The customer experience produced by good B2B companies consists of the following; a reliable brand that meets customer expectations, good reference customers, customer-centric operations, proactivity and clear communication, a unified service package and fast and agile service. According to experience, strategy, brand and culture are also the cornerstones of a company, on the basis of which a good B2B customer experience is created. These cornerstones are surrounded by the enablers of the best customer experience, which include in-depth customer understanding, the company's customer-driven operating model, leadership, leveraging technology, and creating different customer experiences based on emotion. (Holma et al., 2021.)

Zolkiewski et al. (2017) found that in the B2B context, the customer experience between companies is most affected by the interaction at different stages of collaboration. Companies should have the ability to meet the different expectations of customers associated with these interaction situations. Through several positive customer encounters and interaction situations, the aim is to build and maintain good customer relationships. Succeeding in these situations enables the creation of a good customer experience in a B2B environment.

Our actions and behavior are particularly affected by emotions and the feelings that a company, its employees, products or services evoke in us. Emotions guide our purchasing decisions and behavior, including emotions born of our imagination. Emotional reactions are usually so strong that we remember the emotion and state it evokes in us. "The customer experience is the sum of different encounters, images and feelings; their overall impact on the customer's mind". (Holma et al., 2021).

Value is a significant part of B2B sales. In B2B sales, it is essential to create a visual image of the solution and solve the customer's problem through expertise. The solution gives the customer value and enables the customer's goals to be achieved. (Eades & Sullivan, 2014.)

2.4 The success factors for B2B collaboration

Value creation for the customer

In B2B collaboration, companies strive to define the value of their solution to the customer, and understanding the value from the customer's perspective is a key benefit for companies. The definition of value should take into account all the benefits received by customers at different stages of cooperation. The value received by the customer can consist of five different areas. These include identifying potential value to the customer's business, understanding the customer's current situation, understanding the impact of the solution on the customer's business, realizing value over the long term for the customer's business, and sharing information between companies at all stages mentioned above. (Keränen & Jalkala, 2013.)

Töytäri & Rajala (2015, 105.) defines "Value is defined as bundles of benefits and sacrifices". The salespeople must provide the customer a value that the customer cannot find themselves. (Schultz et al., 2020). On the other hand, the sales interaction of salespeople is important to meet value expectations and customer needs, in this way customer value expectations can be met. (Kaski et al., 2017).

In B2B meetings, buyers and sellers have different expectations about the meeting. Kaski et al. (2017) have found that in the sales interaction, buyers expect business innovation, future insights, long-term relationships and reaction to the customer's situation. From the point of view of salespeople and their expectations of the meeting, they are often related to the fact that they believe they will bring value to the customer. When the salesperson and the customer interact, value creation is possible. Salespeople should focus on meeting customer expectations as well as business needs, as in the end customers decide what the value outcome was at the meeting. In sales, value has three dimensions, in addition to understanding the business mentioned above, also preparing a value proposition and conveying customer value. (Kaski et al., 2017.)

Rapport building

Kaski et al. (2018) have investigated the importance of rapport building through the success of interaction. Building relationships consists of interactive interaction, which requires the salesperson to have a special sense of the situation as well as emotional abilities for each customer. The factors involved in building a rapport can be identified, but it is not explained what they consist of and what skills sales people need to have. For this reason Kaski et al. (2018) have created rapport building model (Figure 4), which requires action and skills from the salespeople.

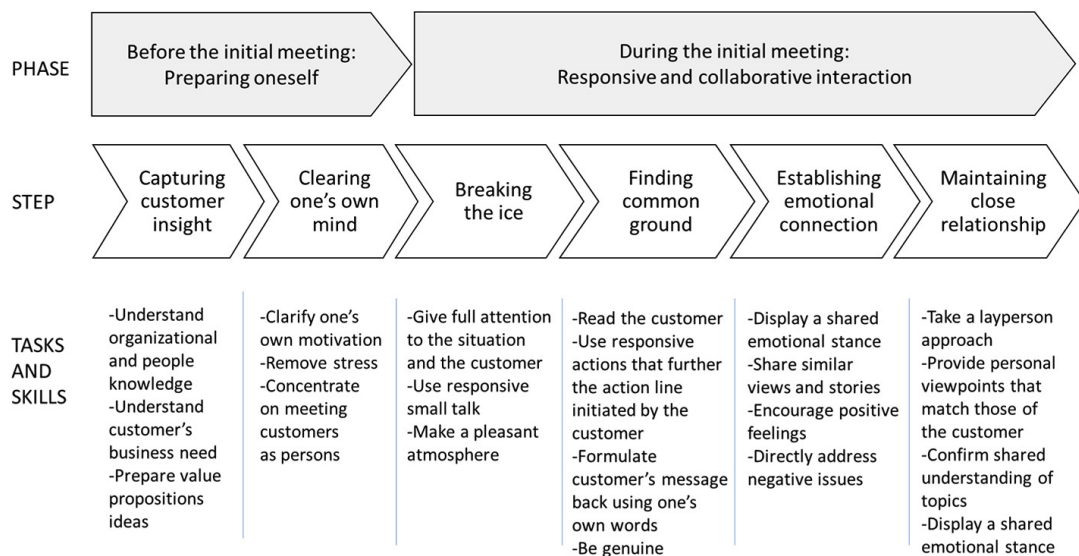


Figure 4. A model for creating rapport in B2B services and solution selling (Kaski et al., 2018).

Kaski et al. (2018) have identified six different stages of rapport building, which takes place before and during the meeting. The first two steps are the duties of the salesperson themselves and the next four steps take place in interaction with the customer. Prior to the actual sales meeting, the salesperson must be aware of the potential needs of the customer's business and prepare for the upcoming meeting both mentally and physically. With these means, the salesperson prepares to delve into the customer in question and identify possible factors in

the conditions for cooperation. The next four steps describe the interaction with the customer; breaking the ice, finding common ground, establishing emotional connection, and maintaining a close relationship. All four of these steps are combined with the salesperson's ability to respond to the customer's emotional states, which contributes to the emergence of positive customer feelings and deepening of the relationship. In these ways, salespeople show interest in the customer, and the salespeople are genuine and credible. (Kaski et al., 2018.)

The key barriers in a virtual collaboration

Kvedare & Nymand (2021) have explored key barriers to a virtual sales meeting. They have identified (Figure 5) 11 different barriers to a successful virtual sales meeting, the four most significant of which are: decoding body language, building trust, technical issues, and engaging customers virtually.

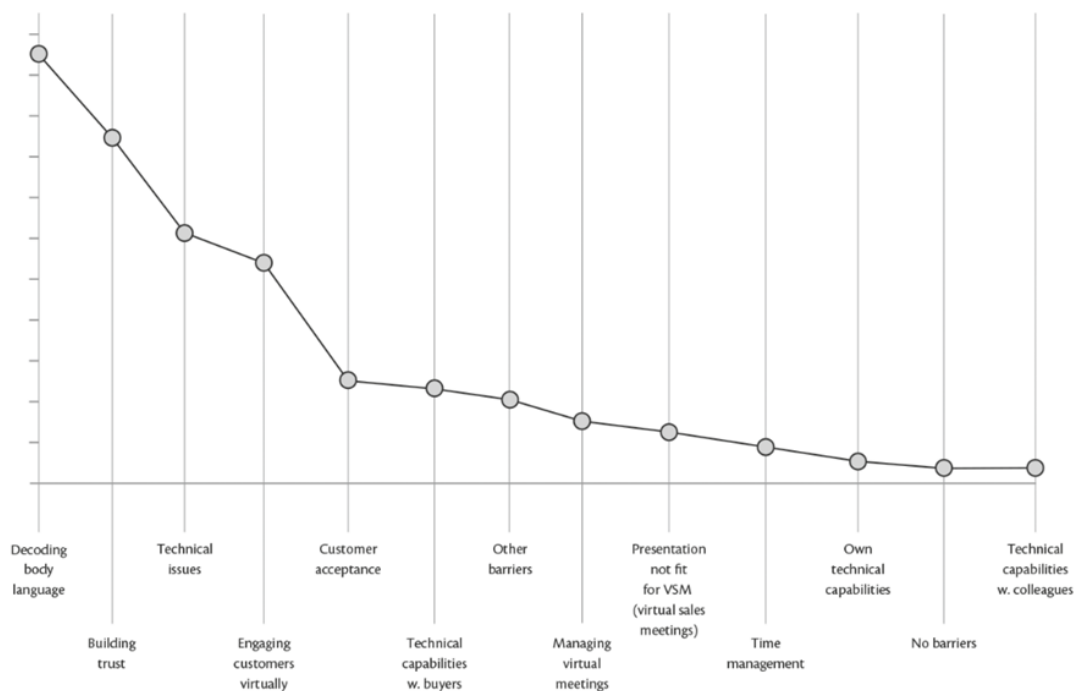


Figure 5. Key barriers to virtual sales meeting success (Kvedare & Nymand, 2021).

The biggest barriers to virtual sales meetings is decoding body language. In virtual interaction, it is difficult to detect nonverbal communication and recognize

different body language signals. Second barrier is building trust. The level of B2B customers trust drops by as much as 83% in virtual meetings and therefore its importance is emphasized in a virtual sales meeting. The challenges by technology are the third barrier, these are for example a poor internet connection, cameras, videos or audio are not working or are not turned on. Fourth barrier is the ability to engage customer virtually. To work more virtually in the future, new habits and practices must be defined in the virtual business model. It would be good to rethink how customers are engaged at virtual touch points, how we communicate towards the customer, how we can support interaction with digital tools and strengthen virtual engagement capabilities. Many salespeople still lack expertise to face these barriers in virtual sales and virtual sales meeting. From this perspective, companies need to develop digital tools, virtual tools and playbooks in order to provide salespeople to learn how to give the best customer experience. (Kvedare & Nymand, 2021.)

In virtual and face-to-face meetings, both have found, according to different theories, different elements that contribute to the success of a sales meeting. Some theories consider virtual meetings to be more effective than face-to-face. And certain theories, on the other hand, support the fact that gestures and facial expressions, for example, are transmitted virtually well, but they may take more time to detect and be more difficult to interpret than face-to-face. The salesperson must therefore adapt his or her own sales style and skills to meet the criteria for successful sales in that sales channel, whether it is a virtual or face-to-face meeting.

2.5 The summary of the theory

This theoretical section presented the background to the digital revolution experienced by B2B sales and the sudden change in B2B business interaction brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, based on the theory, a view of what a future hybrid model might look like in B2B sales was presented. The theory also presented with the factors influencing the emergence of a good customer experience in a virtual environment, what elements and barriers are

associated with virtual sales from the perspective of both salespeople and customers. In addition, the theoretical part deals with the virtual purchasing process and what kind of interaction there is in the digital business environment.

However, in a B2B environment, virtual sales culminates in a customer meeting in a virtual B2B sales meeting. The salesperson's skills and personality play a big role in digital interaction virtually. What kind of experience the salesperson can create for the customer, what kind of skills are needed for it and which, above all, influence the creation and progression of the customer relationship in the virtual world. For this reason, the theory used by Kaski et al. (2018) to create a rapport model in B2B sales has been chosen as the starting point for the study.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research methods

The research strategy and research method should start from the theory and in addition the research problem gives direction to which method is good to use. Qualitative, semi-structured research is best suited when it is desired to find out information about specific issues. The closer the individual and the interaction are in the research, the more the criteria of the qualitative method are met. "Qualitative research presents the subjects' observations of situations and provides an opportunity to take into account factors related to their past and development." In this way, it is possible to study the significance that the subjects give to phenomena and case. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015.)

In this study, qualitative and semi-structured research was chosen as the study method. Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2015) have named the semi-structured interview method a thematic interview. This is characterized by the fact that the interview questions are pre-defined, but allow the interviewees to answer the questions openly and in their own words. In an interview situation, there is direct contact with the interviewee. This enables the acquisition of information as well as helps to understand the motives behind the answers. The interview as a research method is also suitable in the case of a random sample, it is flexible as a method and there is an opportunity to provide clarifications. In addition, data collection can provide additional information on new phenomena related to the research problem. In this way, the interviewer finds out in the best way the experiences and thoughts of the interviewees. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015.)

Before to the actual interviews, the structure of the interview should be tested to find out how the interview is progressing, to ensure that alternative questions are asked or possibly refined, and to ensure that there will not be any problems. By testing the structure of the interview, the order of the questions and the length of time required for the interview are found. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015.) The interview structure of this study was tested once and found to be functional, and it took 30

minutes to complete the interview. The interviews included a total of 13 main questions, two of which were specific.

3.2 Data collection

In this research, company types are large Finnish companies that operate either in Finland or internationally. The interviewees work in these companies, for example, as CFOs, financial managers, purchasing managers and/or are responsible for the credit management and are one decision-maker and person involved in the purchasing process, participating in the purchasing process at virtual sales meeting with the Company X. These interviewees are already Company X customers, Company X prospects or there is already negotiations ongoing. However, the most important criterion for being selected for interview was that the customer or prospect and Company X have only met salespeople virtually during the purchase process.

Table 1. Information of the participants in the interview.

Person	Professional Title	Customer status	Duration of the interview
Person A	Senior Development Manager	Customer	25 minutes
Person B	ICT Manager	Customer	31 minutes
Person C	Vice President	Prospect	27 minutes
Person D	Head of Financial Control	Prospect	32 minutes
Person E	Purchasing Specialist	Prospect	22 minutes
Person F	Financial Manager	Prospect	27 minutes
Person G	General Manager/ Country Manager	Prospect	30 minutes
Person H	Invoicing Manager	Prospect	26 minutes

All interviewees were contacted by telephone and asked to be willing to participate in the interview. During the telephone conversation, the interviewees were told about the topic and objectives of the study and the time required for it. During the telephone conversation, a suitable time was agreed for the Teams interview. After the telephone conversation, a cover letter (Appendices 1) was sent to the interviewees, including the subject and purpose of the study and giving the interviewees access to the questions in advance. According to Hirsjärvi & Hurme (2015), personal contact in advance reduces the anxiety of the interviewer and the interviewee and increases the willingness to cooperate. All interviewees responded very positively to the interview request and wanted to provide their own experiences and insights into the study.

From the point of view of collecting and processing the interview, the most important points are informing the interviewees, consent, processing the identification data and describing the material. In order for the interview and the collection of material to take place in accordance with ethical principles and compliance with data protection legislation, information and the processing of identifying data must be carried out in accordance with the rules. In accordance with ethical principles, the participation of the interviewees must be voluntary, how the identification information contained in the interview has been processed and how the interviewees have been presented in the research publication. (Hyvärinen et al., 2017.)

The interview was conducted as a virtual video interview using Teams app and the interview was stored securely for analysis of the research. Of the interviews, 7 were conducted in October 2021 and 1 interview was conducted in November 2021. Upon completion of the research, material related to the interviews will be discarded immediately. The interviewees are mentioned in the research only with job titles, in which case the person's identification information is at a sufficiently general level. It is not essential for the research to further specify the identity of the interviewees.

3.3 Data analysis

In order to get all the important points out of the interview, the interviews should be recorded for analysis. Recording an interview also helps the rapid progress of the interview and allows for unnecessary interruptions during the interview. In a qualitative analysis, the interviewer can already see different phenomena or the similarity of the answers already during the interview. One approach to data analysis may be the interviewer's interpretation of the transcribed material, in which the responses are grouped in a structured order.

It is possible to make the transcribed material clean by writing either word for word or only for the answers of the interviewees, the most important thing is for the researcher to find relevant content in the answers. This is possible if the person handling the research material is the interviewer himself or herself, who knows his or her material so well that he or she is able to distinguish between themes and highlight important content related to the research. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015.)

In this study, the material was written clean, ie the material was analyzed, the answers of all the interviewees were collected by themes and the answers of the interviewees were summarized. In addition, the analysis of the material was intended to highlight the respondents answers word for word, which will give a better insight of the interviewees' individual experiences.

4 THE RESULTS

4.1 B2B customer experiences of virtual sales meetings

Interviewee practices regarding the meeting of suppliers and salespeople during the Covid-19 pandemic were asked generally. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, all interviewees generally met with suppliers or salespeople 100% virtually. Virtual sales meetings were mostly through the Teams app, but Google Meets and Zoom apps were also used for virtual sales meetings. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic since March 2020, 7/8 of the interviewees have met with suppliers or salespeople 100% virtually. Person D has been prohibited from taking suppliers or salespeople to the office, as there is a factory next to the office and therefore the aim has been to secure production as far as possible. Person H's company had immediately agreed that salespeople or suppliers would only be met virtually, as the company had significant social responsibility and in this way they ensured the continuity of service operations. In addition, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Person G had met with suppliers and salespeople face-to-face after the pandemic situation had calmed down and the first vaccinations had been given.

Experiences in general

According to the experiences of the interviewees, virtual sales meetings have generally been perceived as good and positive, although at first there were prejudices related to virtual sales meetings. Good experiences in particular have been the scheduling and ease of arranging virtual sales meetings, the virtual sales meetings save travel time and the virtual sales meetings are mostly quite efficient. Person B pointed out that virtual sales meetings have made it possible to meet more potential salespeople/ vendors because time is efficient.

"When you meet for the first time, there should be introductions of people and also an introduction to the topic of the meeting; what company does,

references, the market situation, this is an essential step before we go into the matter itself.” (Person A)

”Once the video has become part of the virtual sales meetings in recent months, the meeting feels much more personal.” (Person B)

Correspondingly, the technical problems and connection problems of the virtual meetings were raised as bad experiences by the interviewees. It is also bad experience if the cameras are turned off, which leaves the level of personality in the virtual sales meeting poor and making contact with the other party more difficult. What is also bad experience, is that it is difficult to detect gestures and body language in virtual meetings.

”In a virtual environment, the challenges are highlighted compared to a face-to-face meeting where the salesperson is able to be more natural and “fix” the situation.” (Person A)

”A bad thing is respect for the calendar, if you have internally booked meetings in a row, you have to book your own time on the calendar if you want to. Overbooking makes the day cramped and the actual work is not done, you may have to skip meetings or work overtime.” (Person C)

”In the beginning there was a treshold to turn on the camera, but nowadays it is good to have the camera on, it can be seen that the person is present and focused at the meeting.” (Person E)

”The salesperson should think about how to get that good feel for that start of the meeting. The business itself hasn’t changed, the salesperson needs to be a big person as everything flattens virtually. It is virtually necessary to see the eyes and gestures.” (Person G)

A good customer experience

Based on the interviews, the customers` views and opinions were also found out regarding what they think a good customer experience in virtual sales meetings consists of. According to the interviewees, the following things affect the customer

experience of a virtual sales meeting the most; the videos are good to keep on, have a well-prepared meeting and a prepared agenda, and stay on schedule. Virtual sales meetings are generally well used. Topics are handled in a meeting, and organizing people from different geographical locations into a virtual sales meeting is easy. Interviewees have experienced that virtual sales meetings have already become a kind of discussion model, one cannot talk over another. Digital practices have brought clarity to virtual sales meetings. One thing that affects the customer experience is also that the virtual sales meeting is made customer-friendly and is tailored to look like the customer. Person D says that the salesperson must not be tired of their work, the salesperson must make an effort to the sales meeting, this will impress the customer positively.

Although virtual sales meetings are perceived as effective, the downside is that often small talk is left out and the threshold for being silent and not asking clarifying or unclear questions is higher. According to Person F, the discussion should be natural, it should be easy to ask to speak and comment.

” There is no difference in handling issues, issues are handled successfully. At first the virtual sales meetings seemed secondary, but now that you have used to this, this has become normal and conversations can get deeper in the meetings.” (Person C)

” In a virtual sales meeting, something has to be accomplished to leave the experience that the salesperson didn’t waste my time. If I get one good idea, it’s enough and I can share it with others in my organization.” (Person G)

4.2 Expectations of B2B customers before a virtual sales meeting

All interviewees highlighted the preparation of the supplier/ salesperson for the virtual sales meeting, it is very important to be well prepared. Person H also pointed out that if the supplier/ salesperson is not prepared for the sales meeting, it will also be noticed in virtual sales meetings. Secondly, a clear agenda for a virtual sales meeting is good to have. Person A hoped to receive the agenda as well as possible material in advance, especially if the topic is already unknown.

Third, all interviewees pointed out that they expect salespeople/ suppliers to keep cameras on in virtual sales meeting.

“Planning the agenda, how to run through, a calm feeling would be good to have. Sometimes it happens that the conversation jumps a lot if there are several people presenting.” (Person A)

“The meeting goes differently compared to face-to-face meeting, Teams-meetings are structured, a certain kind of chairman needs to be in virtual sales meetings.” (Person C)

“I hope the salesperson has researched the customer’s backgrounds and knows the customer and to who is going to sell, it will make the meeting look customer-oriented and customer-specific.” (Person D)

4.3 The experiences of B2B customers during a virtual sales meeting.

This section looks at customers experiences during the virtual sales meeting. Experiences have been divided on this theme, which include building trust, creating value, understanding the customer, presenting solutions, keeping the meeting interesting and meaningful, experiences of buying efficiency virtually, and the customer experience in the virtual purchasing process.

Building trust

According to all the interviewees, trust is also built up well in virtual sales meetings, and there is no difference compared to face-to-face sales meetings. The fact that the cameras are on helps to build trust. That’s when you see the whole team, it builds trust and is more familiar. According to Person D, virtual meetings should not go behind “the curtain”, there should be respect and appreciation for the other so that one can say the same things face-to-face as virtually. The building of trust was also felt to be influenced by how professional the salesperson is, how they can present the issue, whether they have understood the needs and are able to provide a solution.

” All the good salespeople are united by these things; they are really friendly when they call, they are not meant to sell immediately, they have to be able to talk about everything else than selling.” (Person G)

” The basis is that trust is based on the fact that the supplier / salesperson is prepared, because then you respect the working hours of the potential buyer, because you are prepared.” (Person H)

Creating value

Most of the interviewees found this a bit of a difficult question. However, most interviewees felt that value creation has many similarities to trust. If trust is born and each other is understood, it will be easier to create value. The interviewees also felt that a co-operation relationship would not be established unless the salesperson could bring a solution to the customer's problem. According to Person C, this presupposes that the background work has been done well and the solution meets the need. Person B also highlighted the use of examples in the presentation of the solution, what kind of solutions have been made in the same industry, it is a big advantage and differs from a supplier with no experience. The creation of value is also influenced by innovation, marketing material, market knowledge, credibility and expertise in a good way. In addition, some of the interviewees pointed out that interpersonal chemistry contributes to the creation of value and trust, although it is virtually more challenging.

” Very rarely, in large purchases, salespeople know how to add value and it is usually an important piece. If that value is missing, then it is difficult to justify it, eg internally to the management team, I can't know if there is a good or a bad solution if there is no value. Once again, the salesperson has to do their homework.” (Person G)

Understanding the customer

Interviewees generally felt that salespeople succeed well in understanding the customer's needs. According to all the experiences of the interviewees, salespeople are able to identify and find the customer's needs in virtual sales

meetings. A few of the interviewees pointed out that there is no difference in understanding the need, whether the meeting was held virtually or face-to-face. Person B pointed out that in a virtual sales meeting, for example, sharing a presentation or picture on both sides helps to understand and makes the meeting interactive. Person H felt that it is sometimes challenging to have a two-way understanding, especially when it comes to a complex solution. Person H added that a whiteboard would normally be used in a face-to-face meeting, but it is missing in virtual sales meetings. On the other hand, Person E pointed out that there are two sides to the matter; a lot depends on how the customer is also able to communicate their needs, it is important to have mutual understanding.

” Generally well, the needs are understood. It will improve the meeting if you know what the goal is, what is the agenda, not the basic presentation, the presentation should be focused on the customer, preparation is important as well as crystallization, both should have a good understanding after the meeting.” (Person D)

Presentations in virtual sales meeting

In the opinion of all the interviewees, the presentation of the solution in virtual sales meetings goes fine. Presentations are suitable for a virtual sales meeting, especially when it comes to purchasing a service, and there is no physical “component” involved in the solution. Of course, in a virtual sales meeting and presenting a solution, salespeople are not well able to present their own presence, as in a face-to-face meeting. Person D also pointed out that virtual meetings also work well in contract negotiations, as you can sometimes take a short Teams-meeting and then continue on your own again, the dynamics work well and are better.

” Once the discussions have progressed, it’s at least as good as face-to-face meetings, because when you share a presentation, the focus is directly on the presentation. If it were in the same room, the focus may slacken. I feel the presentations are really good! Audio and presentations work and work even better than in a conference room.” (Person C)

When the interviewees were asked a follow-up question about what the salesperson can do better, it was to give enough time for feedback and it would be good to do it right after the presentation. If the solution is presented by more than one person, it would be a good idea to divide the speeches clearly. If possible, it would be a good idea to get a solution proposal in advance so that the customer can get familiar with it. In addition, it was stressed that the offer should be targeted to the customer and the salesperson would have found the customer's needs comprehensively, these will help decision making.

“Virtually, it is not recognized if something is left unclear to the customer. When presenting a proposal, it would be a good idea to confirm with the customer and ask additional questions, specify and ensure that the customer has understood correctly.” (Person H)

Keeping the virtual sales meeting interesting

The interviews highlighted many factors that contribute to keeping the virtual sales meeting meaningful and interesting. In addition, many interviewees felt that this was a good question, mainly because they had not thought about it before and saw it as an important topic. Interviewees highlighted these issues as important:

- The customer must be interested about the presentation
- The presentation is well built
- There is not too long talk on the matter, is well summed up
- It is good to concretize with pictures and presentations and what it aims to solve (solving the real problem of the customer)
- The presentation and discussion will proceed and stay on the agreed agenda
- The meeting has a certain structure and order
- The presentation is well conducted and clearly communicated
- Stay on schedule
- The salesperson is prepared
- If the meeting is virtually long, there should be breaks in the meeting

- The meeting should be effective, kept as long as the need is, and not stretched in vain
- The communication between the participants should be such that everyone can easily participate in the discussion, in this way the participants can be kept active
- It has to be factual and it has to be fun too
- The interaction works better if there is a smaller group size.

" You can see it if the salesperson is interested in the customer."

(Person H)

Experiences the effectiveness of buying virtually

7/8 of the respondents thought that virtual sales meetings increase the efficiency of buying. Only one of the interviewees was a little hesitant with the answer and felt that at least not yet. But if she said yes, it is because she can do more virtual sales meetings and not have to travel. Some of the interviewees continued to explain why the answer was yes. In their opinion, with the help of virtual sales meetings, the case will remain active by the salesperson and interest in the case will be maintained. In addition, virtual sales meetings make it easy to get even a larger group together, making it easier and faster to agree on a common time.

Customer experience in the virtual purchasing process

Overall, the interviewees felt that the virtual purchasing process was good. There were some challenges at the beginning of the pandemic, but now that virtual appointments have become commonplace and increasingly used, the virtual purchasing process is perceived as good. For some of the interviewees, the change brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic was not big, as the organization has been working virtually before the pandemic and working remotely has been common. Virtual buying and virtual sales meetings have been a great addition to a busy calendar. Interviewees also pointed out that if there is already an agreement between the customer and the supplier, then virtual purchasing is very suitable when the parties are already known.

When asked in interviews what salespeople could do to achieve a better customer experience in the virtual purchasing process, interviewees highlighted scheduling, goal setting, milestones, and a clear division of responsibilities between each party. In addition, more personality was desired and that the salesperson would be interested in the customer and found out the customer's backgrounds really well.

” I am accurate and I want the salesperson to know about our company, in which case the salesperson has made an effort and has a vision of what might suit our company. I appreciate that the salesperson has done the background work.” (Person C)

Small talk is often very limited, as it was felt to have an impact on the virtual meeting and was more desired by the interviewees. Person F suggested that sometimes the start of a meeting could be a virtual coffee moment or even before the actual virtual sales meeting. In his opinion, this would ease the beginning and help deepen the relationship between buyer and salespeople. He also noted that this is especially suitable for afternoon virtual sales meetings if the morning has been really busy. This way, the customer gets a little break during a busy day.

4.4 Future expectations of B2B customers for virtual sales meetings

The study looked at customers thoughts on future practices when the Covid-19 pandemic is over. All interviewees think that more virtual sales meetings will be held in the future and that these good practices will be continued. Interviewees believed that in the future there will certainly be a move to a hybrid model. According to the interviewees, possibly the first meeting can be held face-to-face, but after that the discussion and meetings will continue virtually. According to the interviewees, if a customer relationship already exists between the customer and the supplier, it is possible to meet face-to-face once or twice a year, otherwise virtually.

The importance of a face-to-face meeting was justified by the fact that if you are getting something big, it would be nice to meet at least once face-to-face.

Secondly, it was also pointed out that if the subject of the project is, for example, consulting work, where the activities of the team with each other are particularly important, then it is desired to meet face-to-face in order to ensure the compatibility of personal chemistry.

One thing that emerged from virtual sales meetings is that working remotely is greatly influenced by a person's willingness to work remotely, what opportunities there are to work remotely, and whether there are suitable conditions and peace to work at home.

” There will be a different way of building a customer-supplier relationship, virtually there will be a certain amount of depth, so the virtual and face-to-face will support each other. (Person B)

*” Absolutely a hybrid model, i.e. the first meeting face-to-face, then agreeing on an operating model for how to meet and then virtually regular meetings.”
(Person C)*

*” Probably no one will go 100% to the office anymore, a little virtual and a little face-to-face that won't be forgotten. Sometimes it is wonderful to go to a lunch meeting, sometimes it is still important to have a discussion virtually.
(Person G)*

4.5 Research reliability

In addition to the reliability of qualitative research, it is also good to look at the credibility and ethics of research. Credibility is affected by the fact that the results of the study are generally accepted as valid, that the data have been properly collected and that the data have been carefully analyzed. Reliability, on the other hand, is affected by the fact that the researcher is familiar with the topic and the research problem has been studied in the best possible way. From an ethical point of view, the researcher's methods and method of analyzing the material must be acceptable, promote good things and must not cause anything negative to the participants in the research. (Puusa & Juuti, 2020.)

In terms of quality and reliability, quality should be considered at all stages of the study. The quality is affected by a good interview structure, the interviewer's knowledge and knowledge of the topic, a review of the results of the interviews, transcribe immediately after the interview, and the technical quality of the recorded interview material. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2015.)

However, the most important criterion for qualitative research is that the research achieves the most comprehensive understanding of the research problem under the study. Compatibility of theory, data, method of analysis and results help to form an understanding. The validity of the study is confirmed by the fact that what happened is true and that the research phenomenon is verifiable. From the point of view of the reliability of the research, the research must be coherent and the research process consistent. (Puusa & Juuti, 2020.)

This study was conducted both on the need of the commissioner company and on the researcher's interest in the phenomenon under study, which is based on several practical experiences in the researcher's everyday work. The best option chosen for this study was to explore the research problem through thematic interviews, based on extensive current literature on the phenomenon of remote working brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. In this case, the theory served as a good starting point for defining the research problem, and the interviews have been able to deepen into just the right kind of questions.

The interviews provided answers to the research questions and the results of the research can be used to improve both the work of salespeople and the customer experience. In addition, when assessing reliability, it can be stated that the interviewees have had practical experience with both the commissioner company and other companies, in which case the interviewees' views and answers are based on real events and experiences.

One observation regarding the reliability of the study has been question 9 in the interviews, which related to the success of salespeople in creating value in virtual sales meetings. Many interviewees found this a bit of a difficult issue at first. This was clarified in the same way for all interviewees to make the responses

comparable. The question was clarified to the interviewees on how sales people manage to create value with their solution for the company's business.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this thesis was to find out how B2B customers experience virtual meetings, what B2B customers expect before the virtual sales meeting, what are the experiences of B2B customers during a virtual sales meeting, and what are the B2B customers future expectations for virtual sales meetings. In order to achieve the goal of the thesis, background information was sought by finding existing research, literature and current articles available online. A thematic interview was conducted for eight customers to gain their views and experiences from virtual sales meetings.

5.1 B2B customer experience in virtual sales meetings

In perceiving the customer experience, the most important thing is to understand what all things the customer experience consists of and what things enable a good customer experience to born. With the sudden change and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, customers were faced with a new situation when previously familiar face-to-face business meetings had to be held virtually. This change has forced salespeople as well as customers to adopt new ways of doing virtual sales meetings.

In the theory section 2.3. according to Lemon & Verhoef (2016), the customer experience is a combination of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensory, and social components throughout the buying journey and that the customer experience can consist of satisfaction, service quality, trust and customer engagement. Holma et al. (2021) states that the B2B customer experience is the experience that arises from the interaction between companies, such as the brand image, reputation, value gained from the service, and the experiences of the customer`s networks. This includes, as an integral part, human interaction, value creation, understanding customer, proactivity and good reference customers.

In comparison, Holma et al. (2021) as well as the theory of Lemon & Verhoef (2016) and the results of the interviews, very many similarities can be identified. The biggest factor of these is interaction and its success. On the basis of the interviews, the most concrete factors can be identified that affect the customer experience in any situation, especially during a virtual sales meeting. These elements identified from the interview are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Key elements of the customer experience in virtual sales meeting.

Efficiency	Customer-centric experience	Technology	Agenda	Digital practices
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • scheduling and ease of arranging • no travelling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • materials and presentations are targeted to the customer • bring out your own personality • impress the customer positively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • videos and cameras are turned on • good internet connection • audio and presentation works well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clear agenda • staying on schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • chairman for the meeting • no talking on top of each other • involve participants to the discussion

Customers feel that the meaningfulness of a virtual sales meeting is affected by the efficiency of the virtual sales meetings, as they are easy to organize, save travel time, and in general, virtual sales meetings get things done quickly. Customer focus has a significant impact on the customer experience in a virtual sales meeting. In this case, it is required that the materials and presentations are targeted at the customer and that the salesperson demonstrates a genuine interest in the customer. Salespeople can emphasize the interaction of a virtual sales meeting by bringing out their own personality as much as possible and responding positively to customer expectations. The technology plays a big role in virtual meetings, and it especially highlights that the cameras must be on, thus ensuring a personal experience for the customer.

In addition, it is a good idea to make sure that technical things work, such as an internet connection, audio and presentations. A good customer experience is also influenced by a clear agenda and staying on schedule.

Virtual meetings have already developed certain types of practices that are valued by customers. Customers expect a certain kind of chair role from a virtual sales meeting and salesperson. In virtual sales meetings, one of the participants speaks at a time and the salesperson also gives time for a discussion and the salesperson activates the participants in the meeting so that everyone has a chance to share their views.

5.2 Succeeding in a B2B virtual sales meeting

This section presents conclusions based on theory and interviews about the factors influencing the success of a virtual meeting both before and during the sales meeting. In theoretical part 2.4, Kaski et al. (2017; 2018) presented the expectations of customers and sales people before the sales meeting and how to build a customer relationship during the meeting. The same elements can be identified from the theory as were obtained from the customers' views on the basis of the interviews. Consistent elements were innovation, insights and finding common ground. Figure 4 presented the rapport building model, which was divided into two phases, before and after the sales meeting. When this Figure 4 is analyzed from the perspective of a virtual sales meeting and interviews, the importance of the salesperson's preparation comes to the fore.

Figure 6 shows the factors influencing the success of a virtual sales meeting based on the interviews in the study and Figure 4. These factors should be taken into account by salespeople in particular when preparing for a virtual B2B sales meeting.

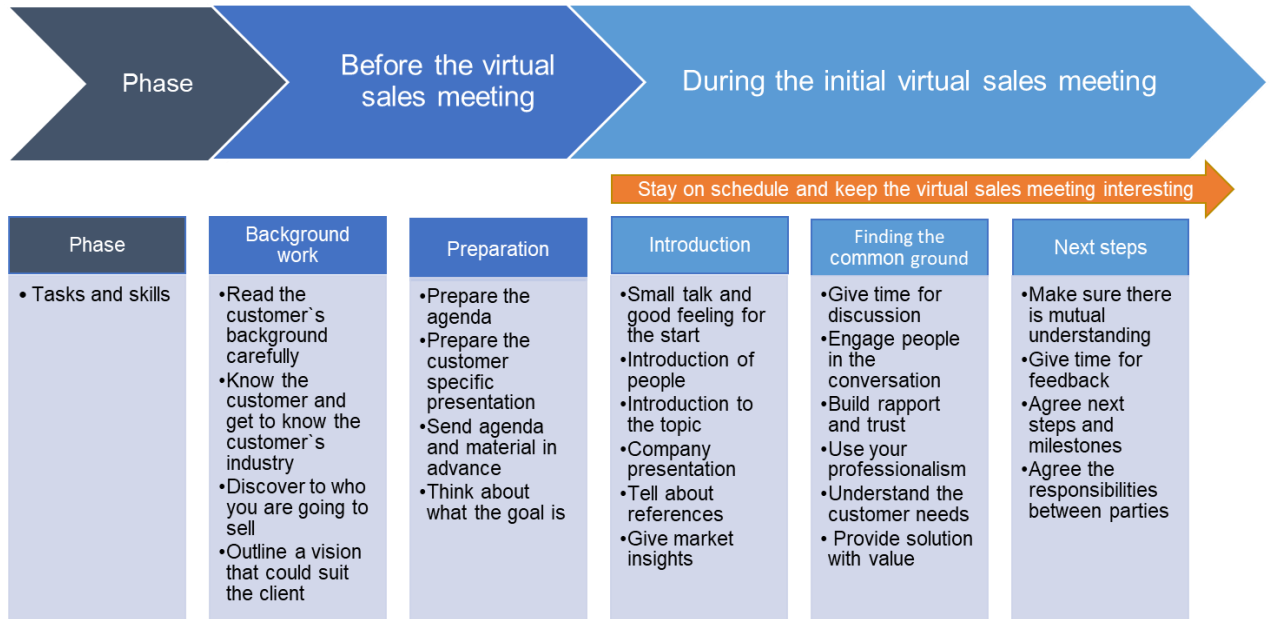


Figure 6. Elements of the successful virtual sales meeting.

The salesperson should comprehensively prepare for the virtual sales meeting; which includes finding the customer's background information, to know the customer's industry, find out similar solutions from the same industry. Prepare a clear agenda, presentations and good planning of the appointment. If possible, the material or presentation at the meeting should be a presentation targeted at the client's industry. This ensures an efficient and very smooth virtual sales meeting that enhances the customer experience. Introduction in virtual sales meeting includes company presentation as well market insights. The salesperson must succeed to find out the customer's needs, so that the proposal of the solution meets the customer's problem. If there are difficulties in understanding a need or solution, it would be a good idea to draw or visually describe the solution, it will help to create a common understanding. In virtual meetings, it is important to summarize what has been observed and to leave room for discussion and additional questions. If there are more than one person in a virtual meeting, everyone should be considered and given the opportunity to be heard. At the end

of the virtual sales meeting, a common understanding, the following steps and responsibilities must be ensured.

Value can be generated for the customer if the salesperson has done a good search for the customer's pain points and found a solution to the customer's problem. In virtual sales meeting, value creation can be emphasized, for example, by telling the customer about references, implementations made in the same industry, and the salesperson must be credible, knowledgeable and up to date. In order for the virtual sales meeting to remain interesting and meaningful, the salesperson must pay attention to the visual appearance of the presentation with pictures and concretize the solution as well as possible. In addition, meaningfulness is influenced by the good and clear agenda of the virtual sales meeting, participants must be involved in the conversation, and there must be good, active communication. In order to improve the virtual customer experience, attention should be paid to the schedule of things, milestones and goals in virtual sales meetings, and there should be a clear division of labor between the customer and the salesperson.

5.3 Future virtual sales meetings

Based on the interviews, it can be stated that virtual sales meetings will be a significant part of the future B2B customer relationship. It is difficult to estimate the percentage, but referring to previous research in the theory section 2.1, the proportion of virtual sales meetings will increase. Kvedare & Nymand (2021) presented that in the hybrid scenario, about 50% of the appointments are virtual and 50% are face-to-face. However, it emerged in the interviews that the interviewees were of the opinion that the hybrid model would remain and most of the meetings would be held virtually. This is particularly due to the fact that almost all interviewees thought that the efficiency of buying would improve with virtual sales meetings. This is due to the fact that virtual sales meetings are efficient and virtual sales meetings are easy to organize. In addition, all potential suppliers may be met face-to-face for the first time, after which discussions will continue with virtual sales meetings. In the future, it would be a good idea for salespeople to

make sure from the customer what appointment policies are agreed and at what stage the client wants a face-to-face meeting and at what stage a virtual meeting.

5.4 Further reasearch ideas

In the interviews, it was very much highlighted from the customers' point of view that the interaction between people and the identification of both emotions and gestures virtually is quite difficult. This was much compared to the fact that in a face-to-face meeting, a person's personality as well as presentation skills come to the fore and have most often had a positive effect on the customer or the emergence of a collaboration. If further research is undertaken in connection with virtual sales meetings, the interaction skills of the personality could be studied in more detail virtually and how expressions and body languages can be identified in virtual sales meetings.

Another topic of further research to be identified on the basis of the interviews is related to proposal presentations. In face-to-face meetings and presentations of proposals, it may be easier to focus on the presenter himself. In a virtual proposal presentation, there is less personal interaction and more focus in the presentation itself. The research could focus more on the visual appearance of the virtual proposal presentation and what are the factors that the customer pays attention to in the virtual proposal presentation and are there identifiable factors that influence the customer's decision-making process.

5.5 Final conclusions

The study and the interviews did not reveal any differences in terms of the customer experience or the virtual purchasing process, whether it was a prospect customer or whether the contract had already been reached and was an existing customer. All interviewees, regardless of customer status, had positive experiences with virtual sales meetings, and the findings of the study describe these experiences well. The study provided significant information on how to

prepare for virtual sales meetings in the future and what are the factors of a successful virtual sales meeting from the customers' point of view.

Good virtual sales meeting practices have emerged in the B2B world between customers and salespeople. I believe that salespeople and customers will continue to follow these good practices. I look forward to seeing what new practices for virtual sales meetings come in the future. It is a fact that in the future, sales people will be required to better prepare and plan for a virtual sales meeting in order to provide the customer with an excellent customer experience at all stages of the virtual purchasing process.

Writing a thesis has been an interesting project and the topic of the thesis in particular was very inspiring. Before starting to write, I already had a lot of personal experience of the subject in practice. However, I have not previously discussed the experience of virtual sales meetings with customers, so I was looking forward to the interview phase very eagerly. Getting to know the theoretical material provided interesting insights and much to reflect on, which I compared to my own experiences. The results provide useful information for myself in my own work, but also for those who make virtual sales meetings in the commissioner's organization. The results of the study can be utilized in many other areas of B2B than just companies operating in credit management services. Based on my own experiences, I hope that in the future more good practices and experiences will be shared among colleagues and customers, what works in virtual sales meetings and whether new practices have been added to virtual sales meetings.

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APPENDICES

Cover letter

DEAR RECIPIENT

I am studying at the Turku University of Applied Sciences for a master's degree in MBA (Master of Business Administration), Sales Management degree program. As part of my degree, I do my thesis by interviewing company management and decision makers.

The aim of the study is to find answers to the following areas in particular:

1. How do customers experience virtual meetings in B2B sales?
2. What are the key factors in a successful virtual meeting between a customer and a salesperson?
3. How to create a better customer experience in future B2B virtual sales meetings?

With the help of the information obtained from the research, it is possible for the commissioner company to improve the customer experience in virtual meetings and to serve customers even better.

The survey will be conducted as a Teams interview, approximately 30min. The interview is recorded for the purpose of collecting responses and analyzing the results. The answers you provide will be treated anonymously and confidentially and cannot be identified with you. Recordings and research material will be stored securely and destroyed upon completion of the research.

Thank you for your cooperation,

Terhi Joronen

Student

Turku University of Applied Sciences

1. What is your position in the company?
2. How have you met suppliers/ salespeople during the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. What do you expect from the supplier and/or salespeople before the virtual sales meeting?
4. What do you think a good and successful virtual sales meeting consists of?
5. What do you think is a good customer experience in a virtual sales meeting?
6. How do you think salespeople succeed in understanding a customer`s need in a virtual sales meeting?
7. How do you feel that the solution presented by the salespeople is conveyed in virtual sales meetings?
 - a. follow-up question of what you think salespeople could do better?
8. How do you feel the building trust between buyer and salespeople in virtual sales meetings? What things contribute to building trust?
9. How do you think salespeople manage to create value in virtual sales meetings?
10. What factors make a sales meeting virtually interesting and meaningful?
11. Does virtual selling increase buying effectiveness?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
12. How do you feel about the virtual buying process overall?
 - a. a follow-up question on what salespeople could do better to improve the customer experience in the virtual buying process?
13. How would you like to meet suppliers and salespeople in the future when the Covid-19 pandemic is over?