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Intensifying buyer personas using an inbound marketing strategy

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to intensify the four existing buyer personas of Company X based on the inbound marketing theory. Inbound marketing is strongly based on the buyer personas that best represent the ideal customers of a company and acts as a base for the content creation. The assignor, Company X had already created four buyer personas based on the research that was conducted in March 2013. However, the company wanted to renew the research to update and intensify the buyer personas and enable their better use. The buyer personas were intensified by making observations of similarities in the three main themes: best issues around the business (1), current challenges (2) and perceptions of the future and internationalization (3). This enables a relevant and informational content creation in the future around important issues increasing the engagement of the existing customers.

The literature review introduces the theories around customer-centric marketing and an inbound marketing method. The data was collected using 15 respondents from the base of 4 000 customers all meeting the pre-defined criteria of a desired respondent. Qualitative research with one-on-one phone interviews were used as interviews are recommended when exploring in-depth customer insight. Furthermore, inbound marketing theories recommend interviewing existing customers to construct semi-fictional yet realistic buyer persona(s).

The results were categorized under three themes, one for each buyer persona. The research brought up insightful data on the buyer personas. Therefore, the results can be a great help in the future content creation. The results of this research show that all the 15 companies representing the buyer personas are facing unique issues but also share some common thoughts on certain issues. Some results broke the prejudices the company had over certain themes. Based on the results, updated buyer persona suggestions were given to Company X.

Keywords/tags (subjects)
Inbound marketing, inbound marketing strategy, customer-centric marketing, buyer persona(s), digital marketing, content creation, social media in inbound marketing, SEO

Miscellaneous
Eight appendices attached (18 pages), classified as confidential until 5.5.2026

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Tiivistelmä

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli syventää Yritys X:n käytössä olevaa neljää ostopersoonaa sisältömarkkinoinnin teoriaa hyödyntäen. Sisältömarkkinointi pohjautuu vahvasti ostopersooniin, jotka parhaiten kuvaavat yrityksen kohdeasiakkaita ja ovat näin ollen tärkeä osa sisällöntuotantoa. Yritys X teki vuonna 2013 laadullisen tutkimuksen aiheeseen liittyen ja loi sen pohjalta neljä ostopersoonaa. Nyt yritys halusi uusia tutkimuksen, päivittää ja syventää ostopersoonia sekä ottaa ne entistä parempaan käyttöön. Ostopersoonia syvennettiin tutkimalla samankaltaisuuksia kolmen aihealueen ympäriltä: toimintaympäristön parhaat asiat (1), tämänhetkiset haasteet (2) sekä tulevaisuudennäkymät ja ajatukset kansainvälistymisestä (3.)

Teoriaosuudessa perehdyttiin asiakaslähtöiseen markkinointiin ja sisältömarkkinoinnin toimintatapoihin. Tutkimustiedot kerättiin haastattelemalla Yritys X:n yli 4 000 asiakkaan joukosta 15:tä asiakasta, jotka soveltuivat mukaan haluttavien asiakkaiden kriteeristöön. Tutkimus toteutettiin puhelinhaastatteluina. Syvähaastattelua suositellaan tutkimustavaksi, kun halutaan tutkia syvällisesti asiakkaiden näkemyksiä. Myös sisältömarkkinoinnin teoriat suosittelevat olemassa olevien asiakkaiden haastattelemista ostopersoonien luonnissa.

Tulokset kategorioitiin kolmen teeman ympärille ostopersoonittain. Tulokset toivat syvällistä tietoa ostopersoonista ja toimivat näin ollen hyvänä pohjana tulevaisuuden sisällöntuotannossa. Tulokset osoittivat, että jokaisella asiakkaalla on omat haasteensa mutta myös kaikille ostopersoonille yhteisiä asioita oli havaittavissa. Osa tuloksista mursi ennakkokäsityksiä tiettyjen teemojen ympäriltä. Tulosten pohjalta luotiin uudet ostopersoonaehdotukset.

Avainsanat (asiasanat)
Sisältömarkkinointi, asiakaslähtöinen markkinointi, ostopersoona(t), digitaalinen markkinointi, sisällön luonti, sosiaalinen media sisältömarkkinoinnissa, SEO

Muut tiedot
Kahdeksan liitettä (18 sivua), luokiteltu luottamukselliseksi 5.5.2026 saakka

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1 Need for inbound marketing

The last decade was revolutionary in the field of marketing. As the Internet is growing rapidly and seamlessly across the borders, market places have migrated to the electronic market space as well. Given the scale and benefits the online solutions offer to businesses and their customers, it can be seen as a big part of businesses' future. (Ryan and Jones 2009, 15)

The Internet provides possibilities for digital communications between companies and their customers increasing the emphasis of Customer-to-Business models (C2B). In this model a potential buyer approaches the company that then compete for the sale. Internet is much more than just another marketplace and channel to market services and products with e.g. banners. Internet provides multiple new channels and options for also customers to compare service providers, their features and prices and seek information *before* a purchase decision. Marketers are therefore no longer in charge. (Chaffey and Smith 2013, 9-11; Ryan and Jones 2009, 15)

Customers are developing new patterns of consuming media and selecting services. Companies need to be visible at the right time in the right place as the customers are using search engines, affiliates and review sites to choose their preferred supplier. The gap between the promises the companies have given and the realities that the customers are actually delivered is shrinking as information search as well as comparing and reviewing companies is easier than ever. The customer is the one to hold the power as they have the power to choose *what* content to consume, *when* to consume it in a way they want to consume it. Customers can choose who to value, trust and especially from whom to purchase. Companies therefore need to adjust and adapt to answer a customer's *need.* Marketers are forced to find new ways to meet those needs. (Hochman 2010, 4; Chaffey and Smith 2013, 5, 103; Ryan and Jones 2009, 15). No wonder the traditional marketing that pushes a message to the audience has passed off from inbound marketing where marketers make an effort to pull in their ideal customers. (Urban 2004, 47; Virtanen, 2015).

Inbound marketing: the answer to companies' needs

Inbound marketing as a marketing method is increasing its popularity consistently as the purpose is to answer to the potential customers' needs and nurture the existing relationship with the customers. The focus has turned from the product to the customer. In the best cases, customer can turn from a loyal customer to an advocate. Advocates are valuable to the companies as they can "market" the service e.g. through their own social media channels.

An inbound marketing is known by several names. In this report two terms are mainly referred to: *inbound marketing* that can be seen as a more wide concept and *content marketing* that can be seen as a subset for the inbound marketing. Even though the terms around the subjects are still changing, the inbound marketing strategy is here to stay. The emphasis will be on the aspect of B2B service marketing although inbound marketing is applicable to both service and product marketing and B2C marketing.

Nowadays, marketing often takes place in an online environment via companies' own publishing platforms and distribution channels. Instead of paying a high price for publishing content through paid medias such as print, TV or radio, companies *have became medias*. (Corcoran, 2009) Content is published on companies' own online platforms aiming to reach carefully build target audience(s) and engage existing ones. Building buyer personas by interviewing a company's customers is essential when implementing inbound marketing in use. However, acknowledging only the target groups is not enough. Companies need to be findable, desirable and significant in the eyes of potential customers to even be considered. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 94-95)

This thesis deals with the topic of inbound marketing and especially the importance of customers in it. For the research about buyer personas there is a case company, Company X, for it. The topic for this thesis was chosen as the need for deepening and updating the buyer personas was seen relevant. Hence, Company X's marketing department lacked the resources to conduct the research themselves. Buyer personas are the fundamental base around the inbound marketing method. Even though

Company X had created the personas already in 2013 and was satisfied with the targeting, a more profound round of interviews was seen necessary. The purpose of the research therefore is to strengthen the existing four buyer personas that Company X already have created in 2013 to enable more specific content creation in the near future. A qualitative research with 15 in-depth phone interviews of Company X's customers was conducted during May and June 2015.

1.1 Introduction of the assignor company

Company X is a Finnish Business To Business (B2B) company offering Software as a Service (SaaS) for all sized companies. The business was started in 2007 when the founders of the company realized a need for the kind of service. Company X was one of the first companies in Finland to provide this kind of service online yet today the amount of the competitors is increasing constantly as even the international competitors has stepped in.

The pricing of the service is based on subscription fee. Subscription has traditionally been revenue model for publishers but is largely used in digital products and services as it offers different range of purchase options at different price points. (Chaffey and Smith 2013, 71). Company X have monthly subscription fee with resign opportunity of one-month notice period. Company X's strategy is not to force their customers to long subscriptions or compete with the lowest price in the market. The aim is to be seen as a reliable partner for their customers. Inbound marketing strategy provides tools to effectively implement this goal.

Challenges of SaaS

Even though SaaS services can be seen as a very good option for multiple reasons from the customer's point of view, it have its own challenges for the service provider. For example, there is no need for physical devices so no big monetary investments are needed when signing the contract with a SaaS provider. As costs are usually rather minimal they do not tie the customer for certain service provider. The service is accessed via a web browser so all the information is easily transferred from service to another. Updating and introducing new features is up to the development team of

the service provider that can change the situation of the competition fast. (Wikipedia, 2016). Furthermore, when using SaaS service, changing the service provider is rather easy to the customer.

Company X has managed to remain one of the most used and well-known services in their field of business. Hence, they struggle with the customers that are willing to change the service provider to competitor that offers the similar service with lower price. Engaging the existing customers is therefore seen as a big challenge to Company X.

Inbound marketing as a competitive advantage

Company X works hard to differentiate from their competitors with their marketing strategy. Company X started to change their marketing strategy from traditional marketing towards the inbound marketing in 2012. According to the company's Marketing manager, they were one of the first companies to implement the inbound marketing in Finland. The company saw the need to change their marketing from working with individual actions for processing bigger picture. One of the aims was also to come closer to their customers.

In 2013 the company renewed their whole brand. During the renewal Company X changed their communication style from a corporate style communication for more human-to-human (H2H) style where help and knowledge are shared with the customers in language they speak. In March 2014 one of the inbound marketing's core was taken into use as the buyer personas were defined with cooperation of the company's marketing, customer service and sales team. The clientele were carefully gone through and the most important four buyer groups were defined based on their profitability. From all the four groups two customers, in total of eight, were interviewed in March 2014 to create four (4) realistic Company X's buyer personas. However, so far only one of the persons has been in active use.

The competition gets harder in the field of business Company X is working as the amount of the competitors is increasing and the prices decreasing. Company X has faced the problem of the existing customers changing their service provider and keeping the existing customers is seen hard both because of the unstable current

financial situation and the nature of SaaS business. Company X does not compete with the price but their goal is to be the best service in the market. This is done by e.g. providing excellent customer experience from the first sales call to the customer service. The inbound marketing strategy aims to engage the customers throughout their whole buying process by offering relevant content that is targeted to small target groups, the buyer personas.

The business decision problems are:

What kind of content should be created to engage existing customers more and create them additional value to make them more engaged to Company X?

What issues are the current customers facing when it comes to their business and how can the company help with those by means of content creation?

By focusing on existing customer's issues Company X believes it will also be helpful when turning leads into sales. This is because even the companies using the service varies a lot by several factors, they are most likely facing same issues in the certain phases of their businesses (Marketing Manager 2015). Furthermore, as every unique new webpage (e.g. blog post) increases the search engine ranking, frequent content creation with relevance to the (potential) customer gives opportunity to generate new leads among the most pre-defined desired customer groups that can be seen as a good side effect of the research.

Inbound marketing strategy in Company X

Company X has a clear inbound marketing strategy and tools to constantly measure the achievements that are gained through different actions. Company X's inbound marketing strategy's main goals are to

- Be organized, measurable and transparent
- Be found from the search engines
- Build trust
- Nurture and generate the leads
- Make strangers to read/subscribe blog and turn them into visitors
- Make the visitors to download e-books and turn them sales qualified leads (SQL)
- Turn the existing customers into advocates that share the Company's content and act as referrals

In Company X, after starting to implement the inbound marketing in use, the marketing department has become a department with real business target and is no longer seen as a department with supporting role. They now have a significant role in customer acquisition and performance accountability. They are driven by lead generation and customer acquisition but also in customer retention by nurturing and helping the existing customers to success. (Marketing Manager, 2015)

1.2 Research approach, strategy and problem

The purpose of this research is to offer information to Company X that is both relevant and informational for their four buyer personas. For that, the company needs to understand their customers' thinking processes and motivations better. The aim is to encapsulate the customers' behavior, experiences and feelings by their own terms and context. In other words, the aim is to increase the understanding of the customer's experiences and later create content around those issues. (Malhotra 2012, 186, 188; Mäntyneva et al 2013, 32)

As here the research problem is within the *existing customers' current issues,* it is clear that the use of secondary data collected before cannot provide answers to this particular research problem. Therefore, exploratory research by collecting primary qualitative data from the customers is seen the most suitable research method. (Mäntyneva et al 2013, 32) The symptoms of the decision-problem are the customers that are switching the service provider. Most customers are satisfied with the service features, reliability and the customer service the company is providing. According to the feedback from the resigning customers, the main cause to change the service provider is the price but lowering the price is not an option. Engaging the customers more throughout the overall service experience is seen as an act that the marketing department is capable to deliver.

The competitors of Company X do not provide content in forms of blog posts, e-books and webinars as frequently or in as a wide form (if any) as Company X does. Even though Company X is far ahead of their competitors when it comes to the inbound marketing strategy and implementation there is a constant need to strengthen the already accomplished position of expertise. This need is highlighted especially among the three buyer personas that have not been that well taken into account in the overall content creation process. For that, the marketing department found implementing a new research about the topic useful to update and intensify the personas.

Research questions:

RQ1: What Is best in the field of business the bueyrs personas are operating in?

RQ2: What challenges are the buyer personas facing now in their businesses?

RQ2: What are the buyer personas perceptions of the future and internationalization?

As stated earlier, Company X had already defined four buyer personas from their four different customer types and given them certain characteristics based on two interviews per buyer persona in 2013. Together with the marketing department it was decided that in this research the amount of interviewees should be larger than two respondents from each group with the maximum of four. The interviews should be recorded to enable a deeper analysis of the than in the previous round and updated versions of the buyer personas would be built based on the new findings.

As the research problem here is to find out the challenges and issues of the current customers of Company X, qualitative research was seen as the best approach to gain an insight into understanding the customers' issues (Malhotra 2004, 57). The aim is to gain rich and detailed answers. Qualitative interviews are not as standardized as quantitative interviews and therefore gives more generality in the formulation of the interviewees' own perspectives. They are flexible and can depart from a schedule based on respondents' answers. (Bryman & Bell 2015, 480-481)

2 Towards customer-centric digital marketing methods

This chapter is divided in three parts. It starts with the definition of marketing and then compares the differences of traditional and inbound marketing. The second subchapter is about the customers as it is the core of the inbound marketing. In the third chapter the inbound marketing conceptions and the strategy are introduced.

2.1 Traditional vs Digital marketing

There are several definitions for marketing such Oxford Dictionary's *(n/d) "the action or business of promoting and selling products or services, including market research and advertising* Business Dictionary states that marketing is" *The management process through which goods and services move from concept to the customer.* " In other words, marketing aims to attract new customers by making the company's product or service selection noticed.

From 4P to 4C

One of the most known marketing methods is the marketing mix with 4P's. The term 4P was coined in the 1960's from four core issues of *product, price, place and promotion.* When these variables are planned and carefully mixed together in the right way the mix should be able to satisfy the customer, especially when used in products rather than services. (Chaffey and Smith 2013, 68-69)

The Internet provides opportunities but also challenges to the companies. Place and promotion overlap when companies can increase their online presence and distribution. Pricing in the other hand is under pressure as structures and options are becoming more complex. Thanks to the transparency of prices the Internet provides, customers can look for lower prices through online tools that easily compare the price range. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 71, 75).

However, the traditional 4P marketing mix suggests a push marketing methods that not explicitly acknowledge the needs of customers but lead more to product or service orientation rather than customer-orientation. According to Mooney (2008, 21, 35), traditional marketing can be described as a closed brand worldview that is a

one-way communication created by the marketers. The companies compete on customer's attention by pushing out mass-market messages they think would appeal their audience. (Chaffey and Smith 2013, 68-69)

4C framework was created in the 1990's that consider the traditional 4P's from customer perspective. These 4Cs are:

- Customer needs and wants (from the product)
- Cost to the customer (price)
- Convenience (relative to place)
- Communication (promotion)

Today the categories of the traditional marketing mix are beginning to blur as the propositions merge with the service experience and all of the mixes are seamlessly integrated. 3P's –people, processes and physical evidence, are also added to the 4P to better serve the online environment and the service produces. (Chaffey and Smith 2013, 68-69). No matter what mix is in use, a company needs to know which variables are the most important for their ideal customers and mix the mixes accordingly. The principle now is to stick close to the customer and this is what the next subchapters are about. In the following subchapters the concentration is in the 2P's of promotion (communication) and place (convenience) whereas price and product are left mainly to the background.

Digital marketing concepts

Chaffey and Smith (2013, 68-69) states that online value proposition (OVP) is a core of the digital marketing concept and should differ from the offline proposition. The OVP exploits the advantages that being online offer to the companies and the customers. These advantages compared to offline proposition include e.g. depth and interactivity of the content, immediacy, easiness to buy online, cheapness to buy from Internet and more resources and information that are available online. The OVP is more than the sum of prices, benefits or features and should enclose the complete experience from selecting the service to buying and using it.

Traditional marketing and selling

- Outbound
- Sales oriented
- One-way communication
- Push out the message to big masses (TV, print, radio)
- Concentrates on service quality and features
- Customer acquisition through cold calls
- Service centralized
- Reaching potential customer is difficult
- Expensive and hard work

Inbound marketing and selling

- Inbound
- Customer oriented
- Two-way communication
- Pulls the customer in
- Personalized content through buyer personas
- Concentrates on the customer's needs and pain points
- Offers solutions
- Share content online
- Aims to loyal customers that turn into customer advocates
- Affordable
- Own media (blogs, accounts in social media channels

Figure 1. Traditional marketing vs. inbound marketing

The main differences between traditional and inbound (digital) marketing are highlighted in the Figure 1. Most significant difference is the fundamental change from company- and product-centric mindset to customer-centric mindset where customers are pulled in instead of pushing the message out. Furthermore, in the online environment the web sites have evolved from one-way, brochure-like listing communication styles to two-way communication that emails, discussions and automated interactions have enabled. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 487).

At it's best, company can decrease their marketing costs significantly when costs for a paid advertisement degreases with digital methods. Hence, a company can reach their target audience more effectively. In digital marketing producing and publishing content is inexpensive as there are no third-party costs for example from buying advertisement space from a magazine. Digital marketing can be even done without any additional costs for example by putting effort in organic search results and by being active in the social media. This approach requires a long-term plan and active participation in social media channels such as LinkedIn and Twitter. (Sivonen, 2015) Even though traditional marketing channels and methods still have their time and place the focus is now to provide information to customers, be present and transparent and enable two-way-communication where customer can feel valued.

Increasing usage and trust towards digital media

According to Global Web Index (GWI) study (2016), Internet users spend typically over 6 hours online daily. People are looking information online independently and only in Finland *30 million Google search* are done daily. Furthermore, consumption of online media is constantly increasing. 2015 already more than 50 % of the media consumption time is spent online. The traditional media channels TV, radio and print gain less time together. (GWI, 2016, Virtanen 2016) More over, according to 2016 Edelman trust barometry (2016) search engines have bypassed the traditional media as the most trusted source of information with trust percentage of 63 compared to traditional media's 57 percent.

To sum up, the usage of Internet and online content is increasing constantly. People search information independently and trust the information they found from search engines. Companies therefore need to be present in the same places the customers are and draw them in. Inbound marketing that is introduced in the next subchapter offers solutions for these marketing needs of companies.

2.2 Conception of inbound marketing

Companies have created additional content around their products and services for decades. For example brands including John Deere and Lego have had their own customer magazines from as early as 1895. Jell'o distributed free recipe books in 1904 that contributed sales of over one million dollar by 1906. (Pulizzi 2014,16; CMI, 2012) Inbound marketing itself can be seen as a relatively new marketing strategy that has been acknowledged since 2006 (Hubspot n/d 1) with the help of digitalization. Inbound marketing is a compilation of content, social and search marketing (Bosomworth 2012). This is clarified in the Figure 2 below. Content creation is to publish content for the website and the rest is playing a role drawing the traffic in the website to distribute the content. In the following chapters all of the three phases are gone through more thoroughly.

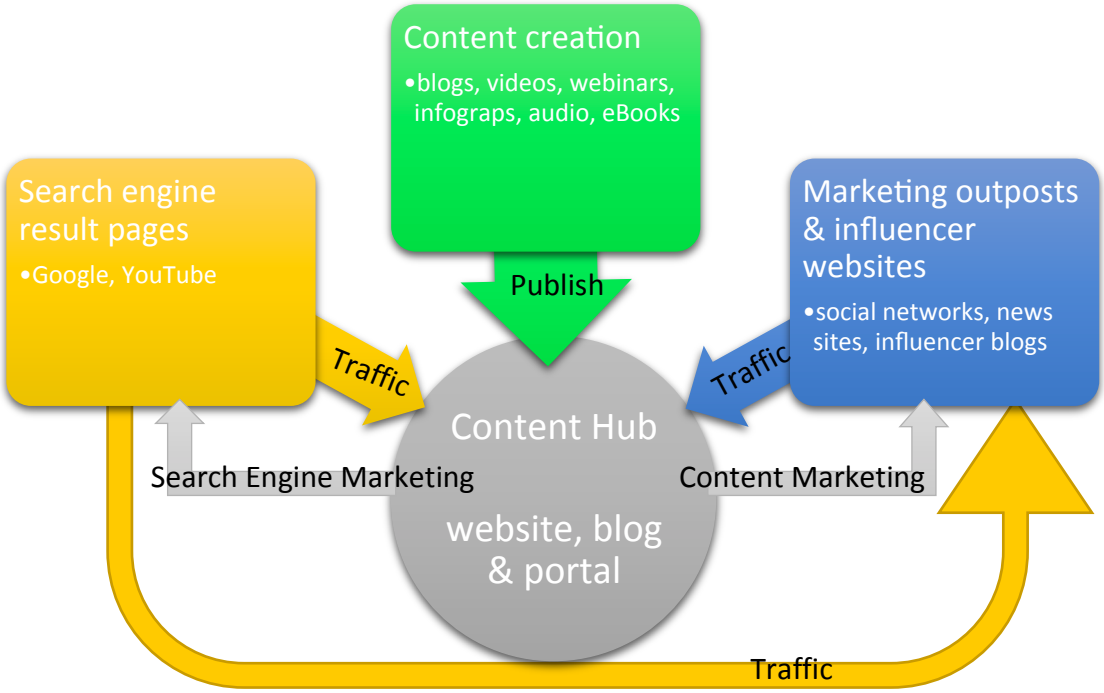

Figure 2. The content marketing hub (adapted from Smart Insights 2012)

According to Hubspot (n/d 1) "*Inbound marketing focuses on creating quality content that pulls people toward your company and product, where they naturally want to be. By aligning the content you publish with your customer's interests, you naturally attract inbound traffic that you can then convert, close, and delight over time*".

According to Joe Pulizzi (2014, 5), the creator of the term *content marketing* and founder of a USA based Content Marketing Institute (CMI), content marketing is: "*marketing and business process for creating and distributing valuable and compelling content to attract, acquire and engage a clearly defined and understood target audience -with the objective of driving profitable customer action*. "

Even though inbound marketing suits all companies and business types Kortesuo (2010, 101) states that inbound marketing is best suitable for immaterial companies s that are for example offering consultation services. These companies need to convince their target audience by marketing their service indirectly through content with strong expertise. Although the purpose for a company is to promote sales the communication and content sharing to prospects and customers should be done without actively selling the service. Customers want to be entertained and are interested how the company's services can help them to solve their problems. *The key element is to*

define one to few buyer personas that best represent company's target customers and create content that is targeted to those personas. (Ansaharju, n.d.; Pulizzi 2014, 6, 78).

Importance of an inbound marketing strategy

An inbound marketing strategy aims to provide tools for companies to effectively differentiate from their competitors. The inbound marketing strategy is a plan to maximize the profit the contents are producing. The plan should consist of a plan to help the customer to buy by offering the right information in the right place. The inbound marketing strategy is a part of company's strategy that is also bringing the marketing and sales departments closer together through content. The aim is to strengthen the company's position of expertise that increases the effectiveness of marketing. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 105).

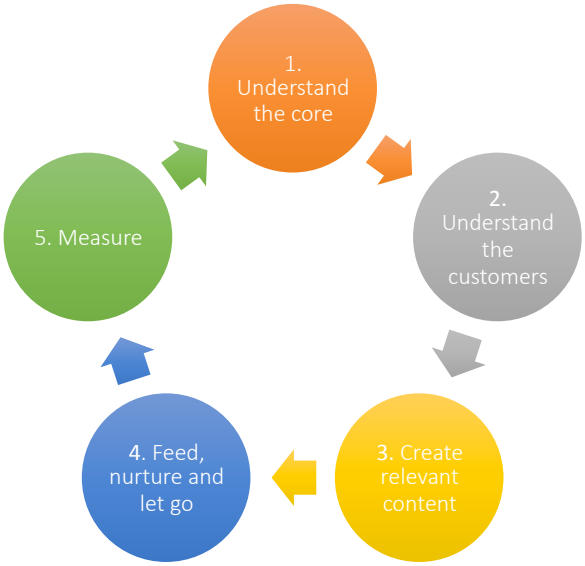

Figure 3. Five key elements for successful inbound marketing (adapted from Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 11-12)

As shown by Figure 3, there are five key elements that need to be understood when accomplishing successful content marketing strategy. The first (1.) key is to understand what the company's core is by understanding e.g. the differentiating factors of the provided service. The second (2.) key is to understand the customers that the company either already have or wishes to have. When the customer types are well defined, creating relevant content that is the third key (3.) element, is possible. The fourth key (4.) is to feed and nurture the potential and existing customers and letting

go of them if their lifespan as a customers is seen to be over. The fifth (5.) key is to measure the results constantly. Measuring is important and easy to implement due to digital marketing. (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 11-12)

The results of the inbound strategy can be seen after creating the trust among the most important target audience that the buyer personas represent. An inbound marketing strategy is not a campaign as building the trust and ultimately being an opinion leader takes persistence and time. The potential and existing customers will be nurtured and engaged with information; content, that they find interesting and relevant to their business. (Tanni and Keronen 2013, 183).

A successful inbound marketing strategy forces the departments to co-operate more closely in order to create high quality content. This requires that people administering the marketing communication come closer to the processes that are connected to the customer interface e.g. the sales and customer service departments and the ones responsible for the product planning and development. This enables the creation of content that is relevant to the customer as the content need to revolve around the core needs of the customer (Rose and Pulizzi, 2011, 128).

Companies fail to achieve results in their inbound marketing if they have not spent enough time recognizing their target audience and their problems. The content is created only to publish content from the company's own perspective and there is a lack for perseverance and continuity. It is important to aim at being a pioneer instead of a follower. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 226). Kubo Oy (2014) released a study about Trends of Content Marketing in Finland 2014. According to the study, only 23 % of the companies using content marketing strategy have it documented. However, a documented strategy with a responsible person to implement it does increase the effectiveness of inbound marketing.

2.3 It is now all about the customer

As stated in the previous chapter, in inbound methodology, after the company understands the core (1.) of their business, the second (2.) stage is to understand the customer. A customer, also referred as a buyer, is defined in the Business dictionary (2015) as: *A party that receives or consumes products (goods or services) and has the ability to choose between different products and suppliers.*

The aim of marketing is to match the customer needs with the company's services and make the company's offering something that the customer want to buy. (Urban 2004, 1) By understanding the customers it is possible to serve them from the information-search stage up to the buying decision stage. This can be achieved only by looking the business through customer´s eyes. The customer is only interested of their own interests and the company's ability to serve these needs. Companies need to develop meaningful content to earn place in the customers' conversations. Success is build around the marketing processes, expertise and customer understanding. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 104; Mooney 2008, 35).

The online environment has enabled the number of marketing channels to increase. People are exposed to more than 5 000 marketing messages per day (Pulizzi 2014, 27) and have learned to go around the interruptive advertisement (Kurvinen & Sipilä, 2014, 102). They are finding traditional marketing boring and fatigue and would like to not see the obvious selling messages (Sinha & Foscht 2007, 164-165). Customers have the power of choosing the channels and seeking the information *where ever and when ever* it is needed. They can be demanding and have no tolerance for interruptive or disruptive advertisement. (Virtanen, 2016) According Mooney (2008), in digital era the individuals create a web-made world that has turned the brand-made world to customer-created space where companies need to engage richly, meaningfully and deeply to have the control. For the costumers community-by-brand—association is not enough. Interactivity is needed to deepen and foster the customer relationships.

As the communication now runs both ways, the reputation is no longer in the hands of the company. Brands need to engage their online consumers on their own turf by supporting communities that have closest affinity to their customers. Communication is based on transparent dialogue with the customers. If the brand is co-created with customers it will engage them and pull the customers in. (Mooney 2008, 16) Customer referrals are highly appreciated among the customers and therefore the customer can be the best marketer for the company, an advocate. (Virtanen, 2016) According to Edelman Trust barometer, 75 % of 33 000 respondents have impact of conversation with peers when making decisions, overcoming concerns or warning about risks. More over, 78 % trust the information created by their friends and family on social networking sites. To compare, 55 % trust the employees of the company and 49 % of the CEO. (Edelman Insight, 2016). Especially service related businesses are likely to loose customers to competitors if they mishandle their customer relations, according to Olenski (2015). He states "*Customer engagement is a very important asset for a business. It is important to include marketing experts in the process of engaging customers and also in delivering a consistent and focused service quality to customers*. "

2.4 The buyer personas and how to build them

In many cases the customer's needs are often defined by the company's sales and management visions and assumptions lacking actual customer understanding (Kurvinen & Sipilä, 2014, 102). Marketing and sales are focused around the service whereas it should offer solutions to attract the buyers. (Hanki, 2015). However, the customer is in control as they have the ability and freedom to choose from several different service providers. Building relationship with the customers is now more important than ever and knowing the customer is essential. Customers want all the information available before making buying decision and if a company can't provide that, they will choose a competitor who will. (Hochman, 2010, 78-79)

One of an inbound marketing's main purposes is to strengthen or widen the relationship with the potential and existing customers and stakeholders. Content can help to build these relationships if it participates to creation of *value*. Value is bind to context, relevance and timing. (Avaus, 2012). In Hochman (2010) views: "*Value is at the*

forefront of every customer's mind, at every end of the value chain". In other words, the feeling of advantage must be greater than the spending that customer have put in. Understanding the need of the customer by offering unique solutions can therefore create the value. Relationships that are built on trust and create value to customer will more likely turn long-term. (Creamentors, 2015)

In the inbound marketing, communication is formulated according the customer type, i.e. a buyer persona. The company needs to know who to reach. However, modern people's buying behavior is hard to segment as the buying behavior varies. According to Sinha and Foscht (2007, 12-13) this "hybrid shopper" purchases from any social class-, income-, or education-based model and fitting them into certain customer segmentation is hard. Instead of using the obvious demographics of e.g location, sex and age, companies should generalize their ideal customer(s) that is combination of different factors. These factors can differ a lot based on the service the company is selling.

A buyer persona is a person that has targets, challenges and certain ways to act and is considered as a live and different person representing the company's ideal customer. As its best the buyer persona can help the company to understand their audience better. If the buyer personas are carefully built, they can be used in base of all content production in all channels. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 01) Use of the buyer personas enable content creation that meet the customer's real expectations and needs by being relevant yet semi-fictional. (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 41). According to FIGA-model the purpose is that a small target group *Finds* the company's content. The better the people can *Identify* to the content the better they can *enGage* to the content which will lead into *Action.* In the FIGA-model the target audience grows constantly and creates group of advocates that can bring in new followers that eventually can mature into potential customers. (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 118)

It is important that the company can answer to their customers' needs by telling credibly, truly and in interesting way about their issues with the customers having ability to interact with the company as they want. (Kurvinen and Sipilä 2014, 39). The company need to know where the customer is obtaining the information and how do they consolidate the information to reach decision. But as the customers are ex-

posed to constant barrage of information the message must attract the customer's attention. *To become customer-centric companies have to understand their customers' biggest problems and pain points thoroughly.* Interviewing the potential or existing customers and getting into their mindsets can achieve this. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 103-104; Urban 2004, 25; Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 03) Also Pulizzi (2014, 94-95) states that the best way to gather clear insights about the customers is to have in-depth conversation with the buyers that have turned into customers.

After the research it is possible to create the buyer personas that should then be the base of all content creation. According to Hubspot (n/d 2) the buyer persona should be semi-fictional representations of the company's ideal customer based on real data and educated speculations about customer demographics, motivations, behavior patterns and goals. Buyer persona should not be a representation of the target markets, job titles or specific real people. Instead, they have common behavior patterns, shared pain points, universal goals and general demographic and biographic information. The buyer personas should be continually iterated according the need and therefore can never be fully completed.

All the available information from marketing researchers to the company's internal knowledge of the customer base should be exploited when building the buyer personas. The amount of the buyer personas varies from one to few according the business. Rose and Pulizzi (2011, 41-45) suggests that at least following questions should be asked when creating buyer personas:

1. Who is she/he?
2. What is their need?
3. What unique value proposition do the company offer to the persona?

The more detailed the buyer persona is, the easier it is to create content. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 16) With relevant content, the discoverability from the search engines can be increased (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 84). However, external features, especially in a B2B business, should not matter much when creating the personas. According to SalesManago's Case Study (2015), using buyer personas can lead up to 210 % in-

crease in total traffic in company's website and 97 % increase of acquired leads through the website.

Company X acknowledges the increase in the online traffic that using the inbound marketing and buyer personas has brought. Also the amount of the sales qualified leads (SQL) has increased after they started to implement the inbound marketing to use with the carefully defined buyer personas.

To sum up, defining buyer personas in content strategy is important as it

- Enables the creation of relevant content to the clearly targeted group(s)
- Participates in all marketing stages from lead generation to nurturing existing customers
- Increases the traffic and amount of leads generated from the company's website
- Help people inside and outside the company to create content

2.5 Customer's Buying Process

A buying process is a process that leads the customer towards the buying decision. The online environment has changed the buyer's behavior as the customers compare the sites that feature well in in the search engines. Even in a B2B buying process, options are taken into consideration independently. Before an offline purchase, the B2B buyers can make up to half of their research online. In other words, buyers control their buying cycle much more than the merchants control their selling cycle (Wizdo, 2015). By understanding the customers' buying process, it is possible to affect a buyer´s decisions. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 184).

Such content that is based on an expertise and is created through a marketing and sales department's co-operation can and should support every phase of the buying process as the visitor can be at any buying process stage when entering the company's website. In the first phase, the company needs to stand out with its expertise and answer to the knowledge seekers' questions. The second phase should make the

change transparent and once the potential lead has turned into an existing customer to help them develop their own approach. (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 63). Inbound marketing can therefore help a sales department with customer acquisition but also with the customer retention.

Hubspot Academy (2015, Class 01) divides the buying process in three stages:

1. Awareness stage
2. Consideration stage
3. Decision making stage

In the *awareness stage* (1) the potential customer is experiencing and expressing symptoms of a problem or an opportunity. In the *consideration stage* (2) the customer has defined the problem and is now committing to research of different service providers. In the *decision making stage* (3), the customer has compiled a list of available merchants and make the decision based on the journey. The targeting and timing of the content need to match to the buying process stage. Without relevance in the information search, the information is screened out by the uninterested audience. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 182-183). When a customer's buying process is taken into consideration in every stage of the inbound methodology the company is able to create content to every visitor according their stage in the buying process.

3 Implementing inbound marketing in use

This chapter provides the basic tools to implement inbound marketing in use. The first chapter describes the four main stages of inbound marketing. The second sub-chapter is about producing relevant content with the help of buyer personas and the third chapter is to ensure that the content will be found via Search Engine Optimization (SEO). The fourth sub-chapter is about the content distribution channels and the last sub-chapter about how a sales department can benefit from a well-implemented inbound marketing strategy.

3.1 Four main stages of inbound marketing

While an inbound marketing at it's best can be profitable yet rather inexpensive (marketing) strategy, it is vital to put some effort into introducing it. Without documented inbound marketing strategy, inbound marketing will not work as desired.

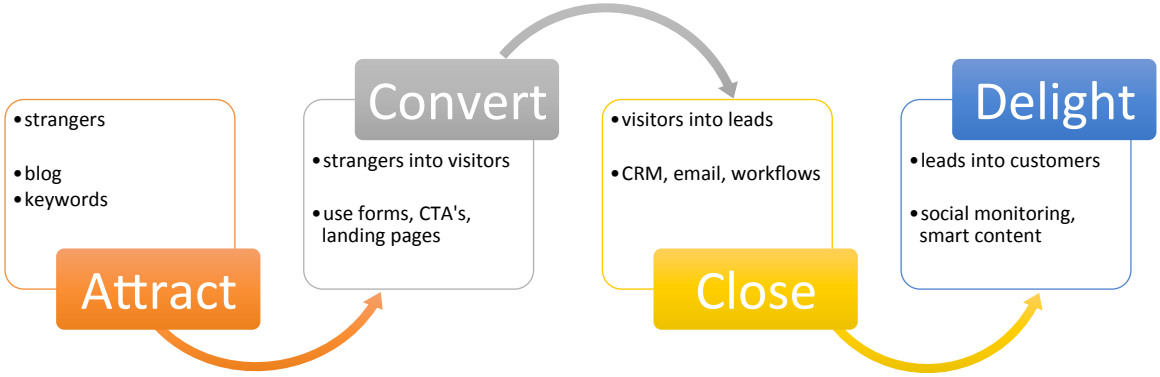

Figure 4. Four main stages of inbound marketing (adapted from Hubspot, n/d 1)

According to Hubspot's inbound methodology (n/d 1) introduced in the Figure 4, there are four main stages in inbound marketing. The stage one (1) is to *attract* strangers to a website by creating e.g. blog posts that solve the target customers' problems. In this stage search engine optimization (SEO) plays a huge role as if the content is not shown in the search results the stranger will most likely not find the content. After strangers are turned into visitors in the second (2.) stage, they can be *converted* into leads. Leads can be generated for example by using landing pages

where contact information is gathered via calls-to-actions (CTA's) and forms. When the contact information is gathered the lead is warm enough to be contacted and turned into a customer in stage three (3), *closing*. Stage four (4) is *delighting* customers by offering them smart content that can ultimately turn them into advocates or promoters. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Classes 01-03) SEO, landing pages and CTA's are introduced more thoroughly in subchapter 3.4.

3.2 Content creation

Once the buyer personas are defined the content creation is more straightforward and same rules can be applied to all content producers. Producing content is much more than just publishing news from the company or releasing bulletins. Content is important as it is the message the company's inbound strategy delivers. If there is no content, there is nothing to deliver. With content it is possible to pull the people from a one stage to another in the inbound methodology. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 03) The biggest strengths and weaknesses of an inbound marketing are in the content. If the content does not resonate with the target audience, the audience will be disappointed and the consumption of content and furthermore the engagement can be threatened. Only by setting clear, measurable targets and by creating an inbound strategy success is possible. Building content culture is advised by engaging the whole company to the content creation processes. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 182) One way to ensure that the content is high quality is to create a quality criterion and valuate the content after it is written. For example if all the company's departments are participating in the content creation it is recommendable to ask the following questions before publishing:

- Is there a clear argument in the beginning that follows the topic?
- Is the argument justified clearly?
- Is the content exiting and helps the customer?
- Would you share the content in your social media profiles?

(Tanni & Keronen 2013, 158-164)

Content types and formats

There should be one clear purpose for every piece of content. The purpose can be e.g. to inform, to inspire or to start a conversation. Content can be presented in different forms most important being the written articles such as blog posts, white papers and e-books. Other formats are e.g. videos and infographs. The choice of right format of the content is depending on the buyer persona the content is targeted to. (Hanbury 2011; Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 03)

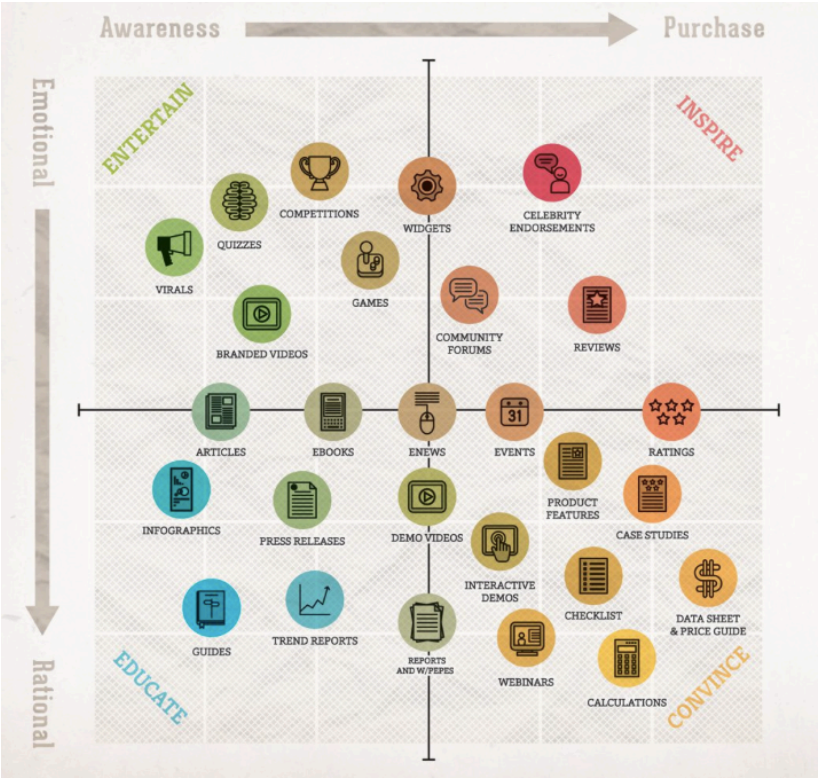

Figure 5. The content marketing matrix (Smart Insights 2012)

Smart Insight introduces Content marketing matrix that is seen in the Figure 5. According the matrix, content can, and should, be shared through different forms, channels and styles to appeal more customer. There are four different styles to create the content; entertaining, educating, convincing and inspirational. The selected style depends on the buyer's journey and can be between emotional and rational. For example articles are, according the matrix, educational and rational content that work best in the beginning of the buyer's journey, the awareness stage, whereas reviews can be seen more emotional and convincing method closer to the actual buying decision stage.

Importance of a website and blogs in content creation

As introduced in the chapter 2.2.1, a company's website acts as a content hub that most of the content is distributed from. A company website and its blog are playing biggest role when committing and activating the customer in a long run. A company blog is easy to set up and it is one of the most effective and best ways to share expertise and to build followers and loyal readers. It can be combination of news, communication and work as a marketing channel. Yet, to be successful, a blog needs to have at least one or more writer and it should be updated frequently. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 187, 189) A blog can contain text, pictures and videos and can easily promote new content related to the industry. Every blog post is new unique web site which ensures better visibility in the search engines and can therefore be seen as a one of the most important content distribution channels. Furthermore, companies *can address the posts to a certain buyer persona* in any of their buying process stage. Hence, it is most suitable channel in attract stage and therefore using the language the customers use is important while producing blog posts. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 04). Furthermore, corporate style communication lacks personalization and by avoiding that getting closer to a visitor is easier. (Kortesuo 2010, 22) When providing potential customers free, downloadable material e.g. white papers and e-books, it is easy to collect their details through forms. When potential customer has given their email address voluntarily they are more easily converted into customers. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 06).

Grapping and holding the audience's attention

After grapping the attention of the desired audience, the company need to hold on to the customer's attention. To create devoted and long-term advocates the only way is to produce content that is build with strong expertise that meets the website visitors' needs in their buying process stage. (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 119). Furthermore, if the content can be told as a story it will affect both to sense and feelings. A good story includes characters that the reader can identify with and whose actions are understandable. The most effective stories are new to the reader and therefore the best stories are based on own the writer's own experiences. (Kortesuo 2010, 103-104)

Effect	+	Convince	= Engaging
Interesting details makes the visitor to read more		Justified content that is frequently provided convince the visitors with its expertise	Quality content make visitors to subscribe notifications about new content and visit the website again when a need arises

Figure 6. Effective and convincing content creates engaged visitors. (Adapted from Tanni & Keronen 2013, 95)

As shown in Figure 6, the main goal of convincing content is to make the customers engaged. To engage people that are seeking information the content need to be both impressive with interesting details and convincing with its expertise. If the audience is not loyal and engaged, the content itself cannot accomplish much (Pulizzi 2014, 27). Furthermore, when content is worthy, casual visitors turn into leads that can be ultimately converted into loyal customers.

To sum up, the main purpose of quality content is to engage the customers with frequently published, relevant and informational content that make them ultimately to buy the service. Key to the long-term success is to be able to engage the customers continually and create content that the customers can find valuable. Creating content as stories is engaging and more memorable yet harder to produce. Well-defined buyer personas will help the employees and visitor content producers to target the content to the right people and write in understandable style mimicking the language the customers are using.

Marketing through an own media

Pulizzi (2014, 20, 26-30) states that inbound marketing can be referred as a publishing as brands are focusing not on their products in marketing but more importantly on the informational needs of their target customers. The difference is, that in inbound marketing the content supports the business whereas media companies make money directly from the creation of content. The target is to build an audience that finds the content interesting enough to lead to subscription.

Digitalization has enabled a decrease in physical expenses that has meant a revolution in marketing actions as the barriers to entry in publishing arenas no longer exists (CMI, 2012). Own media is the channel that the company completely controls such as a web site. Own media enables communication directly with the customers who want to engage with the company and build long-term relationship with them. It facilitates publishing, distribution, measuring the results and development. The distribution of the content can be done via company's own channels or through partially owned media such as social media channels Facebook and Twitter. (Corcoran 2009). Own media as a low-cost publishing platform can be also used as a test platform. If the content works in the own publishing platform by collecting shares and comments, it is easier to consider distribution through paid media (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 157). This means that the company is paying for publishing their company message e.g. by advertising in traditional channels such TV or radio or in digital media e.g. Facebook. (Pulizzi 2014, 7).

3.3 Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

To attract visitors a company needs to be found from the search engines and to do that, the content have to be relevant for the (potential) customer. Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the website to attract more visitors from the search engines, such as Google or Bing. SEO is vital as no content matters if it cannot be found from search engines. This applies also in the B2B as the buying process often starts by seeking information to solve a problem through the search engines. According to Hubspot Academy (2015, Class 11) Up to 60 percent of a buyer's purchase decision has already been made *before* talking to a sales representative. The customer should be able to identify their own world with the help of the service the company is providing. This is essential especially in the stage of turning strangers into visitors. (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 167-169; Hubspot Academy, Class 02; Virtanen, 2016).

Content that is created around the buyer persona's issues by mimicking the customer's language is easily found as the key words match to the information seeker's search-terms. (Hubspot Academy, Class 02) However, this is not enough. The content also need to be interesting to the information seeker and suit to the stage of the buying process. Most important SEO issues from inbound marketing's view are:

- Heading of the target page
- URL (the address of the owner of the content)
- Meta text and possibly image (alt-text)

Organic vs. paid results

In order to be found from the search engines, companies can either pay for the visibility with paid ads or aim for organic search rankings. In organic results *context and relevance* are playing big part as search engines are moving towards content sharing instead of only individual keyword hits. The more credible the content in the website is, the better chances are to be found from the organic results (Pulizzi 2014, 23). Organic search results are the results that appear when they are relevant to the search terms. Becoming well ranked in organic searches is time consuming. It requires both creating relevant content in unique sites, e.g. blogs and using SEO tactics to achieve it. Organic results are percept as credible resources and high ranking may imply for an industry leadership generating more clicks to the site. (Goodwin, Brecht) However, if the customer does not find the relationship of the content and the provider of it trustworthy, the search result might not be clicked even though the rank would be among the best three (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 83-85).

The Marketing manager from Company X states that one of Company X's aims is to gain high rankings in organic search engines results and "drown the keywords with quality articles through company's blog."

3.4 Social media is important part of inbound marketing

Distribution makes content relevant as the purpose is to have the right content in front of a right person at the right time. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 03) The upcoming subchapters will give a more thorough idea of where to publish the content and of the channels through which to distribute the content. Different social media channels are introduced and examples given how and when to use them in an inbound marketing strategy.

According to Pulizzi "*no content marketing strategy is complete without a strong social media strategy*". Hence, the use of social media channels is important but of no good if the content is not valuable, compelling and engaging. In social media marketing the focus is on social networks. In the inbound marketing however, the center is the company's website and social media is used to distribute the links to the content on the website. (Pulizzi 2014, 20-23, 231). A company should lead a customer through different channels to their website where the high quality content is being published. This increases the value of the company's website and builds a foundation for effective multi channeling. (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 38-39). Sharing content through multiple channels creates a continuum that is easy to follow. All channels have their own time and place. Together they create a multichannel content path that will lead not only the customer but also marketing departments' own work. (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 38-39). Therefore it is wise to think which channels are relevant to the company as being present in all the channels is not necessary in most cases.

Social media channels

Social media channels can be roughly divided into four sub categories; short text channels such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, long text channels such as blogs and LinkedIn's SlideShare and image channels such as Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube. (Siniaalto 2014, 36). As shown by the Table 1, all social media channels serve different needs and their lifecycles vary from short to long. All the channels have a purpose in creating and sharing content. Tanni and Keronen (2013, 40-41) suggests that a customer should be lead through the channels by using three content types: (1) recapturing, (2) engaging and (3) activating. These contents are then divided based on the customer type and the nature of the channel used.

Table 1. Nature of the most used social media channels and how they fit to different content publishing and sharing phases (adapted from Tanni & Keronen, 2013, 49-50)

Channel	Listen	Reach	Commit	Activate	Life cycle	**Purpose**
www	x		x	x	long	To gather www-presence and ensure ongoing story
blog	x		x	x	long	Increase the company's value, commit the customer and enable interaction with customer
facebook	x	x			short	To listen other influencers and to gather followers. Guide customers towards engaging content/contacts
twitter	x	x			short	To listen influencers and expand the amount of own followers. Guide customers towards other engaging contents/contacts
youTube			x	x	long	To solve problems by providing videos Guide customers towards other engaging contents/contacts
LinkedIn	x	x			short	To listen influencers, to participate discussions, guide customers towards other engaging contents/contacts

At their best, social media channels can be part of the engagement process. Twitter and LinkedIn publications have short life cycles but are needed for sharing information about the existing content and reaching people as well as in creating networks and relationships with other users. LinkedIn and Twitter play a big role especially in social selling. The timing of a publication is important to reaching customers.

Sharing content in different channels by several users at different times of the day enables a better visibility. Through social media channels, companies and professionals can share their expertise through both their personal and company's accounts, participate in interesting conversations and create networks and relationships. (Sivonen, 2015)

Kortesuo (2010, 32-33) states that social media users can be divided in four subcategories. The first (1.) group does not participate in social media activities at all. The second (2.) group has social media accounts that they use to consume other's content but does not participate in content creation. The third (3.) group is active and produces content. The most effective SoMe user is the fourth (4.) group both actively consuming and creating content. Social media is also a good channel to follow other significant companies from the same field of expertise. Listening constantly what others have to say about the company's products and service is as important as sharing one's own content. (Tanni & Keronen 2013, 51)

Trust drives customers to referrals, renewals and upsells. Companies can grow from inside out if they acquire new customers via existing ones. This can be achieved by concentrating on a three-cee model of content (1), conversation (2) and (re)commendations. (Jafe and Albarda 2014, 182). Social media channels offer good platforms to implement the 3-cee model.

3.5 Role of a sales department in an inbound marketing processes

One of an inbound marketing's main target is to warm up the leads up to the point where a sales department can contact them and turn into customers. In an effective inbound marketing, the sales and marketing departments need to come closer together. After all, they both share the same target: to gain revenue. Companies that set a common goal for their marketing and sales departments have greater chance to increase revenue than the companies whose marketing and sales departments do not co-operate. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 10) The responsibility of a sales process in an inbound marketing sales funnel has moved considerably from a sales department to a marketing department. The lead is moved to sales department after it is seen a qualified enough to actually buy. (Mildht, 2015) By measuring the potential

customers' online-actions can do this. These actions can be e.g. subscribing the company blog, downloading e-books and visiting the website frequently. The more knowledge about the customer before contacting them the sales department has, the more warm the contact is. (Hubspot, n/d 2; Hanki 2016)

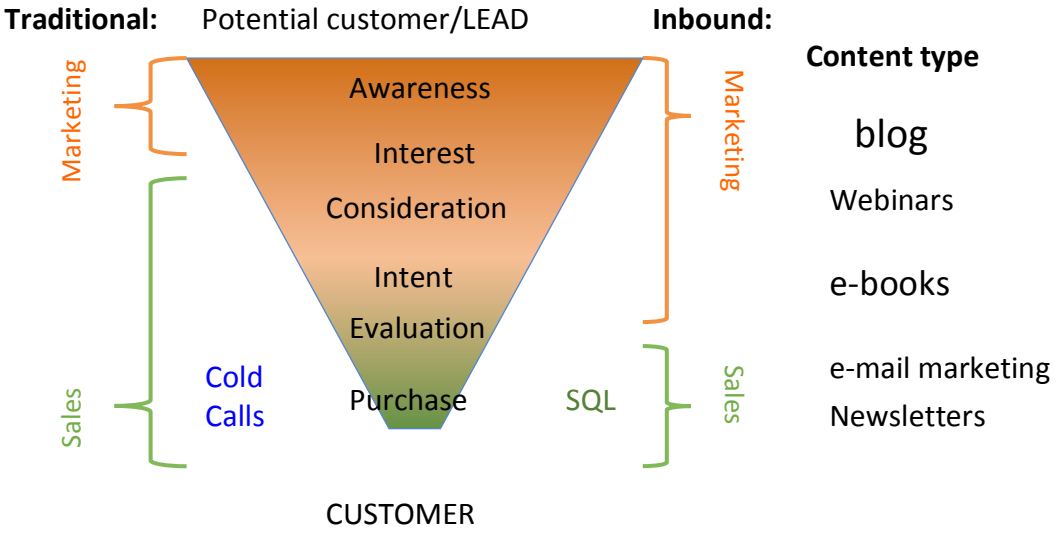

Figure 7. Role of Sales and Marketing departments in a traditional and an inbound sales funnel (adapted from Singlegrain n/d; Creamentors 2015)

As shown by Figure 7, the left side of a sales funnel represents the roles of marketing and sales departments in a traditional sales model, and the right side represents an inbound marketing model. The difference between the traditional and the inbound marketing is the increased responsibility of a marketing department in a sales funnel in the latter. After the visitor has shown enough interest towards the company, the lead is categorized as Sales Qualified Lead (SQL) and can then be contacted by a sales representative in the best possible timing. Marketing department's role is to provide relevant content to the potential customer along the whole buying process having supportive role for the sales department. (Hubspot Academy 2015, Class 11) However, the funnel should not be a strict list of who does what but the whole company should be involved in the sales process. The trust is not gained via processes but from genuine interaction with the customer. Implementing inbound marketing but administrating outbound sales lead to undesired results. (Sivonen, 2016)

Company X's Marketing Manager states that after implanting inbound marketing in use the potential customers, Sales Qualified Leads, are moved to sales department's responsibility only after they are warm enough. This is measured by carefully defined qualification metrics in weekly basis.

Genuine interaction in social media channels can turn into good sales figures. Finding potential customers, building a trust and creating content are the key elements in successful social selling. Social selling means engaging customers by e.g. promoting the brand in any of the social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter and is now considered as a powerful strategy. (Mildth 2015). By nurturing and engaging the contacts new relationships can be found and trust build. Existing relationships can be cultivated in social media both before and after the close. LinkedIn plays the biggest role in a B2B networking as it can be seen as a best platform at the moment to share professional articles and comments and build an own image as an expert. At its best, these contacts create extra value and are effective way to build relationship to the customer through expertise. (Mildth 2015; Hanki 2015)

3.6 Automating and measuring the processes

Digital marketing enables automating and measuring of variable actions. Traditionally marketing automating refers to triggering e.g. emails or social media messages based on time delays. In inbound marketing automation is centered on the prospect. By automating the marketing efforts it is possible to target the message to the right person at the right time. Automation of the actions is vital and time saving. Effective automating takes into account every marketing channel a lead is consuming and takes account the evolving needs, behavior and interactions the lead has. Automating system recognizes a visitor and their movements in different channels and based on the data, can assess the buying process stage the visitor is at. With right tools companies can measure the amounts of visitors and followers in different channels, downloaded e-books and the amount of opened newsletters sent by e-mail. Measuring gives valuable information of how the content is seen and how it resonates with the audience. Yet, the numbers are not the only thing to look for but also the effect the content have. When the measured lead is warm enough to contact, the sales department can contact the lead. As the data is collected from multiple channels, it

can be used to send marketing messages utilizing the various channels that influence a buyer's decision. From customer's point of view, the automating and measurement efforts are saving them from unnecessary imposing sales. (Kurvinen & Sipilä 2014, 147-148; Hubspot, n/d 3; Sivonen, 2015 2)

Finnish companies have named selling and bringing in new customers as their main business goals for inbound marketing. However, less than half of the companies measure the amount of leads, the quality of leads or the amount of sales in inbound marketing. (Kubo, 2014)For example, Company X have a point system where the collected points are constantly monitored. After the prospect have collected enough points according pre-defined criteria from their actions (e.g. subscribing the company blog and downloading an e-book), they will be ignored or qualified from a Marketing Qualified Lead to a Sales Qualified Lead and contacted by a sales representative.

4 Research Methodology

4.1 Data collection

Use of qualitative research method enabled search for patterns and diversity. It brought out the examinees perceptions of situations and gave a chance to observe the factors that influence their past and development. With qualitative methods macro level information and especially their splitting can be observed better (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2010, 26-27). Exploratory study is useful when clarifying of the problem is needed and where the subject cannot be measured in quantitative manner and objective is to understand the customer better. Furthermore, it is characteristic to exploratory research that information needed is loosely designed. Here the goal was to e.g. find challenges that are not measurable from the participant's perspective. The aim was to study "what is happening; to seek new insights; to ask questions and assess phenomena in a new light" and use the information to content creation. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 140; Malhotra 2012, 86-87; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 140).

Interviews

One of the principal ways to conduct exploratory research is interviewing experts in the subject (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, 140). When the questions are open-ended it requires respondents to give their extended answers in their own words. Use of one-on-one in-depth interviews encouraged the respondents to talk in depth of their opinions, feelings and reactions. (Adams & Brace 2006, 37-38, 75,77). Here the experts were the Company X's current customers from four different fields of businesses representing the buyer personas. The focus was in the quality of the interviews that are highly linked to the qualities the respondent had in terms of richness of experience and the relevance of the experience to the study. (Malhotra et al. 2012, 260) In-depth interview were semi-structured, direct and personal to uncover underlying motivations, beliefs, attitudes and feelings of a topic. (Malhotra et al. 2012, 254). Interviews enabled drawing as much information as possible from the chosen respondents. Even though interviews were done with only small number of customers, they provided important starting point for future actions.

The interview contained 10 open-ended questions based on the first round of interviews that the marketing department had used in March 2013. The interview schedule is included in Appendix 1. The interviews were done on one-on-one basis and were conducted through phone calls. Phone interviews were justified for many reasons. They were economic and suitable for interviewees that were either busy, geographically far or both. Here the customers were scattered all over Finland and face-to-face interviews would have been both time consuming and expensive to organize. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2010, 64-65) The interviews were held between 20th of May and 23th of June 2015 during normal office hours.

Following Malhotra's (2005, 437) interview structure the interview process was divided in five steps. The first (1.) step was to make the Initial contact that results either in cooperation or the loss of a potential respondent. The initial contact was made by email as to "warn" the prospect companies and give the candidate, who was the contact person in the database of Company X's, time to think whether or not to join the research. Also, sending emails with the same content was less time consuming than calling the candidates. The initial email is included in Appendix 2. After

the initial email contact the time for the actual interview was scheduled via phone call and the candidates were shortly prepared for the upcoming interviews. If a candidate refused to participate, a new email to another candidate was sent to gather the agreed number of interviews, which were 12 – 16. Asking questions was the second (2.) step and the third (3.) step of probing was also used. Here probing was used e.g. in cases in which the interviewee did not seem to fully understand the question. Probing is an effective method to motivate the respondents to provide relevant information and clarify their answers. Even a slight change in the wording, manner or sequence can lead to distortion and bias and therefore probing is recommended as it can elaborate, clarify or enlarge the answer. (Malhotra 2005, 437). The Interviews were recorded, according the fourth (4.) step, with the help of two smartphones in lack of better technology at hand. One phone was for the actual phone call with the speaker on and the second smart phone for recording the call to enable later transcribing. The negotiation rooms of Company X were used to enable better concentration and to avoid extra background noise. The last (5.) step was to terminate the interview. The recorded interviews were transcribed shortly after the interviews to enable the analyzing. Transcribing was done outside the office hours.

The interviewees

Company X has more than 4 000 existing customers. Interviews, loosely structured conversations, were here drawn from the participants that represent some of the four target groups defined earlier, the buyer personas. The interviewees were gathered from the already constituted four buyer personas that exclude many of the customers from the research. To narrow it down even more, the following criteria were created to enable more precise statements from the suitable respondents. The suitable respondent should fit in the following requirements of:

- Has not been part of the first round of interviews in 2013 AND
- Has volunteered for Company X's Customer panel OR
- Has otherwise communicated actively towards the company AND
- Is closely involved in this segment of the business

Here, the selection of interviewees was relied on the author's personal judgment. The candidates were selected based on the accessibility and cooperativeness and on the colleagues' recommendations to suit the research. The amount of interviewees were agreed to be small but bigger than in the previous round in 2013. It was also agreed with the Marketing Manager of Company X that three to four participants from each group are enough for the research. In total there were 15 participants. As the time resource was limited the candidates were attempted to contact maximum of four times via phone after the initial email was sent. If the candidate was not reached, the next suitable candidate was contacted. The participants and the persona demographics will be more closely introduced in the Appendix 3.

4.2 Data analyses

The content analysis is a classical procedure to analyze textual material, here the transcripts. The objective is to "reduce" the data, to simplify it by summarizing and structuring the data. The unit of analysis may be words, themes, or topics. It can be therefore even defined as a quantitative technique based on the classifying and counting. (Malhotra et al. 2012, 307). Furthermore, when examining individual cases the presence or absence of a theme may be measured. Going through the results thematically was seen most applicable based on the research questions. Malhotra et al. (2012, 296) suggest that after qualitative data is assembled, it should be reduced by first organizing and structuring the data and then putting some of the collected data aside. This includes a process of coding the data. Coding is to break down the data into discrete chunks by labels. Labels are created based on the pre-defined themes of

- what is found best in the business the buyer personas are operating in
- what are the challenges the buyer personas are facing
- what are the perceptions about the future and internationalization

Here, broad labels from the initial reading were the following: *best, challenge, future and internationality.* Labels were gathered from throughout the interviews. After, the initial labels were examinated more carefully and chunked to even more precise labels inside the personas when possible. (Malhotra et al. 297-298) Common percep-

tions throughout all the 15 respondents are here left aside as the purpose was to find similarities inside each buyer persona.

5 Results

This chapter is conducted to introduce the results of the research. In this research the results effects on the marketing material that will be produced in the future in the forms of blog posts, e-books and even webinars. The nature of the research is to feel the current business environment and look for the trends in the responses. The results are introduced by the popularity inside each of the four buyer persona's responses following suggestions of how to update the existing buyer personas.

5.1 Best issues in operating in the field

See Appendix 4.

5.2 Perceptions of the challenges

See Appendix 5.

5.3 Thoughts about the future and internationalization

See Appendix 6.

5.4 Suggestions of the new buyer persona descriptions

See Appendix 7.

6 Conclusions

See Appendix 8.

6.1 Reliability and validity

The reliability refers to the ability to give other than random results (Mäntyneva et. Al, 2003, 34) and is easier to reach in quantitative research where sample size is large and research is structured. Here, the conclusions and generalizations from the four group's issues were drawn based on qualitative research method and small amount of interviews. The data obtained from the in-depth interviews can be difficult to analyse and interpret. The number of in-depth interviews tends to be few, as in this case three to four per persona, due the length and lack of resources. The challenges of phone interviews were the missing cues that offers context in the interview situation, especially knowing if the interviewee has understand the question. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2010, 64-65) Additional observations add richness and multi-faceted analyses. These potential interpretations were not possible as the interviews were conducted via phone. (Mäntyneva et. Al, 2003, 34; Malhotra et al. 2012, 260)

All of the respondents were representing different fields of businesses and therefore their issues varied a lot and the respondents' perceptions had impact on the results. For this reason, same results cannot be replicated if the interviews would be repeated with different interviewees. However, this issue is general with small amount of respondents and therefore cannot be seen as a challenge for only this research. (Mäntyneva et al. 2003, 34-35) Triangulation, use of different data collection techniques, is a process of validating data by comparing data (e.g. quantitative and qualitative) or methods (interviews and observations). For example, a further research to study the generality of the now found issues could be useful to enable even better understanding of the buyer personas. Validating the data could be done through cross-verification with e.g. as a quantitative online-questionnaire. (Malhotra et. al 2012, 304)

Generating information that is both accurate and current is extremely difficult to achieve especially in marketing research. This is partly due the complexity of the subjects under the study, the context or environment in which the measurements are taken and the skills required from the researcher to perform and interpret the measurements. (Malhotra et al. 2012, 78-79). Also, some of the respondents interpreted the questions in different way than it was meant to. In these cases, new round of interviews with clarifying questions might have brought more accurate answers to the question. In some cases it was possible that the speaker and some occasional background noise had effect on respondents hearing and understanding the questions correctly.

As stated in chapter 2.4, the more detailed the persona is, the easier it is to create content for it. If the focus in this research would have been e.g. in two of the buyer personas instead of all four, more insightful results might have been able to be created. The questions in the interviews were following the same schedule as the interviews in 2013. This was according the wishes of Company X. Generating more persona-specific interview schedules could have brought even more insightful observations for each buyer persona. Hence, by using same questions it is possible to reflect the results to the previous round to see the changes that has occurred within the time period between the interviews. However, this comparison is not part of this research and therefore it is impossible to know if this has any additional value.

Keeping buyer personas up to date is on-going process and here, as the business environment is under constant change, adding extra challenge to keep the buyer personas up to date. The data was collected during the summer 2015 but analyzed and introduced to Company X in December 2015. This might have caused some data being already dated as some challenges the customers were facing back in the summer 2015 might have already been solved and new problems rose by the time the results were introduced.

6.2 Discussion

Marketing has been under a revolution for a decade as the customers keep changing their (buying) behavior and many companies seem to struggle to keep up with the pace. Also the relatively new inbound marketing method and its implementations seem to be evolving fast with new terms and sub-methods constantly popping out while writing this thesis. Inbound marketing strategy is an effective way to become more customer-centric but implementing it successfully requires lot of persistence and time. By offering relevant content it is possible to gain trust among the customers. But to be relevant and informational there is a need *to know everything about the customers from their language they speak to their buying processes and social media channels they use.*

Building buyer personas cannot be based on random act as Company X realized before conducting their first research in 2013. Interviewing customers is time-consuming but offers a lot of valuable information that cannot be gathered from anywhere else. Understanding that the buyer persona is never “done” but evolve and change just like a normal person is important. Therefore, implementing the inbound marketing method is not a light decision but requires resources and engagement from the whole company. On the other hand, borders between different departments are blurring and closer cooperation between departments is vital. This is especially true with marketing and sales departments and Hubspot (Hubspot Academy, Class 11) have created a new term to describe the phenomenon: smarketing.

It is still odd, that knowledge that a customer service has about the customers, are not taken in a consideration more visibly in inbound marketing methodology. It is interesting to see what the future of the inbound marketing method will be like and what direction it will take. One thing is certain, though; the customers hold the power now and companies need to adjust to that to survive.

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