

Master's Thesis

Digital Marketing Strategy

Social media and its contribution to competitiveness



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Abstract

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how the use of social media can contribute to a firm's competitive position and identify the key factors that lead to a successful use of social media.

Research

1. How can social media within digital marketing strategy contribute to Swedish SME's ability to compete?
2. Which are the key factors for successful application of social media for Swedish B2B companies?

Methodology

The study has used a qualitative research with both semi structured interviews and email correspondence. Three Swedish SME's that operate within the manufacturing industry were selected as case companies.

Findings

Social media can contribute to a firm's competitive position as long as the firm has a well-established network and has studied the adequate platforms to utilize before the implementation. Social media can also increase brand awareness among B2B companies.

Managerial implications

Companies which are working in an international context can find it beneficial to integrate social media platforms due to its strengthening effects on relationships, both new and existing. Companies should also investigate the different digital platforms that are available in order to find the applications that adapt best to the company and its industry before the implementation.

Theoretical implications

By applying social media to a firm's network it will increase brand awareness and make the network with stakeholders stronger. This study verifies previous research that claims that digital marketing strategies can act as an instrument of competitiveness.

Limitations

The amount of companies investigated in this study is too small to generate representative results that can act as a guidance for other companies in other industries. Only B2B companies from one Swedish region were studied and they all belonged to the manufacturing industry.

Future research

It is of high interest to verify this research with more profound qualitative and quantitative research, especially with a greater sample of case companies.

Keywords: Digital marketing strategy, social media, networking, relationships, brand awareness

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Andreas Bång

Joy Hell

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Currently the competition among companies is increasing and new methods are developed to achieve higher market shares and sustainable profit (Armstrong, Kotler, Harker & Brennan, 2009; Magnusson & Forssblad, 2009). Globalization and Internet has made it easier to connect sellers and buyers all over the world. Companies that operate in business-to-consumer (B2C) contexts can find customers located in different areas, regions or even countries, at the same time buyers can easily search for companies situated worldwide to purchase from. But it is not only B2C firms that are facing changes; the markets where business-to-business (B2B) enterprises operates are also changing. These buyers have stronger needs of information and often recur to Internet to obtain information in order to make a smart choice when it comes to selecting the right supplier or to have a better understanding of global prices (Taylor, 2014; Zambito, 2013). The need for acquiring information faster has created new ways of communication and new media. This has created new market opportunities all over the world, which has generated a need for new and innovative marketing strategies in order to stay competitive (Magnusson & Forssblad, 2009).

One marketing strategy that is receiving more and more attention is the digital marketing strategy which holds many opportunities but also challenges (Chaffey, Chadwick, Mayer & Johnston, 2009). This type of marketing focuses on establishing personal, corporate, and product brand positioning; enhancing brand equity; product and process development; internal and external marketing and can also be used for conducting consumer research (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

Digital marketing encloses several activities such as social media, blogging and online communities where relationships are created and maintained through a network established between different stakeholders. Digital marketing has become an important factor in influencing various aspects of consumer behavior including brand awareness, information acquisition, opinions, attitudes, purchase behavior, and post-purchase communication and evaluation (Mangold & Faulds 2009), these different aspects aim to improve a firm's competitive position and

ultimately lead to increasing the sales. More and more companies are using social media for marketing and sales (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012).

The concept of digital marketing is becoming increasingly important to marketing scholars who try to identify ways in which firms can make profitable use of applications and at the same time provide direct contact with their customers (Vernuccio, 2014). So far research have illustrated the importance of appropriate and effective digital marketing strategies in today's marketplace and some researchers have gone so far as to refer to digital marketing and social media as the "new" element of the marketing promotional mix (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Further research has described how social media platforms are increasingly used to promote brands; research also indicates that brand owners are losing control of their content and the reach, frequency and timing of the distribution of their messages (Fournier & Avery, 2011).

1.2. Problem Discussion

Despite that social media holds many great possibilities not all business segments utilize them to its maximum (Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). The business-to-business (B2B) marketers have difficulties to fully utilize the social media as a marketing tool (Swani, Brown & Milne, 2014). Business-to-customer (B2C) marketers are on the other hand relatively well equipped for the challenge and have long experience from marketing through social media (Swani, Brown & Milne, 2014; Kumar & Mirchandani, 2012). Even if most studies have found utility in using relationship-oriented digital marketing to improve the selling process, communication and improvements of brand awareness have mainly existed in B2C contexts (Moore & Raymond, 2013; Mangold & Faulds 2009; Vernuccio, 2014).

It is of great importance that B2B companies understand social media and learn what possible effects that the usage of these could have (Kärkkäinen, Jussila & Väisänen, 2013). While there is a general understanding how social media can affect the direct relationship between business and customers there is a lack of research on the impact that these types of applications can have on a firm's competitiveness in a B2B context.

An efficient digital marketing strategy can lead to a strong demand generation all over the world and in the long term perspective be decisive for a firm's ability to compete (Coughlan, Anderson, Stern & El-Ansary, 2006). The future use

of social media is expected to grow and many companies are strong believers that social networks, websites and personalized marketing are the future of international marketing. There still remains a large challenge for companies that operate within B2B. There are a vast selection of social media platforms that companies in the B2B industries could select from, such as blogs, business networks, forums, micro blogs, product/service review, social networks and video sharing (Kietzmann et al., 2011). This could also act as an obstacle since the variety of selections is too vast (Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides, 2011). In addition, the changes in buyer behavior and the new technologies may have come faster than the firms of the B2B industry have been able to adopt.

So far firms that mainly interact with other companies act according the social networking theory, where the actors from a firm form a network in terms of nodes and ties with other players (Moore, Hopkins, & Raymond, 2013). This network creates bonds between different actors on the market leading eventually to a sales operation. But so far only limited research has been made between the connection of social media and networking. B2B companies face many questions when it comes to the use of digital marketing and its possible impact on brand awareness, networking and the firm's competitiveness.

1.3. Research questions

- 1. How can social media within digital marketing strategy contribute to Swedish SME's ability to compete?**
- 2. Which are the key factors for successful application of social media for B2B companies?**

1.4. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore how the use of social media and other digital applications can contribute to a firm's competitive position and identify the factors that lead to a successful use of social media.

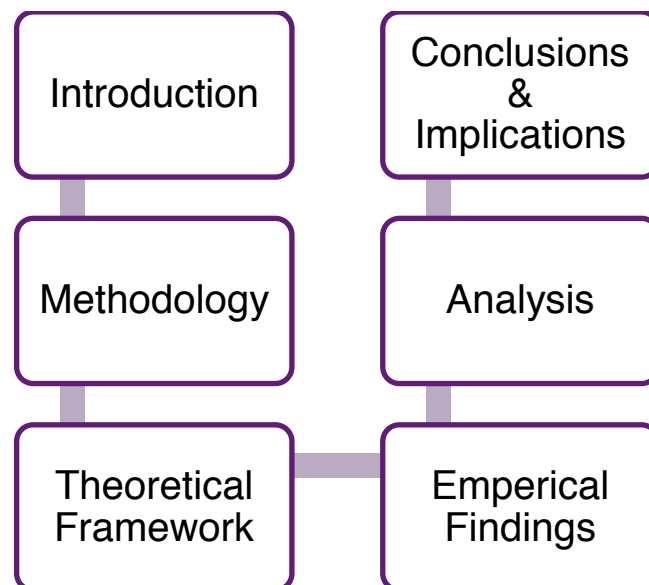
1.5. Delimitations

This research will be limited to small and medium enterprises; firms with less than 250 employees in Sweden. These firms operate in the manufacturing industry in a business-to-business context in Sweden.

1.6 Thesis Outline

After the introduction, the methodology chapter demonstrates the research method that has been carried out in order to obtain the primary data and to prove the validity and the relevance of the research. The theoretical framework gives the reader a considerable background in a literature study in the field of social media and how its application along with networking can increase brand awareness and its ability to compete. It will also help the reader to have a better understanding about digital marketing strategy and later on it is directly used to relate and discuss the empirical data. The next chapter is the empirical findings. The empirical data was collected from the interviews and email correspondence with three Swedish SME's that are operating in the manufacturing sector. In addition, we combine the data with examining each company's website. Later on we analyze the findings towards the theoretical background in order to be able to draw conclusions. After that, we make an overview of the conclusions that has been reached and explain the implications of these deductions. Finally we indicate the further research that should be conducted and point out the limitations of the study.

Figure 1



2. Methodology

This chapter is created to give a thorough picture of how the methodology and the qualitative research have been conducted and how the research has been executed. It explains the research approach, the selection of the companies that was chosen and how the interview questions were constructed from the problem discussion. It also presents the viability and the reliability of the thesis.

2.1 Abductive research approach

Abduction is a research approach that combines both induction and deductive approach. This method is often utilized when having an inductive starting point where investigation of a problem is conducted with or without a theoretical starting point (Patel & Davidson, 2011). Another definition of abduction is mixed approach, due to the mix of induction and deduction. Abduction could also be interpreted as a process where pragmatism is heavily present, on account of the deductive cause of action within the abductive approach (Richardson & Kramer, 2006). Abductive research approach was used for this study. Research within the field of business administration is also attached to the social science, which is commonly using the abductive research approach (Patel & Davidson, 2011).

The researchers began with collecting data through a company (Norden Machinery) to in an inductive way collect knowledge about its situation within the area of social media. The work proceeded with building a theoretical platform that has its foundation on scientific articles and demonstrates how the researchers used the deductive research approach.

To collect primary data both email correspondence and interviews were used, this to be able to answer *how*, *why* questions and secure the researchers with further research topics. The research area itself are formulated and constructed from the foundation of scientific articles and literature within the field of digital marketing strategy, which represents the deductive approach to provide a theoretical framework.

This study has the requirement to include a theoretical platform that can act as a strengthening factor from the findings of the primary data. The researchers have made the assessment that the study needs both a theoretical platform and findings from the primary data collection to strengthen the research area with new insights.

2.2 Qualitative research

The research questions that are directed to fulfill the purpose are connected and based on how social media could contribute to the firm's ability to compete. In the process to fulfill this, an assessment was done and landed in that a qualitative research was to prefer. With qualitative research approach there is a possibility to have a more profound perspective than with for example a quantitative research, furthermore one is able to answer the *how* questions of this study. A qualitative method is not interested in setting a value on something, instead explore and describe *why* something has a relation to other parts (Patton, 2002). The qualitative research has typical characteristics that enrich the ability to provide richer and deeper information (Patton, 2002).

2.3 Research design

It is the type of research questions that decides which type of design is to be used (Yin, 2009). Case studies have the characteristics that they are often directed to more than one case and are often represented in research where social science and business research are featured. Case studies have the possibility to represent several so-called departments, such as an organization or a person (Patel & Davidsson, 2011). When choosing method the resources and time are the variables that decide (Yin, 2013). When implementing a case study design it allows the researcher to get access to several cases and often get a thorough and deep understanding. In this type of research design the problem discussion acts as the central force and creates the actual problem through discussing where organizations in both B2C and B2B context stand today in terms of digital marketing strategy. When studying processes and changes a case study design is beneficial due to the fact that it is possible to get a holistic view. Additionally it is possible to study more than one case, however the definition is then a multi-case study. The benefits with this approach are that it is a larger possibility to get a higher covering rate in the chosen research area (Patel & Davidson, 2011).

The research of this particular study has been made through multi-case strategy. The reasoning behind this is that by using more cases than one can enhance the primary data to be more reliable and trustworthy (Yin, 2013). In all types of

situations when taking the perspective of research questions, it is a requirement that they have the effectiveness to produce enriched information and according to Yin (2013) the multi-case strategy has this specific feature. Three companies have been chosen due to its specific characteristics that match the study's objectives. The companies that have been carefully selected belong to manufacturing industries that operate on different markets.

2.4 Research strategy

A research strategy is an essential tool for a researcher. It is pin-pointing what should be done, and why. Another common definition of research strategy is an action plan (Sontakki, 2010). The process of collecting primary data, the actual method and how to analyze the collected data is all features of a research strategy (Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005). Examples of research strategies are exploratory and descriptive research strategies (Sontakki, 2010; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005).

Descriptive research strategy has the feature that it is aiming at describing something. What is unique with descriptive research strategy is the viewing of different issues; who, what, when, where, why, how and has a problem definition that is well developed already in the problem discussion (Sontakki, 2010; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005). When viewing the exploratory research strategy the common approach is; new ideas, insights and relationships which are researched. What should be mentioned is that this type of research strategy is very flexible and the direction of the research could change along the way depending on what information that is collected during the primary data collection (Sontakki, 2010; Ghauri & Grønhaug, 2005).

In this particular study the purpose is both of descriptive and explorative type, since a descriptive strategy symbolized of the theoretical framework is used and the collection of the primary data which acts as the exploratory strategy.

2.4.1 Data collection method

Some methods are more suitable than others to the different research methods (Yin, 2013). The researchers require knowing which information the research need before selecting the data collecting method. The researcher should

select the method that can best provide the type of information that is critical to answer the research questions (Österberg, 2003). Qualitative interviews aims to give flexibility and a deeper discussion in the subject area. Qualitative interviews also contain open questions to ask the interviewee to answer in greater detail and with their own words (Yin, 2013).

A qualitative interview is preferred if the focus of the interview is relatively clear, when more than one interviewer is involved or if a multi-case study is used. It gives a clearer structure and enables easier comparison if the interviews have followed a similar structure (Patton, 2002).

For this study a qualitative interview was selected since a deeper knowledge is preferable in this type of study. The authors want to have a structure to avoid or miss areas that might be important. The authors are searching for answers on the research questions regarding *how* and *why*. It is closely connected to the descriptive research design and it takes the interviewees view of the topic and enables the questions how and why that are asked in this study to be answered more deeply (Yin, 2013).

2.4.1.1 Primary data

The definition of empirical data is primary data (Alvehus, 2013). The collection of primary data was done mainly through questions that were sent out via email and through interviews that were conducted at the companies' headquarters. The questions that were sent out via email are formulated from the interview guide to ensure that these questions were operationalized in the same way as the interview concepts (Kothari & Garg, 2014; Grönmo, 2006). In the latter process the primary data will be analyzed towards the theoretical framework. For the analyzing part it is important that the collection of the primary data is relevant (Grönmo, 2006). The interview with Norden Machinery was held the 25th of February in Kalmar at the headquarter with the sales director of Norden Machinery. The interview with Alpha was held at the company's headquarter the 13th of May with the manager of digital marketing strategy of Alpha. The email correspondence with all the three companies has been regular with from March to May.

2.4.1.2 Secondary data

Another part of empirical data is the secondary data. This is data that someone else has produced (Alvehus, 2013). Within this study the companies'

websites and other information has been used to collect secondary data that could be valuable in this particular study to create a larger understanding about the area of digital marketing strategy and the ability to compete (Patel & Davidsson, 2011; Grönmo, 2006).

2.5 Interview guide

According to Yin (2013) an interview guide is beneficial to create when conducting interviews. The reasoning behind this is that it facilitates the ability to get an overview of the concepts that are to be discussed during the interview. The interview guide is created from the theoretical framework and contains the concepts that were operationalized in the previous section and has its foundation from social media, brand awareness, networking and relationships and competition through social media. The interview guide enables the researchers to be more relaxed and improves the ability to not forget any important areas (Yin, 2013; Patton, 2002). This interview guide starts with considerable open and broad questions about the company's perspicuous marketing strategies. This is to let the interviewee become relaxed and comfortable with the so often strange situation that the interview is (Patton, 2002). The discussion proceeds with a more detailed agenda, which relates to social media and competitiveness.

2.6 Operationalization

The term operationalization explains how the connection is linked via the theoretical framework and the research questions. The operationalization also contemplates the questions of data collection into consideration and describes how these have been taken out from the theoretical framework (Yin, 2013). The questions that are sent out via email are open questions formulated and structured from the theoretical framework. The same applies to the interview guide. The theoretical concepts that the questions relate to are: social media, brand awareness, networking and relationships and competition through social media. Table 1 describes how the researchers have formulated the interview questions from the theoretical concepts to

the interview guide. To find more detailed information about the actual questions in the interview guide, see appendix.

Table 1

Theoretical framework & concepts	Questions formulated from the theoretical framework
Social media	Questions 1-26
Brand awareness	Questions 27-38
Network and relationships	Questions 39-45
Competition through social media	Questions 46-63

2.7 Case selection

When working with research one is also working with one or several samples (Yin, 2011). In qualitative studies the term case selection is used to enable that the selected cases are producing data that could be of high value for the research (Alvehus, 2013).

The reasoning why this study is using case selection is that this method has the ability to generate and select interviewees that could produce data that is relevant for concerning the research questions and purpose of the study (Yin, 2013).

It is important to notice that case selection is an active deed and is not founded on availability instead the interviewees are selected based on their characteristics and relevance for the research (Alvehus, 2013). This particular research concerning social media and competitiveness has its foundation in a broad context and it could be beneficial to include more than one case to enable a larger amount of data to analyze (Yin, 2013). The cases that have been chosen are of the selection criteria that they could facilitate the answering of the research questions and that the characteristics of the actively chosen companies had some sort of connection to digital marketing strategy. Additionally, the companies should be SME-sized and operate within the B2B sector.

There were in total three companies selected by the selection criteria in the case selection and are presented in table 2. All of the requested companies verified the invitation and responded that they looked forward to participate in the

study since it could bring value into their organizations. One case company expressed very distinctly that they wanted to be anonymous.

Table 2.

Firms	Industry	Number of Employees	Turnover 2013 (K-SEK)
Flexlink	Automated conveyor systems	111	682 284
Alpha	Plastic	75	243 130
Norden Machinery	Tube filling systems	225	912 555

2.8 Data analysis method

When implementing data analysis through a qualitative research a qualitative analysis is to prefer (Yin, 2013). This specific research contains two interviews with two out of three companies and email correspondence with all three manufacturing companies. To analyze the empirical material, the researchers analyzed the data from email correspondence and interviews, out from this created pattern. The pattern makings goal is to discover patterns that are matching the theoretical framework to impel to answer the research questions (Yin, 2013).

2.9 Quality criteria

2.9.1 Credibility

To enhance the credibility, the interview guide has undergone a thorough inspection by the researchers themselves to ensure that the interview guide enables to collect as much enriched information as possible (Yin, 2013). The questions that were sent out through email correspondence were also reviewed by the researchers to ensure that the questions could generate answers that were of great value.

2.9.2 Transferability

The external validity has been reached through actively selecting companies that represent various areas within manufacturing industries (Bryman & Bell, 2011). One of the companies in the study urged to be anonymous, due to this the transferability is affected, but only limited effect since the company are SME sized, it should not have any larger impact on the transferability.

2.9.3 Dependability

To increase the reliability the two interviews were held in the same way. Regarding the email correspondence the questions that were sent out held a slightly different structure. To avoid affecting the interviewees the interview guide were used in as large extent as possible (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

2.9.4 Conformability

The study is based on a qualitative research and researching phenomenon. To decrease the interference of the researchers the email correspondence acts as a beneficial factor, due to the fact that the possibility for the researchers to become biased in an email correspondence is minimal (Yin, 2013).

2.9.5 Ethics

One company has asked to remain anonymous which creates an ethical aspect. The researchers handled this through presenting the data as confidential and will not disclose the name of the company or the name of the interviewee, nor the location of the company's headquarters (Bryman & Bell, 2011). One of the companies chose to be anonymous, this could affect the credibility of the thesis, but the researchers have clearly stated the dates of the email correspondence and when the interview was held.

3. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework and a literature review of previous studies. It contains the following theoretical cornerstones; social media, brand awareness, relationship & networking and competition through social media that later on will be used in the empirical findings and the analysis. The chapter aims to create a holistic view of the topic for the reader.

3.1 Social Media

Social media is fairly new concept especially when taking the perspective of business to business. According to Carr and Hayes (2015: 50) the definition of social media is:

“Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others”.

This definition will be the point of departure for this thesis. The reason why companies begin to use the social media is that they want to get closer to their customers. Brennan and Croft (2012) argues that the most used platforms within the area of social media in the context of digital marketing are; LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Blogging. Applications that could be used at the different platforms are content marketing, business networking and brand development (Brennan & Croft, 2012). They further argue that social media could be used in the B2B sector as a tool for sale prospecting and also as a communication channel as way to establish relationships with other players on both domestic and the international markets.

Kärkkäinen, Jussila and Väisänen (2013) argue that social media within B2B could enhance and clarify the customers’ needs in terms of increasing customer orientation. This is important since the competition the firms are facing is no longer domestic, instead it is globalized. It could speed up the product development; however, companies still have a difficulty to see the economic benefits of adopting social media (Kärkkäinen et al., 2013). Michaelidou et al. (2011) show in their research that many SME companies have realized the benefits of supporting their brands with social network sites. Their research also show that social network sites (SNS) could enhance the relationship with customers, increase the customer value and create a unique brand identity (Michaelidou et al., 2011).

An interesting finding from Schultz, Schwepker and Good (2012) is that social media usage is affected by the age of the user among B2B sales people; the older a person is the less usage of social media. In addition the same study suggests that by using social media it could positively affect the sales performance. In the article of Schultz et al. (2012) they could conclude that only a very limited amount of sales people use social media but those who use it can see an increase of the sales performance. The study also revealed that when the sales performance is enhanced for those who use social media, other employees at the company also start to utilize social media.

According to Okazaki and Taylor (2013) there is especially one capability that could bring value into the social media when taking the international perspective of advertising; networking capability. The first benefit that Okazaki and Taylor (2013) mention is that network capability is facilitating the creation and maintenance of networking. Another advantage they mention is that through implementing a social network into the organization the number of weak ties will increase which could act as a competitive advantage in the long-term perspective. Brennan and Croft (2012) further argues that social media within B2B is mostly used for soft marketing and describe this as relationship and brand development.

Their study implies that these capabilities are creating opportunities by implementing global marketing. Okazaki and Taylor (2013) explain that social media has the possibility to bring people together with larger target groups than with traditional marketing methods especially regarding the international perspective. However, Okazaki and Taylor (2013) and Benedict (2001) also point out the importance of the cultural dimension that has to be taken into consideration before going global with a brand on the platform of social media. Taking the decision to implement social media into an organization must be prepared for fast changes, since the electronic world of social media does not answer to the rules of common marketing strategy where changes happens monthly, maybe weekly at the most (Okazaki & Taylor ,2013; Benedict, 2001).

In the world of social media the customers expect an answer within hours which challenge the organizations, since if the firms do not live up to the demands from the customers, the firms take risks in terms of branding. When utilizing a social media platform companies should be aware of the fact that once something is posted on a social media platform the material, if it is bad or

inappropriate could damage the brand severely which could in the longer perspective result in loss of clients and therefore create financial risks (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013; Schlinke & Crain, 2013). Another risk with using social media is the threat from competitors who can discover potential ideas and intellectual capital from social media platforms which could implicate in loss of sales and diminishing development in the long term perspective (Schlinke & Crain, 2013).

For companies that decide to implement a social media it must be sure that it can handle it. There are a large number of aspects that should be considered. For example, the firm must be sure to do updates of content and information regularly and take care of the platform one has chosen to operate on, and be sure to select platforms that give a relative high value in return (Aichner & Jacob, 2015).

3.2 Brand awareness

Brand awareness explains how a brand can be recognized by the customers or anyone related to its purchase. There are two aspects that explain brand awareness (Rosenbaum-Elliot, Percy & Pervan, 2011) which are: brand recall and brand recognition. The first one refers to the consumer's capability to remember the brand when it is being mentioned. And the second one refers to the ability of the consumers to recognize the brand among other brands. Rosenbaum-Elliot et al. (2011) conducted a study in which several business managers were asked which factors they considered to provide an important competitive advantage to their companies and the study proved that it revealed brand awareness was the third most frequently mentioned aspect. Aaker (2012) explains in his article that brand awareness does not only suggest familiarity but also the presence and commitment for the brand that is used. Aaker (2012) also explains that this fact is particularly important for B2B purchases, since consumers tend to be more cautious when dealing with higher prices.

One way of influencing brand awareness is through networking. The more people the company interacts with, the more people will be aware of the brand or company if it is talked about (Aaker, 2012).

When discussing brand awareness the difference between B2C and B2B often comes up. The difference is that B2B relies more on long-term relationships, while B2C prioritizes other factors. According to Glynn (2011) the

brand could enhance the firm's performance in terms of higher prices which lead to economic benefits. Glynn (2011) further argue that B2B branding strengthens the relationship with its existing and future customers. Leek and Christodoulides (2012) propose that a brand if utilized correctly could facilitate the emotional connection to a company that strengthens the relationship with customers. Laroche, Habibi and Richard (2012) explain that social media as brand communities could improve the relationship with customers which also enhance the brand trust and brand loyalty. They further argue that brand communities play an important role in brand awareness success (Laroche et al., 2012; Bruhn, Schnebelen & Schäfer, 2014). Bruhn et al. (2014) explain that firms should implement a network orientation in their strategy of branding in order to increase the loyalty of the brand. The brand is a very important asset for the firm and it should be carefully managed. The brand has the potential to affect the customers' perception. The work with brand awareness has played an important role for the B2C companies. Now the B2B market is beginning to realize the importance of having a brand that the firm works actively with to be able compete in the long-term perspective (Glynn, 2012; Leek & Christodoulides, 2012; Benedixen, 2004).

What should be considered when operating in the B2B sector and working actively with the brand is how the firm is working towards its customers, such as the price, quality in operations and after sales service since these are areas that affect the attitudes to the brand (Leek & Christodoulides, 2012).

There is another interesting perspective that one should be taking into consideration in the case of marketing; the national culture (Benedict, 2001). The reason to this, according to Benedict (2001), is that different dimensions, such as power distance and uncertainty avoidance is different from region to region and by taking this into consideration, the firm's marketing including the brand could be more accurate and avoid cultural clashes. When studying the internationalization process in terms of branding, in a digital marketing perspective, it is important to remember that internationalization of a brand or a firm is in the context of an ever-changing world (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990).

3.3 Networking & relationships

Rogers (1995: 308) described communication network as “interconnected individuals who are linked by patterned flow of information”. When studying networking and relationships it is the sharing of information between these linkages in the interpersonal connection that is analyzed (Rogers, 1995). Networks can be visualized as a spider’s web that is made up of stakeholders. A network can be explained as a structure that is established by several different threads that interlink patterns in the business environment just like a spider’s web, where each thread (stakeholder) is connected to another one (Håkansson & Ford, 2002), such as relationships with customers, suppliers, distributors and competitors. Also manufacturers, suppliers of different materials that the firms use to produce complementary and/or competing products are also actors of a network (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). When being part of a network it is extremely hard, almost impossible to control the process or the results of the relationship that take place in an network between the nodes (Payne, Ballantyne & Christopher, 2005). However through repeated interaction between the actors a unique relationship is created with its own characteristics (Payne, Ballantyne & Christopher, 2005).

The structure of a business network relationship can be explained in horizontal and vertical dimensions. Vertical relationships are those that integrate the nodes of the supply channel while horizontal dimension consists of the relationships with other organizations at the same level collaboration and cooperation is carried out in search for mutual benefits. Horizontal networks are observed to exist when firms find the solutions to provide for specific customer needs (Ellis, 2011).

The environment that companies are operating in is becoming more competitive. In the business to business (B2B) landscape the relationship creation and maintenance are becoming more important. Relationship marketing (RM) is mainly about improving relationships, and creating long-term profitable relationships between actors that are exchanging value but also encourage a strong connection to the brand (Baines, Fill & Page, 2013). A firm’s ability to succeed is very highly dependent on its capability to create relationships with other players on the market, especially in the B2B sector in an international market (Jansson, 2007). The effort of trying to create valuable and sustainable relationships with other actors can be defined as the networking process. International networking strategy can be

explained as *how* a given company is linked to other international players in the system (Jansson, 2007).

Relationship marketing that is utilized correctly could result in increased market shares. Another benefit with relationship marketing is that it makes networks stronger and it can also increase the commitment and trust which results in loyalty, especially in the long term perspective (Gil-Saura, Frasset-Deltoro & Cervera-Taulet, 2009). There is an importance to choose the channels that the customers appreciate to work with, otherwise the effort the company puts in relationship marketing is without use or value (Gil-Saura et al., 2009). Gil-Saura et al. (2009) further argue that the higher perceived value the customer has of the relationship, the higher the possibility is that the relationship will continue. By working with strengthening relationships the value for all involved within the relationship will increase, especially in the long term perspective. The benefits do not only consist of relationship improvements; the benefits do also show financial improvements, such as lower costs and more efficient customer relationship management (CRM) (Lambert & Enz, 2012).

Bolton, Smith and Wagner (2003) argue that relationship in the B2B sector is complicated and when adding the international perspective it becomes even further complicated. It could be argued that social bonds created with personnel are more important than the financial and operational aspects in terms of creating value (Bolton et al., 2003).

However communities would play an important role in maintaining the relationship and creating a form of brand awareness. Palmatier, Scheer, Evans and Arnold (2008) argue that the firms could increase return if implementing RM into the organization. They further argue that having an organizational platform that facilitates the relationship marketing and the relationship orientation (RO) could generate a sustainable competitive advantage.

3.4 Competition through social media

There are few business journals and other academic literature that deals with how social media and online communities can be used as a part of B2B company's marketing strategy. So far it is established that marketing is about building profitable customer relationships and the basis of marketing is to understand

the consumers' needs and desires better than the competitors when it comes to a specific product or service, and the process of satisfying these needs through an exchange process (Armstrong, 2009; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012) that in turn leads to a company being competitive. Digital marketing is the fastest-growing form of direct marketing that market products and services and build customer relationship over the Internet (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). This type of marketing, especially social media, can lead a series of competitive advantages and benefits. There are several advantages of including digital marketing in the B2B context, for instance this type of marketing is more cost efficient than similar traditional marketing. The main goal of social media is to create an advantageous corporative reputation and to establish relationships toward the customers. Digital marketing also helps establishing closer bond with the customers (Miller, 2012), and can be used as a way of maintaining a strong relationship with existing customers. Even though it is considered that social media can be ideally used "to generate viral effects, consumer evangelism and positive word-of-mouth (WOM) advocacy" (Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluoto & Jayawarhena, 2012: 103) and is generally thought to be part of business-to-consumer markets it can also be a good strategy for B2B companies (Järvinen et al., 2012). Most authors studied in this research agree that B2B focuses more on brand awareness, creating trust and establishing relations with current clients than finding new ones.

The B2B clients are believed to spend a great time interacting with each other (Brennan & Croft, 2012) and tend to search for information online about products and possible purchases (Michaelidou et al., 2011). So being present on different social media can offer certain gains for customers as it creates a stronger bond with the firm and increases customer loyalty. One of the great advantages of social media is that it offers direct feedback to the clients, which is usually highly appreciated. Consumers feel more engaged with products and organizations when they are able to submit feedback (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). The feedback the company obtains can come in the form of criticism, compliments, and helpful suggestions (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). This feedback contributes to a sense of community, which is created and customer loyalty is enhanced (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Several studies also show that consumers are more likely to talk about

companies and products when they feel they know a lot about them (Mangold & Faulds, 2009).

With the use of social media companies can even involve users in product development processes, by asking them to share their ideas for product improvements or new products that may fit their needs better (Sawhney, Verona & Prandelli, 2005). It is clear that social media has evolved to a prosperous channel and source for the support of a company's innovation processes. The authors state that the Internet leverages user dialogues to a much broader reach, implying that much more users from all over the world can interact with each other on a continuous basis (Sawhney et al., 2005). It is hence a very cost-efficient way for a company to explore the knowledge of their customers and even go beyond that by also listening to potential customers or other stakeholders that may have an interest in the product and who may not even be living in a market where the company is present today (Sawhney et al., 2005).

The use of social media and online communities can expose a previously unexploited market potential of individual, so called non-segmented consumers with very specific interests and demand for low-volume, customized products and services (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Due to low volumes or high customization such clients have so far remained below the radar of the traditional marketing. New service-based business models are giving new opportunities for reaching small individual customers by using digital marketing strategy (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008).

The benefits of social media also depend on the personal experience of the employees. Skeels and Grudin (2009) did a case study on the workplace use of social networking sites. The study, published in a conference paper, showed that within the organization they studied, social networking sites were used heavily among the employees. They found that many individuals found their personal activities on social networks useful for work and that high-level managers considered social media to have potential for the future. These employees were also more inclined to introducing new social media tools at the company as they already had previous knowledge on their functions.

Benefits relating to productivity were mainly found in the ability to maintain and strengthen weak ties between colleagues, and no direct effects on

productivity were identified as well as being a tool for enhancing customer marketing relationships.

Other studies also show that social media can contribute to the firm developing a unique style. A different tone can be used for each audience and situation (Ramsay, 2010). Thus digital marketing is more flexible than traditional marketing and, therefore, making the firm more adaptable to its customers; increasing its ability to compete (Ramsay, 2010).

3.5 Theoretical Synthesis

The conclusions from previous research on social media, brand awareness, relationship & networking and their contribution to competitiveness are summarized in the following section and figure.

Social media acts as the main character in this theoretical construct. Brand awareness, networking and competitiveness through social media are factors that influence a strong competitive position. When viewing research question number one the theory mentions especially two aspects that contribute to the ability to compete; the *brand itself* and *networking*. Social media enables a larger portion of brand awareness by utilizing a wide selection of social media platforms and the same time increase customer orientation and CRM. By applying social media platforms to the existing network it increases the possibility to engage in new and strengthen existing ties which gives way to stronger network since it enables a direct communication channel that works both ways. Consequently, a stronger network will lead to an increased commitment and loyalty with the stakeholders of the company and even create new relationships with other players on the market. These aspects can in both short- and long term create stronger abilities to compete.

Regarding the second research questions the theory mentions two aspects that can be argued to be factors for a successful application of social media. The first factor include brand awareness, the higher the brand awareness factor is the higher possibility is it that a firm would be noticed on different social media platforms, it can also create an emotional connection to the company as it creates a stronger relationship between the customers and the company. The second factor is the amount of social media platforms a company can operate in a professional

manner; the more applications that are used the higher is the possibility to both increase the brand awareness and loyalty but also the relationships and networking which is also beneficial in the long term perspective for the ability to compete.



Figure 2

4. Empirical Findings

In this chapter we will present the empirical findings of the research. Primary and secondary data will be presented in form of cases. The data is gathered mainly from interviews and email correspondence with representatives of each of the companies. As a starting point, the firms' background will be presented in order to make the analysis and findings of this study more understandable considering that they are real case companies. Furthermore, we will present the data collected in four different sections; digital marketing, brand awareness, networking and competition through digital marketing.

4.1 Alpha

Alpha is a manufacturing company that operates within the plastic industry and operates highly in an international context. Alpha has 75 employees and a turnover of 243 million SEK. Due to obligation of confidentiality the genuine name of this case company cannot be exposed. The company will be presented as Alpha.

4.1.1 Social Media

Alpha is an experienced user of digital marketing and can be found on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Vimeo and YouTube. In the earlier stages before the actual implementation of social media was made, Alpha had expectations that it would help the company to grow the brand awareness, both domestically and internationally. In the end the expectations were to support the sales to generate revenue (Alpha, 2015). According to Alpha (2015) social media has a differential advantage in form of different strengths that lies in the value of the quickness, the honesty and that it values a good content.

According to the marketing manager of Alpha:

“Since the implementation of social media it has helped us to understand our target groups better in terms of understanding the different interests, identifying the interests and what the target group in general are speaking about which supports our work in expanding the brand”.

According to Alpha (2015) there are potential risks of using social media, but that depends on the utilization of it. When running a business, different statements could hurt the brand, such as statements about politics or other sensible subjects. Another dilemma or potential risk that could arise is an infrequent activity which could damage the brand as well. Alpha further explains that social media has

its pitfalls also in form of weaknesses (Alpha, 2015). One of the weaknesses is that it requires a lot of time and effort to keep it running. When creating content that holds a great quality it gets spread and gets a lot of attention. However, companies that lack the budget and resources to create a great content will have difficulties to spread the content, consequently the presence on a social media platform could then be questioned (Alpha, 2015).

When Alpha attends fairs the company searches for business related information through social media platforms. This is also the case when competitors do its product launches. Alpha has the opinion that social media is an excellent tool to communicate with its customers and suppliers but does not do it in any personalized manner where the message is directed to any of this. Alpha has large experience from being active on social media platforms. It has won prizes for its work of social media and explains that its customers and suppliers do use social media on different platforms, if not in a professional context, they certainly do it in private. Alpha explains that there is nothing that is impeding them to utilize social media, but with a larger extent of resources it would be possible to create additional content that are directed to social media channels (Alpha, 2015).

Social media is a vital part of its marketing strategy. Value propositions are an important element of Alpha's strategy on social media, due to the fact that it is educating customers about its new products and projects that arise during a year (Alpha, 2015). Innovation is an important part of Alphas strategy since it is a manufacturing company. However, Alpha cannot say that social media is a driving force in the work of innovations and creating new markets. At the same time it explains that new markets and target groups are born around with the new technology and describe that the bloggers could be seen as a new target group (Alpha, 2015).

Alpha (2015) further explains that depending on the country it could affect the use of social media but globalization is making the "social media population" more and more homogeneous. The digital behaviors are different, but Alpha cannot say it is due to the country or age. Alpha has not seen any patterns that customers should be inclined to use social media in terms of country or culture, instead the difference lies in the selection of what social media it is using (Alpha, 2015).

The location of its customers does matter when it comes to social media according to Alpha (2015). Its own experience suggests that LinkedIn is more popular in the United States of America and different parts of Europe. The Asian based social media, WeChat, is the replacement for Facebook since it was censored when it was launched in different parts of the Asian region.

Alpha is a multinational manufacturing company where most of its products are exported. The challenge it has when operating in such a vast selection of countries is handled by being flexible when using the different social media channels and also being flexible regarding the content (Alpha, 2015). However, Alpha explains that though the flexibility needs to be there, it is of highest importance that the content is keeping the same core value and message.

The Internet and social media has changed the customer relations for Alpha. It's noticing this since requests and inquiries are more often handled online than through telephone. Alpha (2015) also mentions that with its experience of social media, that if other companies in the manufacturing industry are thinking about implementing social media channels it is recommended to really investigate if it is any certain values that could be added to its audience. Furthermore, Alpha's number one recommendation for a company entering social media should ask itself the question, "how do we add value" several times before the actual implementation is executed.

Additionally Alpha's marketing manager explains that:

"The largest benefit with social media is that it is a great tool to communicate with our target groups".

4.1.2 Brand awareness

From its creation Alpha has had a clear vision on the high quality products that its founders wanted to manufacture, and with this vision they understood early that the brand was an important aspect in being competitive. The company has gone from being a traditional weaving mill to an international design firm (Alpha, 2015).

The brand has evolved during the several family generations that have been in charge of the company. In order to keep the high quality the brand stands for and maintain an innovative Swedish design, the firm manufactures all its products in

Sweden (Alpha, 2015). During the last decade the firm has also opted for an innovative marketing strategy that very much represents the vision of the firm. Currently the company transmits its brand values in several digital applications, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Vimeo, YouTube and its own blog (Alpha, 2015).

According to the company the main reason why it implemented social media was because of its high potential to increase brand awareness globally. The company also expected the brand recognition to increase which it has since the searches for the brand has increased during the last years (Alpha, 2015). Social media can be used for many purposes but in this case Alpha focuses strongly on the brand and on creating pre-sale advisements.

The marketing manager of Alpha (2015) mentions:

“The value and loyalty of our brand will increase when creating content that can solve a possible problem or add extra value to our customers”.

The brand is also reinforced by using the logo and links to the website in the emails sent out from the firm.

Despite being present on several social platforms the company still maintains its traditional marketing activities, such as printed magazines and newspapers (Alpha, 2015). So far the company is managing a productive harmony between both traditional and innovative marketing strategies.

4.1.3 Networking & relationships

Just as most companies that operate in a B2B context, networking and relationships are very important for Alpha (Alpha, 2015). The firm celebrates exclusive events such as dinners, parties and workshops where the firm can both create new ties with other players on the market and develop a stronger connection with the existing ties (Alpha, 2015). In this way the company can also maintain relationships with other corporations that interact with Alpha.

Apart from interacting daily with customers via social media and other applications, the firm also interacts with architects and designers through these platforms, in addition to social media, emails and newsletters are also used when it comes to communicating with other stakeholders (Alpha, 2015). Alpha mentions that

it has been satisfied with the results of social media when it comes to networking and establishing relationships since it gives the firm a better understanding of the stakeholders' needs and behavior. The company also believed firmly that an even broader application of digital marketing could improve its relationship with suppliers and distributors.

4.1.4 Competition through social media

Alpha is using Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn as social media platforms (Alpha, 2015). The platform that is considered to contribute most to its competitiveness is Instagram. The reason behind this is that Alpha is actively working with design of its products and Instagram is according to Alpha a platform that makes the company more competitive due to its visual material and easily-captured products. The work of acquiring new customers and suppliers are done through meetings, fairs and online activities. The existing customers are retained by working with workshops, meetings, dinners and fair events at different locations around the world (Alpha, 2015).

For Alpha it is important to provide high efficiency and legitimacy around the brand and its products. It is doing this by “walking the talk”, the company is according to itself extremely good at communicating its brand and creating an experience around it. Alpha explains that the process of doing this is important due to the fact that people shall have the chance to actually be able to connect to it.

The competitive advantage is created by first of all focus on the inside of the company, the brand. Because it is here it can do a large work with differentiation. Also, by working with product development to make sure that the products it is selling are far ahead its competitors. In the perspective of the long term, to be a market leader, the measures that Alpha, according to itself has to considerate, are several aspects to be certain to stay as the market leader. Examples of aspects are; the usage of new technology, expanding the business area and re-evaluate the whole business model continuously.

Regarding the competitive advantage the most important factor is the brand. Alpha (2015) explains that people refer to its products as Alpha and not as the actual product. The brand enables much different kind of contents and is applicable in several contexts of social media which make the brand and social media together an extremely important asset for Alpha (Alpha, 2015). The differentiation that Alpha

is working actively with depends on the country and the target group, but regularly the brand is always there and acts as a major corner stone. Alpha (2015) argues that if social media would not be established within its organization as it is today it would miss out on business opportunities, which would have a negative impact. Furthermore, it explains that it would be more difficult to strengthen and establish the brand awareness (Alpha, 2015).

4.2 Flexlink

Flexlink is a manufacturing company that operates within the automated conveyer systems. The company is operating in all continents and has a high international knowledge. Flexlink have 111 employees and a turnover on 682 million SEK (Flexlink, 2015). The company has its headquarter in Göteborg, Sweden.

4.2.1 Social Media

Flexlink's digital marketing strategy spans from the web site to different social media platforms, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The website is the main communication tool when it comes to digital strategies, but Flexlink does also have so called live communications as a part of the whole marketing strategy that constitutes of telephone calls and personal visits to existing and future customers (Flexlink 2015).

Flexlink has done the evaluation that digital marketing strategy is a vital part of its communication scheme. The website is an extremely important asset for firm. On a monthly basis it has 37 000 visits. Updates are done continuously, at least once a month to guarantee that the materials shown to its customers are up to date (Flexlink 2015).

The marketing channels that Flexlink are using today are both digital and traditional ones. The channels are used in connection to each other to facilitate the spreading of certain messages and are not utilized independently. The company explains that traditional channels are exhibitions, seminars and customer days, where customers are invited to Flexlink and regular newspaper advertising. The digital channels that are utilized intertwined with the traditional ones are; email campaigns, press-releases and digital advertising. Flexlink explains that if it enters a new industry, it supports this through launching campaigns such as industry seminars and social media.

The activity on social media is very sporadic according to Flexlink. It publishes something when it has something to communicate. The number of posts on different platforms could vary from a few posts per week to every minute. Flexlink operates on many different social media platforms and according to itself every platform has its own purpose. LinkedIn and Facebook are also significant to Flexlink and the reasoning behind this is that the creation and maintenance of relationship is done on these platforms. The relationships represent an essential part of Flexlink's business model. In addition to these platforms YouTube is a very important platform.

Different channels have different purposes and target groups. Facebook is a social media platform where Flexlink has the possibility to connect to employees, old employees and different partners that are stationed around the globe. The purpose of utilizing Facebook in the future is to grow influencers. LinkedIn is another social media platform that is more directed to work related matters, but also here Flexlink has connections with existing employees, old employees and partners. The purpose of working with LinkedIn in the future is somewhat different to Facebook, due to the fact that Flexlink tries to create industry experts.

The company is also using Twitter. The use is mainly to follow certain companies, people and obtain updates from these stakeholders. The future purpose is actually different from both LinkedIn and Facebook, since Flexlink wants to grow industry organizations through these social media. Another social media platform that is somewhat different from the previous described is Google+. This is a social media that the firm is using as a mix of the other platforms and has also the mix of purposes.

4.2.2 Brand awareness

Flexlink is a leading provider for high end solutions for manufacturing companies where the brand that the company stands for is an essential part of its competitive strategy. According to the company the main reason it has a strong brand is because it must reinforce the values in order to keep its strong competitive position in the marketplace. The company also faces competition by 'copycats' on the small components who tries to capitalize on the reputation of the company (Flexlink, 2015).

Flexlink belongs to a major corporate group (Cohesia) which has global brand values that Flexlink applies. Despite the fact that the brand values are

compulsory the company firmly believes they are valid and create positive brand awareness (Flexlink, 2015). Currently the brand is based on four elements: Respect, Responsibility, Knowledge and Passion, these elements are continuously communicated to all the stakeholders of the firm.

One of the stakeholders that Flexlink considers to be important is the employee, since it represents the company in all its aspects. This year Flexlink is focusing on an *Innovation Theme* that includes workshops, communication and seminars aimed for the employees in order to dig deeper into the corporate brand values (Flexlink, 2015). For the company it is important that the brand stands for true values that the whole firm truly believes in.

When it comes to traditional marketing the firm still focuses on traditional advertisement and press releases to promote its brand. However, Flexlink (2015) emphasizes that it is only to a limited degree, especially if there is a campaign going on. The company is leaning more and more towards new digital marketing strategies. Flexlink have started with online newsletters, “Flexlink News”, which is distributed twice a year on a global scale. The company also points out that occasionally newsletters are also distributed for certain campaigns. So far the company sees no need to higher frequency of distribution of news. The emails that the company sends out are also used to promote the brand, currently the company has tailored emails that are sent out to large audiences (Flexlink, 2015). Flexlink has been present on social media for a few years and believes that it is a great opportunity to increase brand awareness (Flexlink, 2015).

The marketing manager states:

“Even if social media is not very extended among B2B nowadays it will change in the future and by then Flexlink will have learnt how to promote the brand in a successful and sustainable way”.

4.2.3 Networking & relationships

As most B2B companies Flexlink is highly dependent on its network.

“Personal relations are essential for the company as it is selling capital investment goods to manufacturers” explains the marketing manager of Flexlink (2015).

The firm has a high retention rate for existing customers. The customers has the highest priority in the stakeholder's list and in order to develop a sustainable relationship with its customers the company organizes "customer days" which includes information about the company, products and seminars where representatives and customers can interact directly at the firm's premises. Flexlink has always had a very direct approach towards new customers, the sales representatives take contact with other manufacturing companies that might be interested in purchasing the products. Flexlink is also aware that good references is primordial in B2B sales, and therefore makes sure that the existing customers are satisfied with both the products and services.

One of the ways to ensure customer satisfaction is submitting an annual survey that contains approximately one thousand interviews (Flexlink, 2015). The survey deals with quality management, after sales service and other type of feedback that can be useful for the company. In addition the firm also makes sure to follow up on projects once the products are delivered.

Regarding other stakeholders that form part of the network, such as suppliers or distributors, Flexlink uses a common CRM system and some of the platforms of social media in order to maintain the contact (Flexlink, 2015). According to Flexlink (2015) so far the networking has been efficient and the firm aims to continue with this approach.

4.2.4 Competition through social media

Flexlink argues that it is important to be relevant when sending out messages; above all, sending the right message to the right customers and follow it up, it concerns the areas marketing and competition. If the firm can target a customer and send the "right" message, the possibility that it will generate business is high. It further explains that after the message has been sent out a follow up process is executed. It is an ongoing process during the whole year. The marketing plan that Flexlink is using today has both a short-term and long-term perspective where social media is calculated from both perspectives.

Flexlink is operating within an industry that manufacturers automated conveyer systems to other, often manufacturing industries that has a need for its products. The current marketing strategy that Flexlink is working towards is aimed at identifying key industries and directing its activities and resources to fulfill the

targets that are set during the year of the organization. Those targets do take the current competition into consideration, and the turn-out is followed up by the management. When utilizing a marketing channel in for example a social media platform the marketing communication always has a specific purpose and are expected to deliver some sort of value, this is in line with its competitive strategy (Flexlink, 2015).

Flexlink has a vast selection of social media platforms to work with, such as LinkedIn and Facebook, they are important platforms due to its networking capabilities but the one that contributes most to its competitiveness is YouTube. According to the company there are several evidences where YouTube is generating competitiveness. One benefit that Flexlink mentions is that YouTube offers both pictures and sound that is a powerful combination to deliver value to its customers. Furthermore, other social media platforms do not contribute to any large extent to Flexlink's competitiveness (Flexlink, 2015). But there is a belief within the organization that other platforms will be able to deliver value and contribute to future competitiveness.

The marketing manager of Flexlink states that:

“We do not want to be on several social media platforms just because, instead by the end of 2016, we will make an evaluation of the social media platforms that exist on the market and do a social media strategy and act in accordance”.

The company operates in over seventy countries around the world. Despite this the social media platforms are only managed in English, however there are some local initiatives in for example Poland where it has a Facebook-group that is managed in the local language.

Flexlink (2015) argues that its most important competitive advantage is its value that it delivers in all stages of its operations to its customers. The marketing and business strategies that the firm are developing does differ depending on the task, which could be interpreted as some sort of differentiation, however the company has a common strategy framework. When collecting information from its existing customers and observations from competitors, Flexlink utilizes databases to gather general input on potential customers. The databases are especially important when qualifying suspects into prospects. Suspects represent every future or existing

customer in its target market. The prospects are firms that have taken the decision to solve a problem that Flexlink can assist them with, simplified deliver value (Flexlink, 2015).

4.3 Norden Machinery

Norden Machinery is a manufacturing company that operates within the packaging industry directed to tube filling systems. Norden has sales offices in every continent, which constitutes a large international imprint. It has 225 employees and a turnover on 910 million SEK (Norden Machinery, 2015). The company is located in Kalmar, Sweden.

4.3.1 Social Media

Norden is a company that is operating within the business-to-business sector in a very traditional way. Due to this, their digital marketing strategy is not well developed. However, Norden has worked with its website during a long period which has resulted in experience from that usage. However since it is focusing on working actively with its website, the knowledge from other platforms is lacking (Norden, 2015). Norden explains that the website is operating as an information and contact platform for all of its new and existing customers.

The website is offering a direct communication channel to all the service personnel of Norden, which facilitates the repairs and solving problems when damages have occurred (Norden, 2015).

Until today Norden use email and newsletters as a part of its regular marketing strategy. The newsletters are sent out in an intermittent frequency and are not based on any frequency, such as weekly or monthly. The purpose of sending the newsletters is to inform the company's sales people around the world about updates and news regarding products. However, clients do not have the privilege to take part in the newsletters; instead the customers are directed to its website (Norden, 2015). Norden has taken a small step to integrate social media into the organization, which has resulted in an account on LinkedIn. For the firm, this social media platform is important when trying to attract new employees, since it is a cost effective way of attracting new personnel.

Norden are using several marketing channels to communicate, the most common are; fairs, website, magazines, sales network that include local sales offices, direct face to face meetings. Norden considers that these marketing channels are the

most effective ones. Furthermore, the fairs are utilized to meet new potential customers and maintain the relationships with existing customers, additionally; Norden argues that fairs are one of the channels that contribute most to that area. The firm has future plans of integrate social media into the organization and it is very aware of the fact that it has to take the countries different cultural aspects into account before an implementation arise. What should be noticed is that Norden has large knowledge of working in a global context and Norden (2015) explains that since it has large experience on the international arena, the cultural dimensions is not seen as issues, rather the opposite. Norden's largest concern before taking any decisions regarding social media is if it could bring its customers any additional value. Furthermore, the sales manager of Norden (2015) explains that:

“If an attendance in one or several platforms could bring value and that the cost of investment and maintenance would be relatively low we could take the decision to look closer into the area of social media”.

4.3.2 Brand awareness

The approach a company adopts regarding its branding is very distinct depending on the industry it operates in, the type of customer it has (B2B or B2C) and the values it wants to transmit. In this case Norden Machinery belongs to a business of manufacturing industrial equipment where other industrial companies purchase its products (B2B). Thus brand awareness obtains an extraordinary importance among anyone who either sells, distribute or operate the machinery. The company has a clear vision of its unique brand, long term experience and the high quality it stands for (Norden, 2015). Nonetheless, the sales director (2015) insists upon the importance to continue to promote the brand and the values that it stands for. Despite the increasing number of competitors Norden (2015) assures that it is unique in its brand and that so far no other companies are able to offer or supply the same quality or high performance that the Swedish company stands for.

The brand stands globally for quick hardware supply, integrated service and maintenance with global reach and local presence and these are also the values that the firm desires to transmit via a digital marketing strategy (Norden, 2015). The strong commitment Norden has for brand awareness has lead the company to its strong competitive position.

The sales director explains that Norden stands out for its pre-sales advices, production and supply of high quality systems and after-sales services. But for the company it is not only about maintaining high standards when it comes to the machinery and the services but also to create trust by keeping the promises made to customers, as it will reflect on their next purchase (Norden, 2015). The sales director of Norden assures that the above is one of the main bases for its competitiveness as it, at the same time, reinforces the brand and the values the firm stands for.

The most effective way to promote the brand and to transmit the values of the firm is through its employees (Norden, 2015). All personnel is expected to commit to the company, its values and mission; and at the same time live up to the high ambition of the company, be the best in its field and always focus on the customers' needs. According to Norden (2015) the behavior of each employee reflects directly upon the performance of the company and thus it is necessary for the top management to enhance the brand not only externally but also internally and transmit brand awareness through all departments.

The traditional marketing of Norden consists of advertisements and press releases in packaging magazines and other relevant papers which is limited for players in the company's specific segment (Norden, 2015). The company also works closely with their international sales representatives for the traditional marketing strategies.

“For the short term future we desire to promote our brand internationally through a digital marketing strategy since it will be able to reach a higher number of people” (Hammarstedt, 2015).

The usage of social media is inexpensive, fast and highly accessible for Norden's customers and could be used as a splendid tool to promote the brand. The company recognizes that the usage of social media would increase brand awareness but still needs to study its implementation. However, the sales director is also aware of the inconveniences of negative press on social media and its effects on the brand. As Norden is part of a larger corporation (Coesia group) that implements its own guidelines regarding social media that all other companies within this group are expected to follow (Norden, 2015). Norden (2015) points out that it would be favorable for Norden to have its own vision to appear embedded in the inferior part

of the emails that are sent out, however, it is not possible as different layouts and formats cannot be applied.

4.3.3 Networking & relationships

Norden Machinery operates in a very niche oriented market and put high emphasis on the personal relationships it maintains with its customers. The closest tier of its network consists of customers, suppliers, agents and sales representatives (Norden, 2015). The tube-filling and packaging segment is rather limited and most players on the market are well-known among each other. The company's brand is world-known as a leader within its segment, thus most potential customers do not require an introduction or explanation regarding the company's production or standards of quality (Norden, 2015). However potential customers are invited to visit Norden's facilities and manufacturing plants in Sweden or observe existing customers machinery at a near located factory in order to get a clear visualization of how the products functions and its real outputs (Norden, 2015).

The sales manager of Norden (2015 states that:

“About forty percent of our new customers rely on references to buy its products which implies that maintaining customers satisfied is not only needed in order to maintain our market share but even more important to increase our market share”

Thus near half of the Norden's customers are referred by existing customers and other entities that never had experienced any kind of relation with the company. New tiers of the network are created by new clients that previous buyers recommend or customers the agents propose (Norden, 2015). When it comes to approaching new customers and increasing market share, Norden Machinery focuses hard on international fairs where the products are displayed and explained, and seminars are also occasionally arranged for representatives that might be interested in how the machinery works (Norden, 2015). It is also here at the fairs where many relationships are started and others reconnected. Appointments with representatives from other companies are arranged beforehand. Norden (2015) also insists that after the fairs it is extremely important to initiate the contact with the representatives met in order to establish a long term relationship and build the trust and dependency that can lead to a future sale of products. The company recognizes clearly the importance of creating trust and loyalty among all the players that it is connected with, especially

where cultural and societal differences may appear (Norden, 2015). In order to address possible dissimilarities and to maintain a transparent relationship, Norden has focused on personal relationships from its beginnings. Knowing its customers personally and keeping a direct communication has proven to be the most efficient manner to establish a successful network for the company (Norden, 2015).

The firm uses different communications channels; phone calls, emails and personal visits to the customers' facilities (Norden, 2015). The personnel in charge of sales are divided by geographical zones and is also in charge of maintaining a close relationship with the customers and other players located in that zone, which usually implies a couple of visits each year to the customers factories and facilities (Norden, 2015). According to the sales manager the aim of these visits are to make sure the customers are satisfied, collect feedback and also offer after sales-services such as maintenance, quality control and training to the local operators that operate the machinery. The sales manager further explains that:

“It is important that the customers always keep in contact with the same personnel in order to create a closer relationships and to feel that they are being heard by our representatives that have insight in the their specific situation”.

According to Norden (2015) personal relationships requires time to build and maintain, which is the main reason why the company sees relationships and international networking as a long term investment. Personal relationship is far the most important aspect when it comes to marketing. One way of being closer to the players on the market that Norden Machinery interacts with is setting up local sales offices. Currently Norden has sales offices in more than fifty locations world-wide that form an extensive sales and service network which sets the basis for the company's competitive advantage (Norden Machinery, 2015).Despite insisting on the importance of direct personal communications, Norden Machinery used an external publicity and communication agency. The company's sales director (2015) explains that the company required professional help in establishing its positioning strategy and have an international channel of customer communication.

4.3.4 Competition through social media

Norden works with LinkedIn, but not actively. This has resulted in that at the moment the firm does not see the potential benefits with LinkedIn even less how it could contribute to a competitive advantage. The importance of digital marketing strategy for Norden is unclear at the moment (Norden, 2015). The B2B segment that it operates in does not show any indications that social media plays a critical role when it comes to the sales of its products. Norden does however work relative actively with its website but Norden (2015) admits that by just being active is not enough to create a strong competitive position.

The actual website gives the visitor a good overview of the company's products that it is offering and in which different segments that Norden operates in. According to Norden (2015) the website includes videos from the Cohesia group, which is the parent company of Norden. The videos explain various operations that Norden does in different countries around the world. Norden has occasionally received feedback from its website, but it is rare and Norden (2015) continues to explain that if the rare feedback is an answer to a not so attractive website, social media integration could be a solution and contribute to its competitiveness.

For Norden the fairs play an important role and are a part of its marketing strategy to show new equipment and promote it. Norden (2015) explains that the firm relies heavily on the fairs, due to the fact that it creates possibilities to strengthen the sales network and become further the absolute first choice for its customers, which is a conscious move to strengthen the strong competitive position. The fairs are a part of the strategy to maintain the competitive advantage that is has toward its competitors and Norden (2015) argues that if social media is to enter the organization it has to deliver equivalent of value to its customers as the fairs are at the moment.

Norden works on a global market and Norden (2015) argues that social media could bring value into the organization in terms of internationalization since social media does not have any borders. This could according to Norden (2015) mean that if one or several social media platforms would be operational into the Norden organization, it could add value and competitiveness to the company since the company is operating in such a segmented business and the social media would be a way for Norden to strengthen its sales network globally.

5. Analysis

In this chapter the empirical data will be analyzed in relation to the theoretical framework presented previously. The analysis aims to create a contrast between the results and knowledge from previous studies and the data collected from this research in order to answer the established research questions. The analysis will be presented in the same sections as the empirical findings; social media, brand awareness, networking and competition through social media.

5.1 Social Media

5.1.1 Alpha

There are many different reasons why companies begin to utilize social media, but a common denominator is that firms have the urge to enhance the relationship to its customers (Brennan & Croft, 2012). By integrating social media into the organization Alpha has facilitated to comprehend the interests of the target groups. Kärkkäinen et al. (2013) describe how social media could improve and most of all clarify the customer's needs, also due to the tools that social media is offering there is a possibility to intensify the customer's orientation. Furthermore Okazaki and Taylor (2013) argues that larger target groups are arduous to reach with marketing when using more traditional marketing channels, such as print. Okazaki and Taylor (2013) further explains that by entering a social media platform the conceivable features of targeting more customers are increasing, above all when speaking in terms of the globalization. By being able to interpret its customer's orientation Alpha could from the perspective of competition be in the forefront, which should be of high value for Alpha since it is competing in a globalized context.

There exist many different platforms where social media are active, but the most common are; LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Blogging (Brennan & Croft, 2012). When viewing the empirical findings from Alpha, it can be argued that it is a firm that has large experience of social media platforms, today it is active on; Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter Vimeo and YouTube (Alpha, 2015). For Alpha, the utilization of social media is derived from facilitating for Alpha to extend the brand awareness in both an internationally and domestically context. According to Alpha (2015) this is what the social media platforms have generated, additionally it has supported the company's sales department to generate revenue and increased its brand awareness (Alpha, 2015).

Michaelidou et al. (2011) argue that social media platforms have the power to enhance the brand identity, but also to ameliorate the customer value. Brennan and Croft (2012) describe how different platforms could bring value into an organization through content marketing, business networking and brand development. It could be argued that Alpha has implemented different social media platforms into the organization and that a clear purpose has facilitated the process. According to Kärkkäinen et al. (2013) a large portion of companies has discouragements to see the financial benefits with entering the world of social media; this is not the case of Alpha who has seen financial return, indirectly from its active work with brand awareness through social media platforms.

The usage of social media is also associated with a risk taking that the company in question has to considerate (Kärkkäinen et al., 2013). According to Alpha (2015) the risks are always there but everything depends on the utilization of the specific social media platform. Alpha (2015) explains how an infrequent activity could damage the brand, additionally when a firm decides to integrate a social media platform into the organization it should be certain to have the time and resources to keep it running to be able to create excellent content. Aichner and Jacob (2015) is also emphasizing the risks with entering a social media platform if the organization are not ready for it, in terms of the time and resources it could occupy, also the demand from its customers is another parameter that has to be included due to the risk of a decreasing brand awareness that in the long term perspective could result in financial disappearances and risk of losing clients.

When going global with a brand due to entering a social media platform the culture dimension has to be taken into consideration (Okazaki & Taylor, 2013; Benedict, 2001). The empirical findings from Alpha indicates that the usage of social media is not affected of either the country or culture, instead findings appears to lie in what type of social media platform each country are using (Alpha, 2015). Its own experience could be explained with that the actual location does matter more than the cultural dimensions. Alpha could see differences in usage from USA and Europe where LinkedIn is frequently used, in contrast to the Asian regions where the WeChat is the dominating platform.

Alpha (2015) argue that age has an important role when it comes to the utilization of social media platforms, however it explains that due to the globalization the users are becoming more homogeneous. Schultz et al. (2012)

explain that when viewing the business-to-business perspective the usage of the different social media platforms are influenced by the age of the user. Furthermore, the article asserts that people with a higher age do use social media platforms less than young ones, however no empirical findings from Alpha (2015) did indicate this.

5.1.2 Flexlink

There are many different incitements for business to be on the Internet. The most common one is that firms have an eager to reduce the gap between them and its customers. Brennan and Croft (2012) show in its research that the platforms that most frequently used are; LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Blogging. Flexlink is a company that is diversified in terms of digital marketing strategy. The firm is a skilled user of social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, however the digital channel that retains the largest interest is its website which has 37 000 visits on a monthly basis. Due to the traditional business environment that Flexlink is operating in, it does also utilize live communications, such as phone calls, personal visits and customer days where the customers are invited to Flexlink to take part of its genuine atmosphere (Flexlink, 2015). Laroche et al. (2012) argues that the loyalty for the brand could be enhanced if companies utilize social media platforms which in the long term perspective could meliorate relationships with future and existing customers.

The firm is using both digital and traditional marketing channels without preclude any possibilities to exercise both in an excellent way. No matter which type of channel or in which type of media Flexlink is communicating, the goal is always to deliver value to its customers (Flexlink, 2015). Kärkkäinen et al. (2013) argue that by being active on several social media platforms it bestows companies the possibility to illuminate the needs of its customers and the ability to chart the target market. Flexlink is operating in several different industries due to the fact that its products are automated conveyer systems, this gives Flexlink opportunities to enter new industries. When an entrance to a new industry is enabled, it is always in terms of marketing done the two step way; traditional channels, such as print, seminars, and then campaigns through social media platforms to ensure that all potential stakeholders are meticulous pinpointed. Brennan and Croft (2012) argues that social media has a unique utility due to its different platforms that exist such as;

content marketing, business networking and brand development, which is currently applied by Flexlink.

In Flexlink's case the content marketing is an important asset which is communicated through several platforms, principally via the website. When viewing the business networking both Facebook and LinkedIn are social media platforms that Flexlink apply its networking abilities to. Furthermore, Brennan and Croft (2012) explains that social media platforms has the advantage to, in an easy and cost effective manner, establish relationship, not just seen from the domestic perspective but the ability to do it on the international arena is what excel social media above other traditional medias. Flexlink's ability to create and maintain relations are one of its most important assets in its business model where YouTube plays an essential role. Other social media platforms are also significant communication tools such as LinkedIn and Facebook, but in those cases where these platforms are utilized the purposes differ from connecting to new and old employees to establish new contacts with new partners (Flexlink, 2015).

5.1.3 Norden Machinery

Brennan and Croft (2012) argues that the reason why companies use social media is that companies want to come closer to the customers. The case company does not experiencing this through its usage of social media. However since Norden Machinery is using only LinkedIn today, as a social media, the closeness to customers is absent, at least through social media. The most used platforms in B2B in terms of social media are LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Blogging (Brennan & Croft, 2012).

Norden is using LinkedIn and a homepage as its digital marketing strategy. The homepage is well structured and information regarding the products, segments and numbers is easy to find. What Norden could display is some business networking by using LinkedIn, however not to any large extent. The company's homepage have an enormous amount of content marketing. Brennan and Croft (2012) argues that content marketing, business networking and brand development are the most utilized applications of social media. Norden uses content marketing and brand development through its website, but the business networking is something the Norden lacks within social media because the company considers it already has a great sales network established with its international sales

representatives located in many different countries and this could be a future feature that the firm could implement.

Michaelidou et al. (2011) display that social network sites (SNS) could enhance the relationship with customers and increase the customer value. In this study with Norden this could not be proven. The company only uses LinkedIn, however Norden does not witness an enhanced relationship with its customers, this could depend on the fact that it does not work actively with LinkedIn, instead the company is working more with personal relationships. Findings from Schultz et al. (2012) mention that social media usage is affected by the age of the user among B2B sales people. The older the sales people are, to the less extent the employee use social media. This was not investigated in this study, however the average age of the personnel at Norden is between forty to sixty years old, so this could be argued to have an impact why social media is not implemented in a higher extent. The same study displays results that suggest that by using social media it could positively affect the sales performance. Norden use LinkedIn but since it does not actively work with it, it is difficult to measure if it would have had any effect on the sales performance until today.

Social media is often used as a tool for marketing and strengthening the relationship development within the B2B sector (Brennan & Croft, 2012). Norden does not experiencing this today.

What Norden does highlight is the networking capabilities that an implementation of a new social media platform could generate, especially in a global perspective, since this is the market where Norden is operating in for the most of the time. As mentioned earlier, Norden is dependent on good networking qualities. Norden explains that if it is going to implement a social network into its organization it is of the highest importance that it brings value to the company's customers since it is the most important for Norden.

Norden Machinery works with a social media, LinkedIn, but not to the extent that it could see an increase in the number of weak ties, additionally Jansson (2007) explains that network strategy, which LinkedIn form part of, connects other international players together. The platform of fairs that Norden attends to, where the company meet a large quantity of existing and future customers that could be argued as an increase in number of weak ties in that specific moment.

Okazaki and Taylor (2013) implies that network capabilities create opportunities for implementing global marketing. At the moment Norden does not internationally interact with social media. However, if Norden would in the future after doing a larger implementation into the organization, it would probably not encounter any barriers to this aspect.

Okazaki and Taylor (2013) and Benedict (2001) point out the importance of the cultural dimension that has to be taken into consideration before going global with a brand on a platform of social media. Norden emphasizes that its largest concern is that it wants to be certain that an application could bring value to the company, but the most important aspect is that it brings value to Norden's customers irrespective of different cultures.

5.2 Brand awareness

5.2.1 Alpha

Alpha's long family tradition in manufacturing goods for industries have turned into a well-recognized brand that stands for innovation and high quality. The company has invested in brand awareness and is currently focusing on digital platforms to strengthen the brand even more. Aaker (2012) explains that a brand name stands for familiarity and commitment, and both of these values are high priority for Alpha. The company has invested in creating close relationships with its customers and other stakeholders in order to develop a long term relationship with these players on the market. Through the different events that the company carries out it tries to create an emotional connection that can strengthen the attachment towards the brand, but only if the connection is created appropriately as explained in the research of Leek and Christodoulides (2012).

As Laroche et al. (2012) explains brand communities can enhance brand trust and value, and this is the main objective of Alpha when utilizing the different social media that it is present on. Knowing the possible risks that social media comes with (Bruhn et al., 2014). Alpha has been careful knowing that customers' perception can vary quickly. The company focuses on creating added value to the customer and tries to reinforce the brand in as many channels as possible.

Benedict (2001) brings up differences that can occur when operating globally; so far Alpha has not encountered any cultural clashes. Alpha has not had to adapt its brand values or has had difficulties in promoting the brand in different countries or environments. However, in order to adapt to all types of customers, the company still maintains its traditional marketing activities via printed magazines and newspapers.

Just as a successful networking strategy can lead to financial benefits, brand awareness can also translate into economic advantages (Glynn, 2011). As the customers of Alpha get influenced by the brand and the values that it stands for it creates a long term commitment to the firm that leads to a higher and repetitious sales frequency. The customers that are satisfied with the products and services provided will also create positive references and good mouth-to-mouth reviews which can lead to new customers.

5.2.2 Flexlink

Brand recognition is a serious matter for Flexlink as it is for most companies that sell industrial equipment, the brand stands for the quality and is one of the major aspects that potential new customer looks into when starting a purchasing process. According to Rosenbaum-Elliott et al. (2011) a company needs to invest in its brand and make sure that it transmits the values that the firm stands for. So far Flexlink has managed to do it successfully and the company's usage of both traditional and new marketing activities shows that it grasps the importance of its brand recognition. Flexlink also invests time and resources on promoting the brand internally, among employees. The company aims to create an emotional connection that according to Leek and Christodoulides (2012) will lead to strengthen the bonds with stakeholders and increase trust and commitment among them. Due to the strong competition that the company faces it is important that the brand stands for the reputation of the firm and can transmit the high quality and high technology that Flexlink stands for.

Laroche et al. (2012) concluded in their study that a frequent interaction on online communities also leads to an increased trust and loyalty which will translate to a closer approach to customers, both new and existing clients. The usage of LinkedIn by Flexlink has proven to be effective and has given company new opportunities that might not have been possible without social media. The

company is planning to increase its presence on diverse digital platforms and several studies have proven the efficiency of brand communities (Laroche et al., 2012; Bruhn et al.; 2014 Brennan & Croft, 2012). The company is a firm believer that social media will prevail and out do traditional marketing strategies. However, the firm still maintains parts of its traditional communication methods since not all companies that pursue the products are on the same level of innovation.

Benedict (2001) explains the importance of national culture and how a company might need to adapt the brand values for each geographical environment since cultural clashes can lead to a negative opinion and even cause loss of customers. Flexlink has not had to deal with any cultural issues despite having customers all around the world. The local sales offices have been able to adapt to the local environment and therefore avoid any cultural problems.

5.2.3 Norden Machinery

Glynn (2011) argues that between B2C and B2B there is often a debate about brand awareness and that B2B is in larger extent working towards the industry in projects that have a long term perspective. In this case Norden Machinery works towards B2B. According to Glynn (2011) an increase in brand awareness could enhance the firm's performance. In the case of Norden competitors obtain a higher market share each year and more competitive companies are willing to compete with lower prices. Norden (2015) insists upon the importance to continue to promote the brand and the values that it stands for to be able to compete in the future. Aspects that stands for Norden's advantage, is that it has a clear vision of its unique brand, long time experience and the high quality it stands for. The company uses an innovative marketing strategy in order to differentiate from other companies. Glynn (2011) mentions that B2B branding enhances the development of relationships with its existing and future clients. This is of highest importance for Norden since it is in high extent depending on the brand to differentiate itself against its competitors.

Leek and Christodoulides (2011) propose that if a brand is utilized correctly it could facilitate the emotional connection to a brand. Norden work actively with its brand and no companies, according to Hammerstedt (2015), have offered the same quality or high performance that Norden Machinery does today. This could be argued that Norden has succeeded to create an emotional connection

amongst its customers and that the brand Norden stands for represents quality. Laroche et al. (2012) explain that social media in terms of brand communities could enhance the relationship with customers, which leads to brand trust and brand loyalty.

Norden is not a member in any online community that could strengthen the relationship with customers, at least not in a digital manner. The brand loyalty Norden already has since it is living up to what it is promising, which is high quality.

Companies have realized the benefits of supporting brands with social network sites (Michaelidou et al., 2011). This is not the case for Norden, since it has not implemented social media into the organization. Bruhn et al. (2014) argue that firms should implement a network orientation in its strategy of branding to increase the loyalty of the brand. Empirical data show that the brand of Norden Machinery has values that it wants to transmit via digital marketing strategy in the future.

Norden's values stand for fast supply of hardware, service that are integrated and always act on a local presence with a global touch. The theory explains that firms should always have the brand in mind when working towards its customers and remember that everything that the firm does affect the attitudes to the brand. Norden is known for its pre-sales advices, production and supply of high quality systems and after-sales services. Maintaining high standards is important but trust is the most important factor. Norden (2015) argues that by supplying in right time to customers is important, as it will reflect on Norden's next purchase. Norden (2015) also explains that values of Norden Machinery are transmitted actively through its employees. There are several benefits with this, especially that personnel that are working with the customers could maintain the values towards the customers on a daily basis.

Norden explains that the internal brand awareness is as important as the external work towards its customers, since the employees are executing the work that represents the values that come from the company, directly reflects the performance of the firm. If Norden could transfer this mindset it could be argued that Norden will be well equipped for the future when it comes to digital branding. The national culture does play a decisive role when going global with a brand (Benedict, 2001). There are underlying factors that influence different dimensions in each country where there exists different culture dimension on the local markets where Norden operates. For the short term future the company desires to promote its brand

internationally through a digital marketing strategy that will be able to reach a higher number of people. In a digital marketing perspective an internationalization of a brand or a firm is a risk-taking operation since the digital world is very variable and changes happens fast, often with no notice (Johanson & Vahlne, 1990).

Norden have been operating globally in many decades, this have resulted in a unique knowledge about different cultures which Norden would have usefulness of if it decide to go global with the brand on a social media platform. The company should take into consideration that social platforms do not last forever and that the brand could be damaged if not utilized correctly.

5.3 Networking & relationships

5.3.1 Alpha

Networking has become a new concept in business relationships the last decades and has become increasingly more important for companies who operate in B2B. It has turned into an essential part of the relationship between the firm and its stakeholders. The importance of relationships and the need to have a specific relationship oriented strategy has become the aim of many researchers (Baines et al., 2013; Jansson, 2007 Gil-Saura, 2009) and these studies have shown the importance of networking in any type of business unit. Jansson (2009) focuses on B2B sectors and highlights the linkage between different players on the market and that creating weak ties between different nodes can lead to a successful strategy.

Alpha has also reached the same conclusion and has put in a considerate amount of effort in its networking strategy. The exclusive events such as parties or dinners create a new way of relating to other nodes in an innovative and challenging way. For the company it has been easier to maintain a close relationship with certain corporations or stakeholders while having social events. Gil-Saura et al. (2009) explains the creation of value by choosing the right channel to connect with other players and in this case Alpha has wisely chosen certain activities where their stakeholders can feel at ease.

Gil-Saura et al. (2009) also mention that networking can create strong bonds and increase loyalty towards the brand which is also one of the reasons why Alpha invests in networking. The company also uses different digital platforms to maintain the contact with the different nodes that it interacts with and it has made it

easier for Alpha to communicate directly with its stakeholders. Alpha also benefits from a better understanding of customers' needs and behavior since it been utilizing social media which has led to a stronger competitive position. Palmatier et al. (2008) explains how relationship marketing can lead to a higher return and if used properly it can become a part of a sustainable competitive advantage, which Alpha is currently attempting.

The research of Lambert et al. (2012) show that not only communication, trust and loyalty improve by having a close relationship with stakeholders but also financial improvements can be done. So far Alpha has not been able to obtain these types of advantages but expects that the networking and the use of social media will bring more advantages, including financial benefits with the increase of applications of digital platforms.

5.3.2 Flexlink

The strong dependence that Flexlink has to its network has affected its way to do business, the company invests in creating strong bonds with different players on the market, not just its customers. Payne et al. (2005) states that no company is capable to control neither the whole network it is part of nor the outcome of the relationships that are created. One way that Flexlink has managed to have a better control is by having local sales offices. Since the company operates globally it is important to be efficient but at the same time have a close relationship with its customers worldwide.

In this sense, Baines et al. (2013) suggests a strong relationship marketing strategy in order to promote the brand globally, which can be achieved by having local sales representative as Flexlink has. Relationship marketing has also proved to increase trust and loyalty towards the brand (Gil-Saura et al., 2009) and by having the so-called "customer days" Flexlink is able to increase commitment the customers have towards the company since they are invited to several events at the firm's headquarter.

The complications of relationships that Bolton et al. (2003) mentions in their study can be avoided by these type of activities that Flexlink carries out. Bolton et al. (2003) explains that the personal relationships can lead to a higher value for customers and turn into greater profits for the company despite not being a financial or economical factor.

From the empirical findings it can be understood that part of the company's competitive advantage is created by the company's strong relationship orientation, which is also mentioned by Palmatier et al. (2008). Their study showed that communities and having an organizational platform that promotes marketing relationships can turn a competitive advantage sustainable if the platform is applied correctly.

The annual survey that Flexlink sends out is a clear example of the company's desire to improve its CRM; the company obtains useful information and at the same time the clients get the notion they are being heard by their suppliers. It is also a cost efficient way to obtain feedback and be able to create product or service development based on the real needs of the customers. If Flexlink manages to continue its strong network and create even more weak ties then the network will be able to increase the brand awareness (Baines et al., 2013).

5.3.3 Norden Machinery

Norden seeks competitive advantages in manufacturing high quality and long performance machines that few other international competitors are able to produce. It is not only the products that make up the competitive advantage, the trust and loyalty that customers have for the company could be considered just as important as the machines themselves. Although the firm has a well-known international brand that it face tough competitors who are decreasing the technological gap that places Norden as the number one supplier of tube machinery. Improving its existing network strategy is one way to reach more customers, increase brand awareness and transmit the values of Norden. Any given customer that derives value from any product or service is very different from each other and highly individual and this is the main reason why maintaining a personal relationship with each customer is so important for the companies that purchase Norden's machinery. We found that Norden does not rely heavily on many players in the network.

Baines et al. (2013) study in relationship marketing and its effect on long term relationships can easily be applied to Norden's perspective on enhancing relationships and focusing on loyalty and trust in order to create such a long term bond.

So far Norden is focusing mostly on its strongest relationships, namely with its customers and locally hired agents and own sales organization. The empirical data reveals that the company does not find it necessary to interact with other players as local institutions or local business agents. However building up new, even though initially weak, relationships with for example more suppliers, local legislators and other players on the market could give the company the opportunity to break free from its given locked in position and gain new information that Norden does not have access to right now acting in this very closed business network it have built up so far. This also leads us to the fact that in the future Norden can profit from watching other actors more closely, which means that even though they might think it does not affect Norden directly, it is always better to know what is happening on the market. Eventually through establishing new relationships on the market as well as maintaining and strengthening them further, Norden will not only be able to have a wider network in place but also transform the weak relationships into stronger ones and be able to keep and maintain a stronger position and at the same time increase its information influx.

Maintaining a less extended network and a rather scarce linkage with other organizations inhibits productive as well as long-term relationships that could create value for the customers as well as give Norden an opportunity to also gain more valuable information for instance about the market outside of its previously established network horizon. Having a close relationship with many actors could also lead to even more positive word of mouth promotion, especially since the customers from emerging markets are known to be very distrusting and rely very heavily on the experiences of others when making a buying decision. Establishing relationships can be made in several ways; the traditional manner though personal visits has been the main focus of Norden but new ways are constantly developed and due to globalization, Internet is providing an excellent tool for companies that operate in international B2B industries.

The existing digital marketing strategy of Norden has not been very clear or well-structured and it is during the last years that the company has realized the need and importance of digital marketing when it comes to approaching international customers and other actors in its business segments. Gil-Saura et al. (2009) explains how choosing the adequate channels can create value for the customers and so far Norden has adopted very direct and traditional channels as an

approach to other players. The company's choice of communication channels needs to be updated in order to promote the brand but also expand the vision of modernity and high tech that the company is already well known for. Norden consider relationship marketing as one of the most important factors in international markets. As mentioned previously, Norden has focused its networking on creating long term relationships with its customers worldwide, mainly because the product have a long term performance up to several decades and during that time Norden aims to provide maintenance services but also because a long term relationship implies that the customers will rely on Norden for its future purchases.

Bolton et al. (2003) conclude in their study that personal bonds can create higher value than what financial or organization aspects can and it is clear that Norden follows the same perspective and has so far been beneficial for the company. The empirical data shows that despite presenting the relationships as personal and direct the company is not as close as it could be. Cultural aspects are sometimes hard to deal with and make it difficult for the sales personnel that travel to the local factories to establish a personal bond with the top management of companies that purchase the machinery. With the increase of competitors that focus on more price than on high quality or new technological advancements it is important that Norden strengthens its network and transmits its capabilities and outstanding performance through all the tiers of the network, not just the customers. The local sales offices deal with the local and regional institutions while the headquarters in Sweden might not have a clear insight on the daily operations these employees manage nor how it develop its own network with local players.

If Norden wants to increase its control on the different international markets as well as maintaining a productive network it should invest more strategic efforts into trying to build more deeper and sustainable relationships with the other players in the network. Especially relying merely on its local agents for most of the communications as well as the distribution of its products can be quite risky.

The theoretical framework, previously explained, puts emphasis on relationship marketing (Baines et al., 2013 and Palmatier et al., 2008) and the usage of the several digital tools. These tools, such as, online communities and different social networks as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook create a close network with both new and existing players, and promote the company's brand which will lead to a sustainable competitive advantage (Palmatier et al., 2008). Thus it can be established that the

present relationship strategy carried out by Norden Machinery is not as efficient as it could be, and a higher percentage of potential customers could be persuaded with more specific marketing actions, targeting new customers by creating a more extensive network that will eventually promote and extend the brand values of the company.

5.4. Competition through Social Media

5.4.1 Alpha

Kotler and Armstrong (2012) argue that marketing is about building profitable customer relationships. It is fulfilled by understanding the customers' needs and desires better than the competitors. Alpha's most used social media platform is Instagram and it is also the digital media that is contributing most to its competitiveness. Digital marketing has the power to build strong customer relationships and is at the moment the fastest growing media according to Kotler and Armstrong (2012). Empirical findings from Alpha indicate that this is also the case when taking the perspective of the social media platform, Instagram. The platform is encouraging users to display pictures which suits Alpha very well since it is working actively with innovative design, Instagram offers Alpha opportunities to visualize its products in an easy and fun way, which gives Alpha a strong competitive position.

Miller (2012) argues that digital marketing facilitates a firm to establish and maintain close and strong relationships with its customers. For Alpha the brand is everything and it is crucial to make sure that the brand keeps its efficiency and legitimacy. Alpha (2015) argues that the digital revolution that has occurred the last couple of years have created new possibilities to create a connection to the brand, due to this tighten the relationship with new and existing customers which have contributed to competitiveness. Järvinen et al. (2012) explain that creating trust, brand awareness and establishing long term relationships with clients are more common than focusing on finding new customers in a business-to-business context. Alpha is also investing its time and resources to existing customers. The customers are invited to special dinner parties and events around the world at different locations. Despite this, Alpha is also attracting new clients and suppliers. This is frequently done through personal meetings, fairs and online activities.

Ramsay (2010) argues that social media can be the driving force for firms in the work of developing a unique style. Alpha starts all its work from the inside of the company, with a resourced based perspective. The workmanship lies in its product development that makes sure that its products are in the forefront in comparison of its competitors. Since its products are much about design, the work is heavily directed to create a unique style which has created a competitive advantage. Its design is also the brand, according to Alpha (2015) it is working hard to make sure that customer's entitle its products with Alpha and not the actual product. The company utilizes social media platforms to facilitate this process which has generated the strong competitive position that Alpha has today. According to Ramsay (2010) the digital platforms are much more flexible than traditional marketing channels. For Alpha the brand is its most important asset in terms of competition and social media has the effect that it could be utilized and is applicable with various contents which has made the combination of social media and the brand Alpha competitive.

5.4.2 Flexlink

By understanding the customer's needs and desires a foundation is created to build long lasting profitable customer relationships which could in the long-term perspective excel the competitors and create a competitive advantage (Armstrong, 2009; Kotler & Armstrong, 2012). Flexlink is operating from two perspectives, short and long term. Its core competitiveness lies in the messages that are transmitted to carefully targeted customers. Furthermore it is argued that if it is done correctly the transmitted messages that could take the form of emails, campaigns or advertisements through social media, which would generate an increased level of business (Flexlink, 2015).

According to Miller (2012) advantageous corporative reputation is a long term objective with social media usage due to an establishment of tighter relationships with existing customers which contribute to competitiveness. Flexlink operates on several social media platforms; YouTube is the one that stands for the creation of its competitive position. The company's reasoning around YouTube is that it offers the user the opportunity to take part of material in both pictures and sound which increases the possibility to grab the concept of what Flexlink sends out

(Flexlink, 2015). Interestingly apart from YouTube there is no other social media platform that contributes as much to its strong competitive position.

Something that excels Flexlink from the other companies in this research is that it is carrying out follow-ups of its marketing activities that are cross-checked regarding the targets that been set during the year (Flexlink, 2015). Ramsay (2010) argues that social media platforms can be tuned in target and measure each audience and situation which facilitates the follow-ups for the management. This entails that digital marketing can present Flexlink with measurements that could enhance the ability to compete.

According to Sawhney et al. (2005) different social media platforms could be used in the work of product development due to the customer's needs, which improves products that could be invented from the response of its users. Flexlink is working with social media platforms to identify key markets and search for new opportunities and chart the customer's needs and wants to direct its resources and activities to fulfilling the targets that has been set (Flexlink, 2015).

5.4.3 Norden Machinery

Brennan and Croft (2012) argues that social media could be used in the B2B sector as a tool for sale prospecting. This is something that Norden does not experience at all. Its sales prospecting is executed at fairs and a well-developed sales network which could be argued as competitiveness. Kärkkäinen et al. (2013) argue that social media within B2B could enhance and clarify the customers' needs in terms of increasing customer orientation. Norden does not experience this, since the company is just operating on one platform and in a very limited way.

Today Norden is a member at a packaging group online at LinkedIn where other similar companies are members, it does not witness that this is helping it in any further extent, due to this the competitiveness from LinkedIn is vague. Norden is one of the leading manufactures in its industry and is not using LinkedIn to increase the speed of its product development; instead the company uses it for recruiting employees. Kärkkäinen et al. (2013) debate that companies have a difficulty to see the economic benefits of adopting social media, which is also the case for Norden who definitely likes the idea behind social media, but is having issues to view the financial benefits in the short term perspective, however in the long term it would try to increase the perceived value for its customers. The financial

outcome from working with social media is that the company could experience tighter relationships with customers and suppliers which in the long term perspective could generate revenue through the word of mouth between customers and suppliers, when taking this one step further this could strengthen competitive position for Norden. Norden (2015) explains that the company does work actively with its website, if this has had an effect on sales performance is troublesome to view, since Norden does not measure this activity. Norden is using the website to inform its customers about news, keeping up the service contracts, the website also acts as an around-the-clock service. These are actions taken to strengthening the competitive position of Norden.

The company does consider that if it does work with social media on more platforms than it does at the moment it could enhance the relationship development which could increase the competitiveness of the brand.

Norden explains that networking is one of the most essential operations that it does, often between sales agents at fairs and at the companies in the different countries. Okazaki and Taylor (2013) mention especially the networking capabilities could bring value into the organization when taking the international perspective of advertising and social media.

The network capability that Okazaki and Taylor (2013) explain cannot be visualized by Norden, not even in a perspective of advertising. Okazaki and Taylor (2013) also mention that network capability is facilitating the creation and maintenance of networking. Norden is definitely experiencing this too, the fairs that Norden work actively with, where the representatives meet new potential customers and maintain the existing customers. Okazaki and Taylor (2013) argue that the weak ties will increase a competitive advantage in the long-term perspective by installing a social network into the organization.

5.5 Cross Case Analysis

5.5.1 Social media

Alpha has managed to identify its customers' different needs through customer orientation. The other two case companies, Flexlink and Norden do not show any evidence of this orientation factor. When it comes to the utilization of the social media platforms, the difference is palpable. Alpha is the company that has reached furthest in the work of implementing and utilizing social media platforms,

whereas Norden has a long way to go. Flexlink is a company that still works very traditionally but has succeeded to integrate social media platforms in an extent that it is operational on several platforms.

There is different reasoning behind the case companies' usage and integration of social media platforms. Alpha's integration has facilitated brand awareness and supported the sales department. Flexlink communicates large amounts of content marketing through its website and YouTube channel which are two of its main platforms and much of it is content marketing in order to facilitate for its customers information about new prototypes and products. Norden does understand the advantages of social media but has not experienced it and is still investigating the possibilities of integrating a platform that could be connected with its traditional marketing and communication systems.

When viewing social media platforms from an international perspective; Alpha argues that the actual location matters more than the cultural aspects. From its own experience the usage differ from USA, Europe and Asia due to local restrictions. For Flexlink the cultural dimension is not a dilemma, instead it sees the vast selection social media platforms as a way to maintain and increase its ability to act on the international arena. Norden has not established any specific digital marketing strategy; however it emphasizes that when it will establish a digital strategy the cultural dimensions will be taken into consideration.

5.5.2 Brand awareness

All case companies in this study insist that the brand is one of the most important aspects that their customers focus on. Each company has had so far a different strategy to promote their brand; Alpha has invested in social media, Flexlink uses a mixture of digital and traditional marketing while Norden still relies on traditional marketing. According to Alpha the company's implementation and application of social media has been successful and Flexlink is also content with its use so far of different digital platforms. Both companies agree that social media has increased brand awareness of their companies and see a direct relation with the use of social media. On the other hand, Norden does not aim to directly increase its brand awareness since it is the leading manufacturer in the products it produces, however the firm would like to reach out to more potential customers.

5.5.3 Networking and relationships

Currently Norden and Flexlink rely heavily on their network and the relationships they have established with their local sales offices all around the world. These two companies also belong to the same business group (Cohesia) and can therefore benefit from the network that this big firm has created worldwide. On the contrary, Alpha is a family owned company that has created its own network through several generations and is not linked to any other firm.

All three companies have developed a strong network over the years that they rely and depend on. Flexlink and Alpha have been able to improve their network by using social media, and it has brought the different players together and strengthens the ties between them.

Due to the strong sales network that Norden has it is clear that if the company does implement social media its existing relationships would make it easier for the company to interact with the stakeholders and make the company's digital marketing become successful.

5.5.4 Competition through social media

For Alpha the most competitive social media platform is Instagram while for Flexlink it is YouTube, each of these platforms have different characteristics. There are significant differences between these two companies; Alpha works with a large amount of innovative design and for this Instagram is the best suited platform since the utilization of Instagram is done through visualizing its products and themes through pictures and images, Flexlink on the other hand works with construction and technical products which demands both pictures and sound for an efficient distribution of information to the customers. Norden is too early in its application of social media to notice any notable competitive positions.

For Alpha the absolutely most important competitive advantage is the brand. The company emphasize that it is the social media that has given it the possibility to create its strong competitive position since it can utilize the different platforms to create its own unique style. For Flexlink the competitiveness lies in the ability to transmit messages through different social media platforms, but also traditional channels. Norden has a large competitive advantage through its high quality products and sales network, but it is maintained by utilizing traditional marketing activities.

Table 3. Cross-case analysis of the three case companies in relation to the four theoretical concepts that have been used in this study.

Concept	Alpha	Flexlink	Norden
Social media	Large utilization of social media	Has succeeded to integrate social media with its traditional marketing activities	Does only operate with LinkedIn in a very limited extent
Brand Awareness	The brand is one of its largest competitive advantages that is strengthened by social media	A relative strong brand that is communicated through both traditional and social media platforms	A very strong brand that is only communicated through traditional marketing channels
Networking	A very important factor and social media has increased its ability to create or enhance relationships	Relationships are very important, but are usually created or maintained through traditional marketing channels	Very important for the company, it relies heavily on its sales network based on local offices worldwide
Competition	Social media is contributing in a very high extent to its ability to compete	Social media is enhancing the overall communication enough to say it is contributing to a strong competitive position	Social media does not contribute to its ability to compete, due to a very limited implementation

6. Conclusions

This chapter presents five areas; conclusion, managerial implications, theoretical implications, limitations and future research. The conclusion aims to give a justified answer to the two research questions of this thesis. The managerial implications are directed to managers working actively with digital marketing strategy. The theoretical implications present the theoretical contributions of this study and future research suggest different aspects that require further investigation.

6.1 Conclusion

In this study it is shown that there are large differences between the utilization of social media platforms. This study shows that companies have come far in its implementation and development of social media platforms that constitutes the main part of its overall digital marketing strategy. It can be concluded that the companies that have succeeded have combined its traditional marketing activities with new digital strategies. This has created synergy effects with the social media strategy that has contributed to the companies' ability to compete. The ability to compete lies above all in the companies' capacity to utilize the social media platforms capability to networking, both in an internationally and domestically context. It can be concluded that social media platforms does not have any country borders and facilitates the branding and networking process for companies working in an international environment.

The social media platform Instagram has played a crucial part in the development of brand awareness which has had an effect on the power to compete in the long-term perspective. Companies that have been utilizing YouTube have garnered success and the social media platform is generating competitive positions in several aspects. One of the companies is fairly invisible when it comes to social media which makes it difficult to draw any conclusions regarding its digital marketing strategy and its contribution to competitiveness. But what can be concluded from the research is that if a Swedish SME that operated within B2B decides to integrate social media into the organization it would most likely contribute to its competitiveness.

The companies which have been presented in this study have a different degree of usage of social media. This circumstance gave the researchers the possibility to create a comparison of companies that are successfully using social media and companies that still is not using applications to its full extent. Despite the

fact that the companies are not using these platforms in the same way, they all had a clear predisposition to using social media before implementing them. The marketing department was convinced of the benefits and advantages that social media could offer. Hence the predisposition can be seen as a key success factor.

Companies that have a large extended network which includes most of their stakeholders, it is thanks to this functioning network that social media will be easier to use and became efficient and profitable. Therefore having a wide network is a clear key success factor for using social media. In addition, these companies have also invested time and resources on creating a strong bond and trust between the company and its customers, and it is due to the brand loyalty and trust that the two companies are content with their presence on digital platforms. Since these companies operate in B2B context the relationships between sales representatives and clients are very strong and this strong bond has become a key success factor since it has made the customers less reluctant to interact with their suppliers on social media.

6.2 Managerial implications

Managers within the manufacturing industry within the B2B context could find this study useful. Companies that are working in an international context can be benefited by integrating social media platforms due to its strengthening effects on relationships, both new and existing in a domestic but foremost in an international context. Managers that have intentions to increase the firm's brand awareness and increase its ability to compete could find several social media platforms that are suitable for this purpose.

Before implementation, research should be done regarding which social media platform to use and investigate which suits the purpose of the company best. The managers also need to make sure that the firm has the right amount of resources to update the platform frequently. It is also important that the companies study its own network to make sure that an implementation of social media would benefit the network.

6.3 Theoretical implications

The theoretical contributions that this research can provide are related to the usage of social media in manufacturing companies in a B2B context. We have shown how different digital marketing strategies can affect a company's competitiveness. We have corroborated the results from previous studies, despite that they are few, the articles expose the easiness to create a direct communication with stakeholders and the low cost that social media application has in relation to the amount of people that it reaches out to.

We have concluded that there is a close connection between a firm's network strategy and its ability to increase brand awareness both on a domestic market and internationally. Up to now, little academic work has explored the association between a firm's relationships on social media and its brand. Therefore we add to the existing literature that by implementing social media to a firm's network it will increase brand awareness and make the network stronger.

6.4 Limitations

This case study has a limited ability to generalize since it measures only three manufacturing companies, all of them located in south of Sweden due to limitation of time and resources. These three companies cannot be considered as a representative sample of Swedish SME's since the sample is too small to be able to generalize.

Only industrial manufacturing companies within B2B context were included therefore other industries cannot directly apply the results from this research. The information collected from these companies was not done in an identical manner; interviews were held with only two companies and even if email correspondence was used with all companies the amount of primary data differed between the companies.

The major limitations of this research was the lack of previously conducted studies related to SME's in B2B that successfully was utilizing social media and the results it had on its competitiveness.

6.5 Future research

This study has focused on the use of digital marketing of Swedish SME's within manufacturing industry. In order to verify the results that have been concluded and be generalized to other firms in the same sector, future qualitative and quantitative research is recommended. Qualitative research can be made including SME's from other Swedish regions to verify if the results from this study are consistent with SME's in southern Sweden. In addition, our conclusions can obtain a higher degree of validity if further studies use a larger sample of companies.

Due to the speed that digital marketing and Internet is changing it would be interesting to study the changes within different industries that this study has not included. Also, it would be intriguing to explore how other variables can affect the application of social media, such as the personal use of social media by employees, the age of a company and its vision towards innovation.

Last but not least it would bring great insight to companies to know if it is worth the resources it requires to maintain social media platforms and to know if its contribution to competitiveness is sustainable in long term or just short term, therefore we recommend these aspects to be further investigated.

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Appendix

Interview guide

General information

- Could you describe the industry your company operates within?
- What is your role in this company?
- Could you describe the organizational culture of your company?

Current marketing strategy

- Can you describe briefly your current market strategy? Who is it aimed at?
- Which marketing channels do you use today? Why do you consider those channels to be the most productive and efficient ones?
- Do you work with newsletters? How often? If not, could a monthly or quarterly newsletter be considered?
- How do you work with your digital marketing strategy today?
- How important would you consider that digital strategy is for the company currently?
- How important do you think that the company's website is for customer? How often do you get comments or feedback on your website?
- How are sales functions organized? Is there one sales person assigned a specific geographical region? Is that person the only one responsible of the maintenance of the personal relationships with the players (customers, agents, distributors, etc.) in that region? Is that person assigned that to region due to any specific factors (like previous knowledge or experience from that country, or local language skills)?
 - In your traditional marketing efforts today are you measuring any ROI, why or why not?
 - Do you have any direct contact with end-consumers?

Social Media

- Do you use any social networks or other social media? Which?
- What is or was your expectations on social media before implementing it?
- Which the strengths of social media according to you?
- How is social media helping you since you implemented it?
- Have you changed your way of working since you began using social media?
- Do you have any responsible for the social media?
- Do you see any potential risks in using social media?
- Can you see any weaknesses with social media, how?
- Do you search business related information through social media platforms?
- Do you communicate with customers and suppliers through social media platforms? If you do, in which way and through what platforms?

- Do you know if your customers and suppliers use social media platforms? In that case, do you know in which context?
- Is there something preventing your corporation from using social media in a greater extent? If, what is the reason for that?
- Would you like to focus more on social media within your marketing strategy? Why?
- How do you explain to the customers your value proposition on social media? Do you teach customers about new product usage, or new ideas, trends etc.?
- How with innovation, have you re-segmented the market by creating new markets around your products? Could social media be useful for that?
- Do you believe that the age and the country/culture of each salesperson affect their use of social media?
- Have you perceived that some of your customers are more or less inclined to use social media depending on its home country/culture?
- Is there any geographical location where social media makes more sense or where it makes less sense? Why?
- Regarding social media, how would to handle the challenge of social media since you are operating in different countries?
- If you would implement social media, what is it you want to achieve?
- There are many platforms that do exist in the world of social media, which do you think should suit your needs and why if you chose to implement social media into your organization?
- Have you noticed any change in customer relations because of Social Media or Internet in general?
- With your experience of social media, would you recommend it to other companies? Why/how?
- What is most important to think about for a company entering into Social Media for the first time?
- What time do you put in to social media if you compare with traditional marketing channels? Why?
- Which are the largest benefits with social media?

Brand Awareness

- Do you have/had any expectations regarding the brand awareness when implemented social media?
- Have you noticed that brand recall and brand recognition has increased since you implemented social media?
- The brand is a vital part for a company, so also in the B2B world; could you say that the brand has increased in value since you implemented social media? How?
- When exposing the brand to social media, has it changed the price setting of your products or is it the same? (Exclude all other factors, such as currency change, political decisions, laws etc.)
- Do you use social media to handle your after sale service, how?

- How is your brand represented in the emails?
- Which are your brand values? Do you consider these values to be shared with the rest of your main competitors or are they unique to the company?
- How do you work with your brand today in traditional media? Do you work with a PR firm that manages the traditional media?
- Why is it so important for the company to increase its brand awareness?
- How do you think you could increase your brand awareness with social media? If so, in what way?
- How do you promote your brand among your employees? Are there any values that are aimed directly towards the employees?
- Which is your most important brand value? And why is it the most important one? How do you think that value contributes to your competitive advantage?

Networking & relationship

- Explain a bit how the company works with its relationships within marketing.
- How do you maintain relationships with other corporations?
- What stakeholders do you have contact with in your daily work?
- How do you have contact with them today?
- Do you think the way you communicate could be improve? How?
- Is your communication with stakeholders important for you in your work? Why?
- Do you think a broader usage of social media platforms could develop or create relationships to customers and suppliers? If you think that, how could this be done?
- Regarding the stakeholders of the firm could you put the following ones in order, from most to least important: (1-7)

Customers

Distributors

Suppliers

Competitors

Internal stakeholders (e.g. employees)

General Public and media

Governmental authorities

- Would you prefer your customers and suppliers to be active on social media platforms and in which way would you like them to be active?
- If your customers and suppliers is using social media, would you then prefer to use it as well?
- How often do you make personal visit to your customers, are some customers visited more frequently than others? What does the frequency of visits depend on?
- Does the way you maintain contacts or establish personal relationships with customers, suppliers, agents, sales representatives, etc. vary on the cultural or societal background of these players? If so, how does it vary?

- Do certain customers prefer or avoid determined types of communication channel due to cultural aspects?
- How do you work with your existing relationships today? A part from meeting new potential customers at fairs and recommendations from other customers how does the company establish new relationships with customers?
- How important do you think personal relationships are for the company? Please specify. Do you manage to retain your existing customers? (Arranging seminars, Business meetings, auctions, internet etc.)
- How do you work with your suppliers today? Is there any internet connection between you? Do you work with any enterprise systems?
- How do you maintain the network of contacts around the globe today?

Competition through social media

- Which of the social media that the company is active on (YouTube, Facebook, twitter, Google +, linkedIn) is the most important, and why? Which of these media do you consider to contribute most to your competitiveness?
- How is social media affecting your competitiveness?
- Has it changed since you implemented social media? How?
- Could/has social media effected your competitiveness in a negative way, how?
- How do you acquire new customers?
- How do you manage to retain your existing customers? Maybe by building personal relations? (Arranging seminars, Business meetings, auctions etc.)
- As far as quality management and feedback is concerned, what measures do you use to gather further constant customer feedback in this area?
- How do you make sure not only to provide high efficiency with your products but also add legitimacy (keeping a positive image of you and your company on your customer's minds)?
- What do you think is your competitive advantage? Which measures do you take to sustain it? Do you rely just on your own strategies or are you also looking at what your competitors are doing? (for instance their main strategy)
- From a long term perspective, which measures do you think you will have to take to stay the market leader?
- What would you consider your most important competitive advantage? Can you give an example?
- Do you use generic marketing strategies or do you differentiate in a specific kind of way?
- For example, do you mainly rely on web resources and business reports (trends and patterns) or information gathered from existing customers, or maybe even on information gathered from the observation of competitors
- As far as quality management and feedback is concerned, what measures do you use to gather further constant customer feedback in this area?

- Do you think that your current situation, when it comes to competition could change to the better if you implement some form of social media, in that case how?
- When it comes to competition today, what is your absolute most important asset for you?
- How/why could social media change this?
- If you took a decision today to not establish social media at all, how do you think it will affect your future situation when it comes to competition?

