

Creating a marketing communication plan for a small B-to-B consulting company

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<p>This master thesis studies integrated marketing communication framework and strategic planning. The aim is to create a communication plan for a case company.</p> <p>The literature review introduces key concepts related to integrated marketing communication, digital marketing, content marketing. In addition, strategic planning models are also presented.</p> <p>The case company Fountain Park operates in the field of management consulting mainly in Finland. Company has been strongly developing its strategy and operations for the last couple of years. Company wants also develop marketing communication activities towards more systematic and organized direction that would support sales and increase reputation.</p> <p>The nature of communications had previously been reactive, and actions not very systematically executed or measured. There is also a question of resources, since in a small B-to-B company there is no communications function, but several persons fulfil communication activities among other duties.</p> <p>This thesis followed qualitative approach and the method applied was action research. Data gathering methods were in-house meetings and everyday observation combined with interview with CEO and marketing assistant. Data from the case company and selected competitors was also gathered from public social media channels and analysed to find out the current state.</p> <p>This thesis introduces first the literature review, then the case company and action research findings. After this, the planning process of suggested communication plan is presented. Bearing in mind limited resources of a case company, communication tasks, responsibilities and roles are also defined as part of a communication plan. The plan itself is confidential.</p> <p>Discussion is the final part of this thesis.</p>	
Keywords integrated marketing communications (IMC), digital marketing, content strategy, strategic planning, marketing planning, action research	

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Introduction

"The world has changed." "There is nothing permanent except change."

These sayings are used until you get tired. But nevertheless, in the world in general and in the world of marketing and communication as well, much has changed.

In just ten short years we have moved to the world where digital communication channels have exponentially grown wider and more powerful than ever. During this time digital world, channels and services have shaped the way we live, communicate to each other and how we see the world. Our behavior is different, we see time in a different way. As individuals and as consumers we are better than ever to outsource our problems and decision making for technology and to others to save time to whatever is more important to us.

Does this mean that the role of advertising and other marketing communication options, and how they work, is also changing? The answer is yes and no.

Percy (2018, 3) argues that we as people still process information the same way than before. Even though channels and tactics are wider, the role of advertising and other marketing communication continues to be what it has always been: to move more of a branded product or service, or to obtain a higher price-point than would have been possible without it.

A period of transformation has nevertheless affected for companies and agencies to steer their marketing communication activities from stand-alone traditional elements, like for example advertising, in a direction where all elements of communication and promotion are integrated. This integration is driven by technological advancement, media fragmentation, market demassification, and competitive pressures. (Kitchen, P. Burgmann, I. 2010, 1.)

In this master thesis I wanted to widen my own theoretical understanding of marketing communication and strategical planning. The understanding from strategic thinking alongside current marketing and advertising environment are tools which help me to help the case company to steer processes from reactive way of working towards more proactive and systematic direction to do marketing communications.

The case company is a small B-to-B consulting firm which has urge to develop marketing communication processes and tactics with limited resources. Because the case company in question has limited human resources and budget for marketing communication the

emphasis of this thesis is especially business-to-business marketing communication in digital channels. Focus is in strategic planning phase, updating marketing communications plan and helping the case company to build working processes it and measuring results.

In a literature overview I will cover the concept of integrated marketing communication, digital marketing, social media marketing and concepts of strategic planning. Marketing communications plan is mainly a tool to make business strategy alive. This literature overview defines and key concepts and gives review about theoretical findings and current trends.

1.1 Thesis objectives and research questions

Digital communications are taking over and social media is here to stay. It is changing the way we work, network, build relationships and engage.

The aim for this thesis is to study how to integrated marketing and digital marketing theories work in practice and to use them in creating a working marketing communication plan for a small B-to-B company. The thesis is looking into what kind of digital marketing methods and strategic planning processes are useful to a case company and what benefits integrated marketing communication offers. The aim is to create a marketing communication plan for a case company to help it to improve effecting communication and internal processes in a situation of limited resources available.

Research question in this thesis is: How can a small B-to-B company with limited resources benefit from integrated marketing communication and digital marketing theories?

In this thesis the research is qualitative in nature and it is conducted as an action research. Koshy (2008, 15) states that

“carrying out action research is all about developing the act of knowing through observation, listening, analysing, questioning, and being involved in constructing one’s own knowledge”.

So, this thesis process doesn’t only aim to improve the communication and marketing processes of a case company but also to improve researcher’s knowledge and understanding about subject.

In this thesis the base on which to build knowledge gathering are related to literature, interviews with the company's CEO, workshops with marketing assistant and current state analysis with company's current performance. The goal of whole research was to find out how communication could be improved in the case company.

1.2 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters. In chapter 1 we look the thesis topic and research questions. This gives perspective of researchers' motives and why this thesis topic was chosen.

From there, in Chapter 2 we move on to take a literature overview about integrated approach to marketing communications, digital marketing and strategic planning. We will examine how the changes in this digital era have affected to marketing communication and the need for stronger integration of different communicational ad promotional elements. After this we cover some aspects of digital marketing, social media marketing and content marketing, what are the characteristics and have special emphasis on planning phase. We also examine customer lifecycle. Last part of literature overview is a closer look for strategic planning processes and marketing communication planning.

In chapter 3 we look at the direction of a case company. We examine what is the history of the company, what is current communicational situation and what are the communication needs of a case company.

Chapter 4 dives deeper for research method used in this thesis. The characteristics of qualitative research will be presented and after that he specifics of action research will be discussed. There is a short introduction of research methods and final part of the chapter is review of reliability and validity of research process and results of this thesis.

Chapter 5 will introduce the strategic planning process of the marketing communication plan created for a case company Fountain Park, which is the practical part of this thesis work. The plan itself is a confidential information. Full plan is attached in Appendix 1.

Chapter 6 researcher examines what benefits there can be founded if a case company is using strategic and tactical approaches of digital marketing communication founded from literature review. Are suggested strategies appropriate and useful for small organizations. Finally, the thesis work will also be evaluated from the learning perspective of the researcher.

■ Literature review and key definitions

This chapter introduces overview of integrated marketing communication, digital marketing, social media marketing, content marketing and strategic planning processes.

2.1 The role of marketing is to get and keep customers

As stated in chapter one, the primary task of marketing communication is still relevant. It is important to identify what is valued among target audience and deliver that special something to target market that values it the most.

The degree of customization depends on identifying the needs of specific segments of consumers and assessing the firm's ability to meet them. Strong digital media presence allows marketers to better understand key positioning questions: 1) Who are potential customers and 2) does the product or service fit their needs? When this positioning problem is solved, the better can a company address to wanted customers, create value for them and gain brand loyalty. Without dialogue about stakeholders changing needs, the customer relationship weakens. (Doorley & all, 2011, 261-262.)

2.2 Integrated marketing communications

As described briefly in chapter one, the idea of integrated marketing communication (IMC) emerged when the multiplication of media channels in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century left marketers in a challenging and competitive environment. The integration and coordination of different messages aiming to portray a single and unique image to all stakeholder groups became both more important and more difficult to achieve. Some researchers claim that the idea of IMC emerged already in 1970s. Usually timeline for IMC is drawn from the mid -to late 1980s. (Kitchen, P. Burgmann, I. 2010, 1.)

The very first definition was done in 1989, when the American Association of Advertising Agencies gathered a task force to deal with integration. Task force came up with this definition of IMC:

“A concept of marketing communications planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines (e.g. general advertising, direct response, sales promotion and public relations) and combines these disciplines to provide clarity, consistency, and maximum communication impact.” (Percy, L. 2018, 3-4.)

Since then there have been lots of other different definitions and wordings that describe the essence of IMC. The emphasis of early days definitions was in planning. Today the emphasis has shifted more towards customer relationship. (Percy, L. 2018, 5.)

Percy (2018, 3.) argues that the essence of IMC is planning, and the aim is to deliver a consistent message. Brief definition of IMC according to Percy is

“the planning and execution of all types of advertising-like and promotion-like messages selected for a brand, service or company in order to meet a common set of communication objectives or, more particularly, to support single positioning.”

Clow and Baack (2016, 25.) acknowledge both planning and customer relationship angle in their definition

“the coordination and integration of all marketing communication tools, avenues and sources in a company into a seamless program designed to maximise the impact on customers and other stakeholders.”

In Doorley’s definition (Doorley & all, 2011, 260) integrated marketing communication is seen strongly from the customer relationship perspective, since IMC is described

“a customer-centric, data-driven method of communicating with consumers.”

This definition of IMC stresses marketing to the individual by understanding needs, motivations, attitudes and behaviours. IMC is a result of convergence; one on end is reputation and at the other is brand. Brand is about relevancy and differentiation with respect to customer. Reputation is about legitimacy of the organization with respect to a wide range of stakeholder groups. (Doorley & all, 2011, 260.)

Because of disagreements about the emergence of IMC and limited amount of research conducted with organizations, researchers have not been able to agree of one specific definition of IMC. However, researchers have been able to reduce IMC definitions to five essential elements

1. The communication effort should be directed at consumers to affect behaviour.
2. An outside-in approach should be utilized, that is, start with the customer first when developing a communication strategy.
3. A well-established relationship between the company and the customer is necessary.

4. To deliver a message correctly all communication activities should be included with contact points integrated into the strategy.
5. To create a competitive brand, coordination between the communication disciplines is needed. (Kitchen, P. Burgmann, I. 2010, 3-4.)

What are then the benefits of integrated marketing communication model? Kitchen and Burgmann (2010, 5.) summarise the various benefits of IMC in their article. IMC approach aligns short- and long term marketing efforts and messages, increases synergy and reduces conflicts in organization, takes into account all audiences and delivers more holistic view, encourages individual and one-to-one communication, enables better use of media and promotional mix elements and saves costs.

Percy (2018, 24.) reminds that effective IMC helps to build a strong and positive brand image with the help of consistent positioning and clear brand messages brought across every contact with the market.

2.2.1 Components of IMC

Today the media environment changes rapidly, and it offers an ever-expanding variety of options for delivering IMC messages. But what are the fundamental building blocks of IMC?

According to Clow and Baack (2016, 26.) a complete IMC program should include all elements of the marketing mix. Today there are several conceptual frameworks for viewing the marketing mix. Depending on an approach, some frameworks include the 4Ps, 5Ps or 7Ps. Historically marketing mix is focused around four Ps: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. This provides a basic framework, although it has faced criticism and accusations of being outdated. When an extended marketing mix is used, the original 4 Ps is extended by Process, People, and Physical evidence. (Smith, P.R. and Taylor, J. 2004, 7.)

During recent years, this approach has expanded to alternative methods of communication: digital marketing, social media, content marketing, database marketing, personal selling tactics and other alternative methods of communication. (Clow, K.E. and Baack, D.E. 2016, 26.)

According to Percy (2018, 71-73) one of difficult issues associated with IMC is to understand the role of advertising and promotion. This is because of the change in the world. Compared the situation before, now both advertising and promotion messages use same digital channels. It is the strategic intent of a message is what counts, not the channel used. With advertising, the primary intent is to raise brand awareness and attitude, build

positive brand associations and strengthen positioning differentiating from competitors. This all takes time, so advertising plays more long-term role than promotion.

The most important objective for promotion is to encourage and guide the person to immediate brand purchase decision. In terms of IMC strategy, promotion should be used as short-term tactic, not as an ongoing program. In developing IMC program, it should be taken into consideration whether a promotion or a specific type of incentive promotion could be an effective part of the whole marketing communication effort. There are two types of incentive promotion categories: immediate reward promotions and delayed reward promotions. The use of promotion should of course be integrated to target audience's decision process. It is important to remember that there are always costs associated with promotion and these have negative effect to marketing budget. At best advertising and promotion should be used together to maximize the effective IMC. (Percy, L. 2018, 95, 114.)

One thing that has followed from the growth of digital media is that target audience consume media in a different way and audience fragmentation is greater than ever before. It is important to understand that people have relationships also with media they prefer, not only with brands they are interested in. Now when there are almost endless possibilities, individuals can gather their own network and actively edit what channels they are using and what ads they are willing to see. There are differences of what media is seen as trustworthy, what media is more entertainment and from where people seek information. Understanding target audience's personal relationship with medium helps maximize the potential effectiveness of IMC media choice. (Percy, L. 2018, 95, 118.)

Digital media, social media and content strategy are current "buzzwords" and have significant impact in currently evolving media environment and IMC toolkit, they will be examined more detail in next chapters.

2.2.2 The IMC planning process

As stated before, the integrated marketing communications IMC, is an approach that achieves the objectives of a marketing campaign, through well-coordinated use of different promotional methods that are intended to reinforce each other. Within the IMC plan, the company carefully integrates and coordinates its many communication channels to deliver clear and consistent messages about the organisation and product or service.

Next, we will be looking at the specific steps involved in the strategic planning process for integrated marketing communications.

According to Percy (2018, 19-2020.) it is important to first examine how an IMC programme will help meet the company's marketing objectives. Marketing plan reveals relevant market and marketing information. After a review of the marketing plan, it is time to begin the five-step strategic planning process introduced in the picture below.

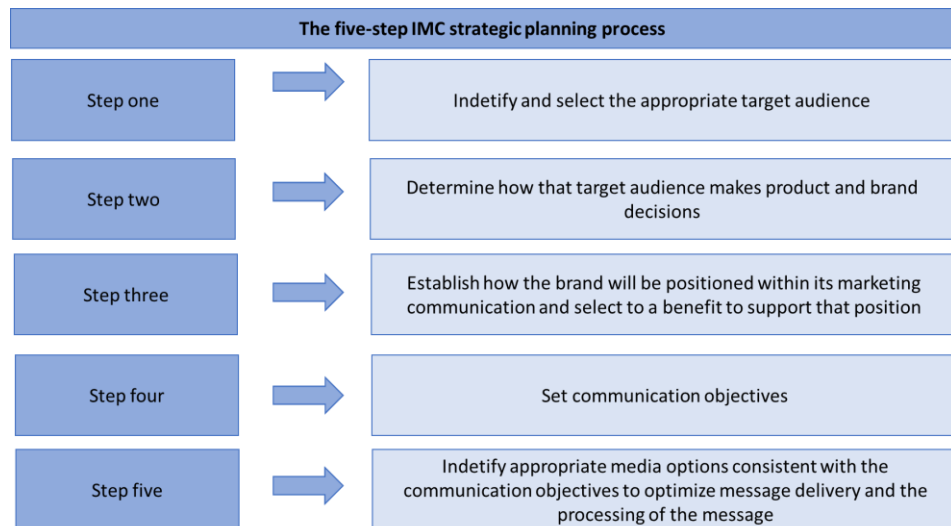


Figure 1. The five-step IMC strategic planning process (Percy, L. 2018, 20.)

During this process, all advantages and disadvantages of various advertising and promotion options are considered for satisfying the communication objectives. The strength of IMC process is, that first everything even wild options are considered and then the optimal choices are made within strategic and resource parameters. (Percy, L. 2018, 20.)

Next each step is explained shortly according to Percy. (2018, 265-266.)

First step is to identify the appropriate target audience and consider the advantages and disadvantages of various advertising and promotion options for satisfying the communication objectives. It is good to remember, that most markets have multiple target groups, and as a result, there may be several communication objectives required to reach them.

Second step is to gain understanding of how audience is making purchase decisions. In order to increase understanding, it is beneficial to examine what stages involve in decision making process, who are involved in a process and what roles they play and where, when and how purchase is most likely to happen.

Third step is to optimize the message development. This includes determine the appropriate positioning and selecting a benefit around to which to base the message.

Fourth step is to set communication objectives. These objectives are chosen from four effects: category need, brand awareness, brand attitude and brand purchase intention.

Fifth step is to identify an appropriate set of media options that are consistent with the communication objectives.

2.3 Digital marketing

Marketing has always been about connecting with your audience in the right place and at the right time. Today, that means that marketers need to meet the audience where they are already spending time: the internet.

According to the online report Digital in 2019 Global Overview, the total population of the world today is 7.676 billion. Out of that the total number of internet users is 4.33 billion an increase of 9 percent from last year. The number of active social media users is 3.484 billion with the worldwide total growing by 9 percent since this time last year. Numbers indicate that more than half, 57 percent, of the global population actively use online resources. Based on the numbers, it can be argued that digital marketing and digital presence is beneficial to each and every company, no matter if operations are B-to-B or B-to-C level.

This is the era of digital marketing, in other words, any form of marketing that exists online. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016, 11.) define digital marketing simply as

“achieving marketing objectives through applying digital technologies and media”.

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016, 11.) remind that this definition helps us to remember that it is the results delivered by technology that matter, not the adoption of the technology. They also explain, that in practice digital marketing is about managing different forms of company's online presence integrated with online communication techniques. Today company controlled online presence, such website, blogs and social media presence is also known as owned media. Customer relationship management (CRM) on the other hand is commonly used technology to maximise sales to existing customer and encourage continued usage of online services through techniques such as database, chatbots, email and social media marketing.

No wonder digital marketing can be seen as a major part of integrated marketing communications. (Clow, K.E. and Baack, D.E. 2016, 242.)

Kingsnorth (2016, 6-7.) reminds that the term digital marketing first appeared in the 1990s, but the world and the meaning of term was very different back in the days. After this, the social media revolution has really changed the internet and consumer behaviour altogether. Now days, more than ever before, digital marketing should be an integral part of all marketing activities. This means the whole marketing mix: PR, creative direction, CRM, retention, product development, pricing, proposition and communications. He argues that only through fully integrating marketing will companies succeed in this world. Creating silos for digital activity would be unwise and even dangerous.

Rummukainen, Hiila and Hakola (2019, 13-19.) describe digital media as formless organic ecosystem. In 1704-2008, the time of traditional media, marketing professionals spoke of media triangle. Media triangle is an ecosystem of traditional marketing communication, where the three parties form the machinery of effective and clear marketing communications. Three parties are media, advertisers and agencies of communication, marketing and advertising. In this model media creates communities with interesting content, agencies know both different media channels and what interests' audience and advertisers try to get their message heard via media among their most important target group. The role of audience is rather passive and communication work mostly one-way.

In digital media, talking about after 2009, the logic is totally different. Practically anyone can start a blog or other social media channel or create a web page and create their own media. Now audience have the same possibility to produce and deliver content than media corporations and advertisers. Digital media platforms work in totally different logic than traditional media triangle. Now anyone can compete for people's time with interesting content. (Rummukainen & all, 2019, 13-19.)

In digital environment, content is distributed via three different channels: owned, earned and paid. Owned media is any web property that you can control and is unique to your brand. One of the most common examples is a website, although blog sites and social media channels are other examples of owned media properties. Earned media is essentially online word of mouth, channels and exposure you can't buy but you can earn by delivering value to the user. There are different ways a company can gain earned media. Good SEO strategy and content strategies are the most controlled and effective. Paid distribution typically involves some form of media or partner spend in return for exposure for your campaign. Paid media can be a great way to promote content to generate more

earned media and can also be used to drive traffic directly to owned media sites. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 250-251.)

2.3.1 Website, SEO and SEM

Clear, well-functioning, customer-serving and visual web pages that follow the company overall look is an important centrepiece of digital marketing efforts. A company website is part of owned media, and therefore a company has most power over them. Content is easily adjusted and quick responses to changes are possible.

But what is the point of creating a web site, if people don't find it.

Enter search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine marketing (SEM) which are not competing services.

SEO is the process of getting traffic from the "free," "organic," "editorial" or "natural" search results on search engines. However, SEO should always focus on optimizing for the user, not the search engine. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 91.)

SEO can be broken down to into three core areas: technical implementation, content and links. Technical implementation includes issues like URL structure, code and user experience. On content side important issues to consider are topics of content, keywords, social engagement and fresh and timely content. When thinking about links it is important to make sure that link profile is clean and ethical link strategy e.g. link baiting. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 80-81.)

SEM is a broader term than SEO and is used to encompass different options available to use a search engine's technology, including paid ads you see at the top, bottom and side to your Google search results page. Unlike traditional advertising, paid search is bought via auction model. One of the big plus sides of paid search is that the advertiser only pays each time the advert is clicked (PPC or pay per click) and not displayed. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 110-111.)

It is also increasingly important to ensure that your site renders well on all devices, desktop, laptop, tablet and mobile phone. Google pushes mobile-friendly sites up the rankings when a mobile device is being used. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 102.) And mobile devices are used a lot. The online report Digital in 2019 Global Overview there are 5.11 billion unique mobile users in the world today, up 100 million (2 percent) in the past year.

Key requirements for a high-converting website are fast performance, ease of navigation, compelling content, user-focused design, SEO, SEM and analysis optimization and strong conversion funnel. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 299.)

2.3.2 PR Smith's SOSTAC® Model

SOSTAC® is a marketing planning model developed in 1990's by P.R. Smith to use in marketing planning. This acronym stands for

- Situation – where are we now?
- Objectives – where do we want to be?
- Strategy – how do we get there?
- Tactics – how exactly do we get there?
- Action – what is our plan?
- Control – did we get there?

This model is suitable and easy to use whether you're creating an overall marketing or digital marketing strategy or improving individual channel tactics. Figure illustrates SOSTAC model phase by phase. Next, we will take a short look for each phase.



Figure 2. SOSTAC ® Planning System.

Situation analysis is the first stage of implementation of the SOSTAC methodology. The idea is to perform a general description of current stage of your organization. For that, consider using some or all the following tools

- Define and identify your digital customers, create buying persona.
- SWOT analysis. The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to your business.
- Perform a competitive analysis.
- Evaluate the landscape of digital channels.

Objective determination is the second stage. Focus on the main objective of your strategy or a plan. Your plan might also have different objectives for different stages of the online customer lifecycle. Kingsnorth (2016, 77.) reminds that many businesses use SMART approach to creating objectives. SMART acronym stands for Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Time-based.

Strategy involves analysing the information you gathered during situation analysis in order to determine how you'll meet the objectives. This is the place to think targeting and positioning, partnerships, processes like marketing automation, credibility and visibility, integration to other information and databases, tactical tools e.g. content marketing and social media, engagement.

Tactics cover the specific tools to use in order achieve the objectives of strategy or plan. This is the place to think e.g. marketing mix, contact and content plan, campaigns to customer life cycle.

Actions are to bring a plan to life and take proper activities. Actions include details of tactics. In this stage is the place to think responsibilities and structures, systems and processes, checklist and guidelines and internal marketing.

Monitoring ensures that we will get where we want to be. In this stage it is time to monitor and evaluate performance and change course if needed. It is important to decide who is monitoring and what are KPIs and analytic methods, frequency of reporting and overall the whole reporting process.

2.3.3 RACE Digital Marketing Planning Framework

RACE is a practical and action-oriented framework developed by Smart Insights. Idea of this framework is to manage digital marketing activities in a more structured way in order to improve results. Acronym stands for Reach, Act, Convert, and Engage. Each of these

steps has a certain purpose which helps to engage potential prospect and customers of a company at different stages of the customer lifecycle. (Chaffey 2017.)

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016, 31.) describe the RACE framework and as follow.

Reach is about building awareness of a brand, products or services across different media platforms with the aim to generate traffic to a website or any other platform a company has a presence on.

Act implies engagement of an audience with a brand and making them interact with a company or each other on the company's website or social media.

Convert is aiming to convert visitors of a company's website or social media communities to leads or customers.

Engage implies establishing long-term relationships with customers that in its turn ultimately lead to customer's retention and repeat purchases.

This framework also involves additional phases which refers to the creation of the overall digital strategy as seen in picture.

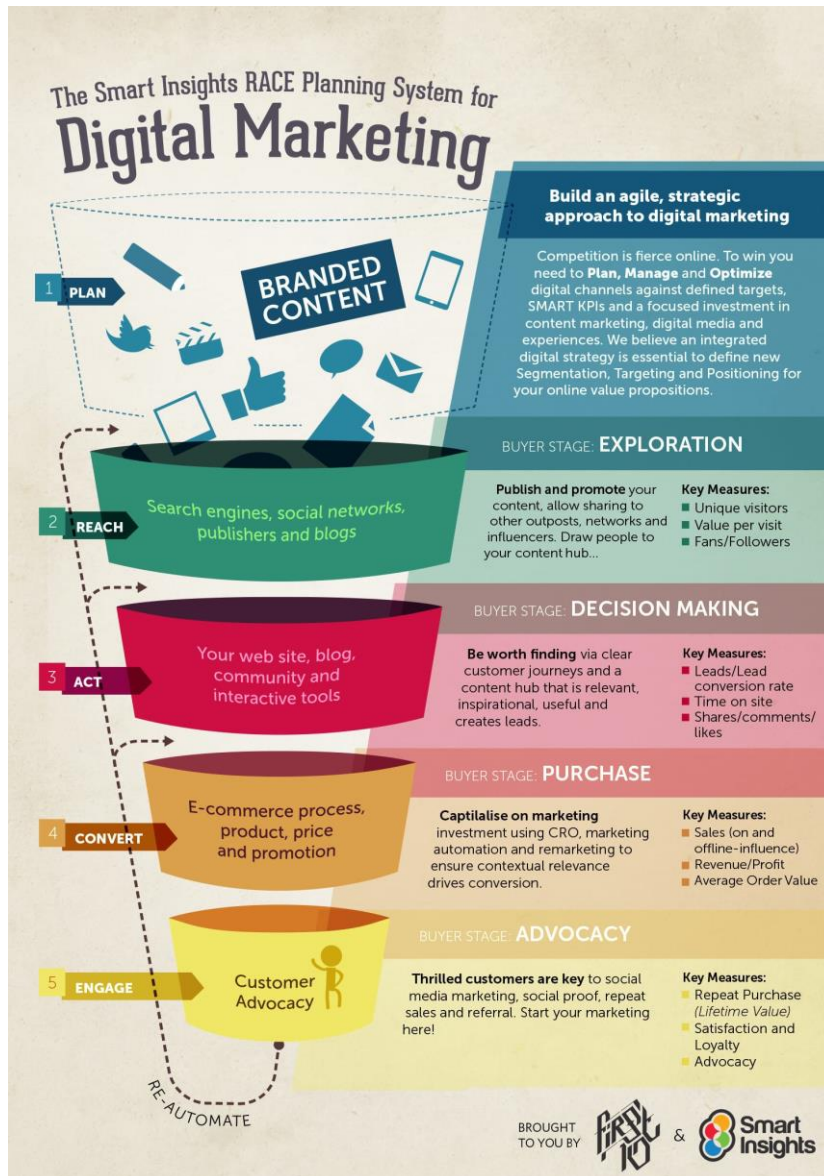


Figure 3. RACE framework (Chaffey 2017)

2.4 Social media

According to Kingsnorth (2018, 150.) social media is generally defined as

“any website or application that enables users to create and share content, or to participate in social networking. “

Usually when people think of social media, they often think only well-known social networks. This is not wrong, since first and foremost social media is all about the power of networking. Social media allows brands to influence their customers and moreover, provide brands with the opportunity to be influenced and co-create services and products together. Social recommendations and the resulting word of mouth can help accelerate your

marketing efforts. But it is good to remember, that whilst there are huge gains to be reached from social media, there are also risks. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 150-153.)

What, then, is social media marketing? Definition of Barker, Barker, Bormann and Neher (2013, 3.) provides clarity.

“Social media marketing (SMM) uses social media portals to positively influence consumers toward a website, company, brand, product, service, or a person. Typically, the end goal of social media marketing is a “conversion”, such as the purchase of a product, subscription of a newsletter, registration to an online community or some other desirable consumer action.”

Two aspects distinguish social media marketing from so-called traditional marketing. The first is control vs. contributions. Social media marketing welcomes unfiltered audience contribution, everyone can speak up their mind. In social media company gives up control over larger parts of the produced and visible content. Content flow is created together in constant dialogue with audience. The second big difference is building trust. Since companies cannot fully control the content users create, companies must develop trusting and open relationships with their audience if they want to build brand image. (Barker & all, 2013, 1-2.)

When a company starts marketing efforts in social media, it is recommended to create a plan, set clear marketing objectives and measure success. There is a risk, that if a company enters social media without a strategy or enough knowledge, it spirals into random direction and there may not be results at all. However, a company can greatly benefit presence and marketing in social media if actions are properly executed. (Barker & all, 2013, 1-2.)

2.4.1 Social media planning

The social media plan is an ongoing process which involves monitoring the SMM action elements, modifying them to improve and incorporate alternative approaches. It is important to methodically carry out all of the steps, which are, listening, setting goals, defining strategies, identifying the target audience (market), selecting tools, implementing, monitoring and tuning. (Barker & all, 2013, 26-27.) The social media marketing planning cycle is illustrated in a picture below.



Figure 4. Social media planning cycle. (Barker & all, 2013, 26.)

Next each step is explained shortly according to Barker & all. (2013, 26-27.)

Listening to what the audience is saying about the company or brand. There are two reasons why this is important. First it will enable the company to determine its current social media presence, setting new social media goals and strategies for achievement. Second reason is to increase competitive intelligence and learn what people are saying about competitors. It is important to find out what people are saying in order to be take part of the conversation.

Setting goals involves conducting an analysis to determine a company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) in the competitive environment. Often a competitive analysis is also performed to find out the strengths and weaknesses of key competitors. Using this information digital marketers can decide which social media goals will satisfy the unmet needs of the consumers.

Defining strategies must be addressed on a case-by-case basis, using all available data gathered.

Identifying the target audience (market) is done by researching the behavior, the needs, the location and the preference of the target audience.

Selecting Tools is accomplished by selecting social media sites the company is operating and then gathering appropriate toolkit to assist with virtually every activity in the planning cycle.

Implementing is the process where the goals, strategies, target market and platforms are integrated in creating an actionable social media platform with specific marketing tactics.

Monitoring is the process of tracking, measuring and evaluating an organization's social media marketing initiatives.

Tuning is a constantly evolving process to evolve and improve elements and tactics of the social media marketing plan.

2.5 Content Marketing

There's a saying that content is king. In the digital world of the internet, content has a similar value. Enter content marketing. Content Marketing Institute's definition (2019.) gives a short overview what it is all about.

"Content marketing is a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience — and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action."

So, what exactly is content? Business Dictionary defines content couple of different ways:

"Text matter of a document or publication in any form. Content is both information and communication: the sum total of the freshness, readability, relevancy, and usefulness of the information presented, and the manner in which it is presented."

"Essence of a communicated message or discourse, as comprehended or received by its intended audience."

List of the most common content types demonstrates the many guises that content can take: website articles, news, case studies, white papers, blogs, video, mobile apps, mobile content, testimonials, e-books, infographics, images, annual reports, research papers, podcast. (Kingsnorth, S. 2018, 235.)

What content types should you use as a marketer? And what kind of content is good?

Kingsnorth (2018, 232) gives a listing of features that great content have. Great content is credible, shareable, useful or fun, interesting, relevant, different and on brand. The effectiveness of a specific type of content can still vary. Besides, Patel (2018.) points out that to find out the most effective type of content, a company should also understand who is its ideal client and know all possible touch points through the journey. Each stage of the customer journey requires a different type of content.

To map the most relevant content a customer journey, Chaffey (2018.) advices that the content marketing matrix is one possible tool. The two dimensions used in the matrix help to review how content can support the business to achieve its goals against how different formats appeal to different types of people. Picture below shows the content marketing matrix, developed by Smart Insights in 2012.

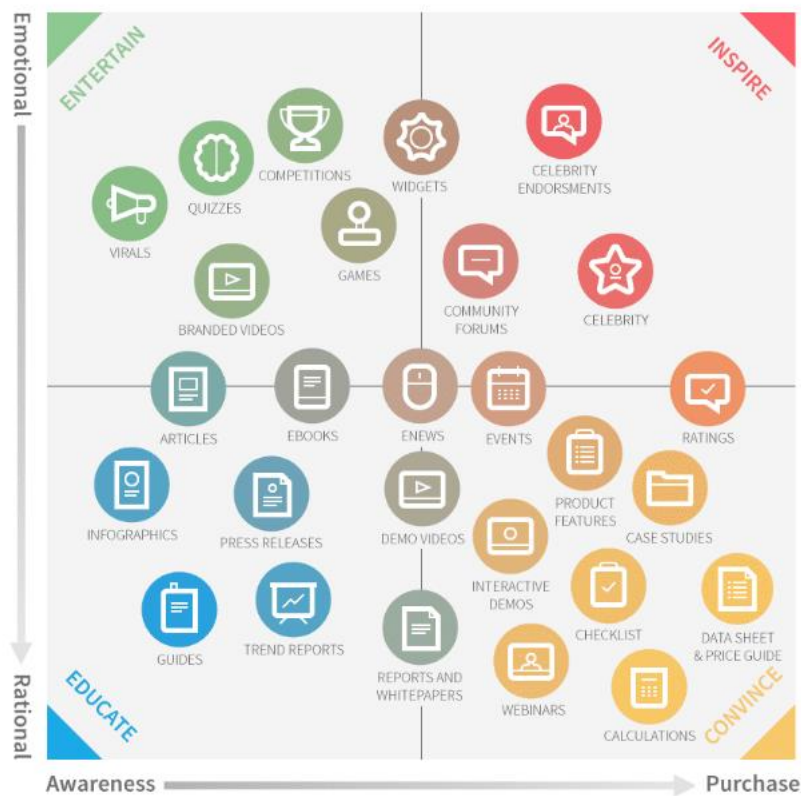


Figure 5. Content Marketing Matrix (Chaffey, 2018.)

Alongside with thinking about a type of content, marketers should also think how created content can be delivered to the target audience. In digital environment, content is distributed via three different channels: owned, earned and paid, as stated earlier.

Rummukainen & all. (2019, 205-208.) remind, that a long-term goal of a marketer is usually to attract audience to consume own media channels. On the other hand, many companies invest in building communities in different social media channels, that Rummukainen & all refer as semi-custom channels. Name comes from the fact that here a company distributes content and perhaps builds its own community, but development is ultimately in the hands of someone else. Bought media visibility is something that company needs to pay for and company itself has limited or no power of how, where and when content is shown.

2.5.1 Content marketing planning process

As we have learned, customers today have unlimited resources of information about every issue. They surf in digital world and make decisions more and more independently. Since marketers we must stay visible with our audience, offer content that interests them and engage ourselves in dialogue. But what kind of content, which channels and how to be visible? Content strategy answers these questions.

According to Rummukainen, Hakola and Hiila (2019, 70-73.) building a content strategy consist with six steps. Figure shows these steps and essential questions linked to each step. Most important step is number one, setting goals. Content should not be done for the sole purpose of content alone but for a clearly defined need.

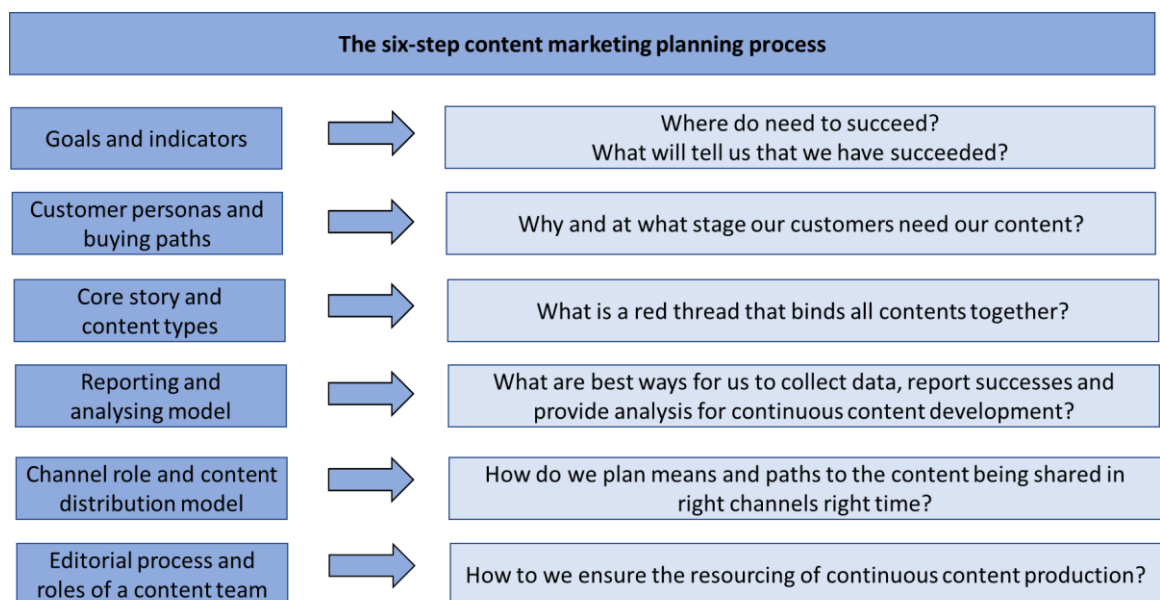


Figure 6. The six-step content marketing planning process. (Rummukainen & all, 2019, 71-73.)

Next each step is explained shortly.

Goals and indicators of content marketing strategy are the basis where everything else is build. Typical main goals for content marketing are developing brand image, developing sales and developing customer experience. The goal should follow company's business strategy. After defining ultimate goal, appropriate measurements that benefit both corporate business strategy and content strategy are the defined. (Rummukainen & all. 2019, 74-81.)

Customer personas and buying paths tell the story how to find a path between important clients and a brand or product of a company. Defining customers personas will give important information of client, what is important to them and how and where they seek information. Buying paths are used to define what kind of content and in which channels are important in different phases of customer journey and conversion. (Rummukainen & all. 2019, 88-90.)

Core story and content types are used to tell unified message about brand's existence and main ideas. Good core story answers these three questions where the brand is coming, what is the vision and reason to existence and what stands in the way. There are also lots of different content types and it is important to define what are used in content production. Good core story and clear content types help to keep the red string in all communication. (Rummukainen & all. 2019, 103-109.)

Reporting and analysing model is used to learn what kind of data are collected and most importantly, analysed the findings. Good analysis shows what has happened and why, where did we succeed and what didn't go so well. Core issues in reporting and analysing are clear responsibilities of who will build the report, access to necessary data and interpretation skills. Good report in the other hand consist of three key elements evaluation of content distribution, evaluation of using content and evaluation of what impact action have in business goals. (Rummukainen & all. 2019, 115-119.)

Channel role and content distribution model is used to define via what channels content is distributed and what is the difference and meaning of different channels. This is also referred to a channel strategy or social media strategy. Usually conversation and discussion about channels consist of two views or elements, technical aspects and understanding customer behaviour. (Rummukainen & all. 2019, 125-130.)

Editorial process and roles of a content team is important for many beginning content marketing companies. It is a process on how company is organizing content planning, production, publishing and follow up methods. Usually there are following phases in this process: planning and ideas, building a accepted content plan, making wanted content, distribution of content, data collection and reporting. This way of working helps a company to operate more than and publishing house and less than a standard advertiser. (Rummukainen & all. 2019, 134-141.)

2.6 Logic behind buying decision

It is useful to know how customers behave when they are buying products or services. If we as marketers understand their values and behaviour, we can provide them resources and information they need in their decision-making process. There are two different markets: business-to-consumer also known as B-to-C and business-to-business, also known as B-to-B. (Richardson, L, James, J. and Kelley, N. 2015, 59.)

In this thesis we take a closer look only to B-to-B stakeholders.

2.6.1 Organizational buying behaviour

A B-to-B buyer is a person who works in an organization and is somehow responsible or at least somehow part of decision-making process. Organizational buyers are also influenced by persona as well as organizational and environmental factors. According to Richardson & all (2015, 68-69.) organizational buyers differ from traditional B-to-C buyers following ways

- are fewer in number when compared to consumers
- tend to be highly trained and familiar of buying and negotiating
- increasingly have qualifications from professional bodies
- buy large quantities
- make long-term commitments
- often seek single source supply deals.

Richardson & all (2015, 68-69.) also present six step process for business decision-makers.

1. Problem recognition
2. Product specification
3. Supplier research
4. Purchase decision
5. Performance evaluation
6. Feedback prior to next decision

2.7 Customer lifecycle concept and customer lifecycle marketing

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2016, 12.) define customer journey and customer lifecycle as following

“The sequence of online and offline touchpoints a customer or buyer persona takes during a buying process or broader customer experience. Online this may include a range of digital platforms, communications media, websites, pages and engagement devices”.

Customers are now defining their own journeys in any acquisition they make. By producing valuable content, answering questions and participating in forums enable company presence in stakeholders' minds and a company's salesperson to engage with stakeholders and potential prospects at early stage. As customers use digital platforms, conduct research and most likely narrow their opinions before decision making, most companies won't get any opportunity with the customers at all. And since we live in a world where people are time poor, it is highly likely that a prospect who makes direct contact with a salesperson is a hot lead and is in the market to buy. Here is where traditional silos of

sales and marketing are now breaking down. Marketers need to be more sales focused than ever before. And same time salespersons must understand marketing more and cooperate with marketing in order to reach customers and have dialogue with them in different channels. (Leboff, G. 2016, 35-37.)

Chaffey (2019.) points out, that renewed focus by marketers on prospect and customer engagement, conversion and retention has led to the appearance of a new phrase in the digital marketing dictionary: customer lifecycle marketing. Chaffey defines customer lifecycle marketing in Smart Insights' article as

“creating a managed communications or contact strategy to priorities and integrate the full range of marketing communications channels and experiences to support prospects and customers on their path-to-purchase using techniques such as persuasive personalized messaging and re-targeting.”

Figure below represents how digital communications channels can be used through an entire customer lifecycle for B-to-B customer lifecycle. (Chaffey 2019.) The diagram is based on Smart Insights' RACE framework that stands for Reach, Act, Convert, and Engage. The Framework covers the whole customer lifecycle and outlines online marketing activities that should be considered as part of a digital marketing strategy.

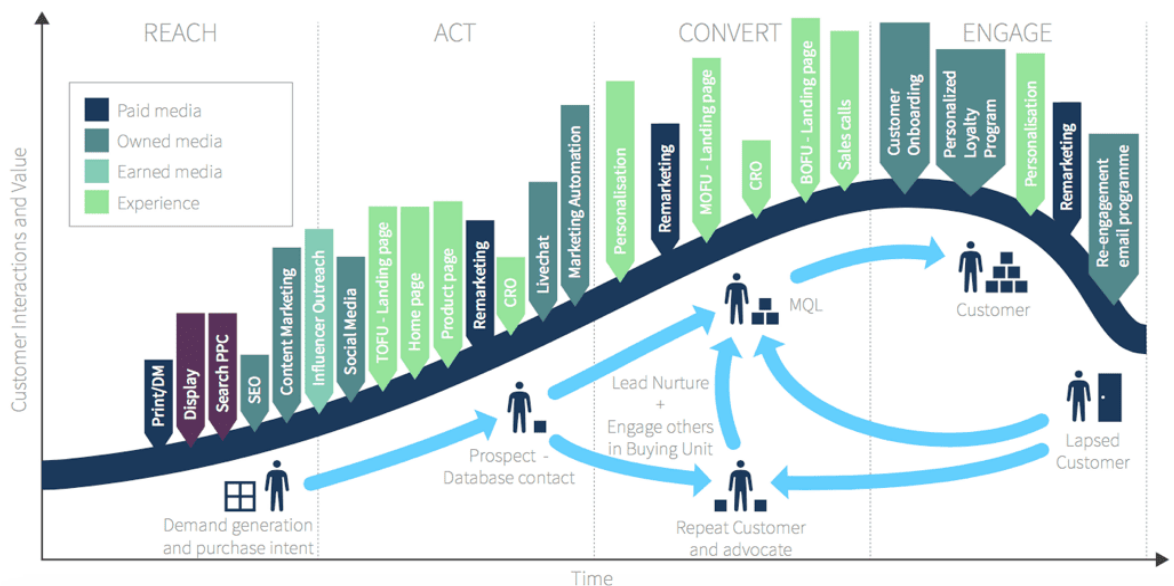


Figure 7. Full B-to-B customer lifecycle activities. (Chaffey 2019.)

Usually there is a big gap between full on customer lifecycle activities and the reality. Figure below reveals gaps.

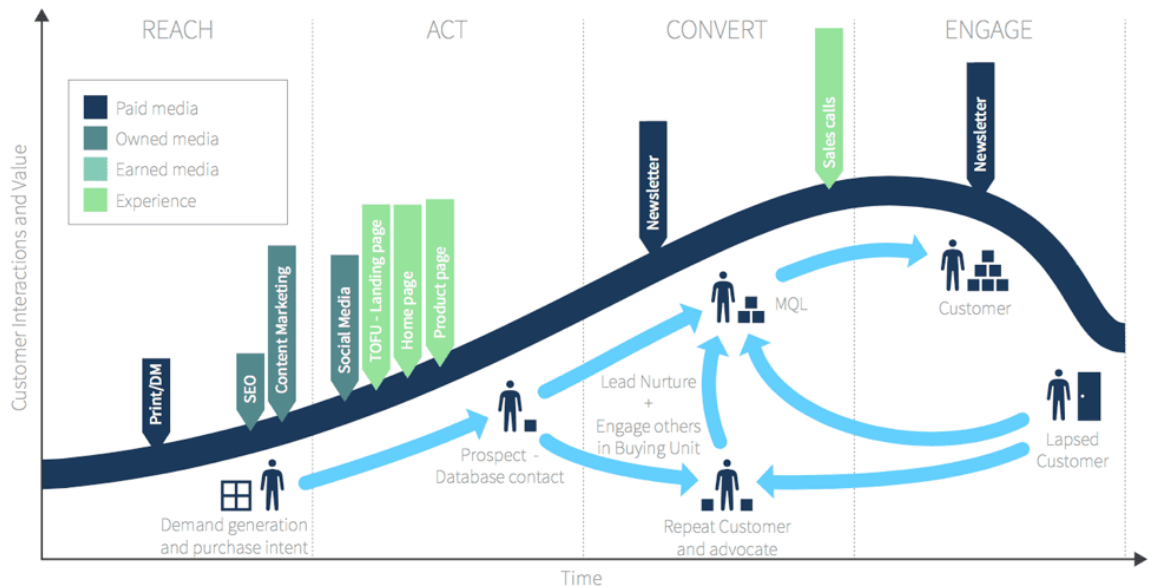


Figure 8. Gap analysis showing actual B-to-B always-on activities used. (Chaffey, 2019.)

2.8 Strategic planning

Having a plan is essential for everyone who wants to meet their goals. A strategy without a plan is merely an idea. According to Kingsnorth (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 67.) it is important to understand three things:

1. Where are we now?
2. Where do we want to go?
3. How do we get there?

First question is answered through researching and analysing current state. Second question is related to company's vision and mission and what is supposed to achieve through marketing communication activities. Third question concerns strategic planning process and the journey company must travel.

2.8.1 Strategic planning models

There are several planning models that can be used for efficient strategic planning. Let's first get to know two core methods: vision-based planning and real-time planning.

According to Kingsnorth (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 68-69.) vision-based planning is likely the most common method of strategic planning. This method has six phases starting with creating a vision and ending with analysis and evolution when needed. Let's look at the six stages more closely:

1. Identify your vision statement
2. Produce your mission statement

3. Establish your primary goals
4. Create specific objectives and strategies for each goal
5. Implement action plans to fulfil each strategy
6. Put the action plans into effect, evaluate and evolve. (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 68-69.)

Vision-based planning method gives an excellent structure the strategy development and is helps to guide thinking process and goals of actions. It enables to travel a clear and documented path in your strategic planning process. Since specific goals are to be achieved by a specific time frame, this model gives eyes for both future and present time. However, some organisations think that this model is too structured and rigid. (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 68-69.)

The real-time planning process is kind of a casual version of vision-based model, less formalized and has more flexibility. A process of planning, deciding goals and actions how the business aims to achieve them is quite similar than in a vision-based model. The advantage of real-time model is, that it keeps the planning process alive and allows reactions to fast changes in a modern world. Usually this model is reviewed in regular intervals and that is why it evolves continuously alongside real-time issues and new trends. The major disadvantage is the lack for formal documentation shared internally and externally. This can be however tackled easily by making sure that core principles and stages of the plan are documented, flexible elements are updated regularly, and versions are truly controlled. (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 70-71.)

The similarity of these to planning processes are visualized in picture.

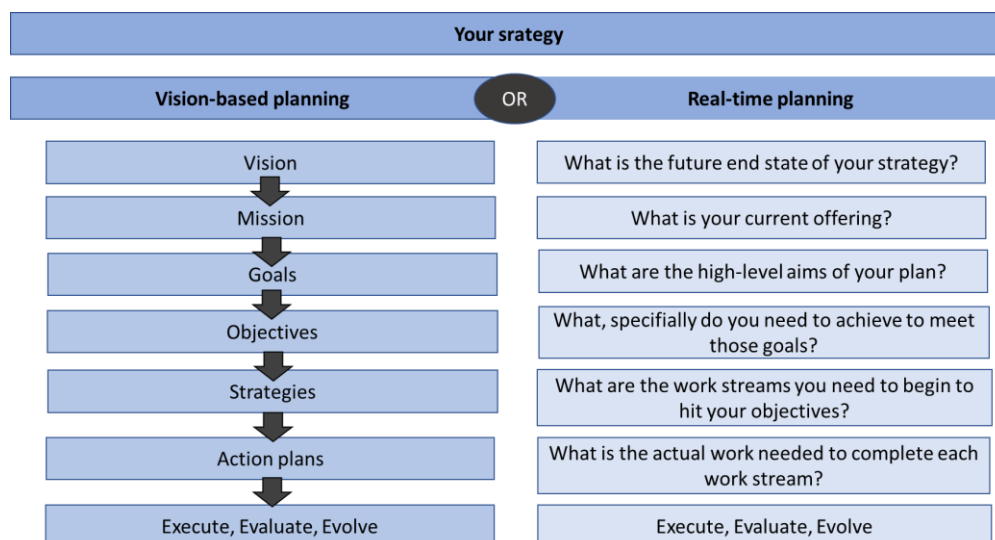


Figure 9. The planning process. (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 69.)

Even though vision-based model and real-time planning are two most popular models in strategic planning, third most popular model, phased planning, is also worth knowing. In

short phased planning means dividing your strategy into key development phases. These phases can be categorized into calendar-based, theme-based and business-based phasing, depending on the strategy. (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 74.)

So, when different phased planning models should be used? Calendar-based model is exactly as it sounds: phasing the plan to match the calendar. This type of approach is common in situations when there is no strict deadline, no essential milestone dates or strategy is not integrated with any other pieces of work. Theme-based planning on the other hand is used when a strategy has certain themes that would be logical to deliver together. Business-based method is useful if you need to align key parts of your strategic plan with overall business goals e.g. ongoing development projects or change programmes. (Kingsnorth, S. 2016, 74.)

2.9 Marketing planning process

Central to the marketing concept the idea is to match processes between company's capabilities and the wants and needs of customers to achieve the goal of both parties in a satisfactory way. The whole purpose of marketing planning is the identification and creation of competitive advantage. In other words, marketing planning is the planned application of marketing resources to achieve marketing objectives. (McDonald, M. 2008, 8.)

Marketing planning is seen as important because it aims to shift the focus to customers. Thus, design can be used to think about what a company can do for its customers, how its own offering responds to competition and the market situation. Planning also assists in allocating resources to marketing efforts. If successful, marketing plan answers the following questions about company's marketing: who, what, where, when, how and how much. (Wood, M. 2013, 3.)

Marketing planning results in a marketing plan that includes, where necessary, an analysis of the business environment and the current state of marketing based on them, strategic choices, customer segmentation, scheduling, concrete marketing tools, budgeting, and monitoring and evaluation of success. Companies often create separate marketing plans for separate brands, markets, new product launches, and other special activities. (Wood, M. 2013, 2.)

McDonald (2008, 25) stresses that it is not possible to plan marketing activities in isolation from other business functions and strategy. Kingsnorth (2018, 43.) reminds as well that aligning sub strategy to your business strategy is vitally important. There are a wide range of factors that must be considered. How brand and vision might impact your strategy, what

kind of culture there is in your company and what is the impact with it. How measurement of strategy and tactics align with the wider KPIs of your business. Is your business customer centric and how this affects the planning and implementation of sub strategy?

McDonald (2008, 8.) points out that the need for systematic approach to marketing is crucial because of the increasing turbulence and complexity of markets as well as a rapid pace of technological change. On the other hand, Wood (2013, 3.) reminds that in the same reason a marketing plan shouldn't be strict guideline followed from start to finish without consideration. The plan should include monitoring tools and milestones to measure success and be updated as necessary. Successful companies are constantly updating their marketing plans to maintain their competitive edge. Thus, the marketing plan should be as specific as possible but flexible to achieve the best possible outcome in a rapidly changing operating environment.

2.9.1 Marketing planning process

According to McDonald (2008, 13-14.) there are four main stages in the marketing planning process: analysis, objectives, strategy and tactics. Wood (2013, 3-4) divides the process divided into seven stages: analysing the current state, analysing the market and clients, segmenting and positioning the clients, defining marketing direction and goals, defining marketing strategies, planning and budgeting for success monitoring and implementation. Both agree that the entire marketing plan starts with the company's mission, business strategy and business objectives. The marketing planning process should not be a linear, once-a-year process, but a continuous process.

Figure below outlines the constituent seven steps between the process of marketing planning and its output, the actual written marketing plan.

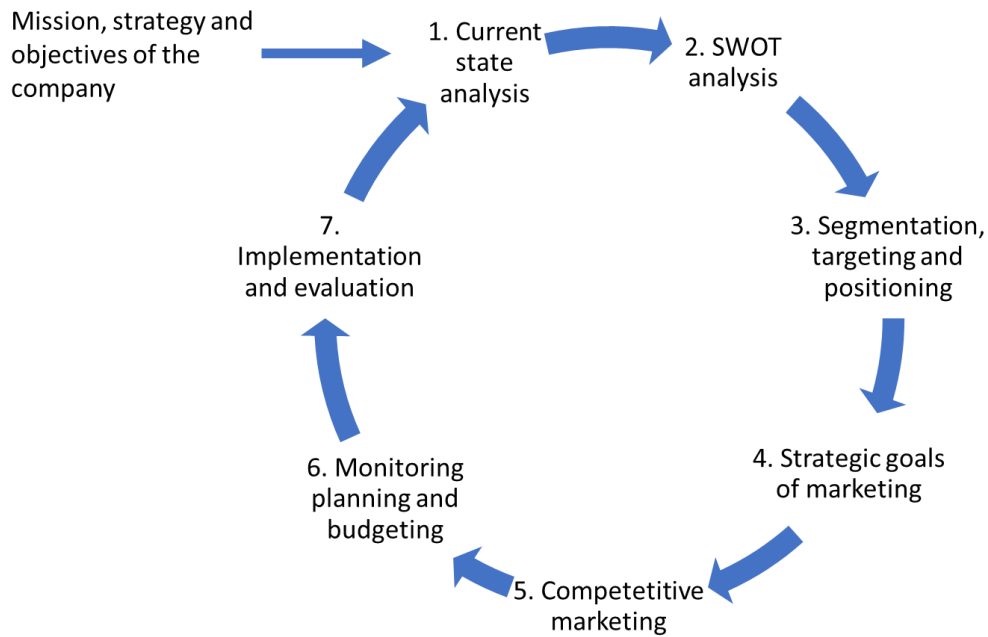


Figure 10. Marketing planning process (Wood, M. 2013, 5.)

According to McDonald (2008, 13-14.) process of marketing planning is usually expressed with in two marketing plans, the strategic marketing plan and the tactical marketing plan. There are usually two documents, since there is a crucial difference between strategy and tactics. Organizations usually need and want to have both long-term strategic view of wants and need of where a company wants to go that is used as a backdrop against with operational decisions are taken. Tactical marketing plans should not be completed before strategic decisions are done.

Next, we will examine each step of the process of marketing planning.

Clearly any marketing plan will be only as good as the information which it is based. Therefore Wood (2013, 5.) starts planning process with internal and external analysis of the current situation.

The current state analysis includes internal and external analysis of the current situation and considers the factors affecting the company's operations. Key areas of the uncontrollable variables (business and economic environment, the market, the competition) and the controllable variables (organization's strength and weaknesses, operations and resources). (McDonald, M. 2008, 41-42.)

A SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis is a summary of internal differential strengths and weaknesses vis-à-vis competitors and key external opportunities and strengths. The internal factors that have emerged from the analysis of the current situation are the potential strengths and weaknesses of the company. The external factors that appear are used to create opportunities and threats for the company. (McDonald, M. 2008, 42-43.) Several companies also carry out a SWOT analysis of their current and potential competitors in order to map the competitive situation. The idea here is to create a marketing plan that seeks to take advantage of competitors' weaknesses and find ways to defend against their competitors' strengths. (Wood, M. 2013, 25.)

Segmentation, targeting and positioning enables firm to target its limited resources on the most promising opportunities. Market segmentation is sorting customers into "prioritizable" and manageable categories with similar requirements that can be satisfied by a distinct offering. Segmentation can be based on myriad criteria regarding customers characteristics and buying behaviour thus covering the critical issues of "who buys", "what they buy" and "why they buy". (McDonald, M. 2008, 56.) After the segmentation, the company should select the segments to which the marketing is to be targeted. When targeting, there is a need to decide how you want to approach your customers. ((Wood, M. 2013, 73.)

Strategic goals of marketing are the key in marketing planning process. Goals are the core of managerial action, providing direction to the plans. The main goals of marketing are usually to increase awareness of the company among customers, to increase sales and to increase customer loyalty. (Wood, M. 2013, 89.) Objectives should also be measurable, otherwise they are not objectives, but merely wishes. (McDonald, M. 2008, 82.)

Competitive marketing tactics enable the company to differentiate to its competitors and gain market share in wanted customer segments. (McDonald, M. 2008, 87.)

Monitoring and planning a budget mean the allocation of financial resources over a period of time. The budget defines resources for various marketing activities, programs or services. The budget is influenced by marketing objectives, market and sales forecasts, and the strategic choices of the company. Groundwork, especially market forecasting and sales forecasting, plays a key role in budgeting. (Wood, M. 2013, 231.)

Implementation and evaluation make your marketing plan in action and evaluate the success. McDonald (2008, 176-11.) remind that planning must be top down and bottom up process. Understanding this interdependence between upper and lower levels helps

the implementation process. The CEO and top management play essential role in planning and decision making, but it is in the end the people who make systems work. Implementation process must take account of the personality of both the organization and the people involved. Wood (2013, 250.) reminds that valuating the success of the measures is important to redesign the marketing plan in the right direction when needed. Accurate scheduling also facilitates the timely allocation of resources. The scheduling should specify the start, duration and end date of the operation.

■ New direction for case company

3.1 Introduction to the company in focus

Founded in 2000, Fountain Park is a management business and public administration consulting company.

Fountain Park's core service is to improve and increase dialogic strategy work in working life, using the company's own virtual brainstorming tool. Dialogic strategy work as a service is suitable for both major change situations and continuous business development. Main business areas of a company are leadership, strategy and co-creation. Fountain Park also have a market share in stakeholder and citizen inclusion on public sector projects.

Company's main market is Finland, but the company has affiliated partners in Germany. This master thesis work is focused only improving marketing communications in Finland market.

Company's long-standing slogan is: "*Wisdom of crowds into practice*". Company vision states that in the future good leadership will consist of constant dialogue and inclusion unlimited by space or time. Company also states that good leadership is also about anticipating surprises. This anticipation requires reliable and innovative tools to management so they can handle the most relevant pieces of the big picture.

Fountain Park's heart and soul is an innovative tool they have developed, a virtual brainstorming. Virtual brainstorming involves and engages a large group of stakeholders, and it also makes this process visible. Tool helps people brainstorm and develop ideas together anytime and anywhere. The virtual brainstorming process gathers hidden information from the organization and stakeholders and Fountain Park's analysts turn this qualitative information into clear data and action proposals for decision makers.

What distinguishes this virtual brainstorming from other online queries is that the virtual brainstorming allows participants to evaluate and further develop other participants' ideas in real time. Thus, the issues that arise in the brainstorming process evolve over participation time as other participants further develop each other's ideas.

Since 2000, Fountain Park has implemented more than 4 000 projects involving a total of more than 5,5 million people.

There are many phases in the history of a case company. In the early days several software developers were required for the company because they developed virtual brainstorming tool used in client projects on their own. Today, enterprise software development and financial management are outsourced. In the past, the company's strategy also had two business lines, one of which is was management consulting current core of strategy.

At its best, company employed over 40 people. Now days this fully personnel owned company employs 11 people and works as a service provider for hundreds of companies and other organizations both in Finland and abroad.

Financial figures show, that in 2014 and 2015, Fountain Park had annual sales of 1.7 million euro. After 2015, the company's net sales decreased by approximately 15 percent in 2016, 2017 and 2018 reaching approximately 1.2 million euro in 2018. (Finder 2019.)

The focus is strongly towards the path of steady organic growth over the next few years. The company has several development projects on their way to support renewal. The virtual brainstorming tool is being upgraded and first version of the new participant interface have been released. In addition to the product development input of the company, a process for a more systematic implementation of the sales process and marketing communication practices has been launched, which has been supported by this thesis.

Company's home base moved from Arabianranta to Kamppi in May 2018. This was a symbolic turning point. The cost structure of the company and operations has been optimized, different development projects and initiatives are running and spirit inside the company towards new era is strong.

3.2 Communication current state and development needs

As a small B-to-B company, Fountain Park has limited resources to spare in daily marketing communication activities and continuous strategic development. Selling, marketing and communication actions are highly integrated and there isn't different "marketing department". The responsibility of communications was before mostly based on self-directed marketing efforts by staff. Therefore, communication strategy has been more reactive than proactive. The main marketing tools consisted mainly of personal sales work and occasional digital marketing, but due to absence of a clear goals and lack of measurement, digital marketing efforts have not been consistent.

It can be said that marketing strategy has been emergent in its nature. When a deliberate strategy is realized, the result usually matches the intended course of action. An emergent strategy develops when an organization takes a series of actions that with time turn into a consistent pattern of behavior, regardless of specific intentions.

Now company is moving to a direction of planning deliberate strategy, plans, actions, tactics and measurement to support implementing this strategy.

Despite of inconsistent marketing efforts, the company is quite well-known in its B-to-B customer target group. Salespersons have wide contact pool of decision-makers in their own network of contacts. Although majority of customer information can be found in company's CRM system, automatic nurturing paths for leads and old customers are missing. Company wants to increase sales, develop its inbound marketing and improve communication with existing clients. These goals need more strategic approach to marketing communication.

The sector where Fountain Park operates gets crowded with competitors so more efficient marketing communication would support company's further growth. Also moving from emergent way of working towards more planned and structured way of working helps to target limited resources to actions that are most efficient.

3.3 Company's strategy

As stressed before, it is not possible to plan marketing activities in isolation from other business functions and strategy. The marketing and communication strategy interpret the business strategy as an act from the customer's perspective. So, the client company's updated business strategy and its five main points were the starting point for the whole planning process.

Also, company's vision and mission were examined when creating core messages for different customer segments. Fountain Park has no separate brand strategy or sub strategies for different market segments. The culture of the case company is highly entrepreneurial and emphasis independent working styles, creativity and experimental grip.

3.4 Customer personas

In the literature view section, the importance of customer personas was examined. The case company also have done exercise in a workshop with the whole company and defined their customer personas two years ago. Since there aren't that big changes in wanted target group and there aren't any new product/service segments, current information of customer personas is in sufficient level.

However, small update for customer personas was done in a workshop in November 2019. Participants were the researcher and marketing assistant, and information were collected from discussions within the whole personnel.

3.5 Thesis outcome for the case company

This thesis will provide the case company a suggested marketing communication plan based on the literature review, current state analysis and SWOT analysis, outcome from interviews, meetings and committed observation in day to day development work. The plan includes confidential information and is not presented. Full plan is attached in Appendix 1.

■ Conducting research

This section describes the empirical research that was conducted as a part of the thesis. It gives an overview of what the steps were taken to reach the objective and how used data was collected and analysed.

Research in general is all about getting new knowledge in some way in some context. In this thesis research is qualitative in nature, the chosen method was action research, a method that can be described with wording "learning by doing".

4.1 Qualitative research

Flick (2006, 14) defines four essential features of qualitative research. They are 1) the correct choice of appropriate methods and theories 2) the recognition and analysis of different perspectives 3) the researchers' reflections on the research as a part of the process of knowledge production and 4) the variety of approaches and methods.

So according to Flick (2006,16) qualitative research is not based on a unified theoretical and methodological concept. Various theoretical approaches and their methods characterize the discussions and research practice. Subjective viewpoints are first starting point. Qualitative researchers use their own eyes, ears, and intelligence to collect in-depth perceptions and descriptions.

In qualitative research, the research process is often difficult to cut into clearly separate phases. Circularity is part of the research process. It is also one strength of the approach, because it forces the researcher to permanently reflect both the whole research process and on particular steps. (Flick, 2006,100-102.)

4.2 Action research method

Research method in this thesis is action research. When studying different definitions and viewpoints of action research, some unique features and certain keywords are often included. The key words are better understanding, improvement, reform, problem-solving, step-by-step process and modification. (Koshy, V. 2008, 26.)

Koshy (2008, 18-19.) defines action research as

“an enquiry, undertaken with rigour and understanding so as to constantly refine practice; the emerging evidence-based outcomes will then contribute to the re-searching practitioner’s continuing professional development”.

According to Hinchey (2008, 33.) the key criterion that separates action research of other type of research is that usually the research is carried out by the person facing a problem or considering adopting a practice in everyday work.

The research method is chosen for this thesis work because the researcher is somewhat directly involved in the situation of a case company. The development project is situated within workplace and researcher has partial ownership of developing communication practices and support wanted change. This means that some changes can be implemented already during the research project, and not until the end of research.

According O’Leary (2004, 139.) this is characteristic for action research. Action research is participatory in nature, so researcher collaborates with the stakeholders of the company. The purpose is to produce knowledge and change with the observation of all stakeholders. The changes are acted on immediately and not left to be implemented after the project.

In a summarized list of processes involved in action research Koshy (2008, 26-27.) suggest the researcher to read through a list created by O’Leary and write down thoughts of each section related to own research topic.

- *Addresses practical problem.* Identification of specific problem in a specific context did happen as well as attempt to seek implementing solutions in that context and goal of research would be improve professional practices. Ownership of change can be a problem, since the researcher is not directly the one who is in charge. But communication team has the support from the management.
- *Generates knowledge.* This research generates knowledge that generates change in organization.
- *Is participatory.* Action research works with rather than on or for the researcher. In a small organization everyone are at least partly participating communication and marketing activities. Management and two-person marketing team are strongly involved.
- *Is a cyclical process.* Cycles move the organization towards better situation, implementing process is based in evaluative practice. There are time limitations, since evaluation of development cycle is not part of this thesis focus.

4.3 Data collection and research process

The main data collection techniques are a combination of face-to-face conversation with the employees of the case company and an observation method.

There are two possible ways to conduct observation; systematic and committed. In systematic observation the findings are structured in detail and the observer is an outsider of the context. This is not the case in committed observation. In committed observation the observation situation forms freely, and the observer is a part of the context. (Hirsijärvi, S. Remes, P. & Sajavaara, P. 2010, 214-215.) In this thesis the committed observation method was used.

Furthermore, there was a sample of data collected from the case company and selected competitors from public social media channels and situation analysis was conducted.

This action research process took place in fall 2019. The researcher, CEO of a case company and marketing assistant agreed, that creating a communication plan would support ongoing marketing development activities and overall company's whole marketing communication process.

The researcher and marketing assistant worked with the strategies and tactics as well as daily marketing communication activities during fall. During this time, they held almost weekly shorter meetings where they discussed different aspects of current and future communication and marketing efforts and tactics. There were also shorter impromptu discussions with communicational development issues with workers of the company. There was also monthly discussion with CEO, the researcher and marketing assistant where marketing communication issues were discussed and evaluated.

Inhouse meetings and everyday observations were used as a main data for the research. The topics covered with the meetings, discussions, interview with CEO and emails included understanding the current company strategy and vision, vision for communication current state of communication and marketing efforts and gaps compared to vision. Matters of resources and planning models were also discussed. Also, selection for competitors for analysis, definition and reviewing theme messages, selection of channels, target audiences and other details related to planning and implementing communication strategy were addressed during the meetings and other forms of communication. Usually participants addressed one or couple issues during one meeting and created a practical solution to problem at hand. According to principles of case study and committed observation, the

researcher did investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context and took actively part in finding solutions.

Data from the case company and selected competitors was also gathered from public social media channels, such as the internet, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram. The data was then analysed according the aspects closely examined in chapter 2.

The researcher participated as an actor in this thesis research. Therefore, all data related to a case company has been derived from observations and actions the researcher made during the research as an employee the company. The purpose of day to day observation and participation was to form real current state analysis, define the desired objectives in a dialogue with a company and develop a communication plan. Due to the position of the researcher, it was also possible to use real-time planning model that matches the way of working in the case company. The researcher was also able to forecast some barriers and speed bumps that are taking into consideration when planning implementation.

4.4 The reliability and validity

Both terms reliability and validity involve the ability to measure the research results and their trustworthiness. Reliability is measured in terms of the ability to repeat the research. In other words, in case the research would be repeated would the results of it change or not. Validity means the ability to interpret the research methods. In this thesis qualitative research methods were implemented and they harder to measure than quantitative research methods. (Hirsijärvi, S. Remes, P. & Sajavaara, P. 2010, 231-232.)

The reliability and validity of the data gathered from social media was not specially verified since the information from digital channels was used as it is. The researcher thinks this is enough. The social medial channel information was used to gain better understanding how the case company and competitors take advantage of different channels and how people are reacting different content. The researcher evaluated what channels were used, what kind of content was offered and how much.

The reliability and validity of the research can be verified by explaining in detail how the process of action research was conducted in this case, examining the findings and comparing whether they reflect the interpretations.

Marketing communication plan

The marketing communication plan created for a case company Fountain Park is the practical part of this thesis work.

Since the plan itself is a confidential information, only the planning process is introduced here. Full plan is attached in Appendix 1.

Interviews with the company's CEO and marketing assistant, workshops, current state analysis and daily work experience as well as additional customer comments have been used as a convincing foundation on which to build the communication plan. Also, literature review gave some ideas and views on how this company could strengthen their processes and delivering key messages in the eyes of wanted target group. These ideas are also included in the plan.

The planning model used in this thesis work is a mixture of real-time planning and SOSTAC planning model. As stated in the chapter 2, the advantage of real-time model is, that it keeps the planning process alive and allows fast reactions. This model was and is estimated in regular intervals and evolves continuously alongside real-time possibilities. SOSTAC is an acronym which means the following:

- Situation – where are we now?
- Objectives – where do we want to be?
- Strategy – how do we get there?
- Tactics – how exactly do we get there?
- Action – what is our plan?
- Control – did we get there?

Situation analysis and setting goals was done in the beginning in the process. Development of strategy and tactics was done in real-time model, beginning to test and learn from the results. According to a real-time approach, a loose plan was created and then begins the testing of the assumptions to shape the development of the plan. Actions and finalizing the strategy means a plan for one year, not a longer period of time. The real-time approach has a clear beginning and execution and control needs to be managed closely to create a path and direction as the strategy evolves based on the learnings, internal and external factors. Control is done in several phases.

Planning process also takes advantage for integrated marketing communication theories and practices, even though marketing communication plan is not fully build based on the phases of IMC program.

■ Discussion

In the literature review, theories from integrated marketing communication, digital marketing strategy, content strategy and strategic planning were presented.

Does knowing this theoretical background help the practical work of planning communication?

Understanding of different strategic planning models helps to integrate different marketing techniques into a consistent business strategy that is smooth to create and present to decision makers. When knowing theories, it is easy to select which method is most suitable for certain situation and company. By following either vision-based planning model or real-time planning model it should be possible to create a detailed communication strategy that covers the messages company wants to deliver.

Steps on planning digital marketing, content marketing and integrated marketing communication programs are not very different in the end. However, it was interesting to really learn how deep fully integrated marketing communication goes and how it is created. Even though now days some amount of integration is a necessity, careful integration requires a complete change of mindset.

In conclusion, knowing about strategic planning models gives a solid base for the communication strategy work.

6.1 Self-evaluation and personal learning

I have done my bachelor studies from the field of communication and, more importantly, have worked in the field of communication for several years. I have background for both in journalism and for corporate communication. Theoretical and practical levels of corporate communications, marketing and stakeholder groups were at some level familiar to me before this thesis project.

However, the daily work is hectic, and one does not have the time to learn new theories or even refresh the memory of the old ones during working hours. Studies in general and specially literature review that offered deeper insight and practical understanding towards fast paced change in communication technologies and tactics and the importance of strategic planning. This is one of the most valuable lesson I had from this thesis project, how to transfer ideas from literature to everyday work and how to sell new ideas in the working environment.

Since now days there is a constant struggle from time and resources inside the companies, one must have a clear plan and tactical understanding what needs to be done and why. It is too easy to drown in a hurry, but it helps if you have a clear roadmap in your head why each task is important. And, it is easier to say no to tasks and content propositions that don't serve ultimate goals.

This thesis project together with the marketing and strategy studies during the program and previous journalism degree will help to understand the big picture even better and enable to transfer this knowledge to my daily work.

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■ Appendix 1.

Communication plan for Fountain Park. Confidential.