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Memorable and attractive customer references

– case Vivo Visions Oy



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- case Vivo Visions Oy

The main objective of this thesis was to create customer references for the Turku-based B2B startup Vivo Visions Oy. Customer references can persuade prospects to become customers. They display supplier reputation, expertise, and credibility.

Aristotle's rhetorical elements ethos, pathos and logos were used as a framework. Ethos can be linked to credibility: is the startup able to deliver its claims? Pathos expresses trustworthiness that lets prospects master insecurity and further emotions. Logos can be connected to the offered evidence that persuades prospects.

The aim of the theoretical framework was to identify and describe both specific characteristics and effective methods for utilizing customer references. Descriptive research was applied using semi-structured interviews (N=4). The questions were grouped according to the rhetorical elements. The interviews were conducted with Vivo Visions Oy's partners and customers. The data was analysed by thematic analysis and grouped into thematic entiretyies.

Customer references were considered essential by the interviewees. The interviews resulted in the creation of customer references for Vivo Visions Oy. The thesis findings indicate, similarly to previous research outcomes, that the utilization of rhetorical principles can help customer references become richer in information and authority and hence increase their persuasiveness.

Keywords:

Customer reference, B2B, relationship marketing, rhetoric

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Mirva Nurmio-Böse

Mieleepainuvat ja houkuttelevat asiakasreferenssit

- case Vivo Visions Oy

Tämän opinnäytetyön tavoitteena oli luoda asiakasreferenssejä Vivo Visions Oy:lle, turkulaiselle B2B startupille. Asiakasreferenssejä käytetään houkuttelemaan potentiaalisia asiakkaita. Ne ilmaisevat toimittajan mainetta, asiantuntemusta ja uskottavuutta.

Viitekehyksenä käytettiin Aristoteleen retoriikan elementtejä ethos, pathos ja logos. Ethos voidaan yhdistää uskottavuuteen: pystyykö startup lunastamaan lupauksensa? Pathos ilmaisee luotettavuutta, joka auttaa potentiaalisia asiakkaita hallitsemaan epävarmuutta ja muita tunteita. Logos voidaan yhdistää tarjottuihin todisteisiin, jotka vakuuttavat asiakkaita.

Teoreettisen viitekehyksen tavoitteena oli tunnistaa ja kuvata niin asiakasreferenssien erityispiirteitä kuin tehokkaita tapoja hyödyntää niitä. Kuvailevaa tutkimusta sovellettiin puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilla (N=4). Kysymykset ryhmiteltiin retoriikan elementtien mukaan. Haastateltavat olivat Vivo Visions Oy:n yhteistyökumppaneita ja asiakkaita. Aineisto analysoitiin sisällönanalyysillä ja ryhmiteltiin teemoittain kokonaisuuksiksi.

Haastateltavat pitivät asiakasreferenssejä välttämättöminä. Haastattelujen tuloksena syntyi asiakasreferenssejä Vivo Visions Oy:lle. Opinnäytetyön tulokset osoittavat aiempien tutkimustulosten tapaan, että retoriikan elementtien hyödyntäminen voi auttaa lisäämään asiakasreferenssien välittämää tietoa ja vaikutusvaltaa ja siten lisätä niiden vakuuttavuutta.

Asiasanat:

Asiakasreferenssi, B2B, suhdemarkkinointi, retoriikka

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List of abbreviations

B2B	Business-to-Business
B2C	Business-to-Consumer
BBA	Bachelor of Business Administration
BC	Before Christ
BNI	Business Network International
BRC	Business Reference Content
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CRM	Customer Relationship Management
IT	Information Technology
KIBS	Knowledge Intensive Business Services
PR	Public Relations

1 Introduction

“There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer.”

Peter Drucker’s famous phrase communicates every B2B firms’ crucial survival objective to concentrate on. (Zimmerman and Blythe 2018, 4.) Marketing terms such as customer advocacy, customer evidence and customer testimonials are synonymously used to mean customer references (Jalkala and Salminen 2010, 976). B2B companies use customer references to transform prospects into new customers (Kumar, Petersen and Leone 2013, 68).

Salminen and Möller (2006, 5) attempted to define the term customer reference by referring to managerial discussions and dictionaries as well as marketing textbooks. They concluded that a reference attempts to indirectly prove a provider’s capacity to deliver its products or services based on some concrete evidence.

Startups are confronted by challenges in marketing and sales, as customers favor companies with strong and recognized performance and already established customer base. Startups lack marketing capacity and tend to employ primary customer relationships as customer references to help expand the business. The utilization of Aristotle’s rhetorical principles ethos, pathos and logos can help startups strengthen their customer references to become richer in information and more authoritative from the customer perspective. (Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos 2016, 188-189.)

1.1 Research motivation

The thesis researcher completed the professional practical training of the BBA studies as a business advisor trainee in the Turku-based B2B startup Vivo Visions Oy from March to July in 2022. Vivo Visions Oy’s key operating areas are coaching and consulting in financing, networking, and business development. It has one employee, the founder, owner, and CEO Jani Rusi.

The researcher had the possibility to get to know Vivo Visions Oy's operating areas and the meaningfulness of networking. This thesis gave an opportunity to get to know several business partners and customers better and gain a deeper understanding of both Vivo Visions Oy as well as the meaningfulness of customer references for a B2B startup.

The use of Aristotle's rhetorical elements ethos, pathos and logos as a framework shows the strong personal interest of the thesis researcher to produce quality content, including her tendency to carefully choose the spoken and written word. Additionally, the interest in understanding the significance of customer references and how they can be utilized was a motivating factor.

The initial idea of CEO Rusi regarding this thesis was to investigate, the reason, for prospects not becoming customers. It turned out to be of greater benefit to create customer references to research the reasons for existing customers and partners doing business with Vivo Visions Oy. The acquired customer references are associated in this thesis with both Vivo Visions Oy as a company and CEO Rusi as a person.

1.2 Research objective and questions

The main objective of this thesis is to create customer references for Vivo Visions Oy. The objective is reached with the help of the research questions.

This thesis attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the effective methods of utilization of customer references in the B2B marketing and purchasing sector?
2. What specific characteristics of customer references display the expertise, reputation, and credibility of a B2B consulting sector company?
3. How is Vivo Visions Oy described by the interviewed customers and partners in terms of the rhetorical element's ethos, pathos, and logos?

1.3 Thesis structure

This thesis is structured as follows. The literature review gives research-based answers to the research questions one and two as well as guides the development of the interview questions which give answer to the third research question. The methodology chapter explains what decisions were made by the thesis researcher during the whole process and on what knowledge they are based. The results and analysis of the interview outcomes are explained according to the rhetorical elements ethos, pathos, and logos. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and further research ideas are pointed out.

2 Literature review

Corporate reputation consists of the collective perception that stakeholders have about the characteristics of a firm. This reputation is important because it helps to increase the firm's turnover by attracting customers who appreciate its good reputation and helps to soften the blow should a crisis occur. Firms use PR as a tool to create a positive image. (Zimmerman and Blythe 2018, 329.)

The practice of PR marketing attempts to strengthen this image on a long-term basis. The goal is to insert it into people's minds permanently instead of achieving just a quick result. Many different communication channels can be used for PR purposes e.g. the company website, social media, press releases, sponsorship etc. One important component that may be utilized, regardless of the communication channel is a customer reference. (Zimmerman and Blythe 2018, 335-336.)

2.1 Vivo Visions Oy

Vivo Visions Oy's webpage states that it operates in the business services market. It is a coaching and consulting company. It wants to be involved in supporting its customers companies' growth as well as the personal growth of the entrepreneur and the employees. Vivo's passion is to help others towards success and 'a better version of themselves'. (Vivo Visions Oy 2022.)

It was established in by the entrepreneur, owner and CEO Jani Rusi, who offers growth expertise as the so-called Business Agent 204.5 – with his total height of 204,5 cm. He has a wide-ranging perspective resulting from multifaceted experience and so called "superpowers" in networking as well as teaching it. His presentation and financial management skills guarantee an excellent result. (Vivo Visions Oy 2022.)

By including further collaborative business agents to this entity, customers can develop their toolset with which to pursue success. All collaborating business

agents are professionals in their fields. The strength lies in the utilization of the networks and cooperation. You do not have to do everything alone – Vivo Visions Oy focuses on connecting the right people. (Vivo Visions Oy 2022.)

Even though Vivo Visions was established in the year 2012 it can still be seen as a startup considering the fact, that most of the years it has been operated as Jani Rusi's secondary profession. This is also the case since August 2022 as Jani Rusi is currently employed by a bank. According to Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos (2016, 188) a startup is a company in the phase of setting up its operation. When the business achieves recurring business transactions and has entered long term business relationships it is considered to have left the startup designation (Aaboen and Aarikka-Stenroos 2017, 231).

2.2 Relationship marketing

Relationship marketing was introduced in 1983 by Berry as a term and a concept defining the way to attract, maintain and enhance relationships with customers. Relationship marketing is a strategy attempting to make service marketing more tangible. (Hendriyani and Auliana 2018, 117; Grönroos 2017, 218.)

B2B marketers must take a generalist approach. They often find themselves adapting their offers to the customers individual needs. (Zimmerman and Blythe 2018, 6.) There are two aspects to this adaptation. The first is the possibly long-lasting establishment of a social and personal relationship between the service provider and the customer. The second is the ability of a small business to cater to the customers' needs in a personalized, flexible, and convenient way. This asset of offering human-centric experiences has been found to be critical to the customer experience and can offer small businesses a competitive advantage. It is a component of relationship management and affects customer loyalty and word of mouth. (Gilboa, Seger-Guttmann and Mimran 2019, 153.)

Innovation has driven the evolution of relationship management theory and strategies significantly during the last decades. Highly personalized data-rich

communication between seller and buyer has been enabled by digital technologies, resulting in increased customer trust. (Lasrado, Thaichon and Nyadzayo 2022, 1.) Companies have added digital technologies such as websites, email marketing, utilization of databases, and social media marketing to their relationship marketing management. The development of online communication platforms helps to create more permanent relationships with customers. This has increased customer loyalty, profitability, sales, customer retention and engagement. (Hendriyani and Auliana 2018, 116, 119, 121.)

Especially B2B businesses utilize customer relationships as customer references. In practice this often means carefully creating and maintaining relationships with key customers who can act as references to further prospects. The effective utilization of customer references has been found especially important for companies offering services of high value or including high levels of uncertainty. It requires reference customers who are willing to act as such as well as the active deployment of customer reference marketing activities to influence potential customers. (Terho and Jalkala 2017, 175-176.)

2.3 Business consulting services

Business consulting services are mainly utilized in B2B operations. They are knowledge intensive inputs affecting the quality and effectiveness of activities by augmenting or replacing the company's own processes. (Rubalcaba et al. 2013, 258.) Business and management consultancy services offer e.g., guidance, advice as well as operational and strategic assistance to businesses and organizations (Pina and Tether 2016, 404). Professional organizations that create value and satisfy customer needs by providing customized solutions and services utilizing the collection, creation or distribution of knowledge offer so called Knowledge Intensive Business Services, also known as KIBS (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2012, 16; Huang and Ji 2013, 96).

KIBS exists as a concept since the early 1990s (Huang and Ji 2013, 96). According to Muller and Zenker (2001) KIBS share the characteristics of

knowledge intensity, problem solving and interaction with the clients (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2012, 16). Typically, KIBS as the product being traded are rather vague, heterogeneous, non-storable and intangible. Their promised benefit will usually become noticeable at some point in time after implementation. They consist of the highly customized application of knowledge to benefit the customer. Therefore, the credibility of the service provider is a key property. (Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola 2012, 16; Benazic 2021, 24.)

Business consulting firms are confronted with challenges, due to the intangibility of their offer, when marketing their business services. Hence, the service providers need to aim for long-lasting business relations. Benazic (2021) found that customers prioritize selection criteria related to quality. Therefore, business service providers need to prioritize messaging about the quality of their offer in their marketing. They should show which benefit their service offers and highlight their ability to deliver the solution by utilizing suitable reference management. (Benazic 2021, 24.)

In order to create long lasting, loyal and satisfying customer relationships business consulting providers need to market their offer effectively. Research (e.g. Homburg and Kuester 2001; Homburg 2015) on B2B customer behavior has found four basic criteria that affect the selection of the service offer: quality, price and cost, delivery terms and B2B relationship quality. (Benazic 2021, 25.) At the beginning of the millennium Day and Barksdale (2003) indicated that customer referencing is especially important for KIBS providers that are often organized as small to medium size businesses (Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos 2019, 29).

2.4 Customer references

An organizations reputation is embodied in its public image reflecting its credibility and competence. How a company deals with its customers, employees, other stakeholders, and resources make up this reputation. When providing services which are of intangible nature there is a high level of

uncertainty involved. Reputation assists in making the offered service more assessable. Organizations which receive the most positive ratings regarding reliability and performance are the most likely to win customer trust. (Gansser, Boßow-Thies and Krol 2021, 276.)

Marketing terms such as customer advocacy, customer evidence and customer testimonials as well as supplier, client or user references are synonymously used to mean customer references. In B2B marketing customer references are used to inform about the actual customers and the provided solutions, showing the suppliers capabilities. Customer references are suggested to be a meaningful information provider in decreasing possible risks and concerns connected to the purchasing of the service and the selection of the supplier. (Jalkala and Salminen 2010, 976; Salminen and Möller 2006, 5.)

Customer referencing is a set of actions, utilizing a triadic relationship consisting of a seller, its previous customer as reference customer, and potential future customers. The seller's business uses the feedback of a reference customer to convince its potential future customers of its offer. (Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos 2019, 27; Morgado 2021, 2176-2177.) The narrative content of business references involves a description of an issue faced by a customer, a solution provided by the supplier and the analysis of the outcome by a customer (Jung 2021, 1326). Customer references are especially needed in companies attempting to enter new markets and not having established a reputation there (Morgado 2020).

References help to reveal how a service provider can solve a customer's issue in a practical manner, showing the process in a comprehensible way, including how the outcome can create value for the customer. The positive outcome of reference customer cases is linked to the perceived credibility of the supplier. It can be enhanced by close relationships or direct interactions between the reference customer and the buyer. (Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos 2019, 39.)

Through the utilization of customer references potential customers can become acquainted with the supplier's expertise, method of relationship sustainment as

well as the expected results of the provided service (Jung 2021, 1324). Both reputation and customer references assist in acquiring new customers as well as upkeeping a solid relationship with existing ones (Morgado 2020). Business reference content (BRC) in narrative format is mostly communicated through digital channels. According to Harrison et al. (2020) the digital reciprocity with prospect customers has become two to three times more decisive for B2B suppliers since the Covid-19 restrictions limited on-site interactions. (Jung 2021, 1323.)

Morgado researched the value of customer references from the prospect customers perspective and found three theoretical propositions that customer references generate. They allow the buyers to understand suppliers' abilities, assess risk and predict return on invest. They help prospect customers to identify contemporary business needs and function as sources of organizational learning. (Morgado 2018, 132.) Positive recognition, peer-to-peer information exchange and positive visibility are important factors in motivating customers to act as a reference (Jalkala and Salminen 2010, 980).

Customer references reduce the prospects risk and promote the credibility of the supplier by providing indirect proof of previous experience and performance as well as the ability to deliver value to the customer (Jalkala and Salminen 2010, 975, 980). Additionally, in showing the compatibility of customer and supplier, the reputation of the supplier is conveyed through customer references (Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos 2019, 28). It can be deduced that a supplier showing proof of performance, experience and value delivery as well as being reputable in and compatible with the prospects field of operation could be considered as the owner of expertise in that area.

2.5 The utilization of customer references

A provider that can showcase customer references can increase their attractiveness and willingness to cooperate with from the perspective of potential customers, especially in the pre-selection phase (Tóth, Nieroda and

Koles 2020, 313, 315). Jalkala and Salminen identified and analyzed various practices and functions of customer reference marketing to search for possibilities to use them as marketing assets. Their findings show customer references being closely related with further intangible assets and possibly having a major role in building brand awareness, reputation, and credibility. The utilization of references in marketing can assist the development of new customer relationships and build other marketing assets. (Jalkala and Salminen 2010, 982-983.)

Customer references can be applied in an organization's operation externally and internally. The external application includes elements of communication that are directed towards external stakeholders, presenting reputation, credibility and expertise and therefore being excellent assets for promotion and sales activities. The internal application of customer references lies in the utilization of their content to facilitate organizational learning and gain a deeper understanding of organizational competencies as well as customer needs, enabling the development of optimal value propositions. The gained understanding can help refine motivation and improve employee training. An organization combining the external and internal application of customer references can therefore gain a competitive advantage; a qualitative edge which involves complex relationships with other parties, which cannot be achieved quickly or transferred to other organizations. (Jalkala and Salminen 2010, 981-982.)

By enhancing their focus on their approach of reference material utilization purchasing managers can improve their effectiveness. Purchasing departments should be able to implement several methods to extract maximum value from the references. Firstly, applicable reference content should be relevant to the customer's need and display challenges similar to the ones they are seeking solutions to. Secondly, the utilization of reference materials should also be adjusted to the purchasing phase the company is currently executing. Lastly the references provided by a supplier need to be evaluated and checked. Customer

references can be seen as a point of familiarization of the purchaser with the supplier's solutions. (Morgado 2020.)

Therefore, in addition to presenting their performance as the results of past projects, service providers need to also show their readiness and capability to adapt the service to the customer's needs. It is necessary to communicate realistic outcome scenarios with the customer including potential future benefits. For example, the service provider could develop target outcome ranges (from – to) for different scenarios as a result of the combination of provided service and customer variables which influence the outcome. (Benazic 2021, 31.)

Additionally, to applying customer reference marketing to gain and retain customer trust, it is also possible to leverage the gained feedback internally in the company, subject to the reference, for developing the selling strategy. Empirical support has been found to support the suggestion that deploying customer reference information in the sales and marketing organization of a firm can increase its performance. This application of customer reference data can be seen to support customer driven learning and spreading of knowledge in the organization. (Terho and Jalkala 2017, 183-184.)

When considering that the most reputable references can be gained from companies with similar characteristics as potential customers, companies might want to put effort into attaining reference customers covering their current and upcoming offerings for all pursued customer types and groups, areas of application and geographic regions. Competitors will find a balanced reference portfolio hard to imitate. (Terho and Jalkala, 2017, 184.) Reference marketing can have a positive impact on the supplier's reputation and create competitive advantage by decreasing perceived risk and uncertainty for the customer (Morgado 2020).

Customer referencing results in gains and losses on different levels for the actors of the reference triad. The supplier utilizing the reference will be able to notice the impact on their internal business process, for example accelerated customer decision making behavior. The reference customer simplifies the

creation of the relationship with the supplier helping prospective customers to choose the product matching their need in an optimal way, and helping suppliers target prospects with appropriate messaging. Because the suppliers and reference customers reputations and images become intertwined during the use of customer reference marketing their relationship is deepened. Their positioning on the market through the impact on their reputation as well as facilitation of business exchanges through the adoption of common practices and the sourcing of appropriate partners can occur. Customer referencing leads to increased engagement of B2B actors which can result in more interrelated value outcomes. (Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos 2019, 36.)

2.6 Customer reference management

Often customer references have been seen only as an instrument to acquire new customers. However, there are studies suggesting a broader functionality of customer references, including the building of reputation or evidence of value. Through the conduction of a qualitative field study Terho and Jalkala (2017) found that in order to create a customer reference portfolio, additionally to data collection the customer reference information also needed to be documented and updated. Various practices were utilized for this, ranging from customized IT programs, available CRM tools to spreadsheet applications. (Terho and Jalkala 2017, 176, 179.)

At the minimum, basic facts related to the initial request or requirement of the customer as well as key information regarding the delivered solution and its benefits were being recorded. This enables companies to not only leverage the collected customer references externally in their communication with potential customers but also internally in its own development and training activities. (Terho and Jalkala 2017, 179.)

There is a multitude of tools and platforms where customer marketing assets for internal and external use might be recorded and stored. These include the customer profile databases on intranets, CRM platforms, customer support

ticketing systems, contact software, customer online discussions boards and many other customer data processing interfaces. (upland RO Innovation 2018, 20.) When analyzing the data it might be necessary to combine data from different sources to gain comprehensive insight.

It is not unusual that customer referencing is overlooked as one of the strategies for customer acquisition or retention, or that it is approached narrowly to create a one-shot sales or marketing campaign. Working with customer references can actually yield a much deeper understanding of the relationship and value creating reciprocity being shared and of the foundation on which this is based. (Khan 2022.)

Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos (2016, 189) attempted to find answers to the question how startup companies could, despite having only limited references, increase their persuasiveness and empower their argumentation in the B2B context, by utilizing the principles of rhetoric. Their key offering is the construction of the rhetoric approach utilizing source credibility: ethos, emotional aspect: pathos, and rational aspect: logos. In the following the focus will be on the objective of this thesis, the creation of customer references for Vivo Visions Oy, utilizing the rhetorical elements ethos, pathos and logos.

2.7 Rhetoric

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was one of the sources of philosophical tradition which has influenced many cultures in different time periods and is still being widely studied today. He has had input into all aspects of philosophy and even more than two millennia later his thoughts are being debated. (Moseley 2010, 3.)

The Cambridge Dictionary (Rhetoric 2022) defines rhetoric as “speech or writing intended to be effective and influence people”. Aristotle defined rhetoric as the ability to see the necessary means to enable persuasion by words (Bonet and Sauquet 2010, 121; Flory and Iglesias 2010, 114). He intended it to be a practical tool for public speakers rather than a construct of theoretical philosophy (Ross 1995, xiv). Persuasion takes place in all kinds of personal,

social, and public activities. In business, different economic actors persuade each other and even themselves to take on new situations in attempt to achieve their goals. In order to have a fruitful persuasive discourse the three distinctive, yet inseparable elements usually included are: ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion) and logos (reason). (Bonet and Sauquet 2010, 121, 124; Higgins and Walker 2012, 197.)

2.7.1 Ethos

Ethos is the representation of the speaker's character in terms of authority, trustworthiness, and charisma (Supeno 2018, 60). It is related to the ethical position the speaker represents. This includes for example the prestige and character of the speaker (Vu 2017, 31), the showing of good will, competence, and reliability, in other words the moral character of the speaker manifests in ethos (Bonet and Sauquet 2010, 124).

In the operations of Vivo Visions Oy ethos can be seen in the brand Jani Rusi is creating through the charismatic utilization of his 204,5 cm height and the word agent, which can easily be associated with James Bond like superheroes who always solve the problem. Being a former professional sportsman paints a picture of his prestige ability to competitively take on customer issues. Further Rusi's network competencies are displayed as superpowers indicating that he promises superior amounts of competence, credibility, and reliability. This branding help businesses identify Vivo Visions ethos related properties. Further assessments can then be supported by customer references.

2.7.2 Pathos

Pathos is the emotional response being created in the audience (Supeno 2018, 60). It represents the emotional part of the discourse. This includes for example the speaker's ability to invoke attentiveness from the audience, make an

impression, be convincing and evoking positive feelings. (Vu 2017, 31; Rapp and Wagner 2013, 20; Bonet and Sauquet 2010, 124.)

B2B purchasing involves less emotion and is more rational than B2C purchasing aiming to secure measurable benefits. Nevertheless, B2B purchasers have emotional responses, but aim to minimize them. (Zimmerman and Blythe 2018, 18, 157.) According to this Vivo Visions Oy should pay attention to the communicational output ensuring that it is clear, consistent, and easy to follow as well as appealing. This is important because first impressions are remembered permanently (Zimmerman and Blythe 2018, 194) and there is only one chance to make them.

The combination of the elements ethos and pathos can underline the startups striving to attain benefits for its customers and itself, show understanding of the customers goals and dedication to their market segment (Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos 2016, 191).

2.7.3 Logos

Rational and logical argumentation are properties of logos (Supeno 2018, 60). This includes the elements of proof, reason, logic and argumentation and the organization of these. The aim is to lead the listener to a beneficial conclusion. (Vu 2017, 31; Rapp and Wagner 2013, 20; Bonet and Sauquet 2010, 124.)

In Vivo Visions case, the consultation content includes the specific expertise and ability to display the customers issue from varied perspectives. The approach is generalist enabling the customer to find logical argumentations and prove the most rational outcome to themselves. The intangible product of the consultation is the result of logos related elements.

An additional component affecting the intensity of the rhetoric discourse is the congruency in identification between the speaker and the audience. The audience compare themselves and their situation to that being presented by the speaker. Common elements in this comparison process are e.g., backgrounds,

occupations, personal beliefs, and norms. The more overlaps the stronger the identification with the speaker. Additionally, to the effect of identification on the personal level, the same features of identification can be noted in business interactions as well. Typical question companies will be exploring are does this reflect our situation, do we identify with this issue? In the application of customer referencing this knowledge can also be applied. By crafting identifiable customer references for a specific customer segment, making sure to take congruency and homogeneity into account, their effectiveness can be increased. (Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos 2016, 191.)

2.7.4 Utilization of rhetorical elements

Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos (2016, 191) assumed that the application of detailed information-rich customer references can heighten credibility and display evidence which potential customers can use to compare their situation and level of identification with. They found that rhetoric strengthens persuasion and argumentation and can be used to strengthen B2B relations. Ethos can be linked to the credibility: is the startup able to deliver its claims? Pathos may appeal trustworthiness that lets prospects master insecurity and further emotions about the startup. Logos can be linked to offered evidence that persuades prospects. When startups apply customer referencing the most effective strategy is to start the communication with ethos and pathos elements before moving on to logos. The idea behind this is to show the commitment of the startup to achieve mutual benefits for both the customer and itself. Utilizing these elements can create strong and persuasive arguments if the recipient does not perceive them as unsupportable. (Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos 2016, 190-191.)

Despite many contributions speaking in its favor, rhetoric has not been fully accepted and integrated into management research. Rhetoric is also subject to ongoing criticism. According to many researchers it is inappropriate in management research, considered superficial and unsubstantial. Additionally, it has been linked to manipulation and misuse of power by allegedly hiding the

true motivation behind the discourse. Despite many contributions speaking in its favor, rhetoric has not been fully accepted and integrated into management research. (Flory and Iglesias 2010, 113.) The main objective of this thesis is to create memorable and attractive customer references for Vivo Visions Oy and therefore the criticism directed at rhetoric was taken into account, but the thesis concentrates on rhetoric's favorable contributions.

3 Methodology

The literature review provided answers to the research questions one and two and helped develop the semi-structured interview questions to answer the third research question. The secondary data for the literature review was gathered by conducting literature searches in Academic Search Elite (EBSCOhost), Business databases (ProQuest), Elsevier: Science Direct, Emerald Insight (Journals), Google Scholar and Sage Journals databases. To answer the third research question, and collect the primary data, interviews with four Vivo Visions Oy existing customers and partners were conducted.

3.1 Qualitative research

Data collection and analysis techniques that yield non-numerical data are called qualitative methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 175). When utilizing qualitative research and data collection methods the researchers often collect their data in natural settings, where they can gain the trust and participation of the subjects or phenomenon being studied and achieve a deeper understanding of these. Data acquired through qualitative methods is considered interpretative, meaning that to make sense of it, the researcher needs to interpret the meanings of the socially expressed information about the studied phenomenon. (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2015, 161; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 179.)

This thesis aimed to study customer references from the rhetorical perspective and pursued the purpose to create memorable and attractive customer references for Vivo Visions Oy. Because qualitative research encompasses the derivation of meanings from words it is often necessary to clarify the meanings of these with the participants as the means of expression can vary individually. The gained data is considered non-standardized and needs to be grouped into categories for further analysis. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 179.)

3.2 Semi-structured interview

A research interview is a meaningful conversational interaction between two people who have established some level of relationship for this purpose. The interviewer asks questions and actively listens to the interviewee's response. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 434.) Descriptive research was applied by using semi-structured interviews to gain accurate customer references for Vivo Visions Oy. In a semi-structured interview, the topics or themes are known, and they guide the conduction of the interview, but the form and order of the questions can vary. (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2015, 208-209; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 437.)

Often, the descriptive research questions include the words 'Who', 'What', 'Where', 'When' or 'How'. Similar interrogative vocabulary was used in the interview questions during data collection. Prior to collecting the interview data, the researcher gained a clear understanding of the phenomenon in question during composition of the literature review. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 187.) An advantage of semi-structured interviews is that the researcher has the chance to gain deeper insight into the phenomena being studied. The researcher can explore the responses of the interviewees by asking them to elaborate on their previous answers. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 444.)

This opportunity was important because the used vocabulary and imaginary depictions varied. There were benefits both for the researcher and the interviewee in this practice. The discussion could be taken to areas of the phenomenon which the researcher had not considered, or which helped address the research questions and objectives or formulate additional ones. The interviewee could be encouraged to think about the issues in a way they had not before which enriched and deepened the data. It was important for the researcher to consider the manner of interaction with the interviewee as it impacts collected data. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 445.)

The interview questions were grouped according to the rhetorical elements ethos, pathos and logos. The questions were formed according to the findings in the literature review and the key operating areas of Vivo Visions Oy in cooperation with Jani Rusi. The interview questions were piloted with one interviewee, and they turned out to be suitable. Small amendments were made e.g., the question 'Name adjectives that best describe Vivo Visions Oy' was updated to 'Name four adjectives that best describe Vivo Visions Oy' to get more comparable results and give the interviewees a precise number of adjectives to answer.

3.3 Semi-structured interview questions

The following list of questions was used during the interviews:

Background information:

- What company do you represent and what is your current role?
- What do you think about the role of customer references?

Ethos:

- What motivated you to explore the service offerings of Vivo Visions Oy?
- How would you describe Vivo Visions Oy's expertise and competencies?
- What is characteristic for Vivo Visions Oy's approach?
- What do you give Vivo Visions Oy credit for?

Pathos:

- How would you describe the atmosphere of the meetings / social interactions with Vivo Visions oy?
- How engaging was the cooperation period?
- Can you tell one example or a short story about the good practices used by Vivo Visions Oy?
- Name four adjectives that best describe Vivo Visions Oy.

Logos:

- Did you receive the benefits that you expected?
- What kind of return did you get for your investment in the cooperation with Vivo Visions Oy?
- How did the competencies offered by Vivo Visions Oy affect your actions?
- Name four facts that best describe Vivo Visions Oy.
- Please describe the benefits Vivo Visions Oy can offer.

Conclusion:

- What would persuade you to recommend Vivo Visions Oy to others?

3.4 Data collection

Four interviews were conducted during the period from 15.9. to 14.10.2022. The four interviewees were chosen by Jani Rusi based on their current customer and / or partner status, and the first contact related to the interview was conducted by Jani Rusi. The interviewees had known him and Vivo Visions Oy from many years to less than one year.

The researcher was already acquainted with three of the interviewees prior to the interviews. In the case of one interviewee the first contact was specifically regarding the interview. All interviewees were contacted by email, where the purpose and goal of the interview and this thesis was explained. The interviewees received the questions in connection with the Teams meeting invitation. Three interviews were conducted as recorded Teams interviews and one interviewee first wrote the answers into a document and thereafter the data was revised during a phone call. The interviews lasted for 14 to 19 minutes. One interview was conducted in English and three in Finnish.

3.5 Analysing the data

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The processing and analysis of the interview material started soon after the interview and the interview material was analyzed according to the interview themes. (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2015, 222-224; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 644-646.) The Teams recordings were first dictated into a Word document by means of the Microsoft Word dictate tool followed by the verification of the dictated texts by the researcher simultaneously listening to the recordings. The texts were corrected accordingly, and the layout edited to improve readability.

In qualitative research the collection and analysis of data is interrelated. Analysis may take place during data collection and/or after it. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 640.) In the weeks following the interviews the researcher listened to the interview recordings and read the interview answers multiple times to gain comprehensive understanding and further enabling the recognition of patterns and creation of summaries as well as the extraction of the results in preparation for analysis.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is considered to be a “foundational method for qualitative analysis”. In thematic analysis the researcher searches for themes or patterns which can be found in the transcribed data. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 651.) This was executed by grouping the interview answers for each rhetorical aspect into themes and finding a title for them. The themes are described in the results and analysis chapter. The researchers’ assumptions are likely to affect the interpretation of the data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 651). Interpretation means that the researcher considers the results of the analysis and draws conclusions from them (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2015, 229).

The researcher uses direct quotations from the interviewees to ensure reliability. The thesis documentation does not include names of the interviewed persons nor companies they represent. The recorded interviews and the transcribed texts were kept accessible only to the researcher and deleted when

the whole process was completed, and the thesis represented in the thesis seminar.

3.6 Ethical issues, credibility, and validity

By approaching the research in an ethically acceptable, responsible and trustworthy manner the researcher can achieve reliable and credible results. This includes adhering to research principles which are stipulated by the research community. While processing this thesis close attention was given to detail, accuracy, and integrity during the execution of all research phases. The data collection, research- and evaluation methods are in accordance with scientific criteria as well as ethically sustainable. The researcher has acknowledged the work of other researchers by utilizing citations properly and giving due credit to their work in respect to its impact on the researchers own work. (Varantola et al. 2012, 30; Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2015, 23-24; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 257.)

A high level of validity and credibility can be achieved when semi-structured interviews are carefully conducted. Clarifying question about meanings were made, the participants were asked to check the correctness of the information provided and the answers were explored from varying perspectives to fortify the credibility. Credibility was also enhanced by providing information about the interview themes to the participants beforehand. (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill 2019, 451-452). The gained results cannot be generalized. Qualitative research cannot be repeated due to its uniqueness and context (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2015, 164).

The credibility of this thesis was increased by expressing accurate descriptions of all research stages, so that the reader understands the progress of the research as well as its strengths and limitations. Moreover, several authentic direct quotations from the interview answers are presented to ensure the validity of the research. (Hirsjärvi, Remes and Sajavaara 2015, 232-233.) After confirming the results as correct, the research material was erased from the

computer, including temporary files created during the process, and the printed material was burned (Data disposal 2022).

4 Results and analysis

Four interviews were conducted with Vivo Visions Oy's partners and customers. Three of the interviewees were CEOs in companies operating in the international trade and development, business consulting and services and a consortium supporting industry needs. One was a master photographer in a company offering creative and professional commercial photography and videos.

In this chapter the interview results are explained and analyzed and further associated with the findings expressed in the literature review. All quotations expressed in this chapter are direct answers from the interviewees and according to the main objective of this thesis they are the obtained customer references for Vivo Visions Oy.

4.1 Customer references

Customer references were described as:

"Essential. Helps getting new customers."

"Critical to understand how skilled somebody is at what they do."

All interviewees expressed that customer references are very important. Concepts decision making and shared knowledge were mentioned. Further customer references were described from the point of view which they represent:

"The internal world of the company. It's offering, values and people."

One company had become acquainted with Vivo Visions Oy through a reference, indicating the spread of Vivo Visions Oy's reputation:

"It was a reference. I don't remember where it came from. Someone said that Jani is a good guy for these jobs and worth meeting."

Further the co-operation had started based on Jani Ruis former position representing Nordea's financing for startups and his membership in Business Network International (BNI). BNI is a networking organization with members and groups in more than 75 countries making it the biggest and most successful referral organization worldwide (Business Network International 2022).

The concepts reputation and risk were mentioned in the context of the position Jani Rusi had represented at the time of the first contact with the interviewee:

“He had this trust created by the position, because he was a startup unit person for Nordea, which is a financing institute. I thought that he probably knows about financing for startups. The only thing would have been the drop in reputation if he wasn't that good at what he did.”

“I was willing to trust and give him a shot because the cost of failure was low, and the potential upside of a good lecture and workshop was high.”

The answers support the statements of Jalkala and Salminen (2010), Salminen and Möller (2006) and Morgado (2018) regarding the meaningfulness of customer references as information providers for positive visibility and recognition, decreasing possible concerns and risks, indicating suppliers' expertise and abilities and further predicting return on invest. These help to promote credibility.

4.2 Ethos

The answers to the questions regarding ethos were themed under Expertise and competencies and Experience. The use of the term Agent 204,5 was also mentioned in two answers, but it was seen as a positive extra benefit to be able to include the own height as a kind of charisma booster to brand business operations, but it did not otherwise gain specific attention in the interviews. Jani Ruis stylish dressing, yet avoidance of overdressing also came up as a topic.

4.2.1 Expertise and competencies

Jani Ruis expertise and competencies were described in a variety of ways from overall concepts over responsibility to his appearance. No-nonsense spirit and thorough thinking of what is said is descriptive.

“In depth and determined.”

“He is very responsible. He doesn't wanna give advice if it doesn't work.”

“He wants you to succeed.”

“In all appearances and performances, extremely matter-of-fact and professional.”

Also, Jani Ruis's creativity was rated higher than average. In the answers his competencies were further divided into financing, coaching and networking.

“He is definitely a specialist in financing.”

Jani Ruis can help in figuring out e.g. if a bank loan, Business Finland funding or investors are needed, but he can look at the situation also from reversed point of view and say, that maybe those are not needed. This leads to a mention of him having:

“Kind of like investor mindset or like a co-founder mindset.”

Coaching was mentioned both in helping to understand possibilities which are mostly related to his financial knowledge, but also in helping the customer to succeed in the long run:

“He understands the business models and explains that this could someday also generate money.”

“His coaching style is that he wants you to succeed with him or without him and he would like to help you.”

“He is able to add value to your project.”

“He is able to look into the future on a larger scale and has good ideas where this project could be further developed.”

Networking was mentioned in relation to Jani Rusi’s own networks, and also regarding the possibilities of these:

“He uses his networks effectively and knows how to exploit them and how to proceed further.”

“Connecting people with the partners that they might need. That's his biggest strength.”

The answers brought up the operating areas of Vivo Visions Oy and expressed the actions showing good will, competence and reliability that Bonet and Sauquet (2010) explain being characteristic for ethos. Further the trustworthiness explained by Supeno (2018) became obvious. Like described by Jung (2021) the above-mentioned answers support the potential of customer references facilitating the areas of expertise and making expected results visible.

4.2.2 Experience

The experience was described regarding Jani Rusi’s sales, financing, development, and networking capabilities:

“The business sense is really good.”

“He's not just finance guy, but he fits in that box so well.”

The answers were based on the most characteristic approaches showing his business experience thoroughly:

“Expertise and know-how.”

“Problem solving and goal orientation.”

“Constructive and outcome focused.”

“Open minded, yet practical.”

Further he was described as an expert, who knows all that oneself doesn't understand. The experience was also connected with his general life knowledge of being still young but mature enough to have and show experience in his operations.

“Professionalism so that no extra explanations were needed. It was obviously thought and decided how it can be done. The whole presence was really stylish and relaxed in an appreciative interaction.”

The answers for both themes, Expertise and competencies and Experience, increase the understanding of Jani Rusi operating in practical manner, processing the issues in a comprehensible way, and creating value for the customer. According to Jaakkola and Aarikka-Stenroos (2019) these expressed positive outcomes further increase the credibility and help in convincing potential future customers about the competencies.

4.3 Pathos

The answers for the questions regarding pathos were themed to Relaxed atmosphere, Sharing of knowledge and Adjectives describing Vivo Visions Oy.

4.3.1 Relaxed atmosphere

All interviewees used the word relaxed regarding the atmosphere in which they operated with Jani Rusi:

“Relaxed even in tight twists and challenges. You don't have to be afraid to bring issues up.”

“I can directly say everything that I think. And also what I don't know.”

The discussion situations were further described with a that's it -feeling. Jani Rusi explains who he is and what he does without overselling. It gives the feeling, that he knows his areas of knowledge and is comfortable with it:

“Calm and safe feeling that this guy knows.”

4.3.2 Sharing of knowledge

Directness and clarity were expressions describing the conversations and all interviewees had the feeling that they were discussing on the same level:

“I take my own doctrines and practices as well as perspectives and backgrounds and Jani brings his. It deepens own thinking.”

Jani Rusi perceives the overall situation in a comprehensive way:

“Jani wants to understand the background before moving on to solve future issues.”

This leads to the sharing of knowledge in an atmosphere described clear and secure:

“You don't have to worry about how he tries to cheat.”

Further it can be seen explaining the comprehensiveness of his actions:

“He figures out the wheels inside the idea.”

“Jani is the kind of person that if he suggests something, I will definitely listen, and if I suggest something, he will listen.”

4.3.3 Adjectives describing Vivo Visions Oy

Vivo Visions Oy was described being open minded, supportive, helpful and friendly from the social perspectives. In its knowledge utilizing operations it is described practical, outcome focused / goal oriented and analytical. Clarity,

trustworthiness, straightforwardness, and safety describe the professional aspects it offers towards the customers.

The pathos related answers express, that Jani Rusi has the readiness and capability to understand the customers' needs and it is done in a pleasant and safe atmosphere. Benazic (2021) says, that it is necessary to communicate realistic scenarios when presenting results of past performance. This can be seen in the way the interviewees display the expertise, reputation and credibility of Vivo Visions Oy operations. As these are of intangible nature Jalkala and Salminen (2010) and Morgado (2020) express that the given references can be seen in helping future customers get familiarized with Vivo Visions Oy's approach to finding solutions for its customers and assistance in building marketing assets. Tóth, Nieroda and Koles (2020) further note that references can increase the attractiveness especially in the pre-selection phase.

4.4 Logos

Evidence for Vivo Visions Oy operations has already been mentioned in the answers regarding ethos and pathos. Facts describing Vivo Visions Oy, Clarity of progress, Gained benefits and Ways to recommend Vivo Visions Oy are the themes that were found regarding logos.

4.4.1 Facts describing Vivo Visions Oy

Cooperation with Jani Rusi starts from the fact that he wants to help and is helpful. This was explained by all interviewees. Further it was highlighted by all, that he keeps his promises and keeps the profitability of actions in mind.

His creativeness was mentioned and underlined by the fact that

“He sees new opportunities there where most of the companies don't.”

The professional approach was explained more in detail through the expressions of building trust, being honest and showing his knowledgeability in an atmosphere of ease.

4.4.2 Clarity of progress

Jani Rusi knows how to

“Talk with both the public and private sector in the right tone.”

Therefore, he needs to gather all relevant information and is able to achieve it through discussions challenging the customer:

“Put me thinking more deeply: what kind of intermediate goals must be in order to be able to move forward.”

“He will look at different type of options and prepare you for those options.”

He can make it clear, that

“It's not worth moving forward unless you get this first.”

Jani Rusi has achieved change in interviewees operations by adding clarity to their situations:

“I can somehow also look at this company as an outsider now.”

4.4.3 Gained benefits

All interviewees had gained the benefits they expected or are already noticing, that they will achieve the goals they are aiming for. Jani Rusi has been able to help in career and company development and networking, getting cooperation partners and customers, finding expected leads, writing applications for different projects, sharing his knowledge both in B2B and mentoring aspects and providing clarity to business possibilities.

“On the basis of the experience gained with Jani, our own processes have been developed.”

4.4.4 Ways to recommend Vivo Visions Oy

“Get a strategic analysis and good next steps will come.”

“Get new insights, if you are looking for other forms of cooperation or internationalization.”

“The guy who helps you figure out your financial path.”

“He is a master connector.”

“If he can't help himself, he can lead you somewhere else.”

“He can also link companies together.”

“I've seen tens, if not hundreds of salesmen and Jani is definitely at the top ten.”

The facts gained through the answers regarding logos can additionally help in the creation of Vivo Visions Oy public image and make it more understandable. Services are of intangible nature and their benefits usually come at some point in time after implementation. The gained reputation assists in making the situations more assessable and that can further increase trust and credibility like Gansser, Boßow-Thies and Krol (2021), Aarikka-Stenroos and Jaakkola (2012) and Benazic (2021) explain. Ruokolainen and Aarikka-Stenroos (2016) stated that the utilization of rhetorical elements can create strong and persuasive arguments as can be seen in these results.

This thesis is purposefully written without the names of the interviewees. The expressed quotations will be used in Vivo Visions Oy marketing. Nevertheless, all interviewees expressed to be available to publicly act as references with their names

“If someone wants to ask for a reference, I'll tell.”

5 Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis was to create customer references for Vivo Visions Oy. The objective was reached with help of the research questions:

1. What are the effective methods of utilization of customer references in the B2B marketing and purchasing sector?
2. What specific characteristics of customer references display the expertise, reputation, and credibility of a B2B consulting sector company?
3. How is Vivo Visions Oy described by the interviewed customers and partners in terms of the rhetorical element's ethos, pathos, and logos?

Research questions one and two were answered based on evidence in the literature review which further helped to create the semi-structured interview questions answering to the third research question. The interviews were conducted with four Vivo Visions Oy's partners and customers.

A comprehensive understanding of the context B2B consulting companies like Vivo Visions Oy operate in was gathered before focusing more closely on customer references and their utilization. Relationship marketing aims to make services marketing more tangible. B2B companies which supply nontangible KIBS in a generalist approach attempt to create value and satisfy customer needs with highly customized solutions. Therefore, their credibility as a service provider is a key property.

Business service providers need to prioritize messaging about the quality of their offer in their marketing. This could be one answer to the initial question of Jani Rusi to find out why prospects don't become customers. If enough credibility is not shown as proof, the marketing may not be successful. Why should a prospect believe what a provider is communicating when it is not proven?

The corporate reputation of a firm consists of the collective perception that outsiders have of it. Vivo Visions Oy offers services of intangible nature.

Prospects tend to perceive these as highly uncertain. Considering that customers prefer companies with strong and recognized performance and an already established customer base, the importance of customer references to Vivo Visions Oy became clear.

Information about competencies, atmosphere of interactions, gained benefits and provided solutions help prospects in assessing possible risks and concerns connected to the decision-making of becoming a customer as well as predicting return on invest. This knowledge was considered when the interview questions were created according to the rhetorical elements ethos, pathos, and logos.

The interview answers emphasize the importance of customer references. Reputational facts and evaluation of risks were decisive when the decision of becoming a Vivo Visions Oy customer was made. The interviews produced comprehensive and substantial material regarding Vivo Visions Oy's source credibility, ethos, emotional aspect, pathos and rational aspect, logos. The interview material was easily editable into customer references. A versatile collection of customer references was created. These will be applied externally to communicate Vivo Visions Oy's reputation, expertise and credibility, and internally for learning and development purposes.

Further research could be conducted focusing more deeply on the rhetorical elements. Another area of investigation could be the deeper understanding of internal development possibilities. When considering the fact, that startups sometimes utilize their only customer as a reference and all interviewed persons in this thesis research had differing operating backgrounds also customer background specific customer references could be pursued.

The findings of this thesis show that Vivo Visions Oy can promote its operations by providing proof of the offered services. Proof attracts potential customers and helps fulfil Peter Drucker's famous phrase: "There is only one valid definition of business purpose: to create a customer."

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