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DEALER EXPERIENCE OF MARKETING STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

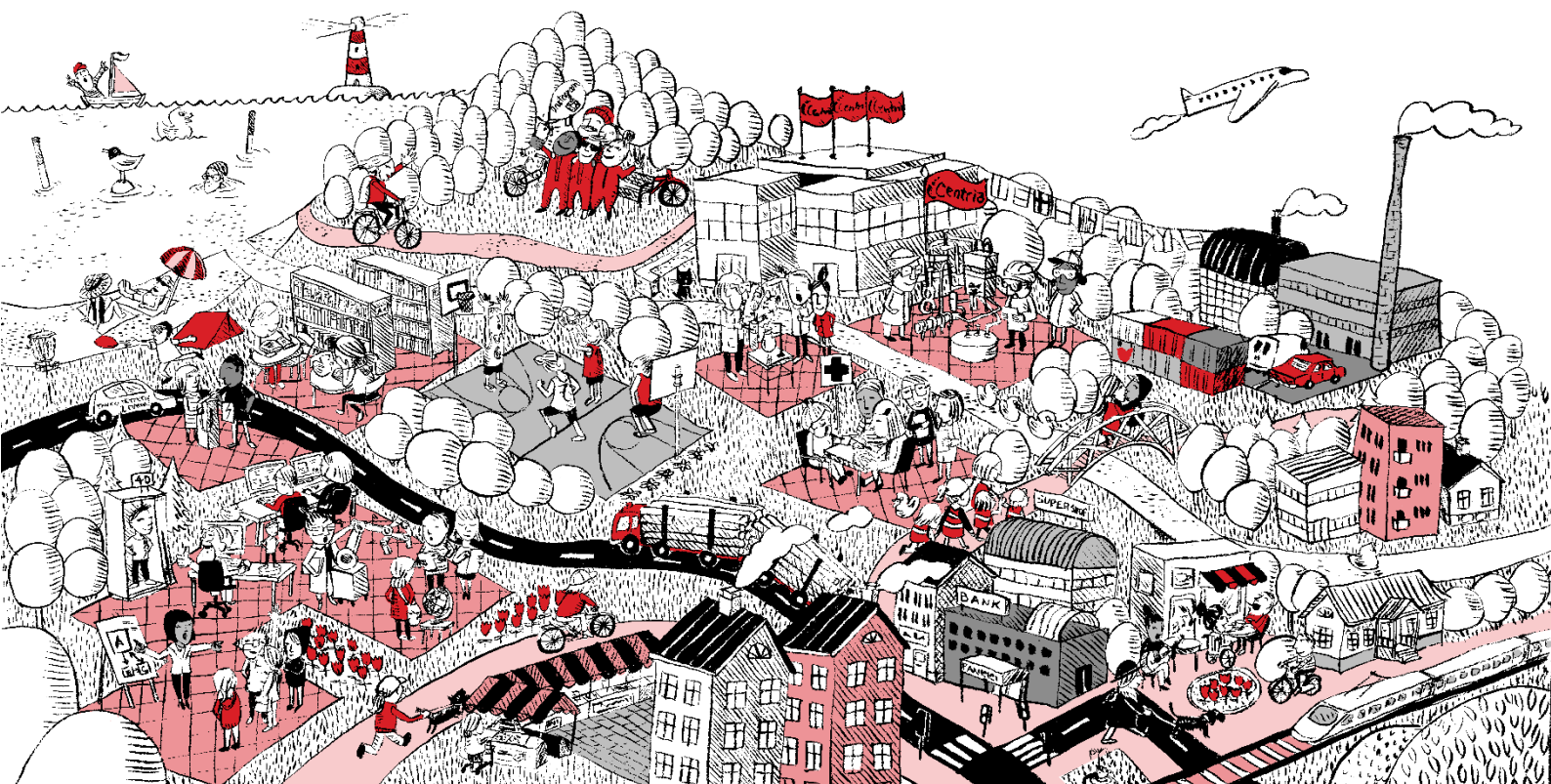
The effects of Covid-19 on business marketing

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ABSTRACT

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Name of thesis DEALER EXPERIENCE OF MARKETING STARETGY DEVELOPMENT. The effects of Covid-19 on business marketing		
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<p>A certain company developed their marketing strategy and brand presence during the last years. These changes were made parallel with the Covid-19 pandemic and the industry experienced new challenges. The contacts on social media were increased, and this thesis examined if there were reactions to the changes locally and were they sufficient in their markets. Also, further development ideas targeting their markets were requested. A company presentation was made to examine the background for the development work.</p> <p>The theoretical framework contained published theories about international trade including international business risks and globalization and business-to-business marketing regarding relationship marketing. For the research qualitative semi-structured interviews with dealer representatives were conducted. The answers are themed up and presented in the analysis.</p> <p>The key findings of this study contain the importance of communication and dialogue also in the future. The changes in marketing strategy were noticed, but it was difficult to differentiate between the influences of marketing and the effects of the pandemic on the businesses.</p>		
Key words B2B marketing, international business, international trade, marketing, relationship marketing, qualitative study		

ABSTRACT
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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines how the boat manufacturer's customers, i.e., the dealers, experience the changes in the marketing and sales strategy. The company is a mid-sized Finnish boat manufacturer, producing GRP and aluminium boats sized between 5-11 meters long. The subject of the thesis originated from the development work of the company's marketing, sales and aftermarket strategy and implementation, which began in 2020. The company will not be presented with name in this thesis and will be referred to as company X throughout the thesis.

Company X has implemented new types of digital marketing and communication measures, which have increased the visibility and familiarity of the three brands in both the domestic and international markets. With the reform of the communication strategy, the company has utilized e.g., advertisements, earned media, brand ambassadors, shared partner visibility as well as television and radio campaigns and streaming TV series. The marketing strategy was renewed because the boat industry's most important sales and marketing channels, Boat Fairs, were canceled across Europe due to the Covid-19 epidemic.

The main goal of the thesis is to find out how retailers have received the recent changes and whether they think they are sufficient in their own market. The boat manufacturer's distribution channels are dealers or dealer chains that sell boats with engines to end consumers. Retailers have the best expertise in different European countries and the best knowledge of their own market, and for this reason it is very important to carry out a dialogue and marketing planning together with retailers.

The main aim is to find out how the smaller dealers have received the recent changes and if they find them adequate for the business in their markets. Since the consumer face of the company also needs to cater to the dealers who sell the products to end-users, the dealers' expertise in their market/country must be taken into consideration. Have they noticed the updates which have been made and have reactions been positive or negative? Have they received support from the company during the changes Covid-19 have made to their business? And do they have any development suggestions for the consumer face or service?

The decision to limit the thesis to the smaller customers is because a big fraction of the sales go to one big multinational corporation, who have a dealer network of several countries. The rest of the customers

are smaller dealers or dealer chains of one or two locations. Therefore, these customer groups cannot be compared in a sufficient way. The number of dealers in this group is about 12, all situated in Europe. The research will be executed via interviews through videocall. The interview subjects and the companies they represent will not be named to keep their anonymity.

The research is supported by theories about Business-to-Business marketing such as relationship marketing and marketing channels together with theories about international business. Theories presented are about B2B vs B2C marketing, relationship marketing, and distributor theories in addition to theories regarding international trade and marketing and globalization. The sources are comprised of both printed and digital material.

2 COMPANY PRESENTATION

Company X is a Finnish boat manufacturing company. They produce boats under three different brands in 3 different locations in Finland. The headquarters are on the west coast. The company X is owned by a Finnish family-owned business with companies in other industries as well, e.g., forestry and construction equipment manufacturing. Company X was founded in 1990 by local businessmen and boating enthusiasts. The business was sold to its current owners in parts between 2004 and 2017 and merged with another boating manufacturer. (Nurminen 2022) They employ today around 201 people. (Company X website)

Company X produces boats under three different brand names. The first brand models are GRP boats between 5,6 and 9 meters long. The current models vary between open console and bow rider boats to semi-open day cruisers and cabin boats. The boats of the second brand are between 5,4 and 7,6 meters long aluminium hull bow rider boats. The third brand boats are the largest models, ranging between 7,6 and 11,5 meters long. The total number of boat models are 12 of the first brand and 4 each of the other two (Company X website)

The boat manufacturer's distribution channels are dealers or dealer chains that sell boats with engines to end consumers. A majority of the Company X's two smaller boat brands are sold within the Nordic countries through one distributor and engine manufacturer with their own dealer network and marketing. Outside of these there are about 10 other dealers within Europe and additional two dealers who fit into both categories. All dealers have their own stock and boats that can be test driven. This is also a requirement for new dealers to accommodate to. Therefore, there are no broker dealers in the network, who only sell the boats to the customer and take a profit of the sale. (Nurminen 2022)

The aftermarket department work with all the spare part and warranty business. Their orders come in mostly through email or phone calls. To simplify the process and free up time, an online service was launched in 2020. It offers online ordering and some basic information about the products. Due to staff shortages the development of this service has halted, but the development will soon continue in conjunction with switching platform provider. (Nurminen 2022)

The company X does marketing of products and brands both by supporting dealers' campaigns and through their own channels. For examples, partaking in yearly national and international exhibitions and

fairs, newsletters, social media, and influencer marketing. Some changes needed to be made when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and all exhibitions and fairs were cancelled, and travel and commerce were restricted. Other channels needed to be strengthened when one big part was inaccessible. Also, the natural place for new product launches had been at exhibitions and fairs, however this was not an option for this period. A regimen of brand campaigns through several media and upgrading the social media management lay the foundation for successful virtual launches of three models and upgrades. Some of these campaigns have raised the first-time visitors to the company's website with 42%. (Viitanen 2022)

3 INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS

Products and their components are made and shipped around the world before ending up in the hands of the consumers. Even though the world market is more unilateral than ever with big global corporations, the most global are the markets of industrial materials and goods. With global brands and the internet and social media making a one-track market, still the needs and preferences in specific regions steer the global market. (Hill, 2021).

International Business encompasses foreign entry strategies, globalization of markets, international trade, participating firms, governments and intermediaries and international business risks. (Cavusgil, Knight & Riesenberger, 2020)

3.1 International trade

International trade is simply put “the exchange of products and services across national borders, typically through exporting or importing”. There are several types of international trade, of which the most basic is exporting and importing products or services to or from another country. These forms of trade regard both material and components and refined products. Then there are several types of investments that can be made in the form of international trade. Either as a passive ownership of other companies in form of a portfolio investment or a more hands on investment with for example production abroad. (Cavusgil et al, 2020)

Some of the reasons for companies to seek opportunities internationally are the possibility to open up to new markets and costumers or find cheaper labour or production costs. The national market can be quite limited and if the products or services are niche the possibilities to grow is even slimmer if staying in the inbound market. (Cavusgil et al, 2020)

The reasons to internationalize can be separated into proactive and reactive motives. Proactive motives are the ones coming from within the company. The urges to for example reach growth or profit goals are a common first step for internationalization. Other proactive motives are special technological advantages, economies of scale or tax benefits. The reactive motives on the other hand are a kind of a push

motions. The domestic market might be saturated and give no more growth or there could be over production. If the products are seasonal, looking for international customers in another seasonal cycle to lengthen the season is one motive also. (Hollensen 2012)

3.2 Globalization

Globalization of markets has been the trend for a long time. Globally people consume much of the same social media channels and films and series, which has enabled a world market. This has also enabled global brands and corporations to form. National economies are more interdependent and much of this has been enabled in tariffs being diminished. (Cavusgil et al, 2020)

Business with other countries has been conducted for centuries in some scale, however, in the 1920's and 1930's tariffs and barriers was laid to inhibit or minimize business to protect the own market. The Great Depression was one reason for these barriers. After WWII the industrial countries committed to minimize these barriers for "free flow of goods, services and capital among nations" as was stated by GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade 1948-1993). GATT later formed and extended to WTO (World Trade Organization). However, nowadays there are now about 300 agreements internationally, a few examples being the EU and NAFTA. (Hill, 2021)

After the 2008 financial crisis the reaction was similar to the Great Depression and countries wanted to protect their jobs and markets. Tariffs on some products have been reintroduced by the now former President of the USA Donald Trump against China which in turn has set out tariffs against the USA. Also, the disruptions in logistics followed by Covid-19 pandemic have made companies consider moving their production abroad closer to avoid that similar situations in the future affect their logistics on the same scale. (Hill, 2021) All the consequences on globalization the Russian attack in Ukraine makes are still to be seen.

3.3 International business risks

Business can't be made totally risk free and doing business with companies in other countries has its own risks. Since all countries and regions have their own culture of how to talk, behave and do business,

there is a risk of having some miscommunication when being in contact with people outside of one's own cultural circle. This is also called a cross-cultural risk. (Cavusgil et al, 2020)

Country risks or political risks regards the business being directed by a country's laws and legislation, and these can change with the politics in a country. The markets can be restricted and regulated or even obstructed all together. This can harm the operating in a country and affect profitability. This is a bigger risk in countries with unstable governments and politics. Currency risks are related to the political risks but are more about the relation to other countries. If exchange rates change and the currency used in the target country increase or decrease, it will affect the profits. Making the wrong choices in business is a commercial risk even in domestic business. However, it can be even more difficult in an international setting where local businesses might be protected by laws. (Cavusgil et al, 2020) A proper trade agreement should be drawn up to minimize risks for all parties. The agreement should include all the details that the parties have agreed upon. It should also include terms of delivery and a financial arrangement. (Carlsson et al 2014)

3.4 International marketing

When entering a new country there are many factors that must be taken into consideration. How are the products suiting the market both according to local regulations but also the culture. Is there a need to make changes in the procedure? Who should they target and how? These decisions affect the business possibilities in the new market. (Hill, 2021)

Not all markets are the same, however, there are similarities overall that enable grouping into bigger markets. This enables companies to distinguish key factors in each group and then to market their products in a suitable way. Common ways to do this is to market similar products but separate the market into regions to suit their laws and regulations or to group them into needs or income and market them as totally different products. (Hill, 2021)

Even with the segmentation into different groups or markets there is the possibility to further adjust the marketing for specific markets or to standardize the marketing to bigger regions. This decision will affect the branding, pricing, R&D and overall communication in the company. Standardizing enables the company to use the same marketing and branding material on a larger scale and this saves the company from making smaller quantities of a specific products for specific markets, instead they can streamline the

production and save money that way. Some products are more suitable for this, e.g., luxury items, aircrafts, while others are less suitable. (Cavusgil et al, 2020)

The other end of the scale is adaptation, which means adjusting to the market standards or tastes. For example, bed size standards are distinctive in most regions. This means global brands need to take this into consideration when selling beds or sheets. Also, pricing is something to consider, especially if a market has a widely different economic status, the prices must be at a reasonable level. However, the question is not as simple and in most cases some parts of the marketing can be standardized, and others should be adapted to the targeted market to find a good balance. (Cavusgil et al, 2020)

4 BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKETING

Marketing in a simple definition is “...engaging customers and managing profitable customer relationships” (Armstrong, Kotler & Opresnik, 2016). However, what this implicates has changed majorly through the years and decades and most recently the digital and social media revolution. The development has gone from the classic thought of marketing being just advertisement and selling to now being more about meeting customers’ needs in a value-exchange. (Armstrong et al, 2016)

Needs are a way to communicate a deprivation of something, for example hunger or cold, which are met with food and clothes, yet the need can be met with an assortment of foods or clothes. If the person has an inkling towards a specific item, a want, which is mostly culturally or personally derived, marketing is a way to try to appeal to a person’s needs and wants and try to direct people into buying and using specific products. However, customers with buying power can demand products or services to their specific needs and wants. (Armstrong et al, 2016)

4.1 Business-to-Business versus Business-to-Customer

Even though the basics are the same in Business-to-Customer and Business-to-Business marketing (further referenced as B2C and B2B), there are structural differences in these branches of marketing. In B2B marketing the customer could also be a supplier for another company. In the role of supplier, they need to consider and help their organizational customers to reach their goals, and for this a continuing interaction for a successful relationship between organizations is the key. There are of course transaction encounters in business as well, but long-term relationships enable stable prospects and goals for both parties. (Ellis, 2011)

A further difference in B2B marketing compared with B2C marketing is taking into consideration the different buying processes in organizations. In organizations the buying power is concentrated to one or a few persons, meanwhile an end consumer mostly make their own decisions separately. The organizational buying process is more rational with less wants and subjective opinions and a company also has a strict budget and profit goals to reach which press the prices and therefore the buying process. (Ellis, 2011) The rational buying process also means that cultural markers and taste is less important variables, and the focus is on laws and trade regulations. The demands from customers, mentioned in the previous

chapter, can reach further up in the chain of suppliers, affect the products being bought from the suppliers and change the product development during the process, also called demand chain management (Ellis, 2011).

4.2 Relationship marketing

To explain relational marketing a short introduction to the differences between it and its opposite, transactional marketing. In transactional marketing the focus lays on single sales, big volumes, product features and quality, but there is less focus on customer service. (Ellis, 2011) In relationship marketing the focus is on customer retention, long-term timescales, quality of relationships and customer service. (Christopher et al, 2002)

The central principles of relationship marketing can be divided into six parts. These are long-term perspective, trust, commitment, communication, customer service and mutual benefits. Long-term perspective refers to having a strategy to keep customers for longer periods. It's because keeping customers is more cost effective than having to find and bind to new customers. Trust and commitment go hand in hand, and it's not clear which comes first. These traits involve dependability and ability to foresee the other parts' actions, collaboration, and efforts to work together. (Ellis, 2011)

Big investments are made only for the trustworthy customers. Trust is built on communication and beside the daily exchanges, it can be developed through training and education to benefit the customer. Customer service belongs together with communication. There is a common goal in the organization to fulfil customer requests in all departments, not just in the marketing department. Finally mutual benefits imply on the fact that there is a common goal to succeed and a target for both parties which can be reached if both are honest. For example, repeated misleading about the products and their performance for added sales undermines the relationship on several of these points. (Ellis, 2011)

However, relationship marketing is not preferable in all cases and have risks. It's time consuming and therefore only suitable to have a limited number of these close relations. They are more suited in cases of complicated products or in case of a strategic customer. Not all companies are reliable enough to have this kind of dependable relationship with and since companies consist of people, not all people suit each other either and people make mistakes which can result in a fall out with a close customer.

(Buttle, 2004)

4.3 Distributors

Distributors are middlemen in the distribution channel. The products are moving through a distribution channel to the end customer. In the contact upstream towards the manufacturer, the distributor purchases the products and holds them in stock and therefore takes risks of selling the products. The manufacturer may ask for forecasts on future demand and feedback about products from customers. Downstream, towards the customer the distributor gives fast responses to customer requests, gives credit, advice, and information about the products. They often provide similar products from several manufacturers. (Ellis, 2011)

To choose the right distributor is essential as it can become a competitive strength. A good distributor can be recognized by their interest in the products and company. A distributor who has several competing brands and good sales don't necessarily have the interest in the product, instead they look to widen their selection to be able to serve more customers. The downside to this approach is that if the distributor doesn't know the products and their sales points, they can't argue for the products, and it only comes down to the price. (Albaum, 2011)

5 RESEARCH PROCESS

In this section the research process is presented. The research method, sampling and procedure, reliability and validity are discussed.

5.1 Research methodology

There are many definitions for the different research methods and research can be executed in several ways. The two main categories for methods are qualitative and quantitative methods and then a mix of both. The determining factor is the question asked. If the question is why or how, the research method most likely is a qualitative one. On the other hand, hard data that can be measured in how much, how similar, or how large something is, is collected via quantitative research methods. (Thomas, 2003) For this thesis, a qualitative method of research is chosen.

There are several types of qualitative research methods e.g., focus groups, case studies and the most common of them, interviews. (Ruane, 2005) Since this thesis is centered around the subjective opinion about the marketing developments from a rather small pool of possible respondents, the use of qualitative interviews is suitable. To get the opinion of specific parts of the marketing strategy a set of open-ended questions are asked of every respondent in a semi-structured interview with the option to ask follow-up questions of how, why, or what.

5.2 Sampling

It requires many resources to study the whole population, therefore sampling is performed. A sample is a smaller group elected from the population studied. The population should be represented in the sample researched. The sampling technique used in this thesis is a non-random, convenience sampling method also sometimes known as accidental sampling. This technique is mostly based on factors such as accessibility, availability, and willingness of the respondents to participate. (Taherdoost 2016.)

This research is limited to the smaller dealers who are directly buying boats from company X without intermediaries and selling them to end consumers. Due to this limitation of this research the possible

pool of participants is in total 12. However, one of them is a more recent addition and has not been a dealer for more than 1 year, which is required to being able answer all questions. All of them who meet the requirement have had the possibility to participate in the research and was contacted via email for a request to participate and the goal was that at least 6 of them would agree to an interview.

5.3 Research procedure

The interviews are semi-structured, where the same set of questions (APPENDIX 1) are asked, however there is a possibility to ask follow-up questions if needed. Because, of the geographical obstacle of the participants being located around Europe, the interviews are conducted virtually through Microsoft Teams. There is also a possibility to conduct the interview via email if the participants wishes or a suitable time for an interview can't be found. Out of the pool of 11 possible respondents, 4 were available and willing to partake in the research. Two agreed to being interviewed and the other two responded through email due to time constraints. Two of the interviews were conducted in Swedish and the responses have been translated. Background information about the respondents is presented in TABLE 5.3. The interviews were conducted at the end of November 2022.

Interviewee	Interview method	Main area of business	Years being company X dealer	Percentage of total boat sales
Respondent 1	Teams	Sweden	20 years	40-50%
Respondent 2	Email	Norway	15 years	10 %
Respondent 3	Email	Adriatic-sea, Slovenia, and Austria	7 years	100 %
Respondent 4	Teams	Portugal	2 years	12 %

TABLE 5.3. Details of the respondents

The analysis of the interviews is conducted by first transcribing the oral interviews, going through the material, and looking for themes in the answers. This is followed by analyzing and defining the themes and writing these findings. This type of thematic analyzing is presented by Braun and Clarke (2012) as “a method for systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset”.

5.4 Reliability and validity

Validity refers to the validity of the conclusions of the study. There are several kinds of validity i.e., measurement validity and intern and extern validity. Measurement validity is the most common in quantitative studies for how closely the measured aspect actually is measured. Intern validity is related to the issue of causality. Is the conclusion regarding the relationship between two or more variables true. Extern validity refers to the generalizability of the results. Can the results be used in other contexts? The external validity depends also on the sample validity. Sample validity deals with the representativeness of the sample. The more representative a sample is, the higher the external validity. Sample validity thus depends on how the respondents has been selected. (Metodeguiden; Validitet, 2022) The goal of 6 respondents were not achieved. However, the total population research in this thesis is 11, which means the response rate still is 36 % of the total population. However, the respondents are representative of the population because of the different kinds of dealers with diverse locations.

Reliability can be translated as trustworthiness or consistency and refers to the accuracy of the measurement. You must consider whether the measurement is stable, i.e. whether the same results can be obtained by repeating the measurement at a different time. Also, whether a study can be repeated must be considered. (Metodeguiden; Reliabilitet, 2022) In a qualitative study this has been ensured with the same semi-structured questions for all interviews.

6 FINDINGS

In this chapter the findings about the research questions are presented. They are discussed in four different themes of Covid-19 experiences and support, marketing changes, aftermarket development, and suggestions for the future development.

6.1 Covid-19 experiences

The answers to how the Covid-19 pandemic hit the different dealers are discussed in the first theme. Also, if they received and how they experienced support from Company X regarding the effects of the pandemic is presented. This theme was covered by three different questions in the interviews.

6.1.1 Successes and setbacks

On the question on how the Covid-19 pandemic affected the business and what challenges it brought the response was mostly positive. The sales increased and boats were sold out in fast pace for the dealers with stock. The dealers whose main marketing events are trade shows, which were postponed several times, needed to adapt to the new situation.

The 1st respondent had experienced a positive development on sales during the pandemic. However, when it first started, they closed the fair they were on and at that moment the situation felt alarming. Respondent 2 had also experienced a positive outcome. Respondent 3 on the other hand said that customer communication came to a standstill. They also mentioned that for them trade shows are a key driver of customer communication. The 4th respondent thought that it went well. They invested in a second store during that time. They however needed to adapt how they do business regarding communication with customers.

The problems were then the prolonged and uncertain delivery times and the logistics these problems caused. These problems are still partly visible today. Respondent 1 had some problems with deliveries and the logistics, “we’ve needed to work three times as much for a sale. It has been problem solving and puzzling to compensate problems and delayed deliveries. Some of these problems have remained”.

Respondent 3 also mentioned the uncertainty of deliveries but mentioned also that digital visibility has increased in importance. The other respondents did not experience any problems.

6.1.2 Support from the company

The question of what kind of support they have received from Company X for the challenges occurring during the Covid-19 pandemic, the respondents agreed. Since only minor challenges followed the Covid-19 pandemic, not much support was sought after. The primary kind of support received was keeping up the communication about the delivery schedule.

The 1st respondent experienced that company X have held a dialogue and they have tried to accommodate each other. The last years marketing has not been needed and has almost been a strain. People have been angry when the advertised boats have not been readily available. However, they've not specifically asked for any support. The 3rd respondent appreciated the good communication and assurance of delivery promises by company x as support. Respondent 4 was on the same line and said "Yes, with support it's easier to fight the others. Good communication and fast responses. It's the strongest thing you can have". Respondent 2 stated that they did not receive any support.

6.2 Marketing

The question about if the renewed marketing strategy and more visible digital marketing has been noticed and if the reactions has been positive or negative are presented in the following theme.

The answers were overall positive, but broad and not convincing. The results are not easy to notice because the marketing strategy changes happened at same time with the pandemic. A regular year this would have been easier to determine. However, the virtual channels have been key to reach further with new releases when no exhibitions and fairs have been held.

Respondent 1 said, "I guess the changes have been noticed. This has been parallel to the pandemic happening, but sure it has had effect. I take back what I said about marketing not being needed. When it comes to novelties the only chance to present it is trough the social media and locally. But it's still difficult to compare with two regular years. But Company X is more visible on the market now, for

sure". The 2nd respondent was positive. Respondent 3 thought, "For sure, a strong Internet presence of the manufacturer also increases interest regionally". The 4th respondent said: For sure, actually I was the first testing Product B and did the launch video on Product C. The only way to reach the customers is at home. Doing friendly and not aggressive marketing is key.

6.3 Aftermarket

In this theme the reactions to the development of the aftermarket and warranty service and the Dealer-Online service launched to support the dealers are discussed. Also, further development ideas for this service are presented.

6.3.1 Experiences of aftermarket

The overall experience is that the new aftermarket webservice as it is, is a good start. The idea is great, it however needs further developing and constant upkeep for it to be useful. The responses are further presented in this section.

The 1st respondent thought the intention of webservice was very good but there is much to improve for it to work properly. There is much incomplete data and parts missing altogether. They don't have much use of it. It's quite pricy and mostly has low inventory. There are competitors who succeeded better with similar projects. Respondent 2 said shortly "better than before". Respondent 3 answered "Yes, the webservice should be the focus of the manufacturer and the dealer. A constant expansion of all business processes via a CRM backend is certainly beneficial for all parties involved". Respondent 4 thought it's good, "you are able to give fast responses to customers thanks to it."

6.3.2 Development suggestions

The development suggestions of the aftermarket services regard quite many different aspects of the department. One common theme is the response time for inquiries, which should be shortened. Other suggestions below in this section.

Respondent 1 brought up the price point and that the shipping conditions which are a bit special, need to be looked over. It's difficult to give a price to the customer when you don't know the full price before it's delivered. It feels like the department is short-staffed. But when you do get in touch, the people we deal with are very service-oriented. The 2nd respondent pointed out faster responses and if there are known errors on the products, send out information to the dealers. Respondent 3 had two suggestions. Firstly, an annual training for the dealers at the manufacturer about the important innovations of the products and the installed technology. And secondly, when designing the product, already consider a good availability of the purchased components. Some components are exotic in our market. The 4th respondent thought the most important is to get fast responses in the aftermarket business, to show that you are here to solve them, and fast.

6.4 Future

In this theme a discussion about the future is presented. The responses were diverse with different suggestions for future support and collaboration. One common response is the continued communication with dealers and end costumers.

Respondent 1 suggested continued close dialogue and ideas. Then there are other simple details like price lists and brochures, which have been cut down on a lot. "Us in the boating industry, who travel around much and look at trade-in boats and maybe sit in a cockpit in a boat discussing with a customer need to have something to give them. It's another thing in the car industry where the customer most often come to the office and it's easy to print out when needed. It's a silly thing to try to save in on. Also, the price picture is worrying. Right now, it looks like Company X products will increase more in price than its competitors. More dialogue is important and getting some feedback as well, so you know if something is happening too."

The 2nd respondent mentioned support for local marketing and more central marketing. Respondent 3 answered "the current global political events and the resulting dynamic price developments for energy and raw materials are contributing to increased uncertainty among customers. Many customers have postponed their planned orders out of concern for their business development, with the indication that as soon as the situation calms down again, they will tackle the subject of boat purchases again. Therefore, it is important to maintain our communication with customers, to signal stability and consistency.

This means further expanding our digital presence as well as our presence at trade fairs and at the dealer's premises and offering customers the opportunity to see and test the boats in real life. Of course, the topics of the future (environment/energy consumption/sustainability) should be emphasized by the manufacturer and the advantages that already exist now should be highlighted and the future visions in this regard communicated.”

Fourth respondent answered “I think we need to be patient. I think costs will stabilize and maybe fall through over-production. In this moment there should not be a rush to raise prices, because the situation could be totally different in a few months and the companies who now raise prices could be at a disadvantage and end up fighting with the customers about the prices.”

7 DISCUSSION

The previous chapter reviewed the dealer experiences of the last years and how adequately recent changes has been received in their markets. Since the consumer face of the company also needs to cater to the dealers who sell the products to end-users, the dealers' expertise in their market must be taken into consideration. The findings will be discussed in this chapter.

Overall, the changes made in marketing and aftermarket have been noticed and reactions have been positive. The strengthened internet marketing was approved. However, the results of it are difficult to see in all markets, especially because of the Covid-19 pandemic creating a situation out of the ordinary. Since all countries and regions have their own culture of how to talk, behave and do business, there is a risk of having some miscommunication when being in contact with people outside of one's own cultural circle (Cavusgil et al, 2020). Therefore, local marketing together with dealers along with the international brand marketing could further strengthen the brand in different regions. This was also suggested in a few interviews.

In some markets the Covid-19 pandemic brought on a lot of business opportunities and boomed the business, meanwhile there were more struggle in other parts. One thing in common for the markets was the upkeep of communication, which company X got good feedback on. Customer service belong together with communication (Ellis, 2011). There is a common goal in the organization to fulfil customer requests in all departments, not just in the marketing department.

Several development areas were suggested for the aftermarket department. The continuous development work of the aftermarket webservice was a given for all respondents as well as paying attention to response effectiveness on incoming inquiries. In the role of supplier, they need to consider and help their organizational customers to reach their goals, and for this a continuing interaction for a successful relationship between organizations is the key (Ellis, 2011). Regarding the future, a big concern was pricing and what the increasing costs will lead to.

8 CONCLUSION

In the first section the background and research questions were presented. The company x had made some developments in their marketing and aftermarket regimen during the last years. The main aim of this study was to find out if these developments had been noticed on the market and if there were any suggestions for further development. Because the last years also were extraordinary in the sense of the Covid-19 pandemic happening, also this had to be taken into consideration. The aim and objective of the thesis was reached.

In the next section the company X and their background were presented. The presentation of the product line and basic information, and distribution channels. The marketing and aftermarket developments, which the research questions were based on were presented together with the limitations of the study.

The following sections 3 and 4 attend to the literature this study was based on. The international business section included themes containing types of international trade, risks involved in international trade, world globalization, and international marketing. The marketing passage include the differences between B2B and B2C marketing, what relationship marketing involves and distributor options.

Section 5 regard the research methodology of this thesis. Research methodologies and sampling were presented. Semi-structured interviews as a qualitative research method were chosen for the research and finally the research process and its validity and reliability were reviewed.

In the final sections the findings were presented and discussed in themes. An overall positive reaction from the local markets about the changes made in marketing scheme and branding can be noted. Further development on aftermarket services were requested. The good communication between manufacturer and dealers were praised and the importance emphasized. The current global political events and the resulting dynamic price developments for energy and raw materials are contributing to increased uncertainty among customers. For this reason, it is very important to carry out dialogue and marketing planning together with retailers.

Altogether, with the best effort to research the manufacturer and dealer relationship and the chance has been given for the dealers to share their opinions and influence the future business. Due to limitations in resources, this study only scratched the surface of this topic. The hope is that this thesis will be helpful

for the company and give them further ideas to work on for better collaboration forward. There are numerous projects the cooperation with dealers would be helpful in.

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APPENDIX 1

Questions for interviews

1. In which country is your store located?
2. What are your market areas?
3. How many years have you been selling on the three brands?
4. What percentage of total sales are on the three brands?
5. How has the extraordinary time of the Covid-19 pandemic affected your business?
6. What challenges did the Covid 19 pandemic bring?
7. What kind of support did you receive from company x for the changes caused by the pandemic and how to deal with them?
8. Did you get support from engine suppliers and other manufacturers?
9. During the pandemic, company X digitally launched three different boat models
 - 2020 product A
 - 2021 product B
 - 2022 product Cand strengthened its presence and marketing and brand visibility in social media and digital channels. Visibility increased to more than 9 million contacts in 2020-2022.
- Do you think this will increase the interest of the products in your area?
10. Company X developed aftermarket customer service and started the webservice to support dealers.
 - Have you experienced that an electronic tool has advantages in your work?
11. Do you have any for the development of aftermarket and warranty services?
12. The world political situation has brought more challenges during the last year. The strong price increase and inflation of electricity, fuel, components, boat transport and raw materials have caused a new crisis situation throughout Europe.
 - What kind of support do you think would help in this situation and in the future?