

Increasing customer value during the customer journey in B2B eCommerce

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Tiivistelmä

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Työn nimi Asiakasarvon lisääminen asiakaspolun aikana B2B-verkkokaupassa		
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Tiivistelmä <p>Opinnäytetyö käsittelee asiakkaiden kokemaa arvoa asiakaspolun aikana B2B-verkkokaupassa. Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli selvittää, miten case-yrityksen asiakkaiden kokemaa arvoa voidaan lisätä asiakaspolun aikana B2B-verkkokaupan avulla ja millaiset palvelut ja ominaisuudet B2B-verkkokauppa alustassa lisäävät asiakkaan kokemaa arvoa.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen teoriaosuudessa käsitellään yleisesti asiakasarvoa, -kokemusta, -polkua ja digitaalista asiakasarvoa sekä näihin liittyviä tekijöitä, pitäen samalla mielessä case-yrityksen asiakassegmentit.</p> <p>Empiirinen osuus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisia menetelmiä hyödyntäen ja tutkimusaineisto on kerätty sähköisesti teemahaastatteluiden avulla, Haastatteluissa haastateltiin toimeksiantajanyrityksen asiakkaita, jotka käyttävät yrityksen nykyistä asiakasportaalia. Haastatteluista saadut aineistot analysoitiin aineistolähtöisellä sisältöanalyysi menetelmällä. Haastattelutuloksista saatiin kattavasti tietoa asiakkaille arvoa lisäävistä ominaisuuksista ja palveluista. Tulosten avulla syntyi konkreettisia kehitysideoita, joita nykyiseen asiakasportaaliin voidaan lisätä ja kasvattaa asiakkaiden kokemaa arvoa.</p>		
Asiasanat B2B-verkkokauppa, asiakasarvo, asiakaskokemus, asiakaspolku, digitaalinen asiakaskokemus		

Abstract

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Abstract <p>The thesis focuses on the value perceived by customers during the customer journey in B2B eCommerce. The purpose of the research was to find out how the value experienced by the customers of the case company can be increased during the customer journey through B2B eCommerce and what kind of services and features in the B2B eCommerce platform increase the value experienced by the customer.</p> <p>The theoretical part of the study deals with customer value, customer experience, customer journey and digital customer value in general and related factors, while keeping in mind the customer segments of the case company.</p> <p>The empirical part was carried out using qualitative methods and the research data was collected electronically through thematic interviews with customers of the case company who use the company's current customer portal. The data obtained from the interviews was analyzed using a content analysis method based on a data approach. The results of the interviews provided comprehensive information on value-added features and services for customers. The results provided concrete ideas for improvements that could be added to the current customer portal to increase the value experienced by customers.</p>		
Keywords B2B eCommerce, Customer value, Customer experience, Customer journey, Digital customer experience		

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Digitalization and globalization are often considered as major trends that are shaping our world. Digitalization is a still relatively new phenomenon, as its effects have been clearly visible for about two decades (TEM 2015, 9). Over the past two decades, the combination of these effects has accelerated their impact leading to the rise of the digital economy. This shift has driven consumer demands to a level that intensifies competition between companies.

In the business to customer (B2C) market the effects of digitalization are already widely integrated. Also, in the business to business (B2B) market, digitalization and globalization have led to a service oriented Finland within manufacturing sectors (Valtionneuvoston kanslia 2017, 14). Consequently, companies are crafting strategies to thrive in today's environment marked by self-service models, the expansion of eCommerce and increasing automation.

The widespread adoption of digitalization shifts in marketing and media landscapes and the reinforcement of consumer culture collectively shape the business landscape with an impact on all organizations (Filenius 2015, 31). Customer experience now holds importance as a key driver that establishes a new standard for brand value. In this age of customer centricity companies that can consistently exceed their customers' expectations will distinguish themselves from competitors and achieve business outcomes. To surpass customer expectations, it is essential to focus on managing customer experience. Exceeding customer expectations requires holistic customer experience management and leadership. (Löytänä & Korhikoski 2014, 8.) Studies highlight the significance of inter-organizational information systems, particularly electronic data interchange in enhancing business process efficiency and overall organizational performance (Subramaniam & Shaw 2002, 24).

Electronic data processing and communication improves the timeliness and accuracy of information, enabling better planning and management of assets such as inventories. The use of information technology in processes increases their quality, mainly at the operational level, leading to lower costs, higher productivity, and improved quality. (Subramaniam & Shaw 2002, 24.)

It is expected that the introduction of web-based applications for B2B eCommerce will contribute to more effective coordination between organizations and deeper B2B

relationships. The transaction cost reductions and competitive sourcing opportunities through B2B eCommerce offer concrete benefits to companies. (Subramaniam & Shaw 2002, 19.)

This study was commissioned by company X, an international forest industry company producing packaging solutions, and is limited to Finnish corporate customers. The purpose of the study is to investigate how the company X's B2B eCommerce can be used to increase the customer's perceived value during the customer journey. The aim of the research part is to find out, through interviews, how business customers see the current eCommerce solution, which factors they perceive as creating value and which new services or features might support or increase the perceived value.

As a result of the thesis, new and possibly already known data will be generated, which will provide valuable information that company X can use in the future.

1.2 Objectives, research questions and limitations

The thesis explores how to increase the value experienced by the customer during the customer journey through B2B eCommerce. The aim of the research is to use qualitative research to gain insights into how B2B eCommerce could be used to increase the value experienced by customers and what features or services in the eCommerce create the most value for the different customer segments of the client company. Qualitative research often seeks to answer how and what questions (Juhila 2021).

The study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. How could a B2B eCommerce platform add value for customers, during the customer journey?
2. What services and features in a B2B eCommerce platform could add value for customers?

The study is limited to the Company X's customers in Finland. The study examines different customer segments, which are divided into A, B, C and D segments.

The A and B segments are typically the most productive customers, with the largest volumes, long contracts, and strategic partner status. For them, the research aims to provide information on what information or services the client company could provide that would be of interest to them.

The C and D segments are more targeted, these customers are typically lower volume. There are also large volume customers, but they have other suppliers in addition to the

contractor. For them, the study aims to provide insights into how the online store could serve them better, which would improve also internal efficiency by increasing automation and self-service options.

allow customer service coordinators to spend more time not having to manually enter orders.

1.3 Theoretical framework and concepts

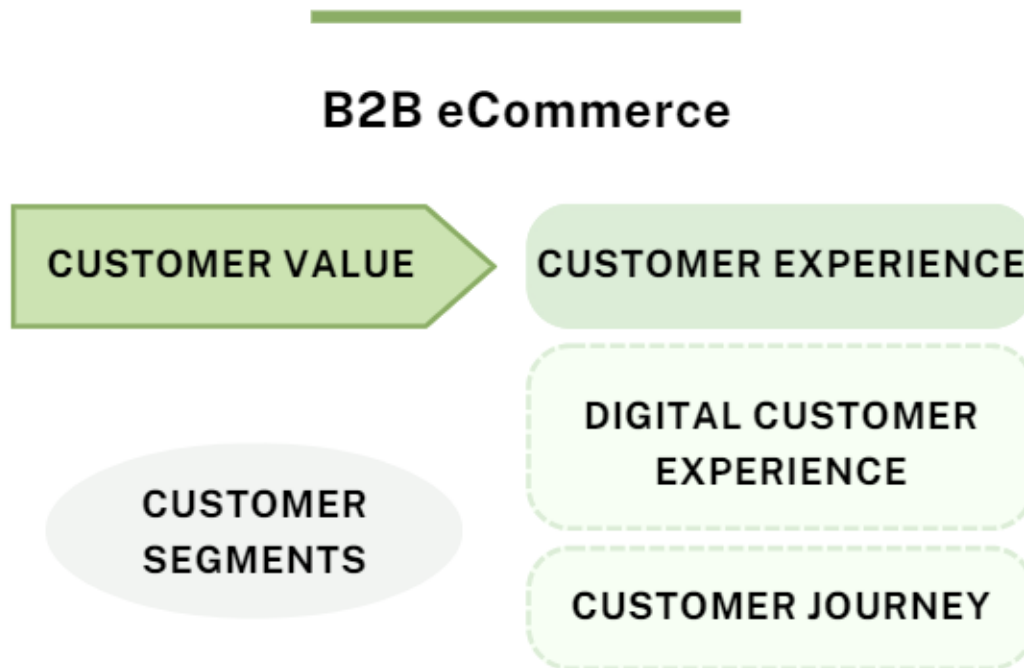


Figure 1. Theoretical framework

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of the thesis. It is divided into four parts: B2B eCommerce, customer value, thirdly customer experience, digital experience, and customer journey and fourthly customer segments. The first section looks at customer value and customer experience in general, followed by a more detailed look at the digital experience and customer journey and the factors that influence them.

The second theoretical part focuses on eCommerce from a B2B perspective. The purpose and functions of eCommerce in general are examined, with a focus on customer value, user experience and satisfaction, keeping in mind the fourth topic, the different customer segments.

Concepts:**B2B eCommerce**

B2B eCommerce allows the participants in the supply chain to purchase and sell products as well as exchange information (Sila, 2013).

Customer Value

The term "value" has various interpretations, but in the context of customer value, it refers to how a customer perceives the worth of a service or product in comparison to other options. In this sense, value indicates whether the customer perceives that they have obtained more benefits or services than what they have been paying for (Mahajan, 2020).

Customer Experience

Customer experience is a much talked about concept, but there is no unambiguous explanation of the term. According to Pine and Gilmore (1998), customer experience is defined as the reflection of the offers that companies deliver and manage. At the same time, it is defined that customer experience is the reactions of customers to their interactions with the firm (Homburg et al. 2015; Lemon & Verhoef 2016; Meyer & Schwager 2007).

Digital Customer Experience

A digital customer experience is the result of a customer using any digitally enabled service on a terminal device to perform a desired action or part of a desired action (Filenius 2015, 30).

Customer Journey

The customer journey is a methodology for exploring and understanding service processes from the customer's perspective (Halvorsrud et al. 2016). It includes all the activities and events that are part of the service provision (Zomerdijk and Voss 2010).

Customer Segments

Customer segmentation is based on the identification of key differentiating elements that separate customers into groups that can be targeted (TechTarget).

1.4 Structure and research methodology

The thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter is the introduction, which describes the background, objectives, methodology and defines the research questions. The

introduction also defines the scope of the study, the theoretical framework, the concepts and the structure of the study. The second chapter introduces the client and the B2B online store that is the subject of the study. The third chapter presents the literature review of the study. Chapter three deals with the customer journey, experience, and value and the purpose, requirements, and benefits of B2B eCommerce in general. Chapter four presents the data collection and discusses the results of the e-survey using a data-driven content analysis method. The chapter also summarises the identified areas of development and pain points in a clear textual format and presents the answers to the research questions. The final chapter discusses the researcher's own learning, the reliability of the research and the success of the thesis process. The chapter ends with a summary.

This research is a qualitative case study, carried out for Company X. Case studies typically examine a single case, event, situation or set of cases selected in advance for study, with a general interest in processes (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006c; Vilka 2021). The empirical data is collected using a wide range of domestic and international research materials. The qualitative research method was chosen because the aim of the research is to understand and explain the behaviour of an individual or a group through qualities (Vilkka 2021).

Semi-structured interviews, i.e. thematic interviews, have been used as the data collection method, considering the wishes of company X, the theoretical framework and the researcher's own perspectives. The interviews were conducted electronically, and the survey questions are presented in Annex 1. The survey consists of 24 or 26 questions, depending on the interviewee's answers, combining a score of 1-10 (1=not at all interested/not at all satisfied, 10=very interested/very satisfied), and open-ended questions. In the open questions, the respondent gives a free-form qualitative assessment of his/her previous response. The chosen data collection method also has the advantage that the researcher is in constant interaction with the interviewees and has the opportunity to ask follow-up questions and clarifications.

The empirical data has been analysed using the content analysis method, which is a common method of data analysis in qualitative research. The empirical data are used to look for differences and similarities, and the aim is to use details to create an understandable overall picture of the topic under study. The data guides the analysis, and the relevant issues are highlighted from the data and presented in a concise way without the theoretical knowledge influencing the points that emerge from the data (Leinonen 2018).

2 Commissioning company

2.1 Company X

The target organisation X is an internationally operating forest industry company with a strong position in Europe that manufactures packaging solutions.

Since the beginning of the year, Company X has organized two internal workshops that have focused on the eCommerce solution. These workshops were organized by an external party. From this point forward in the research, Company X's eCommerce will be referred to as the *customer portal*.

2.2 B2B eCommerce solution

The target organization X has a web-based customer portal, which was first implemented about 4 years ago. It is currently used in several countries in Northern and Central Europe. It allows to place orders, check order status, credit and payment information and purchase history (Company X).

The web-based system is directly integrated with the target organization's ERP system, which streamlines ordering processes and allows customer service coordinators to process orders and check capacities and logistics. Customers can easily navigate the product range and place orders.

The system currently includes the following (functionalities):

Login page

The customer can log in with an email and password and change the password if they have forgotten it.

Default tab bar

Default tab bar is available on every page and Figure 2 illustrates what it looks like.

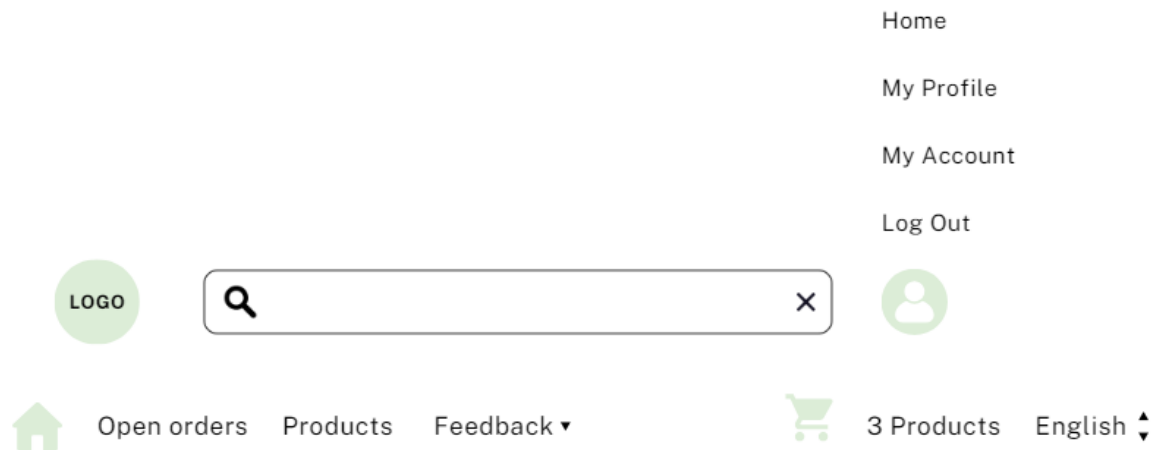


Figure 2. Default tab bar. (adapted Company X 2024)

Home page

The front page features an optional marketing banner, which can consist of one or more slides and automatically change between them. The sequence and rolling frequency of the slides can be set separately. The front page also contains open orders, in addition to a separate tab.

Open orders

The customer has the possibility to view his open orders, which can be limited by production lot. Orders can be viewed in more detail by clicking on the order number.

Additional functions related to orders

It is possible to copy individual order lines to the shopping cart, whereby the product, quantity and delivery address are inherited from the order line when copied. It is also possible for the customer to ask questions about a specific order, so that support can directly see the information needed to answer the question.

Global search

The search function allows results to be retrieved from the product catalogue and from all orders according to search criteria. The search criteria are description, product number, customer reference and sales reference.

Product catalogue

The customer has the possibility to view products, which can be narrowed down by the production plant and by their own search criteria. The search criteria set by the customer are searched by product number and product/model name. The product catalogue also

has a dedicated section for the customer's own favourite products, which is always at the top of the page.

Product card

The customer can explore each product more thoroughly through the product card. It displays essential information such as dimensions, colors, product number, and available stock balance. Prices and order history are also visible on the product card, and previous orders can be easily copied to the shopping cart.

New architectural order

Only visible if the customer has been granted archiving rights in customer portal. It is possible for the client to set the attributes of the archiving order itself according to the validation rules.

Shopping cart

In the shopping cart, the customer can edit the order, e.g. change the quantity of the product, delete order lines or set the delivery address and date. The delivery address can be automatically set to the same for each line but can also be set at order line level. The shopping cart has the same pricing level rules as the product card page, i.e. it is not possible to set a quantity for a customer that is lower than the lowest pricing level of the product. If an amount is set lower than this, the order cannot be placed. Product quantity, delivery address and delivery dates are also set as mandatory fields. The customer cannot place an order if these fields are left blank.

When placing an order, the system locks the shopping cart view with the first click (the customer is asked to double-check the contents ordered) and with the second click the order is sent to the company placing the order.

My account

The customer can view information on the credit limit and balance, as well as information on overdue payments on the page. The profile information comes (mirrored) directly from the contractor's ERP system.

Feedback

The customer can send feedback directly via the feedback page by filling in the form provided. Different types of feedback are available: general feedback, technical problems, development ideas and others. In the form, Title and Description are mandatory fields. If necessary, a product and/or order reference can be added to the feedback form to

facilitate the processing of the feedback. The reply to the feedback will be sent to the customer's e-mail address.

In case of incidents, change management and major accidents, there are well-defined processes in the background on how to deal with different situations.

3 Customers in B2B eCommerce

3.1 Customer journey

Lemon and Verhoef (2016) describe the customer experience as the customer's "journey" with the company during the purchase process, which includes several different touch points. Figure 3 illustrates their model of the customer journey and experience process. The customer experience process starts with the pre-purchase phase, including the search for services or products, and continues through to the purchase and post-purchase phases. This process is influenced by previous events experienced by the customer, such as purchases and external factors. At each stage of the process, customers encounter several touch points, only some of them under the control of the company. The process is also not the same for all customers, as they may move back and forth along the customer journey or in the order they choose.

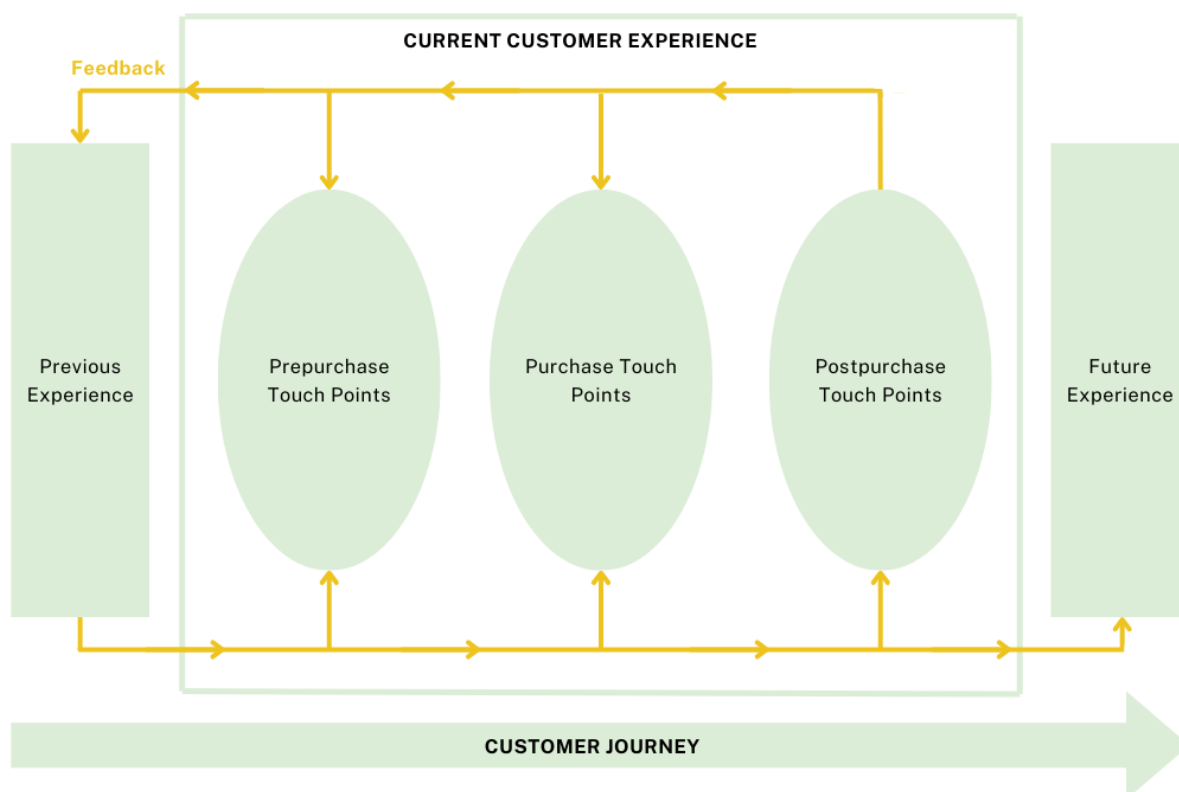


Figure 3. Process Model for Customer Journey and Experience. (adapted Lemon & Verhoef 2016, 77)

The pre-purchase stage is the first stage of the process, which involves identifying needs and searching for and considering products or services. The buying process includes all

interactions with the company during the buying process. The purchase transaction is also where the decision to purchase is made and the item to be purchased is ordered and paid for. Lastly, the post-purchase stage combines use and consumption, commitment, and possible need for additional service. (Lemon & Verhoef 2016, 76.)

Customer journey is used as a strategic tool in service design process, to analyze customer behavior during the process and to understand their emotions. As well as enabling a deeper understanding of customer motivations and issues during the journey. (Zomerdijk & Voss 2010.)

3.2 Customer experience

The concept of customer experience has taken centre stage in business strategy since the early 2000s, but it lacks a single, established definition. According to Löytänä and Korteso (2011, 1.1), it describes the sum of customer experiences, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes towards a company's activities; it is, as the name suggests, an experience, not a rational decision. Lemon and Verhoef (2016, 70) describe customer experience as a multidimensional concept that includes the customer's cognitive, or information processing, reactions. In addition, the holistic experience focuses on the behavioral, emotional, social, and sensory reactions of the customer to the company's offerings throughout their shopping journey.

From a business perspective, according to Filenius (2015, 31), there are three critical issues related to customer experience. First, it is important to identify which concrete factors constitute the customer experience and what the company can affect. Second, the company needs to understand the value of a good customer experience, including customer loyalty and active customer referrals. Thirdly, the disadvantages of failure, such as loss of customers and negative publicity, are worth noting. These aspects underline the importance of customer experience for the success of a company, especially in the long term.

Customer experience is therefore a versatile concept that is all about emotions (Hague & Hague 2023, 5). A company's ability to deliver positive customer experiences largely determines its ability to develop and retain strong customer relationships and achieve a more competitive advantage in the market.

It is important to recognize that while technology has evolved rapidly, the basic principles of customer experience development have remained unchanged. Figure 4 presents Gerdt and Eskelinen's (2018, 15) model of the key elements of customer experience development.

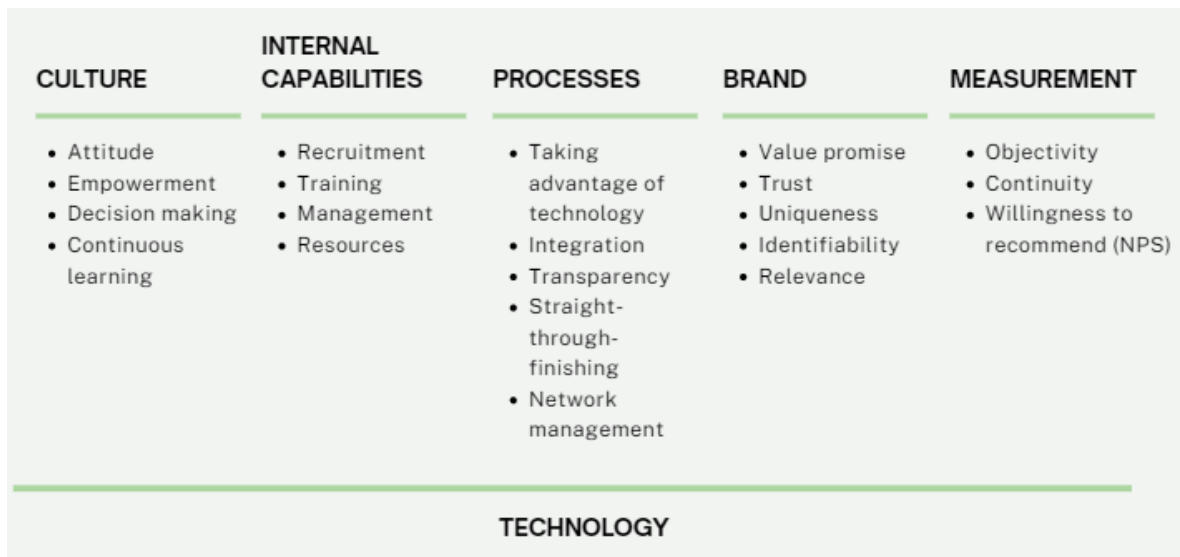


Figure 4. Elements of customer experience development. (adapted Gerdt & Eskelinen 2018)

The key to improving customer experience is a holistic approach that includes looking at corporate culture, internal capabilities, processes, brand, and performance measurement. The role of technology in improving these areas has become more important, but the essence of technology has not changed. What is important is the internal processes within the company, which are expected to become more efficient, error-free and integrable. The importance of training, strategic recruitment, and skilled leadership in ensuring internal capacity is underlined in the fast pace of change. Willingness to change is an essential factor alongside skills. Customer experience processes also include integration between communication channels, continuous service availability, fast response times, use of background information and proactivity in after-sales and follow-up services.

3.3 Digital customer experience

The digital customer experience is created when a customer uses any device where the service is digitally produced to perform the operation or part of the operation they want. A great digital customer experience is achieved when the customer's needs are accurately comprehended, processes are crafted to meet those needs, systems back these process, and the usability of the online service reflects an accurate understanding of customer behavior. (Filenius 2015, 30.)

Both Filenius (2015, 78) and Jiang, Yang and Jun (2013, 200) present the formation of a digital customer experience as shown in Figure 5. In her study, Jiang highlights the term

"convenience" as the goal of each stage. Using digital services should be easy and convenient for the customer. The first step in the customer experience process, accessibility, means being able to access the service in all possible situations and circumstances. The second element, search, and discovery, concerns the findability of services and of the company. The third factor is selection and decision making, which means choosing the right product and service from a range of alternatives. The fourth is transaction, which refers to making a purchase, order, confirmation, or other action. The fifth factor is the introduction, which refers to the deployment of the service after the purchase transaction. The sixth and final factor is post-purchase activities, which refers to post-deployment support with the product and service and customer relationship management.



Figure 5. Digital customer experience at different stages of the service process (adapted from Filenius 2015, 78)

The development of digital services often tries to solve too many issues in one attempt, which can lead to confusing websites where it is difficult for users to find what they are searching for, leaving a significant number of errors and omissions in the services themselves. It would be better to focus on one issue at a time as best as possible, aiming for high quality and taking into consideration customer feedback. It's the little details that count. (Filenius 2015, 36.)

3.4 Customer value

Customer value is often described as a trade-off between sacrifices and benefits, or the difference between the two (Woodruff 1997; Zeithaml 1998). Customer value can be seen as an overall measure of a company's performance, assessing how the promised benefits match the benefits received by the customer company (Zeithaml 1998). Andersson et al. (2008, 50) define customer value in terms of the economic, service, technical, and social benefits that a company obtains in relation to the cost it pays for what it offers in the market.

The key idea behind customer experience management is to create value for the customer. However, it is essential to understand that the customer creates this value, just as they create their customer experience. By their actions or products, companies "only" create the conditions that enable value to be created. The customer himself, through his own actions, creates the value. (Löytänä & Korhonen 2014, 18.)

Löytänä and Korhonen (2014, 18-20) divide the value created for the customer into four categories according to Figure 6:

Economic value

The most straightforward and clear to perceive. The focus is on the lowest possible cost to the customer, which can be achieved through offers and discounts. Value is easiest to replicate from a competitive point of view for businesses.

Emotional value

The emotional experience of the customer, the service or product allows the customer to feel something. With a strong focus on personalising products or services for different customers, this allows for unique experiences that can serve as a competitive advantage. Requires holistic and committed customer experience management and long-term work.

Operational value

Refers to the functional performance of a service or product, which translates into time and effort savings for the customer. From a competitive point of view, operational value is easy for companies to replicate but often difficult to maintain or develop further.

Symbolic value

Usually associated with images and brands, and to the expressed personality of the customer and thus perceived benefits. The focus is often on tribalism, where the customer experiences a strong feeling of belonging with other users of the service or product. From a business competitiveness point of view, in the age of the customer, the brand is rarely effective anymore.

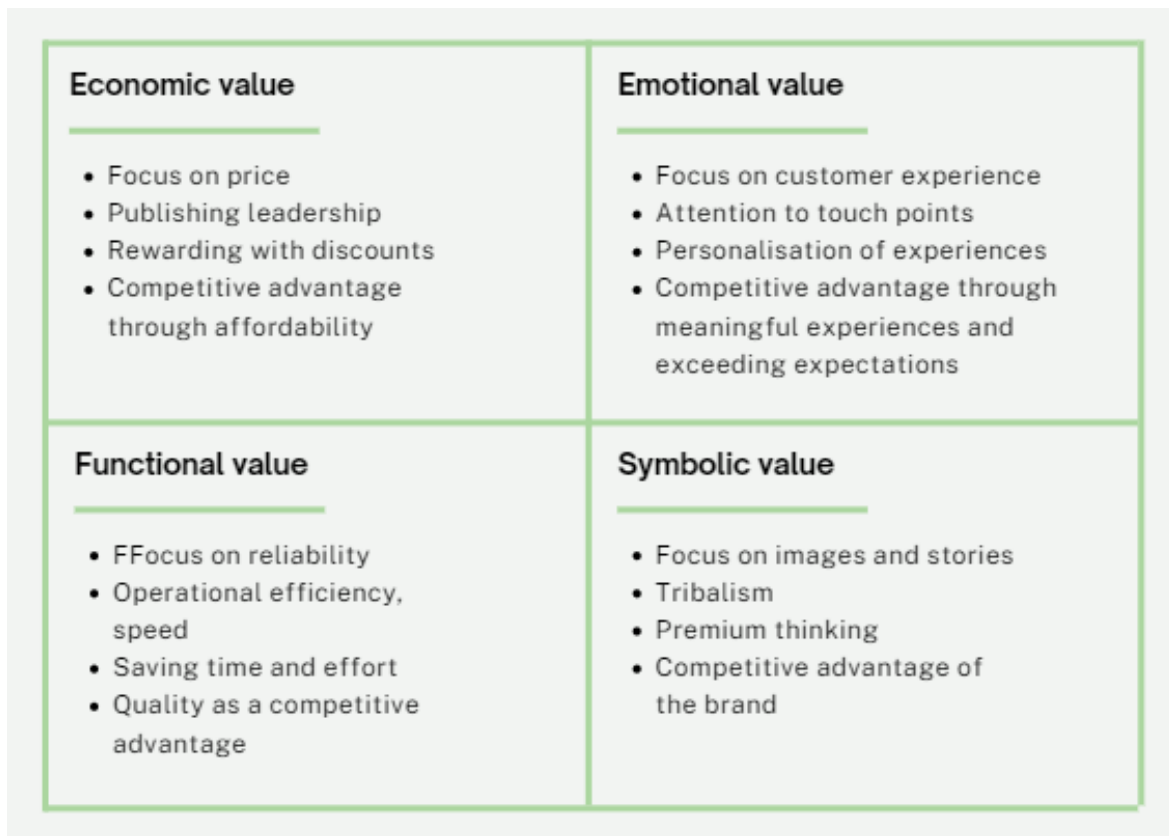


Figure 6. Forms of value created for the customer (adapted from Löytänä & Korkiakoski 2014)

In the age of the customer, emotional values become increasingly important, as it is easy to copy other values and therefore more difficult to compete with other values (Löytänä & Korkiakoski 2014, 20). When customers' experiences are positive and seamless, their loyalty to the company increases, which in turn improves the value of the customer relationship lifecycle in the long term (Filenius 2015, 30).

3.5 Segmentation

Segmentation refers to the process of grouping customers into distinct segments based on their needs, buying behavior and preferences. The purpose of segmentation is to target customers in the same segment with measures that take account of the segment's characteristics. This aims to meet the needs of these customers and to increase the quality and efficiency of the company's operations (Aarnikoivu 2005, 41). Crittenden, V. L. et al. (2002) also highlight the importance of segmentation in their study, particularly in relation to the productivity of a company's strategy. Segmentation allows for precise

targeting of marketing activities to different segments, which can increase competitiveness.

4 Purpose & function of B2B eCommerce

eCommerce is a concept where products, services and information are exchanged, sold, or bought using computer networks, including the internet. This involves the electronic exchange of business information without the need for paper, utilizing technologies like electronic data interchange (EDI) and similar technologies. eCommerce systems are aiming to replace paper-based processes with quicker, more cost-efficient, and reliable automated communications. (Mourya & Gupta 2015, 1.2.)

eCommerce takes many different forms, but the study focuses on business-to-business eCommerce as shown in Figure 7. B2B eCommerce describes commerce that takes place over the internet between businesses, such as manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers, replacing traditional forms of commerce such as telephone, mail, or face-to-face meetings. In the past, EDI implementations were based on direct links between businesses, but today the Internet is the most common tool for establishing these links. (Mourya & Gupta 2015, 2.4.)

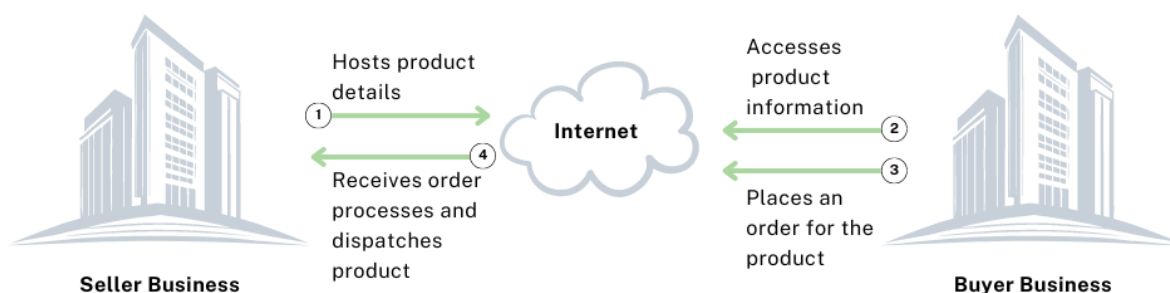


Figure 7. B2B eCommerce model (adapted from Mourya & Gupta 2015, 2.4)

eCommerce also offers several benefits that allow companies to optimize their operations, improve customer relationships and grow their business in a competitive environment. eCommerce platforms provide personalized user experiences, facilitate ordering processes, and offer real-time information on product availability and delivery, which increase customer satisfaction and loyalty. Platforms also offer the opportunity for better business management. A variety of management tools enable centralized management of

orders, inventory, customer relationships and financial data. This helps to create a holistic view. (Mourya & Gupta 2015, 2.5.)

4.1 Needs of eCommerce in general

In order for an online store to serve customers in the most efficient way possible, website development must be in order. Mourya and Gupta (2015) have listed five common eCommerce basics in Figure 8 to keep in mind.

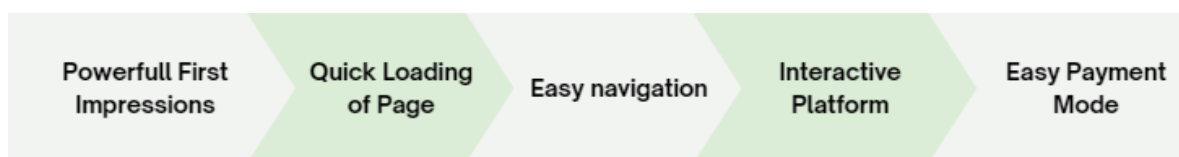


Figure 8. Needs of eCommerce (adapted from Mourya & Gupta 2015, 1.7)

The first impression is important to capture the visitor's attention so that the visitor becomes a customer. To achieve this, the first page should be attractive enough and the website should provide the visitor with enough information. However, the site should load quickly, which means that too many elements should not be included so that it becomes slow or unclear. The site should be quick to load and quick to use, with simple navigation and site structure. It is important to listen to customers and this can be facilitated by a range of interactive features that allow customers to leave comments, questions, feedback or make a complaint, for example. The payment process is also essential for the user experience and should be as quick and simple as possible. (Mourya & Gupta 2015, 1.7.)

4.2 Advantages of eCommerce for supplier and buyer

At a general level, it is easy to see the advantages of eCommerce compared to traditional trading. With eCommerce, buying and selling can take place anywhere and anytime 24/7, including unlimited target markets. Buying and selling has been made convenient, consumers don't even have to leave their homes. Sellers, on the other hand, do not have to have a shop, as long as they can stock the product, that's enough. Speed is one of the important eCommerce needs but also advantages, messages and transactions can be completed almost instantly. eCommerce also brings with it increased marketing tools. No longer relying on word of mouth, business cards or print advertising, email newsletters, websites, search engine advertising and many other marketing tools are now available to increase sales. (Mourya & Gupta 2015, 1.9.)

eCommerce also has many benefits for organisations, most of the benefits at the general level also apply but from an organisational perspective there are even more benefits to be gained. One is the tracking of consumer buying habits and interests, which allows suppliers to personalise offers to consumers' individual needs and maintain their relationship with customers at any time, without time constraints. Overall cost savings can be made because eCommerce significantly reduces the need to generate, process, share, store, and access paper information. Savings can also be seen on the communications side. Beyond all this, there are additional benefits such as enhanced corporate reputation, more efficient processes, faster access to data, better customer service, shorter delivery and lead times, new partners, and operational flexibility. (Mourya & Gupta 2015, 1.11.)

From the perspective of buying companies, the use of a web based system influences four main B2B activities: searching, order management, monitoring and control, and coordination. Offering improved search facilities, faster and more precise handling, real-time and enriched support for media, and low coordination and communication costs. (Subramaniam & Shaw 2002, 25.)

When placing a traditional order, the buyer often needs to exchange information and communicate with the supplier before placing the order. A web based purchasing system offers a real time flow of information, which makes coordination between supplier and buyer more cost-effective, speeding up problem resolution and reducing order lead times. (Subramaniam & Shaw 2002, 26.) In traditional ordering, day-to-day tasks such as monitoring product availability and pricing are left to sales representatives. eCommerce frees people from day-to-day tasks, allowing them to focus on customer management and strategy.

4.3 The value of eCommerce for customer

Tzavlopoulos et al. (2019) report in their study that the comprehensive quality of a website correlates positively and significantly with customer perceived value, loyalty and satisfaction, while showing a negative correlation with perceived risk. Different aspects of website quality, such as usability, design, responsiveness, and security were found to improve perceived value. In addition, ease of use, responsiveness and personalisation increase overall consumer satisfaction. Overall, a high quality website increases customer satisfaction and perceived value, reduces perceived risk and positively influences consumers' desired behaviour, as reflected in customer loyalty.

4.3.1 Customer satisfaction in eCommerce

User satisfaction refers to the experience of users in terms of how well the system fulfills their business requirements. This means more than just delivering the desired product. User satisfaction is also affected by the system's ability to meet user demands. Errors in the process and slowness of the system reduce user satisfaction. In the pursuit of improvement, for example, access to data with minimal effort, quick resolution of complaints and user-friendly systems are examples of ways in which the user-friendliness of a web-based system can be improved. (Subramaniam & Shaw 2002, 28.)

4.3.2 Usability in eCommerce

Nielsen (2012) describes usability as a qualitative characteristic that can be used to measure the ease of use of user interfaces. Usability is referred to as methods to improve usability during the design processes. Usability can be divided into five categories:

- Learnability: how easy it is to perform simple tasks the first time you encounter them on a website or in an application.
- Efficiency: How quickly a user can complete a task once they have learned the design of the application.
- Memorability: how easily users can recall their skills when they return after a long period of time.
- Errors: how many and how serious errors users make, and how easily they recover from errors.
- Satisfaction: how pleasant it is to use.

In addition to these five categories, there are other important features, the most important being utility. This refers to whether the site has everything a user is looking for or needs. Usability and utility are equal in terms of how a site performs. (Nielsen 2012.)

4.3.3 Marketing in eCommerce

eCommerce brings new and affordable ways to market your products and your business. However, it must be remembered that successful marketing requires a thorough understanding of the target audience, their pain points, and the value that the company offers to customers. By regularly monitoring and adapting your marketing strategy, you can potentially stay one step ahead of your competitors.

A variety of possible B2B eCommerce strategies include:

- Content marketing: delivering informative content, such as guides or articles, to customers. This helps businesses differentiate their brand and value from other competitors and drives engagement across all channels.
- Email marketing: a powerful tool, when used correctly, allows you to develop and maintain relationships with potential and existing customers. By segmenting emails based on customer behavior, preferences, and demographics to provide them with valuable content.
- Tailoring and Account-Based Marketing (ABM): a tool for personalized experiences, product recommendations and customer relationship management, designed to target messages or offers to specific customer segments by leveraging customer data. (SalesForce.)

4.3.4 Information quality in eCommerce

Park and Kim (2003) define the quality of information provided by websites in terms of customers' experience of how they experience the quality of the information they receive on the website. Guo et al. (2012) highlights that the quality of information offered by websites is often related to the relevance, accuracy, timeliness, and utility of the information provided. Liu et al. (2008) discovered in their study that enhanced information quality enhances customer satisfaction in online shopping. They assessed information quality based on four different perspectives: understandability, accuracy, comprehensiveness, and relevance. The study also found that the quality of information plays an important role in increasing customer satisfaction.

5 Interviews and results

5.1 Data collection and analysis

The interviews were conducted with customers of case company X using a semi-structured thematic interview. The target was to have 10 interviewees but due to the timeframe of the study and for reasons beyond the control of the researcher, the target was not met, and the total number of interviewees was 5. All of them belonged to the B customer segment. The interview consisted of opinion and open questions and lasted approximately an hour, each interview was recorded but not transcribed in detail. The researcher translated the comments from Finnish into English, trying to be as accurate as possible.

The interviews were conducted as individual interviews using the Microsoft Teams application. Each interviewee gave permission to record the conversations for later transcription. The interviews were supported by a questionnaire created using Google Forms, which allowed for a summary of the open-ended questions and generally facilitated data analysis and interpretation of the results. The interview framework contained themes related to the creation of customer value in B2B eCommerce. Interviewees showed interest in the study as soon as they received the cover letter and were generally satisfied with the development of customer portal by Company X. Two of the interviewees also showed interest in being pilot users of potential new features.

It is good that the customer portal is being developed further and to identify the needs of customers.

Hopefully I can get the customer portal the way I want it.

The data collection method used was semi-structured interviews, i.e. thematic interviews, which considered the wishes of Company X, the theoretical framework and the researcher's own perspectives. The interviews were conducted electronically, and the questions are presented in Annex 2. The number of questions in the survey is 24 or 26, depending on the interviewee's answers. The questions combine a rating of 1-10 (1=not at all interested/not at all satisfied, 10=very interested/very satisfied), and open questions. In open questions, the respondent gives a free-form qualitative assessment of his/her previous answer. Another advantage of the chosen data collection method is that the researcher is in constant interaction with the interviewees and can ask follow-up questions and clarifications.

The data has been analyzed using the content analysis method, which is a common method of content analysis in qualitative research. The aim is to look for differences and similarities in the data and to use the details to create an understandable overall picture of the topic under study. The data guides the analysis, and the relevant issues are highlighted and summarized without the theoretical knowledge influencing the issues that emerge from the data (Leinonen 2018).

5.2 Use of Company X's B2B customer portal

The interviewees were from different sized companies, but this did not affect the answers. Two of them enter all their orders through the customer portal and one only part of the orders.

New products always first as a PDF order, sometimes products are not found in the customer portal I have to trust the products I order to make sure the product is the right one.

The other two only use the customer portal to search and verify information, and therefore do not order products through the customer portal at all.

I do not place purchase orders through the customer portal because I have to place the purchase order anyway in our ERP system anyway, to keep the stock balances etc up to date. This automatically generates a purchase order pdf for us which is faster to just email to customer service than to start making a separate purchase order for each purchase line in the customer portal.

Some of the orders are individual orders, some are joint orders. For new products, the size of joint runs varies. There is more information on order delivery and staging. We will put the aggregated orders/joint runs to the contact person who will process the orders further.

Interviewees' ordering pace varied from daily, to every couple of months. Two of them order boxes only, one is a sheet customer and the other two order both product groups.

5.2.1 Usability in customer portal

The interviews revealed that the current customer portal is generally clear and simple. In particular, the survey highlighted the ease of use and its importance for the value perceived by customers.

A good and simple system, especially in terms of the fact that the user does not need to attend any massive training to learn how to use the so-called "day-to-day" tool. Other platforms may have more information, graphs, etc. but I personally prefer ease of use to endlessly adding features.

Despite the ease of use, opinions were divided on the overall functionality of the customer portal. Satisfaction with the overall functionality was measured on a scale of 1-10 (1= not at all satisfied, 10= very satisfied), with 60 % of respondents rating it 9, 20 % 5 and 20 % 1. It can be seen that more than half of the users of the portal are almost very satisfied with the overall functionality. However, there is room for improvement and, in particular, the timeliness and relevance of the information available on the customer portal was highlighted.

The login to the customer portal is currently very functional and easy to use. All interviewees were at least satisfied, if not very satisfied, with the login and there were no complaints about this feature.

5.2.2 Deployment and contact in customer portal

The interviews also explored user satisfaction with the implementation of the customer portal. None of the interviewees had been involved in the initial deployment, but they could still say that they had been informed about the customer portal by the salespeople or account managers at the time. Invitation links and user IDs have come quickly, and this is appreciated.

None of the interviewees were aware of a customer portal presentation given by sales. This may be because they were not in their current role when the presentation was given or because Company X did not give a presentation to the customers concerned at all. The answers regarding satisfaction with the presentation are therefore not reliable, as none of the interviewees had experience of the presentation.

The customer portal provides the possibility to contact customer service regarding, for example, feedback, comments, questions, or complaints. This feature was completely new to 80 % of the interviewees and they were therefore unable to comment on the value or usability of the feature. However, they were excited to learn something new during the interview. One interviewee was aware of the feature but had never used it.

Same thing, good feature but not used so far. But so far I have been using email for all messaging which has worked quite well from the buyer's point of view and I don't know if it would be useful to take messaging to the customer portal.

In general, interviewees were satisfied with the email communication with the contact persons of Company X. Accessibility is good on a day-to-day basis and the telephone is used for urgent matters, and customers are also satisfied with its availability.

5.2.3 Sales and marketing in customer portal

In the sales and marketing area, the interest, and opinions of customers in the potential added value of various new features in the customer portal were investigated. As mentioned in the theory section, eCommerce can also be used as a marketing tool and as a general communication tool between the company and its customers.

The front page of the customer portal currently contains a marketing banner that can consist of several slides, the order and scrolling frequency of which can be set individually. The interviews explored the interviewees' interest in the feature and the potential value of the feature. 80 % of the respondents were at least interested in the feature. Announcements of future changes, particularly those affecting delivery times, such as production stoppages and production changes in general at the factories, generated a lot of interest.

Why not if there is something to gain from the information, e.g. upcoming changes or expected import/export stoppages in factories that affect delivery schedules.

However, it is important for notifications to be short and to the point. The theoretical part of the study showed that the quality of information plays an important role in increasing customer satisfaction and, consequently, the value experienced by customers. The quality of information is influenced by its timeliness, usefulness, and relevance.

Short notices are ok, but nowadays there are so many notices of all kinds that you can't read them and don't even notice them.

The interviews also explored the interest in the general activities of Company X and the value it brings. This was also of interest to 80 % of the interviewees and was perceived to bring value.

As a big company with a lot of factories and product opportunities it could be interesting to hear more at a general level and learn more.

Products, packaging, and new innovations that we can continue to offer to our customers are interesting.

Although most were interested in the activity and felt it added value, the issue of time and its limitations came up. It is important to ensure that the information provided to customers is useful to them and that there is not too much of it.

5.2.4 Product information in customer portal

For product specific information, the main topics were price, 3D interactive product images and various product certifications. These features were perceived as adding a lot of value and the most significant themes for all three features were speed and especially for price, transparency, and competitiveness.

From a buyer's point of view, it would be very useful to have product specific or general historical data on price developments, even for the last 3-5 years. It would also be good to know about future price change cycles or even if a product has changed its name or pricing practice.

We are interested in price developments in order to remain competitive. Products are competitive and our industry has to make decisions due to increased costs. Timely monitoring of product specific price developments increases competitiveness, adds value and enables us to operate in the market.

The most interest expressed by the interviewees was in product specific certificates. On an opinion scale of 1-10 (1= not at all interested, 10= very interested), 90 % of respondents gave a rating of 10 and 10 % a rating of 9. Interviewees justified the use of certificates on the grounds of speed and ease of obtaining information. This was seen as a really useful feature and would help in day-to-day work, as the certificates could be found directly on the customer portal, instead of having to ask customer service or salespeople for them.

3D interactive product images divided opinions, although all interviewees were interested about the feature and felt it added value.

In the larger farms, there is a growing trend towards own branding/design. It would help if product images were quickly available on the customer portal.

This would be a very good thing to know, but perhaps not the most important from a buyer's perspective.

The variation in responses can be interpreted in terms of the products ordered. Customers with a wide variety of products and layouts, which may change with the seasons, found this feature very important. While customers ordering simple and identical products considered this feature as good additional information.

5.2.5 Orders and tracking in customer portal

The most important and value-adding factor in the interviews was the status of orders and their possible closer monitoring. 100 % of the interviewees were very interested in receiving more detailed information on the status of their orders. One interviewee said that another customer portal they use has a notification function for changes and delays in deliveries and suggested that such a function could be added to Company X's customer portal.

It would be very useful to be informed if the delivery date or quantity of an order changes. It would speed up operational procurement as the information could be immediately retrieved from the customer portal.

Our company has limited storage space, which tends to target a new order for a specific date, so up-to-date information would be very useful.

In the case of packaging of fresh produce, the timeliness of deliveries is very important. Monitoring of orders in season is very important.

Timing and keeping up with the delivery of orders was clearly seen as the most important factor and any additional information and notifications were requested, especially if there was a risk of late delivery.

The ordering and delivery process involves several different documents such as order documents, invoices, waybills, and pallet notes. At present, this information is not available on the customer portal, and has to be requested separately from the account manager if necessary. The ability to find documents directly on the customer portal was a divisive feature, with 40 % of respondents considering the information to be very relevant, while 60 % considered it a nice additional feature.

Waybill documents would be useful but only in cases where there have been problems with delivery.

Different types of documents are often needed in problem situations or sometimes rarely for a copy of a lost document. In such situations it would be good if they could be found directly in the customer portal, thus speeding up work and processes. However, the documents are available from the account managers and this practice is considered to work well, as the availability of account managers is good.

The ordering process itself was found to work well for boxes, but there is some improvement in the process for sheets. Due to the time constraints of the interview schedule, this could not be explored further. This functionality should be explored and developed in the future.

In the new customer portal, sheets cannot be found by code, but everything must be ordered as a "new sheet". This causes a huge number of new sheets. For us, however, each product is stored as its own.

The interviews also explored the interest of customers ordering just boxes in a sheet configurator, which makes it possible to set the attributes of the sheet order itself within the validation settings. Those who ordered boxes only did not feel that this added value for them, as they were not concerned by the products in question.

5.2.6 Other features in customer portal

The interviews aimed to identify the competitiveness of Company X's customer portal compared to other systems used. 60 % of the interviewees felt that the customer portal was competitive compared to other systems used, 20 % of the interviewees had no experience with similar systems and 20 % felt that it was not competitive. Clarity and simplicity, which had already been mentioned before, were positive factors.

The interview survey also explored, at a hypothetical level, the value of having a customer portal sending data directly to the interviewees' systems. This was perceived to add value, but the results suggest that finding information on the client portal is enough.

It is enough if the data can be easily found in your system, no need for direct data transfer for the moment.

Most interviewees expressed interest in transferring data directly between systems but stated that this would not necessarily be a worthwhile investment for Company X. A possible customer portal phone application can also be put in the same category. This divided the interviewees into two different response categories. 40 % of the interviewees thought that a phone app would make their work faster and easier, for example when they are in the field or in the warehouse.

Would make it easier. Not mandatory, but would be very good.

For real-time monitoring of deliveries, a phone app would be good.

At the same time, 60 % had not thought about it or admitted that they would probably not use their phone because the work is already done on a computer with a customer portal and their own systems.

The interviews also explored customer interest and opinions on the potential for additional value in terms of KPIs (Key Performance Indicators). Each of the interviewees showed interest in the KPIs.

On the front page if you could see graphs of some of the essential KPIs it would be useful yes. e.g. delivery accuracy, sustainability (percentage of products with FSC certificates), speed of delivery.

KPI indicators were perceived to add value and useful information. There should be some kind of filter for KPIs that would allow the customer to select, for example, the three most relevant KPIs, as not everyone is interested in the same information.

5.3 Conclusions and suggestions for improvement

Based on the responses from the interview surveys, more than half of the interviewees consider the current customer portal to be generally functional, but problems with the functionality and possible areas for development that would increase the value perceived by customers during the customer journey emerged. Figure 9 highlights the most relevant themes in the customer portal that have a positive impact on the value experienced by customers based on the interviews.

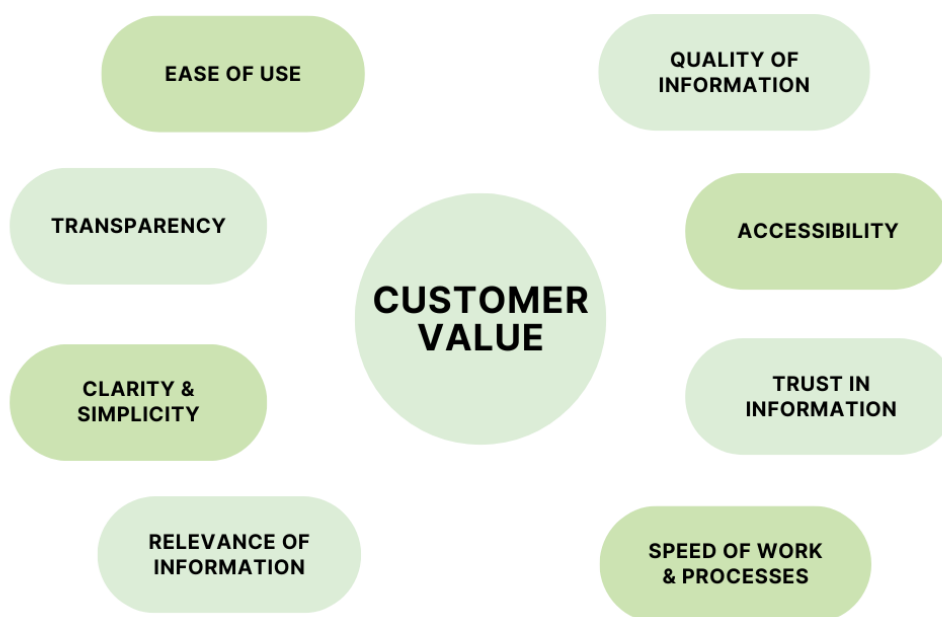


Figure 9. Mind map of factors affecting customer value in the customer portal

The ease of use, clarity and simplicity of the customer portal emerged clearly as the most important aspects during the interviews. Most interviewees found the current customer portal to be particularly clear. Factors that negatively affected the functionality were mainly related to the quality of information and the desired functions that are currently missing. The customer portal was found to speed up and facilitate customers' own processes and work, which was seen as a value adding factor. The electronic system means that the placing of orders or viewing of information is not tied to one place or time and this is also perceived to help in maintaining processes. Accessibility, referring to the availability of customer service, sales and assistance when needed, was also mentioned, and was generally highly rated.

The quality of information emerged as an important factor from the interviews. This relates to the relevance, timeliness, and transparency of information. The interviews revealed that the information is not correct for all products and that some product information is outdated. This was perceived as affecting reliability and leading to a lack of confidence in placing all orders through the customer portal.

The research interviews were also used to find out what services and features in the B2B eCommerce platform add value for customers. Figure 10 shows the potential new

services and features, by theme, that emerged during the interviews. A larger version of Figure 10 can be found in Appendix 3.

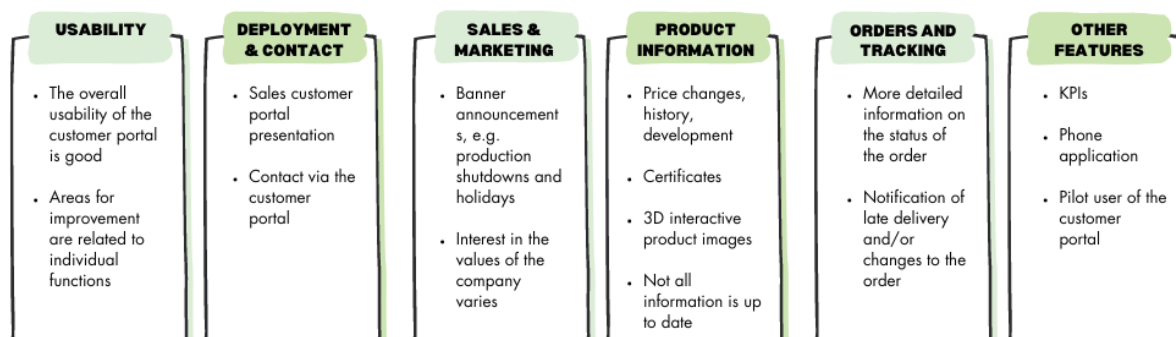


Figure 10. Customer value adding services and features in the customer portal

Usability

The overall usability of the current customer portal was found to be easy to use, and this was considered to be a positive feature. The interviews highlighted the ease of use of the client portal and the fact that no training was required. This is supported by Nielsen's (2012) five categories of usability as presented in section 4.3.2: learnability, efficiency, memorability, errors, and satisfaction. Users should continue to be consulted and feedback on the usability of the customer portal should be collected. It may also be worthwhile to involve users themselves in any future workshops, as the company itself may not be able to see what is important and valuable to customers.

Deployment and contact

The deployment of the customer portal has generally worked well, with invitation links and user IDs arriving quickly. None of the interviewees were aware of the customer portal presentation organized by sales. This may be because the interviewees were not in their current role at the time of the presentation, or because Company X did not hold a presentation for the customers concerned. In the future, it would be useful to ensure that new users are offered some form of demonstration or send presentation material, for example by email. At the same time, feedback on the use of the customer portal and its features by new users could be collected directly from users, which could be used to improve the customer portal based on customer feedback to ensure that it meets users' needs and wishes better.

It is also important to give a presentation, as the interview results showed that 80% of the interviewees were not aware of the contact function of the customer portal. The contact function could be highlighted in the future and customers could be encouraged to use it. The introduction would provide new customers with a comprehensive understanding of all the features and possibilities of the customer portal, which would enable them to use the customer portal in more depth. A video or a link to the presentation could also be added to the portal itself, which users could return to at any time.

Sales and marketing

Based on the interviews, almost everyone was interested in the marketing banner and felt that this would add value. Announcements of upcoming changes such as production shutdowns and factors affecting delivery times were highlighted. Interviewees stressed that notifications should be short and to the point to remain readable and useful. This would allow customers to predict possible changes in the timetable and thus avoid being caught unawares by delays and changes, which could reduce the number of problems. A reduction in problems with orders and deliveries would also potentially increase customer satisfaction and trust in Company X.

Information about the activities of Company X was also perceived as adding value, but this divided opinion among interviewees. The main factor that divided opinion was time constraints, which meant that there was not enough time for so-called 'extra information'. Interviewees who found the activities of Company X interesting, highlighted information on products, packaging, and new innovations. For example, a direct link to the official X-company website could be added to the customer portal, where users can go if they wish. In this way, information would not be a bother for busy users.

Product information

Product information, and particularly its quality, has a positive impact on customer experience and value. This theory is supported by chapter 4.3.4 and the study by Liu et al. (2008). The interviews explored the importance of product information to customers, focusing on price, 3D interactive product images and certificates. All of these were perceived to add significant value.

In terms of prices, customers could be provided with product-specific historical data on price developments in the customer portal and also be provided with information on future price changes and pricing tiers. This was felt to create transparency between the customer and Company X and to have a positive impact on the customer's own competitiveness, thus increasing perceived value. Information on different certificates

could also be added to the product card page. The same applies to 3D interactive product images. The results of the interviews showed that 3D interactive product images do not apply to all customers at the same level. This varies depending on the products ordered by the customer.

In addition to these features, it is very important to ensure that all information displayed on the customer portal is up to date. If the information is out of date, this directly affects the reliability of the customer portal and, based on the interviews, reduces the number of orders placed through the customer portal.

Orders and tracking

Orders and tracking were perceived as very important in the interviews and as adding the most value of all. The tracking of orders in the customer portal should be developed and, for example, a notification function should be introduced to send notifications to the customer about changes to the order and possible delays. In addition, a real-time order tracking facility could be provided, allowing customers to check the status of their order at any time. In addition to the features, it is really important that the information is up-to-date and that customers can trust the information provided.

There are also several different documents associated with orders. A functionality could be added to the customer portal to allow customers to find all documents related to the order process, such as order documents, invoices, waybills, and pallet documents. It is important to ensure that the documents are easy to find and logically organized. This allows customers to retrieve the necessary information themselves without the help of customer service or the salesperson, which speeds up the customer's work and releases up time for Company X employees.

Other features

The survey found that the customer portal is easy to use and clear, and these features should continue to be developed and maintained, as they received a lot of positive feedback in the interviews and were perceived as adding value to the customer. Due to the limited time available for the interviews, not all the reasons for dissatisfaction could be identified. Therefore, in the future, more in detail customer dissatisfaction should be investigated and efforts should be made to improve the customer portal.

Based on the interviews, the phone app was perceived as a value-adding factor. However, this divided opinion depending on the working style of the customers. A phone app supporting real-time delivery tracking and other necessary functions could be developed as an optional tool for customers. The possibility of transferring data directly

between systems could also be explored as a development project but prioritizing for the time being the easy and high quality access to data from the customer portal.

All interviewees were interested in KPI indicators and saw them valuable. The wish to see relevant KPI metrics as graphs on the front page of the customer portal was raised. Possible metrics could be delivery reliability, accountability, certificates, and delivery speed. For the KPI metrics graphs, it would be good to add a filter that allows customers to select the most relevant metrics for themselves, so that each customer gets the most relevant information. Customers could use KPIs to review the quality of operations and possibly use this data in their own processes. Good quality and high scores would also create a positive image of Company X's performance.

6 Summary

6.1 Conclusions and answers to the research questions

The aim of the thesis was to find out how B2B eCommerce can improve the customer's perceived value during the customer journey and to investigate through customer interviews which eCommerce services and features could bring value to customers in this process.

The study showed that B2B eCommerce has emerged with digitalization as an important factor, from customer value and customer experience to competitiveness with other companies. As already shown in the theory section, customer value and experience are very broad and complex concepts. The research shows that eCommerce platforms can provide more value to customers. With eCommerce in use, the internal functions and aspects of eCommerce can also influence the value experienced by customers during the customer journey. These functions were identified through research interviews.

The first research question aimed to explore how a B2B eCommerce platform could add value for the customer's during the customer journey. As already shown in the theoretical section, the value experienced by a customer is influenced by many different factors and always consists of separate interpretations made by the individual, influenced by emotions and unconscious interpretations. For B2B customers, an eCommerce platform allows for better search capabilities, faster and more accurate order processing, real-time and comprehensive information, and lower communication and coordination costs. These factors will enhance processes throughout the customer journey, enabling value to be created for customers. Once eCommerce is in use, the overall quality of websites has been shown to have a positive and statistical impact on the value experienced by customers. Research has shown that the areas that particularly add value are usability, design, responsiveness, and security. The quality of information on websites has also been found to be a significant factor in customer satisfaction and value.

The second research question aimed to explore what services and features in a B2B eCommerce platform could add value for customers. The theoretical part of the study revealed that important factors in customer value in B2B eCommerce are usability, speed, access to information with minimum effort, quality of information and usefulness. The factors highlighted in the theory section supported the results of the research interviews and this helped to gather information and opinions from the interviewees on possible new features and services in the customer portal. The interviews helped to identify concrete issues and features that add value to the customer portal, which are described in more

detail in chapter 5.3. The services and features that emerged were divided depending on the products that customers ordered. Consideration of order status was identified as one of the most important factors by all interviewees.

6.2 Reliability of the study

An effort should always be made to assess the reliability of the research. When discussing the reliability of research, the key concepts are validity and reliability, with validity often being more strongly associated with qualitative research. Validity refers to the competence of the research: whether the research has been carried out properly and whether the results and conclusions are valid. (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006a). Reliability refers to the reproducibility of the research, i.e. the ability of the research method to measure exactly what it was supposed to measure. The reliability and validity of a study can be improved by critical and evaluative work throughout the study, not just at the end of the project (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006b).

The evaluation of the reliability of qualitative research covers the collection of data, its analysis, and the final report of the research. The reliability of the research is helped by the researcher's detailed explanation of how the research was carried out step by step. The circumstances under which the data were obtained should also be described clearly and openly (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004, 214). In this study, the knowledge base has been gathered from literature and scholarly articles on customer experience, customer path and value, digital customer value and B2B eCommerce, which are described in Chapter 1. In the same chapter, the objectives of the study, the methods used, and the research-, data- and analysis methods are described.

A key part of qualitative research is often the interview, and the quality of this must also be observed. The quality of the interviews is ensured by a well-planned interview schedule. To maintain quality during the interview phase, it is essential that the technical equipment is in good working order, for example in relation to the recording of the interview and the sound quality. (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2022, 8.1.)

A total of x (number) customers of company X was sent a request for an interview. In the end, interviews were arranged with x (number) customers. In a qualitative study, it is usually not possible to determine the number of interviewees in advance. For the reliability of the study, it would have been better if more interviews could have been conducted, which would have helped to ensure the repeatability of the interview responses. Despite the limited number of interviews, the same themes and aspects were clearly repeated in

the responses, providing the researcher with a clear understanding of the phenomenon under study.

6.3 Reflection and possibilities for further research

Overall, the study succeeded in its objectives, as all research questions were answered through the framework and the interviews conducted. I believe that the study will be useful both for myself as a researcher and for Company X. Company X will benefit from the research, as it highlighted the factors that increase customer value in B2B eCommerce. In addition, the research interview allowed for a clearer understanding of the current customer portal and what potential services or features would add value to the customer experience during the customer journey.

Although the results of the study are primarily intended for use by Company X, they can also be used by other companies who wish to gain a deeper understanding of the customer value created through B2B eCommerce. As a researcher, my professional skills increased significantly during the research, as I had no previous experience of conducting research or interviewing in the role of an interviewer. The research provided me with valuable practical experience in conducting qualitative research, which I can use in future research and development work. I gained a holistic picture of B2B eCommerce and customer behavior, as well as customer value. I got to build the interview framework and act as an interviewer for Company X's clients. I was also able to do all this with an international team in English, which further improved my spoken and written language skills. I believe that I can use this overall picture, my interview experience, and my English language skills in future projects and jobs.

As a researcher, I would also like to thank Company X and the team with whom I was able to carry out the research, as well as the interviewees for their answers and rewarding interviews.

During the research, some ideas for further research on B2B eCommerce also appeared. Currently, there are no pilot users of the customer portal, but with the help of such users, Company X could quickly get information and comments on new features directly from customers and use this information to further improve its operations. It would be interesting to explore how pilot users could be implemented in practice in the best and most productive way. The use of artificial intelligence, which is becoming more widespread and is growing rapidly, was also brought up. Embracing this at an early stage could potentially increase the competitiveness of Company X and bring entirely new opportunities to develop its customer portal. As a researcher, I would be interested in

exploring the potential of AI to improve the customer experience in B2B eCommerce, for example the benefits and possibilities of customer service chatbots in problem situations.

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Appendix 1. Cover letter (translated from Finnish to English)

Hello,

I received a message from salesperson Y that I could contact you regarding a customer interview for my thesis.

Last summer I worked as a customer service coordinator for company X, and at the end of the summer I had the idea to write a thesis for company X as well. The topic of the thesis is to investigate how to increase customer value during the customer journey in a B2B eCommerce store.

The interviews will be used to gather new information from users of the Finnish customer portal, which will be used in the results of the thesis - the interviewees will remain anonymous. For the interview itself, a max. 1h and will be conducted via Teams. I have already created a questionnaire of about 20 questions, which we will fill in together electronically. I would also ask for permission to record the interview so that I can go back afterwards to what was discussed - but this is not required.

Would you be available and willing to participate in the interview next week?

Have a sunny week and many thanks in advance! 😊

Kind regards,

Moona Hiltunen

Appendix 2. Interview questions (translated from Finnish to English)

1. General information

- How long has your company been using the customer portal?
- Which browser do you use to access the customer portal?
- Which product categories do you order from the customer portal?
 - ➔ How interested would you be in a sheet configurator?
 - Why or why not?
- Do you place all your orders through the customer portal?
 - ➔ What would make you place all your orders through the customer portal?

2. Deployment

- How or from whom did you first learn about the customer portal?
- How quickly did you receive an invitation/login link to the customer portal? (e.g. 1 day, 1 month, several months) How satisfied were you with this?

3. Sales & Marketing

- How satisfied were you with the sales presentation on the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?
- How interested would you be in receiving newsletters by email or banner/carousel ads on the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?
- How interested would you be in the activities of Company X and the value it brings?
 - Why or why not?

4. Product specific information

- How interested would you be in receiving notifications about price changes per product and the possibility to view price trends of products?
 - Why or why not?

- How interested would you be in seeing product-specific visual 3D interactive images on the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?
- How interested would you be in having product-specific certification documents displayed on the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?

5. Orders and tracking

- How interested would you be in receiving more detailed information on the status of your orders?
 - Why or why not?
- How interested would you be if business documents were visible in the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?
- How satisfied are you with the tracking of the status of complaints on the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?

6. Contact

- How satisfied are you with the possibility to contact customer service via the customer portal regarding feedback, comments, or questions?
 - Why or why not?
- How satisfied are you with the overall functionality of the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?

7. Login

- How satisfied are you with the login to the customer portal?
 - Why or why not?

8. Other

- How interested would you be in testing new features as a pilot user?
 - Why or why not?

- How competitive do you think the customer portal is compared to other companies?
 - Why or why not?
- How much value would you see in the possibility of the customer portal sending data directly to your system?
 - Why or why not?
- How interested would you be in seeing different KPI metrics in a customer portal?
 - Why or why not?
- How interested would you be if the customer portal was also available as a phone app?
 - Why or why not?

9. A free word and a big thank you for your valuable answers and time!

Appendix 3. Customer value adding services and features in the customer portal

