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Optimization of Digital Lead Generation Channels

Case: a Startup Nordic company's entry into the B2B market

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Description
The aim of the research was to find out how the Nordic startup company can optimize its multiple digital marketing channels in business-to-business (B2B) market in order to generate more leads and eventually to increase revenue. The objective of the research was to determine which digital marketing channel (social media marketing, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), email marketing) is the most effective online tactic for lead generation in B2B. The final goal of this research was to enter the Nordic startup company into the social media world, to compare effectiveness of three digital marketing channels, and to formulate recommendations for overall medium to long-term digital marketing strategy.   The literature review consists of theory on concepts of digital marketing and lead generation in B2B. The focus of the theoretical part was on three digital marketing channels: social media marketing, email marketing and SEO. The research strategy was an action research, where the researcher (the author) was involved in planning, developing, implementing and learning from a complete cycle of the action research process within the Nordic startup company. Google Analytics and Suite CRM system have been utilized for primary data collection through structured observations.   The research revealed that email marketing was the best online tactic for lead generation in B2B. Within 2015-2016, email marketing generated 179 leads. Meanwhile, social media and SEO have not generated the actual leads. However, they had a significant effect on the improvements of the company's digital marketing activities.

Keywords (subjects)
Digital marketing, digital marketing channels, lead generation, SEO, social media, email marketing.

Miscellaneous

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Every business wants to grow. In the fast moving digital world, it is important for companies to keep up with digital marketing in order to be agile, flexible, adaptive and thus to stay ahead of the competitors. However, for many unexperienced startup companies, especially in B2B (Business-to-Business), there is a question how to start with digital marketing and what to do. This thesis describes the author's digital marketing journey, where the main goal was to improve the case Nordic company's digital marketing activities. Our experience suggests that, in any business, without all the time trying, testing, failing or succeeding and repeating there will not be improvements and self-learning.

The idea for the thesis came to the author during her sales internship in the case startup company. By having a deep access to the company's activities, the author has found a potential area for its business development. The Nordic company wanted to improve its business growth potential, expand awareness of their product, and eventually increase the number of clients and as a result to generate more sales. The case startup company has not been having much online activities, which became a great opportunity for the author to explore digital marketing field and make relevant research. At the moment the Nordic company has only their official website and email marketing system facilitated by cloud-based CRM. The final goal of this research will be to enter the Nordic startup company into the social media world, to create a high quality online presence, to compare effectiveness of three digital marketing channels, use potential of various digital marketing techniques and to formulate recommendations for overall medium to long-term digital marketing strategy. It is hoped that some of the findings may become relevant and applicable for other companies, and in particular those in B2B market.

1.2 Motivation for the research

The main purpose of this research is to find how a startup company can optimize its multiple digital marketing channels in business-to-business (B2B) market in order to increase lead generation and eventually increase revenue generation. In particular, the author will address the following generic digital marketing channels: social media, email marketing through cloud-based CRM and search engine optimization (SEO). One of the objectives of this research is to help a Nordic startup company to promote its product (a mobile cloud based app), to increase brand awareness and sales through different digital marketing techniques in global B2B market.

The author will therefore make an attempt to identify in the existing literature relevant best practices, core measures and possible recommendations for digital marketing strategy of immediate relevance to the company.

1.3 Research questions

To begin with the research process, the author will clarify research questions that flow from the research idea of this thesis, in order to help achieve research objectives (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2009, 32-33).

RQ1 (research question): How does the running of targeted email campaigns affect lead generation?

RQ2 (research question): How does the running of social media campaigns affect lead generation?

RQ3 (research question): How is search engine optimization (SEO) designed to affect lead generation?

RQ4 (research question): Which digital channel (email marketing, social media marketing, SEO) is the most effective online tactic for lead generation in B2B?

RQ6 (research question): How to optimize the use of email marketing, social media marketing, SEO in formulation of digital marketing strategy in a B2B company?

1.4   Structure of the thesis

The structure of the thesis has been divided into five main chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, results, discussion and list of references. The thesis starts with the 'Introduction', where the author shortly describes the topic, backgrounds, motivation and relevance of the research. After the introduction follows 'Literature review' part, where the author presents the relevant to the problem literature. A review of the literature provides conceptual foundation and shows how the study supplements the prior research in the field. The 'Methodology' part presents the choice of methods applied for data collection in order to solve a problem. In the 'Results' chapter the author presents the results and findings of the research which helps to draw conclusions. Last, the 'Discussion' chapter consists of the parts where the author writes conclusions, answers the research questions, presents practical implications, describes limitations of the research and, in the end, provides recommendations for the future research.

2   Literature review

The focus of this thesis will be on three parts (channels) which are key concepts of literature review part. However, the author will start with the introduction to digital marketing for B2B and lead generation. A number of theories, which support the research, will be discussed.

2.1 Digital marketing and why it matters to B2B

Digital marketing, also known as online marketing, internet marketing or e-marketing, is marketing with the concept of promoting products (services) to current or potential clients via Internet. Digital marketing differs from traditional marketing by the channels, which are used to interact with the audience. For example, instead of print, TV and other types of traditional media, marketers use Internet-based media, such as social media channels, email, and website to reach customers. (Miller 2012, 6.) In the future all companies will need marketers with up-to-date knowledge of digital marketing in order to succeed. Chaffey (2012, 190) refers to the famous saying of Michael Porter (2001) to explain why Internet is so important for modern business strategy: "The key question is not whether to deploy internet technology – companies have no choice if they want to stay competitive – but how to deploy it".

According to Miller (2012, 7), there are several important reasons why digital marketing matters to B2B and why companies should construct a digital marketing plan. Firstly, to stay ahead of the competitors and establish closer bonds with target customers. It is not a secret that nowadays everyone is online. Modern buyer's behavior consists of exploring product features online before making a decision of purchasing. Anything from watching videos, reading blogs, and reviews to participating in different social networks. Nowadays in order for a company even to survive, an effective online presence is essential. Secondly, it is important to understand that any business can, and should reach target buyers online. Moreover, customers expect businesses to do so, because the customers are an increasing part of the online community. Therefore, it is very crucial for the B2B companies nowadays to invest in digital marketing, in order to be ahead of its rivals and remain competitive. Another reason why digital marketing matters to B2B is that it is becoming more prevalent and, in fact, costs less than similar traditional marketing methods. As an example Miller provides MarketingSherpa and Forrester research findings where they prove that lately most of the B2B companies have been relatively increasing their budget for digital marketing and its tools (SEO, social

media, website etc.). This represents the priority change over traditional marketing. The world is swiftly moving from analogue to digital, that is why companies need to walk away from traditional marketing, pay more attention, and invest into digital marketing, even if it might seem risky at first. Businesses need to innovate and keep up fast with digital marketing nowadays in order to grow and be successful. (ibid., 8.)

Digital media landscape has never been as complex as today. Rapid introduction of new tools, data sources and different platforms on daily basis makes it challenging for marketers to assess and identify which innovations are most relevant to the company in order to achieve digital goals and objectives. (Hemann & Burbary 2013, 1.)

The one important difference between B2B and B2C marketing (especially online) is the length of the sales process. The B2B sales process has more stages in the sales journey. In addition, it requires a more involved relation-building process, where many decision makers included, thus making it much longer and more difficult. (Miller 2012, 25.)

According to Miller (2012, 40-88), there are five stages of the B2B customer life cycle, or what he calls it - buying continuum:

- *Reach* – the first stage of the B2B buying continuum, where it all starts from for any B2B company. This stage consists of reaching out to new customers, letting them know that your company exists, and capturing their attention by spreading a message. Miller suggests that the best digital media for the "reach" stage are SEM/ SEO, advertising, online PR and blogging.
- *Acquisition* – the second stage of the buying continuum is where the company is moving from the process of getting online attention from the prospect customers, to entering into their purchasing decision-making process. By luring them to further inquiries, and consequently moving them to the next stage of the customer buying cycle. Basically acquiring them as a qualified

lead. The best-suited digital media for the acquisition stage are website/blog, multimedia and email.

- *Conversion* – the third and middle stage of the customer buying cycle is one of the most interesting and important for any company part – converting leads to paying customers. Website and email are considered the best digital media for conversion stage.
- *Retention* – possibly the hardest stage for any company. In order to retain customers, companies have to build and maintain strong trustful relationships, thus to avoid losing them to competitors. That is where social media, website and blog shine.
- *Loyalty* – the last stage of the B2B buying continuum. That is where companies build long-term loyal relationships with their customers, so they would recommend the product or service to other potential clients. In other words, making them part of the team. The best digital media for loyalty are social media and email.

Understanding of these stages of business-to-business customer life cycle could help marketers and B2B companies to choose wisely digital channels, based on the goals which they want to achieve with digital marketing.

2.2 Lead generation

It is important for any company to create relationships and build trust with clients in order to gain new customers and make existing once to come back. Rothman defines lead generation as a marketing process by which the company stimulates and captures interest in its product or service offerings. Lead generation helps businesses to identify potential customers, generate more leads and drive more qualified leads to sales. Therefore, develop company's sales pipeline and increase income, as well as to grow business in many other ways. Lead generation has become a relatively popular strategy for creating demand, and helping marketing campaigns to reach and be heard by target audience across different digital channels. Marketing has drastically changed in recent years, as well as the buying process and cold calls.

Advertisement in print magazines is not enough anymore in today's multichannel world of social media and mobile devices. Nowadays companies have to reach customers via different digital marketing channels such as social media, website, search engine and more, in order to make business grow. Being a faceless corporation is not working anymore. Modern buyers want to get to know companies and their businesses, engage with them as they would engage with a friend. Instead of finding customers, modern companies need to focus more on being found. (Rothman 2014, 9-12.)

The first important step to getting started with lead generation for any company is to identify the company's leads and not just leads, but good leads. In order to define leads, companies need to understand who their buyers are. By using demographics (gender, title, age etc.) and firmographics (company size, company location, industry etc.) segmentation. B2B companies can identify and create a profile of what sort of individual (group) buyers and organizations are interested in their product or service thus they can define who their best leads are. The second step is to define the company's sales process. In fact, most of the companies define it as a sales funnel which consists typically of three main buyer stages: early, mid and later. Depending on sales process, every company has a different sales funnel. It is important to track where buyers are in their purchasing decision, thus every company has to have some form of a lead generation program. The third important step is to define the key metrics, because they will be one of the driving forces behind the company's lead generation plan. The next step is the most important for any strategy or plan to work – establishing goals. What is the company trying to achieve? Get more leads, more social media activity or increase brand awareness etc.? After establishing concrete goals, companies can start choosing which digital marketing channels to exploit. Based on what makes more sense to the company's marketing mix. (ibid., 20-34.)

2.3 Key concepts

Nowadays with the diversity of digital media types, it is important for any company to focus on its optimization, and resources on core digital channels that drive company's value. (Chaffey & Allen 2016, 4.)

There are plenty of different digital marketing channels companies and marketers are using today. Such as website marketing, search engine marketing, online adverstising, content marketing, mobile marketing, online public relations and many others, in order to attract and engage potential and existing customers online (Miller 2012, 24). In the research, the author will focus mainly on three digital marketing channels: email marketing, social media marketing and search engine marketing. The choice of the digital channels that will be explored in this thesis was based on the author's personal interest, company's marketing mix, goals and overall relevance, as well as the survey results from recent marketing researches.

Website (63%), email marketing (52%), social media marketing (49%) and organic search (31%) have been rated by marketers as the most effective channels for a digital marketing plan to include in 2017 (2017 Digital Marketing Plans; Survey Summery Report 2017, 9).

Below presented research results from recent report conducted by DemandWave in November and December of 2016 (see Figure 1). They surveyed 200 B2B marketing professionals in the United States and found out that email marketing has been ranked as the top channel for driving leads (73%) in 2016, followed by organic search (70%) and social media (55%). (2017 State of B2B Digital Marketing, 2016, 10.)
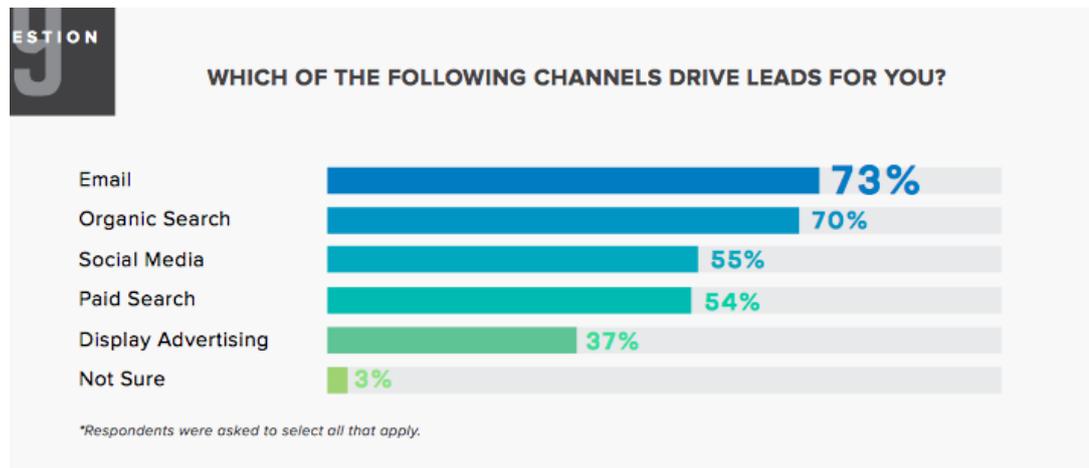
Figure 1. Which channels drive leads? (2017 State of B2B Digital Marketing 2017)

The results of both studies gave an idea of which key concepts could be employed in the research. The selected key concepts are:

1. Social media marketing
2. Search engine optimization (SEO)
3. Email marketing

Performance and impact measures such as company's revenue, targets, leads, social media followers, total likes, link popularity of website, using Google Analytics will be applied, analysed and discussed in the results and conclusion chapters of the thesis. The best practices and recommendations regarding strategy for multiple digital marketing channels as well as tactical and operational aspects with a focus on performance and impact will be presented.

2.3.1 Social media marketing

The hottest topic in digital marketing today is social media marketing (SMM) - marketing on different social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube and many more (Miller 2012,15). Social media covers everything from social networks to social bookmarking services. Shortly social media gives the opportunity for people to share their experience and opinions with each other

online. Social media differs from traditional media (TV, newspapers, magazines) by
the fact that they are two-way conversations between parties; meanwhile,
traditional media is one-way.

There are different forms of social media, such as social networks, blogs,
microblogging services, media- sharing sites and they all need to be considered for
online marketing efforts. (ibid., 214.) According to Stelzner (2016,7), 90 % of
marketers responded that social media is important for their business today.

The choice of social media platforms to exploit with the case B2B company will be
based on several latest social media research findings regarding that issue. The case
startup Nordic company is just getting underway with social media marketing.
Stelzner's (2016, 24) survey results show that there are certain social media
platforms (see Figure 3) that are being utilized by those companies, which have been
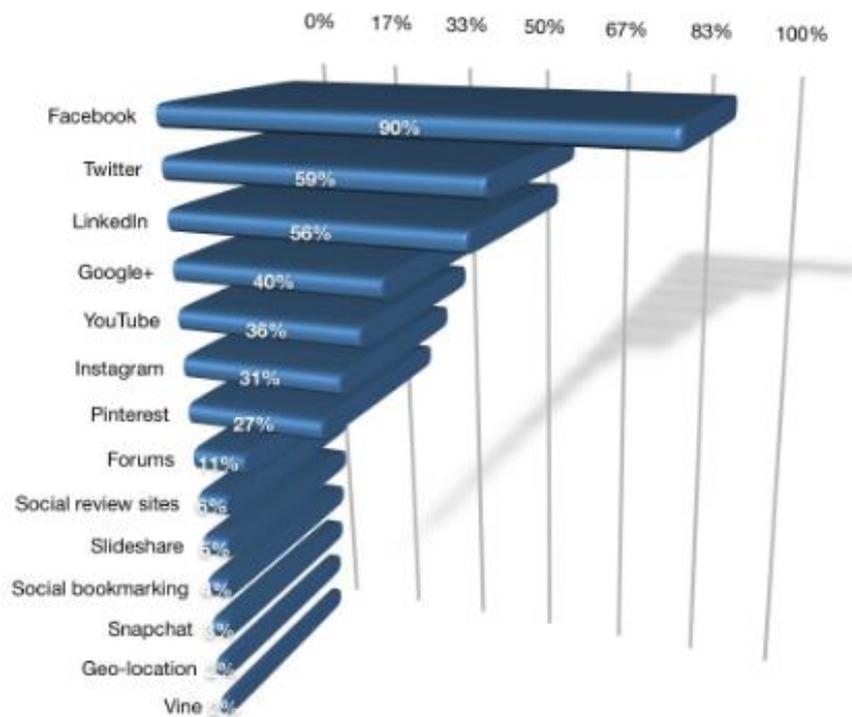employing social media marketing less than a year in 2016.

Figure 2. Platforms used by those companies with less than 12 months' experience of social media (Stelzner 2016)

Based on survey results, Facebook is the number-one choice for startup companies to exploit followed by Twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, YouTube and Instagram.

According to Content Marketing Institute/MarketingProfs research results (B2B Content Marketing; 2016 Benchmarks,Budgets, and Trends – North America 2016, 18), most of the platforms remain on the top as in the previous study, however, LinkedIn dominates and is considered to be the most effective platform for B2B companies in 2016 followed by Twitter, YouTube, Facebook.

Some of the most popular social media platforms for B2B companies, such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+ and Instagram will be listed below and, in fact, will be utilized by the author in the case company's context.

LinkedIn

It is the most popular social media platform for professional networking. LinkedIn offers to people an opportunity to connect with other professionals in the same or similar industry from all over the world. (Maina 2016.) 66% of B2B marketers rated LinkedIn as the most effective and best-performed platform in 2016 (B2B Content Marketing; 2016 Benchmarks,Budgets, and Trends – North America 2016, 18). In addition, LinkedIn dominates as well as being the number one social media network for lead generation (2017 State of B2B Digital Marketing, 2016, 17). LinkedIn can help B2B businesses with several things today, such as building contacts, building brand and personal profile and developing relationships. Besides, making it an information hub, source of news, a place where companies can offer help and customers can ask for help, as well as a place for sharing experience, showcasing expertise, and for market research (Power 2016, 167). Most importantly, LinkedIn is a wonderful social

network for reaching potential business decision makers in specific industries (Miller 2012, 231).

Assuming all these features, LinkedIn is the best social media network for B2B companies to utilize today.

Facebook

Facebook is the largest and most popular social media network on the Internet today with both businesses and consumers (Clapperton 2009, 61). Regardless of the fact that Facebook at fist was never designed specifically for business, both B2B and B2C companies have found success marketing on this social media platform (Miller 2012, 227). With more than a massive 1 billion users, Facebook is a great place to spread the company's content. Because some of the target customers most probably are using this social media platform in one way or another, it is increasing chances for businesses to be found and heard. Another reason for businesses to use Facebook is because it offers a lot of different ways to engage with the audience, as well as highly targeted and low cost PPC advertisement, simultaneously drive traffic to company's website. (Power 2016, 180.) It is a very simple process to start marketing on Facebook by creating a Facebook page, actively updating it with interesting relevant content, encourage customers to "like" the Facebook page and recommend it to other people, and in the end monitoring and responding (Miller 2012, 229). According to Hemann and Burbary (2013, 16), these are some of the most popular metrics in Facebook Insights for the page owner to use in order to track and evaluate page perfomance:

- *Total likes* – total amount of people who have clicked "like" on the page.
- *Reach* – there are three categories of reach: organic, paid and viral. Organic reach is the amount of people who have seen specific post in their news feed on Facebook. Paid reach means the amount of unique people who have seen an ad or sponsored post you paid for. Viral reach means the amount of people who have seen post from the page published by their friends on Facebook.

- *Engaged users* - amount of people (who are actually interested in the content and reading page posts) who have clicked to see your post during a specific time duration.
- *People talking about this (PTAT)* – amount of likes, shares, comments, posts created over 7-, 14- or 28- day time period.

All these features make Facebook a wonderful social network to exploit for any startup company.

Twitter

It is another popular and, in fact, powerful social media platform. Twitter has a concept of micro-blogging, where people can write and share short (140 characters or less) messages (tweets) with other people from all over the world. (Lacy 2011, 10.) As for businesses, it is a very valuable marketing tool. Twitter can help to interact with prospect clients, to share company's news and stories, empower fans, as well as turn customer service into a competitive advantage. (ibid., 15.) As for B2B companies, it is a great tool, for example, to communicate and notify customers about new product announcements (Miller 2012, 2016).

Hemann and Burbary (2013, 17) provide some common metrics to examine for Twitter:

- *Followers* - The amount of people who subscribed to account updates.
- *Retweets* – The amount of people who have shared your posts with their followers.
- *Impressions* – The amount of people who have seen your posts.
- *Mention* – Refers to how many times someone has mentioned you in posts with @ sign.

YouTube

Google-owned YouTube is the most popular video-based social media network and, in fact, the second largest search engine after Google (Maina 2016). The idea behind YouTube is simple - to upload and share videos with other people around the world

(Clapperton 2009, 88). Video search is becoming a more popular type of online search. Today B2B buyers are using internet in order to search for new products or services, and they find that video is a great way to familiarize with the company's product (service) in a fast and easy way. (Power 2016, 143.) 63% marketers plan to increase their YouTube marketing in 2017 (Stelzner 2016, 32). Channel owners can use an analytics platform on YouTube to track channel performance. These are some popular metrics:

- *Views* – the amount of times someone watched a specific video or saw the YouTube channel.
- *Subscribers*- the amount of people who are following the YouTube channel.
- *Likes/dislikes* **–** the amount of times the YouTube viewers selected if they like or dislike a specific video.
- *Comments* **–** the amount of people who shared their opinion or gave feedback on the particular video. (Hemann & Burbary 2013, 17-18)

YouTube channels could help the case startup company sharing their product's features videos, as well as tutorials on how to use its product (mobile cloud-based app) with potential customers online.

Instagram

Instagram is a visual fast growing social media platform, which has over 400 million active users on a monthly base. B2C companies have been successfully utilizing this platform since the first launch in 2010. However, the process of exploiting Instagram has been slow for B2B businesses. The reason for Instagram being challenging for B2B is that it is a mobile application, which were designed to be using only with smart phones or tablets. The idea behind Instagram is for people to share pictures and videos of their activities, where they are and whom they are with. Hashtags and tags are a new dimension for B2B marketing. Regardless all the challenges, Instagram offers to businesses a great way of reaching out to a targeted audience (by age group, geography, job title) and build closer bonds with customers. (Power 2016, 188-190.) Unlike Facebook and YouTube, Instagram does not offer its own analytics

dashboard yet. Nevertheless, companies can use other analytics tools like Google analytics to monitor Instagram activity (DeLane 2016).

Google+

Google+ is a lot like Facebook, however it has one greater benefit for businesses – it ties together social media posts with Google's search engine, thus increasing the company's search ranking (Miller 2012, 229). Like Instagram, Google+ does offer its own analytics dashboard on channel performance. Consequently, there is a need of having some extra analytics tool for social media.

Blogging as a part of social media

According to Miller (2012, 198, 215), blogging is a form of social connection and it is considered to be one of the key social media. Today most of the B2B companies include blogging into their digital marketing strategy. However, the author will not talk about blogging in the thesis. The author's colleague Mircea Hotoleanu is doing his action research regarding blogs for the case startup company. In the end, there will be a short comparison based on both authors' findings regarding effectiveness of social media networking and blogging.

Social media, especially social networking have become critically important for B2B companies. Since it is a two-way conversation type, social networking gives opportunities for businesses to establish closer bonds with their customers, to build trust and lasting relationships. That is why most of the B2B marketers include social networks like Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Google+ in their social media strategy nowadays. (Miller 2012, 235.) Social media is not anymore considered only for brand awareness and buzz, in fact, 64% of marketers responded that social media has an actual impact on lead generation. Modern buyers like to self-educate and learn online about the product or service they are interested in purchasing. Social media gives companies an opportunity to share their expertise and educational content

with potential customers, as well as assist leads to the point when they are ready to purchase. (Rothman 2014, 141-142.)

2.3.2 Search engine optimization (SEO)

Creating social media and a website for the company is great and a must-have. However, the real challenge is that customers need to know that your business exists, therefore it needs to be found (Clapperton 2009, 93). We all turn to search engines like Google, Yahoo! or Bing, to find information, product or service we are interested in, the same with customers in B2B world. At first, B2B potential customers are just searching for something online, and then most likely they would click on the first business website on the top of search results, in order to find relevant information. However, the challenge is that companies cannot just simply buy these top placements in search results. It is all about ranking. How well business sites match what its potential clients are searching for online. That is where the importance of search engine marketing (SEM) and its optimization come in. Search engine marketing (SEM) is an activity, which helps companies optimize their website ranks higher in search results. In fact, their goal is to get in the top ten sites in search results, in order to get more visitors and new prospects. (Miller 2012, 123-125.) Search engine optimization (SEO) is there to help with that issue, thus bringing more visitors from search engines. SEO is a proactive approach for making companies websites as friendly as possible, in order to improve its position in the organic results listing of search engines. (Power 2016, 75.) The goal of all the search engines, like Google, is to provide the most accurate results for users' queries, and to deliver the best search experience. In simple words, search engines examine different websites, choose the best matches, and rank the sites to the top search results with the best-suited content, based on the particular topic of the user's query. Since companies cannot buy top placement, they need to focus on what is called organic search. That means the overall website content, which should match those specific terms or keywords companies' potential customers are most likely using in search engines. (Miller 2012, 125, 131.)

There are plenty of SEO tricks and techniques companies use today for optimizing their websites to the top of search results. However, the most important and the most effective thing companies can actually do, in order to improve their search ranking, is to focus on improving their websites' content. (ibid., 133.) There is an old but accurate Internet marketing term 'content is king', which is true, because content is a fuel for any company's activity on the internet. Having relevant, good quality and grammatically correct content will help companies to attract, engage and retain their visitors (potential leads) online. (Power 2016, 81.) Miller suggests that the company's site content should be not only engaging and relevant, but also SEO-friendly. Meaning that it needs to be presented in such a way, that Google or other search engines would notice it. These are some tips for companies on how to make their content more SEO-friendly provided my Miller (2012, 135):

1. *Focusing on words, not pictures.* Companies should not put important content in images, videos or animations. Instead they should place it in the body text on the site, in order for search engines to find what is important and what to analyze.

2. *Including keywords in the copy.* It is important for companies to work with particular keywords and phrases, which their potential clients are actually using when typing into the search bar on the Internet. Those keywords need to be included in the page's copy, in order for search engines to consider it as a relevant search result.

3. *Natural repeating of keywords*. Placing the most important keywords on the web page is necessary. In addition, the good practice is to repeat them, but not too much in order to avoid unnatural stuffing.

4. *Important information first*. By placing the most important information and key concepts in prominent places, such as on the top of the page. For example, headings, subheading or first paragraphs, could make it easier for search crawlers to find the company's web page.

According to Rothman (2014, 193), the first step in creating a search engine optimization (SEO) strategy for a company is to do a keyword research, meaning to identify right keywords. It is important for the company to understand what exactly their business wants to be ranked for. After realizing that, the company needs to determine keywords and key phrases, which makes sense to their business. Sometimes it can be a challenge for companies, especially startups, to come up with keywords. That is why keywords research tools like Google Keyword Planner exist. Companies can start exploring that tool in order to come up with keyword ideas, but they have to remember the fact that this tool requires the owner to have a Google AdWords account first. Otherwise, Rothman suggests creating a spreadsheet where the company would list every single keyword, its phrase, priority and page URL. This will help companies to organize and keep track of their keywords. (ibid., 194.)

Keywords are one of the most important aspects in successful search marketing. There should be a correlation between what a company has as their content on their website, and what actual potential customers are searching for on the internet. (Power 2016, 87.)

Power (2016, 88-89) suggests that there are some recommendations on how B2B companies can promote keyword positioning in practice:

- *Headline keywords.* The first 200 words on the website are usually the most important. Headings and sub-headings have the biggest effect on search ranking algorithms, thus making it essential for companies to put their primary keywords in the headline.
- *Clarification words.* Some words have several meanings. In order to clarify particular meaning, there is a need to add an extra symbol in the beginning of the key phrase. This will help to see other customers most common searches related to this word or phrase, thus reflecting consumer search behavior in B2B.

- *Keyword distribution and density.* Some companies overwhelm their website by repeating the same keywords in every sentence, which looks unnatural. The proper practice is to use synonyms and to have a balanced amount of two keywords in the body copy.

Another important aspect to consider is that search engines are not only checking companies' visible text on websites, but also what lies underneath – the metadata in the HTML code. Metadata includes the company's website name and keyword content (<META> tag). Clearly defined and written metadata descriptions provide a better picture to search engines like Google, what kind of content the particular website has, thus increasing chances for the company to rise in ranking. Besides the <META> tag, search engine crawlers also analyze <TITLE> tag in the HTML code. That is another reason to place the most important keywords in the title. (Miller 2012, 132.)

Everything discussed before was basically about on-page SEO, which often means an employment of different tactics to make sure that everything on site is working hard for the company, and they are using SEO to its full potential (Power 2016, 90). However, in order to succeed, there should be a mix of both on-page SEO and off-page SEO link generation efforts. Search engines like Google pay a lot of attention not only to the overall companies' website content, but also to the fact that others actually link to it. Link building is a very important practice which consists of adding links to the company's website and getting quality inbound links from relevant high ranked sites. (Rothman 2014, 201.) Quality is the key, thus good practice for a B2B company's site is to get quality inbound links from their suppliers, distributors and customers, as well as from other sites, blogs, online publications in the company's industry (Miller 2012, 146). Nowadays, there are many famous influential bloggers in different industries, and some of them have millions of followers. As an example, companies could share their interesting content with bloggers in exchange for adding

links back to the company website, thus getting attention from the blogger's audience. (Yakimenko & Kostromitsky 2011, 29.)

SEO is a very important part of lead generation. Search engine optimization (SEO) helps companies to make their sites more visible to the potential leads, thus increasing chances for businesses to be found. (Rothman 2014, 184.) Since search engines, such as Google, are driving the major of prospects to B2B sites, it is necessary for B2B marketers today to include SEO in the company's digital marketing strategy. Even if it is a long-term process, after the company gets it right, leads will flow. (Miller 2012, 150.)

Chaffey (2016, 3) provides several recommendations on how to boost B2B online lead generation by using inbound marketing communications, such as social media and search marketing. These are some of the techniques, which can help B2B companies improve their lead generation:

1. *Personas*. Using personas is a great way to determine what content a company's audience really need. Chaffey (2017) describes persona as a type of target buyer with specific needs, characteristics, environment, and motivations. Based on understanding of its target buyer personas, the company can start thinking how to increase leads.
2. *Content formats*. Below presented content marketing matrix tool, which was structured to help B2B companies to identify what types of content they should create (see Figure 3). The content marketing matrix includes four quadrants: educate, entertain, inspire, convince. Depending on what company as a business is trying to achieve, the company can use this tool as a starting point for generating content marketing ideas.

Figure 3. Content marketing matrix tool (Chaffey 2016)

3. *Editorial calendar*. Creation of an editorial calendar is a great way to organize, plan, schedule production and publishing of a company's content.

4. *Content repurposing*. In addition to the editorial calendar, companies should also plan in advance repurposing their content. By creating different content formats and planning repurposing early will help to achieve more reach from companies' online campaigns.

5. *PEO combination*. PEO stands for Paid, Earned and Owned types of media. The content distribution matrix designed by Smart Insights, can help companies review the use of latest digital media, thus boost lead volume (see Figure 4).
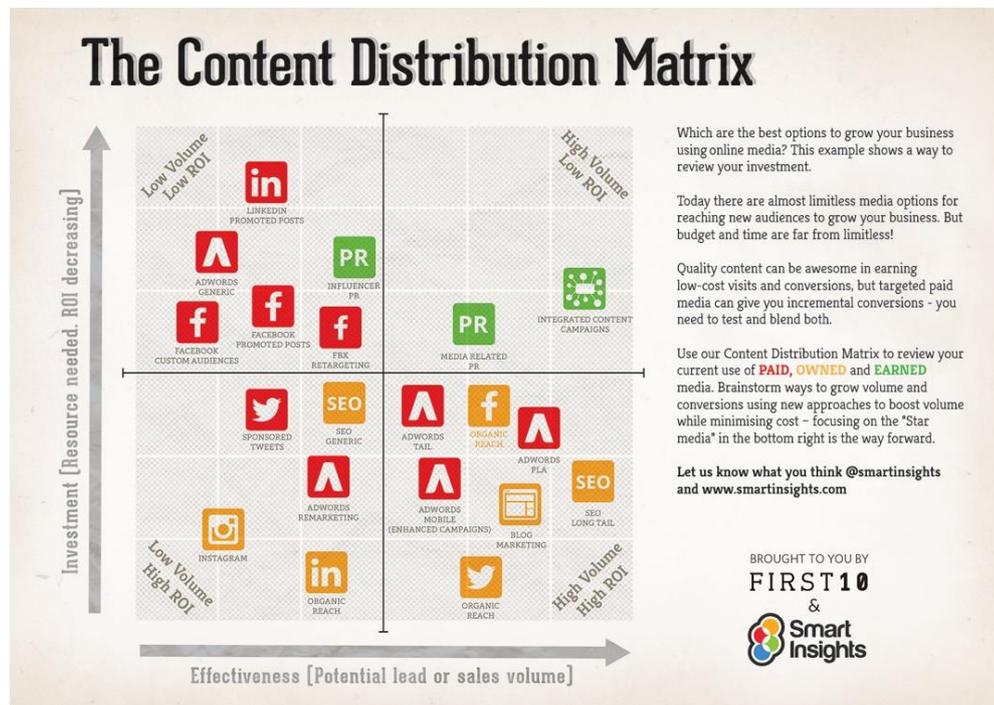
Figure 4. The content distribution matrix (Chaffey 2016)

6. *Using keyword research*. One of the most important keys to search engine
    optimization (SEO) is keyword research. The author has been talking about
    keywords earlier in the thesis. However, recently Google has updated its
    algorithms (Hummingbird and Rankbrain) and its approaches to language
    queries. Consumer search behavior has changed, that is why Google suggests
    for B2B marketers to think now about 'Moments' to apply for lead-generation
    strategy. 'Moments' usually consists of four different types of situations
    showing how customers are searching differently on smartphones.

7. *AdWords and display network remarketing*. SEO is an organic way to get
    visibility in search results, but is it enough? Chaffey (2016, 8) suggests for B2B
    companies also to try to explore paid search advertising. Compared to free
    SEO, paid listings in B2B are mainly costly, however they can create many
    opportunities for B2B companies to attract new customers. Most of the B2B
    consumers are using Google for search today. That is why companies should
    also try, what is called remarketing, in Google AdWords. This will help to

create a follow-up display ad (message) popping up for both existing in database customers and new potential leads, who have visited at some point the company's website.

8. *Social network advertisement.* As paid search ads were created for reaching more people through organic search results, paid social ads were created for the same purpose, but only for operating through social networks. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn provide many options for companies to reach their targeted online audience.

2.3.3 Email marketing

Email marketing is a very important part of any company's digital marketing plan, especially in B2B. It is a great way to communicate with existing and new potential customers online. (Miller 2012, 180.) According to Chaffey and Allen (2016, 4), in 2016 email marketing had the best performance with 80% by delivering the best ROI (Return On Investment), thus it was the most cost effective channel, followed by SEO 71% and organic social media 69%.

Email marketing, in fact, is a form of direct marketing. B2B companies can use email in all the stages of the B2B buying continuum. Mostly companies use email marketing already with existing customer database, after they first make contact. (Miller 2012, 179,180.) It is a fantastic way for companies to build trustful personalized relationships with buyers, as well as to keep in touch with their leads by sending companies' updates, new product launches, events and more (Rothman 2014, 292).

According to the report conducted by Ascend2 (2017 State of B2B Digital Marketing. 2016, 9), email marketing has been the most effective lead generation channel in 2016, followed by content marketing and social media marketing (see Figure 5).

What are the MOST EFFECTIVE online tactics used for lead generation?

Email marketing	45%
Content marketing	45%
Social media marketing	39%
Landing page/website optimization	38%
Search engine optimization	38%
Paid search or online advertising	30%
Webinars or virtual events	29%

Ascend2   State of Lead Generation Survey, Ascend2 and Research Partners, August 2016

Figure 5. The most effective online tactics used for lead generation. (State of Lead Generation Survey, Ascend2 and Research Partners 2016)

However, the case startup company has not yet generated much leads in its database, and that is why its current strategy consists of using email to reach new customers. The author will discuss opportunities, challenges and recommendations on using email marketing in the reach phase of B2B customer life cycle.

Many of B2B companies are using email in the reach phase. The problem is that legitimate email marketing is opt-in marketing, which means that companies cannot send out emails to the new prospects without getting their permission first. These mass emails, which have been sent by companies without prior permission of the customers, are considered to be unwanted commercial emails (UCEs), or simply

spam. Nobody likes spam, spamming potential customers, especially busy businesspeople, is the worst way to start new business relationships for any company. (Miller 2012, 184, 185.)

Miller (2012, 187) suggests B2B companies to follow some best practices when using email in reach phase for lead solicitation:

- *Send email from someone important*. In order to increase chances for recipients to open an email, it has to be sent from someone important with upper-management title in the company. Recipients are more likely to pay attention and open the email if it was sent from someone with a name and title.
- *Work the subject.* Another thing that recipients look first is the subject of the email. If they find it important and relevant to them, most likely they will read it. That is why companies need to think carefully how to make the subject matter for their recipients.
- *Make it short with a point.* People, especially businesspeople are very busy nowadays. Moreover, a majority of them are most likely using mobile phones to check news, social media and emails on daily basis. That is why it is critical to make emails as short as possible and to get quickly to the point. Otherwise, if the email is too long, people simply will not read it, even if it has interesting content.
- *Value is important.* The goal of sending emails in the reach phase is to convert recipients into lead. That is why companies have to offer something of real value in exchange for their time.
- *No images, all text.* In fact, most of the new coming emails from unfamiliar contacts with attached images are often considered as spam. In addition, email services like Yahoo! and Gmail block images most of the time in order to prevent emails from viruses. That is why all-text approach will be the best choice to use in the email campaigns for B2B companies to solicit new prospects.

By following these recommendations, the company can tailor their email marketing campaigns in order to reach potential leads.

2.4 Theoretical framework

The key concepts of the research form an emerging theoretical framework that explains the research problem under study in the exploratory phase.

All three digital marketing channels are designed to be effective tactics for lead generation and considered to be essential for all B2B companies as depicted in below figure 6.

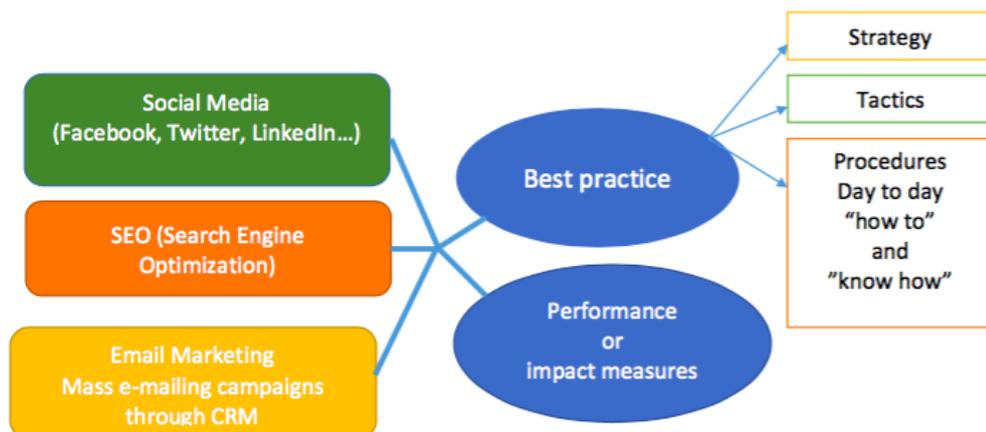**Figure 6. Key concepts**

The author (researcher) will follow, listed above, best practices and recommendations for SEO, social media and email campaigns, measure performance and impact of digital marketing activity on the startup Nordic company.

3   Methodology

Research is a thorough process of inquiry, which helps people to get better understanding of the nature of phenomena (Stringer 2007, 4). Research organized in the real world can be defined as a systematic effort for investigation of the particular problem and finding its solution (Gray 2009, 2). Knowledge is what research is all about. The basic idea of doing research is to discover existing knowledge, generate new knowledge and share it with others. The study of knowledge is called epistemology. (McNiff 2016, 10.)

Based on the assumptions the researcher makes about the world and the nature of realities, a conclusion can be made of which research philosophy should be adopted. The assumptions shape the way the researcher understands its research questions and the choice of the particular methods thus affect its interpretation of the research findings. In this study, the author assumed pragmatism as its philosophical stance. The chosen research philosophical position supported the author's choice of research strategy and the methods. Pragmatism insists that the only relevant ideas are those, which support the action, thus makes the research question with the most important determinant to consider. This philosophical position enables to use multiple views to answer research question, as well as it allows adopting multiple method designs within one study if desired. In the end, the pragmatic choice of the particular method (methods) is focused more on practical applied research combining different perspectives in order to help interpret collected relevant and reliable data. (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2012, 128-130, 140.)

3.1   Research approach

The author of this thesis has conducted an inductive research approach. Inductive reasoning always starts with particular observations, detecting patterns, then formulation of some pilot hypotheses which are desired to be explored, and eventually, coming up with some theory developed as a result of data analysis. (Trochim 2006.)

The objective of the study was to explore particular digital marketing channels' real effect on lead generation in B2B more thoroughly in order to develop a hypothesis that can be tested in the research.

Research design can be described as an overall plan for answering research questions. Coherence of research design with the nature of the research, research questions and objectives is very important. (ibid., 159-164.) Research design is needed to plan in advance which methods the researcher will adopt in order to collect relevant data, as well as which techniques will be used to analyze that data (Kothari 2004, 32). Studies can be classified not only by their research methodology, but also based on their purpose. There are three main types of study: explanatory, descriptive and exploratory which describe the nature of the particular research project. (Gray 2009, 35.) An exploratory study gives opportunity to the researcher get better insights about the topic of its interest. It has such advantages as being flexible and adaptive to changes, however, it can also be discovered that the research might not be worth of pursuing. (Saunders et al. 171.) The author of this thesis has planned to explore the emerging and fast changing field (digital marketing), gain knowledge and try to find solutions to the case company's issues. Hence, the author conducted exploratory study.

According to Kananen (2011, 27), scientific method in the research can be described as a technique which is being used for collecting, analyzing and interpreting phenomena. It is important to know not only the right choice of the method, but also its correct application.

The research strategy was an action research with focus on "learning by doing" within the Nordic company. Action research can be defined as a systematic approach for finding effective solution to the specific problem. (Stringer 2007, 1.) Action research aims at effecting change and its implementation, thus, it demands more from the researcher than traditional research methods and usually takes more time. Action research does not have specific data collection or data analysis techniques. It therefore can utilize qualitative or quantitative or both types of data. (Kananen 2011,

148-150.) In this study, the author collected structured observations in form of quantitative data concerning frequencies of participants' actions (Saunders et al. 2012, 340). For example, target contacts, leads, total likes, YouTube views etc.

Action research strategy has its own strengths, which focus on change, the recognition that time should be dedicated to diagnosing, planning, taking action and evaluating, and of course the involvement of the researcher throughout the particular process. The action research spiral (see Figure 7) demonstrates emergent and iterative action research process and its stages. (ibid., 148.)
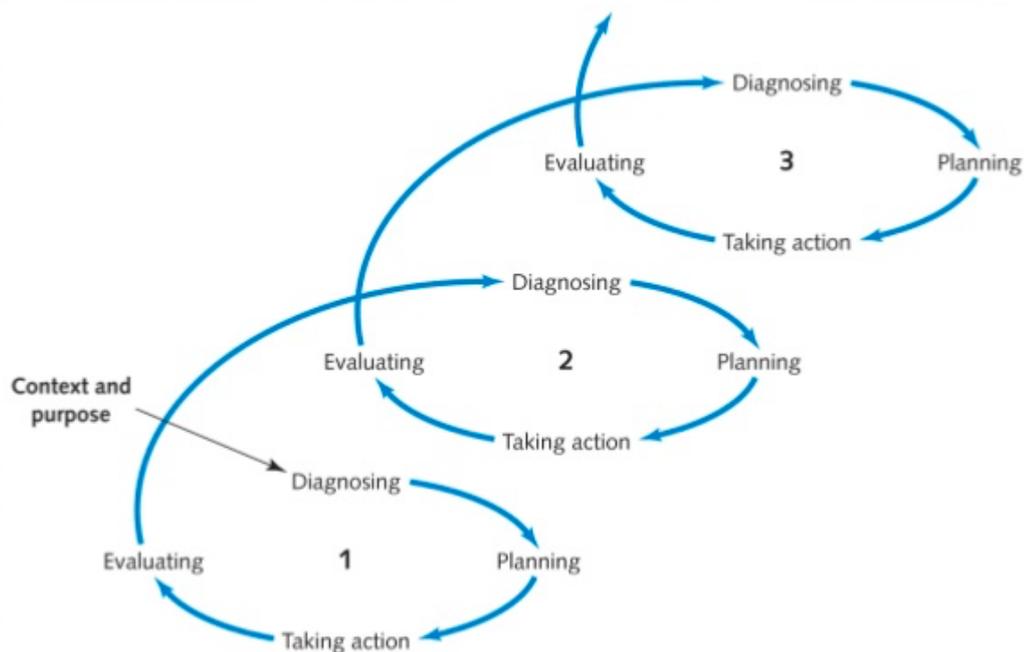

Figure 7. The action research spiral (Saunders et al. 2012, 183.)

According to (Kananen 2013, 40), it is much more challenging for a researcher to implement the change because it requires an understanding of the causal relationships (cause-effect) of the phenomenon and influencing them by means of an intervention.

Participation is a crucial component of action research, which means that without it this approach simply will not be viable. Action research requires the researcher to collaborate with members of the organization and perform as a teacher or facilitator, in order to improve organizational practices. (Saunders et al. 2012, 184).

All in all, action research strategy was selected as the best suited research strategy to conduct in the thesis. In this study the researcher (the author of this thesis) was involved in planning, developing, implementing (running the real life experiment) and learning (measuring impact and drawing conclusions) from a complete cycle of the action research process within Nordic startup company.

3.2   Research context

There are many digital marketing books (e-books), websites, articles, and blogs available nowadays with a lot of different advices and best practices on how to develop companies' digital marketing strategy. However, there is a shortage of publications referring to digital marketing in B2B, let alone startup companies operating in these kind of markets. (Power 2016, 7.) This study is an attempt to find out which digital marketing channel (social media marketing, SEO, email marketing) is the most effective channel for lead generation in B2B. The topic of this study "Optimization of Digital Lead Generation Channels. Case: a Startup Nordic Company's Entry into the B2B Market" is deeply rooted in the context of the business problem (challenge) currently faced by a small startup Nordic company entering the B2B market.

3.3   Data collection

As the author mentioned before, the data collection methods can be divided into two categories: qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative method has been chosen as the method for collecting the data in the research.

There are two types of data that can be collected: primary and secondary data. The primary data represents all the new original sort of data that have been collected for

the first time. Meanwhile, secondary data represents the type of data that has been already collected and analyzed by someone else. (Kothari 2004, 95.) The collection of primary data was chosen through observation method, particularly structured observation.

According to Saunders et al. (2012, 340, 335), structured observation is quantitative and focuses on frequency of actions (events). Structured observation in contrast with participant observation has more of a predetermined structure.

 The approach has been facilitated by computer technologies. Today internet provides many opportunities to conduct complex structured observations. However, it does not mean that structured observation itself is just fact-findings. It is much more than that, because it enables to transform activities into valuable research results. Nowadays, every website can track its visitors electronically and online behavior can be tracked and analyzed. In fact, today search engines like Google conduct research of their users' search behavior. (ibid., 355, 356.) There is specifically a term called 'indirect observation' for tracking and analyzing online users' behavior (Hewson et al. 2003, 46). Every organization is trying now to find the best digital solutions to invest in, in order to get detailed online data of the observation and analysis of its online buyers' behavior. Hence, it provides to the researcher advantage of unobtrusiveness and bias avoidance when using internet for the structured observation. (Saunders et al. 356.) For that purpose, Google Analytics and Suite CRM system, described below, have been utilized for primary data collection through structured observation in the research.

SuiteCRM
SuiteCRM is an alternative to Salesforce open source customer relationship management (CRM) platform that can be downloaded for free online (Product Tour. SuiteCRM - The world's favorite open source CRM application). SuiteCRM includes many functions, which can benefit organization and its sales. In the context of the

Nordic startup company, it uses this platform mainly to facilitate its email marketing and track its performance.

There was a specific process discussed and established by the Nordic company for email marketing strategy in B2B. This is a short description of the procedure the researcher (the author) was following in order to collect data and make conclusions of the email marketing effectiveness on lead generation of the startup Nordic company:

1. Creation of a personal email template in SuiteCRM for the reach phase.
2. Internet research on the potential clients (targets).
3. Recording a target in SuiteCRM.
4. Tailoring the email for the particular person (target) to be sent.
5. Sending the email.
6. Waiting for the person (target) to respond.
7. Respondent who showed the particular interest in learning more about the product was converted from target to company's lead.
8. Follow up emailing to assist the lead towards a buying decision.
9. Tracking results.

The Nordic company has defined their leads from email marketing as all the respondents, who expressed any kind of interest in the product. The company has been having Skype sessions (product tutorials) with every generated lead in order to establish closer bonds with their customers, to build trust and lasting relationships. Hence, the number of all generated leads out of all generated targets were chosen as appropriate to the research metrics, and will be presented in the results part of this thesis.

Google Analytics

In the end, one of the most important goals of running lead generation campaigns is to drive traffic to the company's website. Implementation of such website traffic tool

as Google Analytics can help companies track results of campaigns' performance and analyze how they affect overall website traffic. Over 10 million websites are using Google Analytics, thus making it a must-have analytics solution for any company today. (Rothman 2014, 53.) This analytical platform helped the researcher track particularly social media and SEO performance. The procedure for social media and SEO was the following:

1. Establishing social media platforms for the Nordic startup company (Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter and Google+).
2. Creating social media content, infographic on a regular basis and establishing a publishing calendar in collaboration with company's blog.
3. Publishing created content on social media platforms.
4. Using Google Analytics and social networks' insights for tracking social media campaigns' performance.
5. Recording traffic coming from social media to the website.
6. Comparing effectiveness of social media campaigns' performance and SEO using Google Analytics.

The Nordic company leads coming from social media and SEO were defined as all of those who would contact the company through social media, website visitors who would contact and give feedback that they have found the case company through particular social media networks or using search engine.

The study was cross-sectional, which means that the data was collected at a particular period of time (Saunders et al. 2012, 190).

The researcher (the author) in order to observe and collect primary data utilized both platforms. The researcher was involved (responsible) in every online campaign creation, testing, planning publishing schedules, collaboration with other employees, developing, implementing and in the end learning from the performance.

3.4 Data analysis

The gathered data needs to be analyzed and interpreted. Otherwise, the meaning of the data collected will not be understood thus will be useless. Charts, graphs and statistics refers to the quantitative analysis techniques, which can help with the process of exploring, describing, analyzing and interpreting variable relationships. In quantitative analysis, there is a possibility to use different types of analysis software for calculations and chart drawing. There are many complex statistical analysis and data management tools like IBM SPSS Statistics. (Saunders et al. 2012, 472, 473.) In the current case, the researcher already utilized such statistical software as SuiteCRM and Google Analytics for collecting primary data, thus there is no need to structure data by another complex data analysis tools. However, such spreadsheets like Excel were utilized for creating visual tables, charts and graphs for data presentation.

Primary data for this research was collected through internet-mediated structured observation with the help of using Google Analytics and SuiteCRM software. Particularly, Google Analytics gave the opportunity to track regularly the company's overall website traffic (sessions), monitor the number of visitors coming to the website from different digital channels (social, organic search), as well as from different social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram etc.). SuiteCRM software gave the opportunity to structure email marketing performance by monitoring and journaling potential customers' responses. In fact, the number of targets and leads generated were analyzed.

3.5 Research ethics

The researcher needs to keep in mind ethical concerns and access when conducting a research. Action research is based on collaboration between the researcher and participants within the organization. Access needs to be negotiated within the

organization in order to know what can be done (accessed) and what is not, according to the organization's policy. Ethical principles such as promises of anonymity and confidentiality, the rights to withdraw, communication and maintenance of good faith were considered. (Gray 2009, 328-330.) The researcher (the author) of this study was open-minded, truthful, and respectful while working in the case company. Any harm to the participants was strictly avoided, including mental or social pressure causing stress, anxiety, and discomfort. Since the research was internet-mediated nature, general ethical issues associated with that were explored and considered. While internet is providing the opportunity to access certain types of data, it is also raising dilemmas and issues regarding applicability of the ethical concerns to the internet-mediated researches, notably related to respecting rights of copyright and privacy. Netiquette, which refers to the standards of encouraged courtesy on the internet, was considered while creating emails, messages, social media posts. Overall, the researcher was acting ethically at every stage of the research. (Saunders et al. 2012, 231-235.)

4   Research results

Before the author started working for the startup company, the main sales or partnership creation in the startup Nordic company were made simply based on the word of mouth marketing. Hence, in the beginning there was no such online performance, except the official website, which later was replaced by the new website generated according to SEO recommendations by the author's colleague Ekaterina Murasheva.

Email marketing

Table 1 presents results of running email campaigns in the reach phase by the researcher and the sales team of the Nordic company. Within the period 11.2015 -

12.2015 were generated 16987 targets, which simply means the amount of emails that were sent to potential clients. Out of 16987 targets, 179 leads were generated.

SuiteCRM	Time period **11.2015 - 12.2016**
Targets	**16 987**
Leads	**179 (1, 05%)**

Table 1. Email marketing lead generation results.

All leads expressed interest in the company's product and wanted to learn more about it. Even if the number of generated leads was small compared to the generated targets, email marketing campaigns still were considered as an effective tactic in generating leads for the startup company.

Social media and SEO

The data from social media and SEO performance was collected from September 2016 to April 2017. Below presented results facilitated by Google Analytics. Figure 8 presents an overall website traffic of the Nordic company taken from Google Analytics.
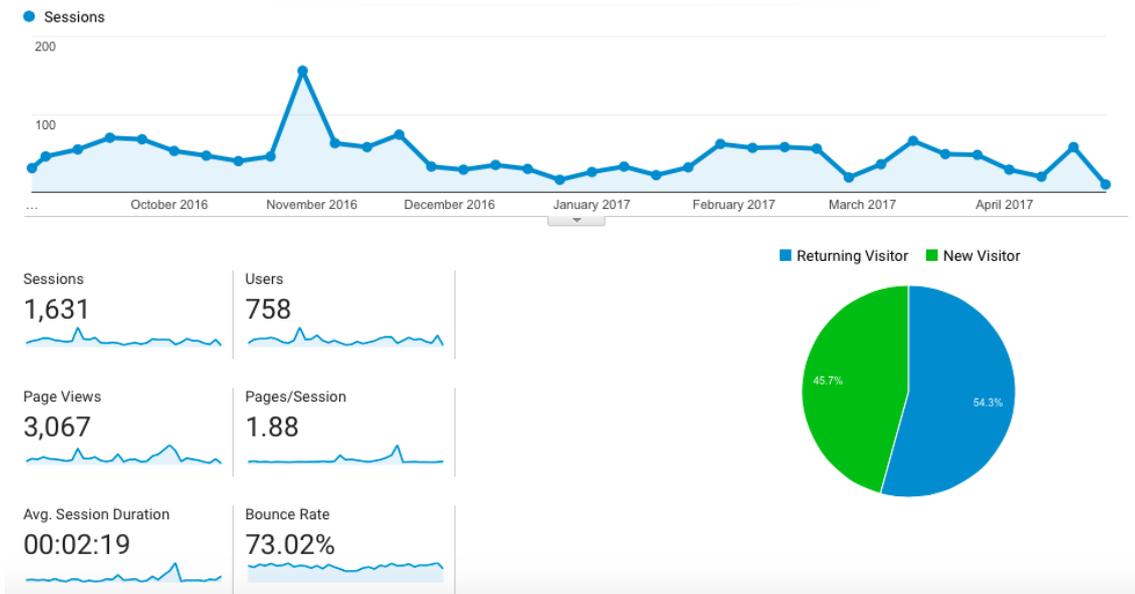
Figure 8. Nordic company's new website traffic from the period 09.2016-04.2017

Total number of sessions represents the amount of time users were actively engaged with the company's website within the specific date range (09.2016 – 04.2017). Within 8 months, the Nordic company's new website generated 1631 sessions. Figure 9 below demonstrates from which channels the visitors were brought to the website.
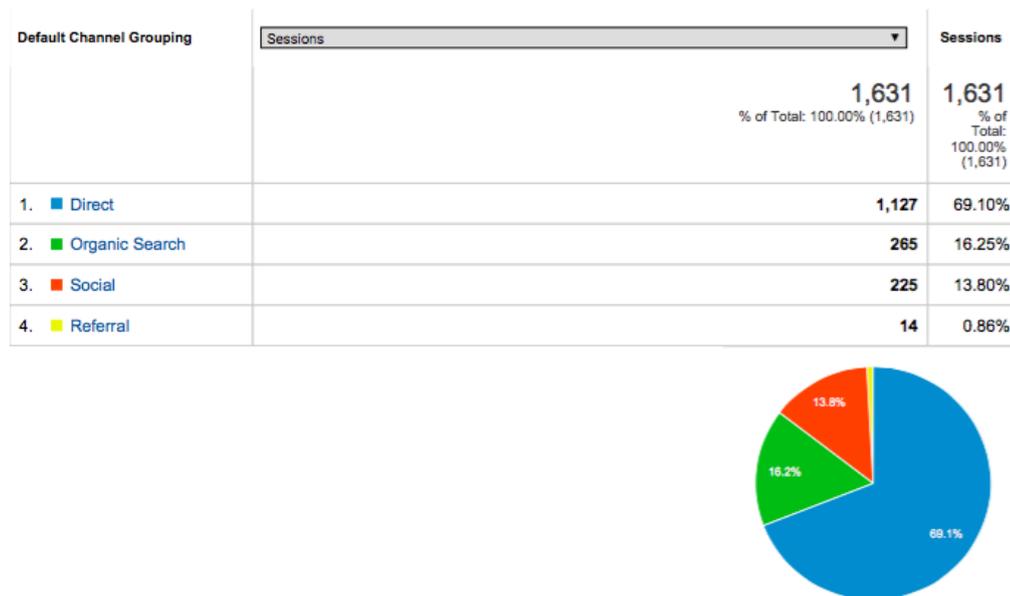

Figure 9. Digital channels results

Direct was the leading channel and the main traffic driver, which means that most of the visitors were coming from direct sources like bookmarks. According to Google Analytics, organic search (SEO) generated 265 (16.25%) sessions out of 1631, and social media 225 (13.89%). These results demonstrate improvements and changes in the overall company's new website traffic. To prove it, the researcher was able to get a one-month performance of the old company's website presented below (see Figure 10).
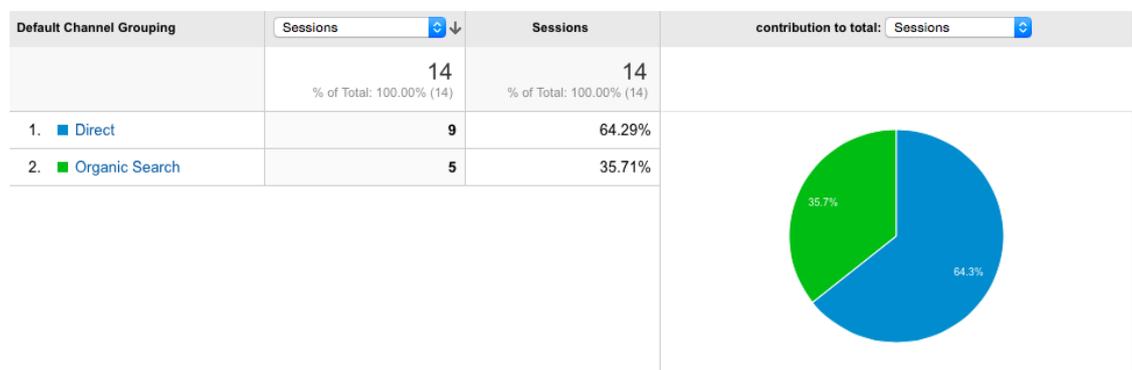

Figure 10. Nordic company's old website traffic results

As we can see, the amount of sessions was very small and only two channels, such as direct and organic search, were bringing traffic to the old website. The implementation of social media and creation of the new website according to the SEO recommendations improved the overall website traffic, thus brought more online visitors. Social media created an extra source of traffic for the new website. Running of social media campaigns on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Google+ increased company's awareness, as well as improved SEO.

Figure 11 depicts all social media networks, which brought visitors to the company's website.

Social Network	Sessions	% Sessions
1. Instagram	92	40.89%
2. Facebook	73	32.44%
3. Twitter	31	13.78%
4. LinkedIn	23	10.22%
5. Weebly	3	1.33%
6. WordPress	3	1.33%

Figure 11. Social network results

Surprisingly, Instagram became the number one social network for getting traffic to the company's website, followed by Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Unfortunately, according to Google Analytics, there was no traffic at all from YouTube and Google+, which lead to some reconsideration of these networks and the use approach.

Since the budget of the startup company was limited, most of the online activities had an organic nature, which means that they have been created without spending any money. However, in the end of the research process, there has been made a decision to try to invest in paid social ads (advertisements) on Facebook and LinkedIn. Paid ads (promotions) were running for the last 10 days. As a result, they significantly increased activities on social media pages, and generated more website visitors. Figure 12 and 13 demonstrate insights of running sponsored advertisements on Facebook and LinkedIn in the end of April 2017.
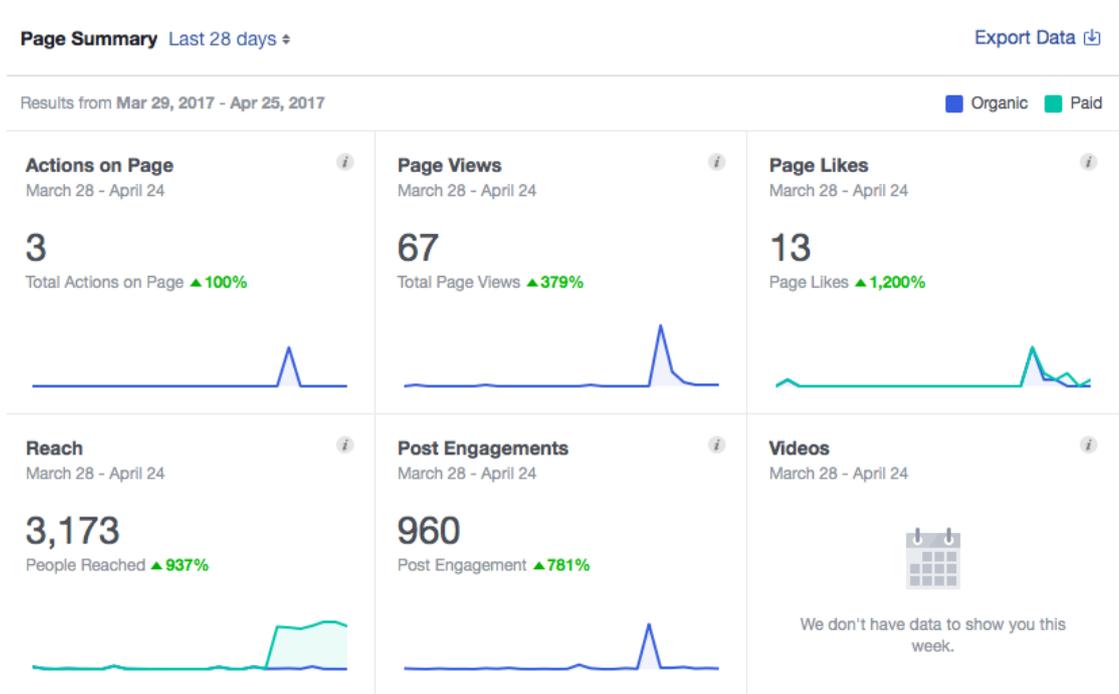
Figure 12. Facebook Insights on the results of running paid ads in April 2017

After creation by the researcher (the author) the social media networks for the company, there was a very slow process of getting people to engage with the page through organic posts. Most of the fans who started following the company's Facebook page were co-workers, their friends, but not potential customers. After running and testing organic posts, there was a realization that there is a need of something else to boost the buzz. That is why the company invested in paid ads in order to test that approach. As expected, there was a dramatic increase of the company's Facebook page activities after using sponsored advertisement. Hence, paid ads gave opportunity for the Nordic company to reach more people (targeted online audience) on Facebook.

The same experiment has been done with LinkedIn network. In the Figure 13 clearly seen changes over activities on LinkedIn.
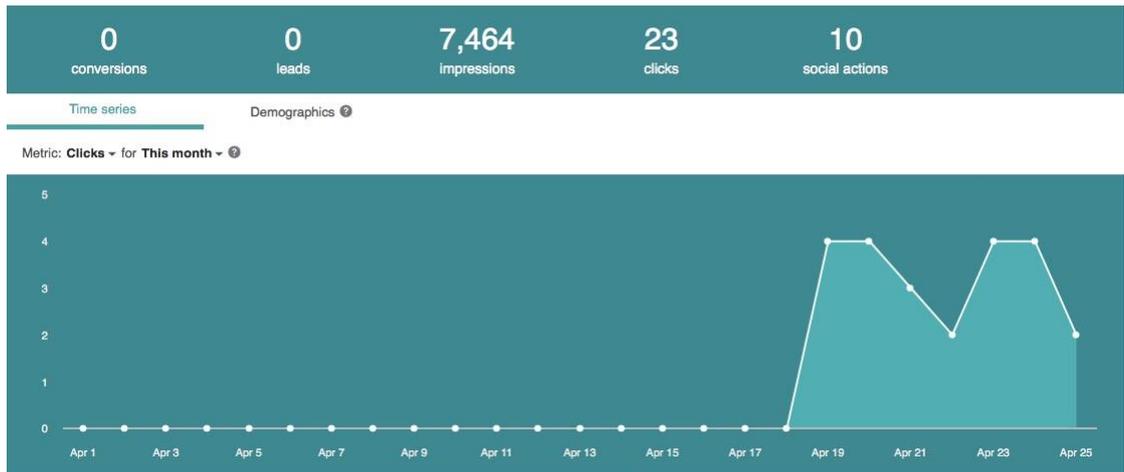
Figure 13. LinkedIn Insights on the results of running paid ads in April 2017

As soon as, paid ads started running, there was a dramatic increase of impressions and clicks on LinkedIn. Impressions means the amount of time people saw the company's ad and clicked, meaning the amount of time people actually clicked the ad. These results show that paid ads are actually very effective in term of getting buzz of the product on the internet. Paid social ads definitely give opportunities to reach targeted online audience via social networks, thus help to reach more potential customers.

However, out of all the website visitors, there was no leads generated for the company. Table 2 below demonstrates the results regarding particularly lead generation of all three digital channels.

Digital channel	Out of	Total leads generated
Email marketing	16987 (targets)	**179**
SEO	1631 (sessions)	**0**
Social media	1631 (sessions)	**0**

Table 2. Digital channels results on lead generation

Based on the research results, email marketing should be considered as the most effective digital channel for lead generation. Social media and SEO delivered zero results. Hence, supposed to be considered as ineffective. The author is, however, in the opinion that all three channels are effective and need to be exploited by the company. There have been many factors affecting the research, which the author describes in the conclusion part.

5   Discussion

5.1   Conclusions

The purpose of the research was to help the case Nordic startup company to find how it can optimize its multiple digital marketing channels in B2B market in order to increase lead generation and eventually increase sales. Email marketing, social media marketing and search engine marketing were chosen as digital marketing channels to utilize and explore within the Nordic company.

The study has shown that implementation of particular digital channels increased the number of the online visitors coming to the website. Hence, establishment of the social media networks and the new website according to SEO recommendations increased the company's brand awareness online. Social media, in particular, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn became an extra online source for driving potential customers to the website. Surprisingly, Instagram was the best performed social media network, even if at first, it was not considered as a potential suited social network for the case B2B company. That possibly means that Instagram is becoming increasingly more of an effective social network for business purposes. Paid social ads have been examined and evaluated as an effective solution for the startup company to use in term of boosting the buzz about the brand and its product in order to be noticed across social media.

The research revealed that email marketing performed the best regarding lead generation. Within 2015-2016, 179 leads were generated, yet no deals were closed. Meanwhile, social media and SEO have not generated the actual leads. However, they had a significant effect on the improvements of the company's digital marketing activities.

In the beginning of the research process, there were expectations of getting more results in terms of leads and revenue generation. However, the reality was correcting them. The case Nordic company is a small startup, which started operating not that long time ago in B2B market, as well it did not have many activities on Internet. There was a start from the scratch for planning and establishing the Nordic company's digital marketing strategy. The research had a concept of "learning by doing", the author of this thesis was for the first time exploring such field as digital marketing, planning, testing, evaluating what works for the case company online and what does not. As in all businesses, there has been many factors affecting the process and of course, many challenges have been faced. The author's opinion is that the main goal, which was established in the beginning regarding improvement of digital marketing activities, has been achieved. The Nordic startup company has been entered into the social media world, there has been created a high quality online presence, and was made a comparison of effectiveness of three digital marketing channels.

According to this study, email marketing based on the research results was the best online tactic for lead generation in B2B. Meanwhile, when social media and SEO has not generated any leads. The author analyzed the results and created a hypothesis why this happened. Firstly, social media and SEO compared to the email marketing are much longer processes. Especially if the company has just established their social media accounts and recently created new website. Nothing is happing overnight, especially when it comes to business. Every company needs time to find their own way of doing digital marketing and making SEO and social media work for them. Secondly, not only the Nordic company is a small startup, it also operates in

Business-to-Business market. B2B market is much more complicated and challenging than B2C. In B2B there are more stages of the sales process, as well as many decision makers, that needs to be considered. Even in email marketing when the Nordic company got a positive response from the lead, had Skype sessions etc. it was hard to convert this lead to the buying customer. The reason is that the people being contacted were not decision makers in their organization and it was taking significant time and delays on closing any deals. SEO and social media had a different approach to getting leads. In the beginning, there was no clear vision and understanding how to generate the company's actual leads from its SEO and social media, that is why there a decision was made of getting potential feedback from buyers who would purchase the product online or who would contact the company directly through social media. However, it did not happen. The researcher has a possible explanation based on its own experience. Even when the product is great and interesting for particular B2B online audience, most probably they will not buy it straight away online, because they are simply not ready for this purchase. In the future, there is a need for companies to create some sort of forms to sign up in order for online users to access some company's content and for companies to get leads' information.

Answers to the research questions

Even with all the challenges faced, the author has an opinion that objectives of this research have been achieved and research questions have been answered. Implementation of digital marketing channels helped the Nordic startup company to promote its product (mobile cloud based app) and increased brand awareness in B2B market.

According to the study, every digital channel had its own effect on lead generation. Email marketing has been considered by the researcher as the best digital marketing channel in generating leads for the case startup company. It was a great tactic to communicate directly with the company's potential and existing customers in B2B market, send them relevant content, inform about new products, events, as well as

to send follow ups in order to remind about the company or to assist leads to the buying decision stage. Email campaigns were working at their best when communicating with existing customers. Even if email marketing was working in the initial phase to contact potential leads, it was not as effective as was hoped. Compare to all generated targets, the amount of leads generated was anyway small, which possibly means that many potential prospects were considering emails from the case company as a spam or unwanted email. The company should possibly move a little bit from this strategy in the future and, instead, use email marketing only with people who gave permission to receive emails from the company. Even if social media marketing did not generate a concrete number of leads, it influenced the overall digital activities of the company. Social media networks such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn generated online buzz, gave opportunity for followers and online users to learn more about the company and its product (mobile cloud-based app). Within 8 months, the researcher has been experimenting with the Nordic company's social media, in order to find the best way of using this digital channel. Every social network required its own approach and plan. The researcher was making sure that every social media campaign had high quality, relevant and interesting content. Later, the author's colleague Mircea Hotoleanu has established the company's blog. There was a nice collaboration between blog posts and social media campaigns. Both blog and social media were driving traffic to the company's website, which is one of the most important goals of running lead generation campaigns. Another author's colleague Ekaterina Murasheva has created the design for the new company's website according to SEO recommendations. SEO is playing a critical role in the visibility of the company's website. Search engine optimization helped to improve the company's search ranking online, thus made it easier to find for potential leads. In the end, it is just a matter of time for the case company to start getting actual leads from social media and SEO.

The author has the opinion that all three digital marketing channels are effective online tactics and work the best when they combined and reinforce each other at the same time. In fact, it is important for the B2B company to consider also other digital

channels such as website marketing, content marketing, blog marketing, display advertisement etc. They all are the part of the big world of digital marketing. If the company wants to be successful and stay competitive in this digital era, it should include all of those digital channels in the digital marketing plan in one way or another.

Practical / managerial implications

After this digital marketing journey, the author would suggest for any startup company in B2B to create a digital marketing strategy and to include it in all three described digital channels. The simple reason is that everyone is online today and if the company wants to grow, be competitive and become successful, it should be active online as well. Based on the researcher's experience, the main challenge in every digital channel was content creation. People are always looking on social media for something relevant to them, funny or interesting. The research shown that the most likes and views on social media were received from posts with the company's own creative infographics. That is why, the author would suggest that companies always create their own relevant pictures to the content being shared. It is because not only pictures get more attention than text, but also it shows the company's individuality.

Another important aspect to consider for other companies is that one person cannot handle all the digital marketing for the whole company. Every digital channel has its own nuances. Every social networking site requires its own approach and new updates following. Digital marketing itself is a very fast changing field and it requires a lot of efforts and all company's participation. Collaboration with all the departments in the company is essential. Publishing content should not only be covered from the marketing perspective. Especially, if the company promotes the IT product or service as in the case company. In any case a qualified in the field person should assist with content creation as well.

Based on the researcher's experience, the first and the most important thing that the company needs to do is to establish digital marketing plan with written strategy, goals and objectives. Everyone in the marketing team and company should have a clear vision of what they are doing online. Without clarified goals, nothing will work. The author itself has learned a lot about digital marketing and has practiced the real implementation of digital channels in business. That is why the author of this thesis would like to give some short and simple recommendations on digital marketing for startup companies in B2B market:

1. Identify goals and objectives of the company.
2. Analyze the current company's digital marketing situation.
3. If the startup company does not have an experienced digital marketing specialist, then the only thing the company can do is to learn the best practices from digital marketing gurus such as famous Dr. Dave Chaffey.
4. The best way to find the company's own way to do digital marketing is to try, test, evaluate, and repeat. If it does not work, then to try something different.
5. There is no common digital marketing strategy. Everyone creates their own, based on the company's characteristics.
6. Not to be afraid of getting zero results at first, especially in B2B.
7. Consider time. Time will definitely play a crucial role in making all the digital channels work for the company. Nothing happens overnight, especially success.
8. Find what works for the company and what does not and keep it going. Running after absolutely all the digital updates is not an effective strategy. The same as getting a new iPhone every year. A waste of money and time.
9. Even if the budget is limited, the company should consider paid ads in order to generate the buzz.
10. Spend more time but create creative, interesting, and individual content.
11. Create the company's own style of infographics.
12. Everybody in a company should be involved in digital marketing.
13. Improve, improve, and improve.

The author hopes that some of the findings and recommendations may become relevant and applicable for other startup companies and in particular those in B2B market.

5.2 Validity and Reliability

According to Kananen (2011, 125), the researcher always has to evaluate the validity and reliability of its scientific work in order to prove the quality of the research and its results. Reliability and validity needs to be considered before the actual research. When we talk about reliability in quantitative research, it refers to the consistent and repeated findings. Meanwhile, validity refers to the quality of the findings.

There are particular issues related to the structured observations in terms of reliability. Such threats as informant error, observer error, observer effects and time error were considered by the researcher and tried to be avoided or minimized. (Saunders et al. 2012, 361,362.)

Validation in the action research was for the purpose of identifying where was the lack of clarity or focus, sharpening claims to new knowledge and making sure the data was matching those claims, for developing new ideas for the case company regarding digital marketing. The process included the use of formal groups including critical mentors in the company and the action research colleagues working on the Nordic company's project. Everyone in the company understood and empathized with the context of the author's research. The data collected through action research was validated through eliciting the views of critical employer and the author's colleagues in the Nordic company. (Gray 2009, 327- 333.)

The author of this research was putting all the efforts in order to present accurate documentation on digital marketing channels' performance within correct utilized research method and strategy. The interpretation of the results was based only according to the research materials. The world of technologies is changing fast, so

does the digital marketing. Hence, in the future the reliability of the research can possibly be affected by the fast-emerging technology development and regular updates of the digital marketing channels, online analytical platforms and social networks.

Limitations of the research

The limitations of the inductive approach in the research consists of the particular characteristics, such as this reasoning cannot guarantee the conclusions, as well as it involves the uniformity of the nature of the universe and approach relies on monitoring the collection of information. (Rusnell, 2016.)

According to Gray (2009, 331), action research has its potential limitations. Typically, action research is taking longer than other research strategies. Within the period of the author's work, there was no permanent team in any department in the company. Hence, people (team members) in the project were often leaving or were being replaced, thus this factor could have had a possible crucial effect on the overall research results. Another factor that can be considered as action research limitation is generalization. Many of the action research projects are unique and have their own peculiar nature, thus cannot be generalized.

Gathered quantitative data requires broad statistical analysis. Sometimes, if the researcher does not have previous background in mathematics and statistical analysis, it can cause some difficulties in data analysis. Limit of the quantitative data collection method such as the lack of knowledge, the resources, and time can affect the research. (Sudeshna & Datt, 2016.)

5.3   Recommendations for future research

The world of technologies is changing fast, so is digital marketing. Because of the continuous technology development, there are emerging many new areas and topics on daily basis regarding digital marketing. Hence, possible future studies could research on other digital marketing channels and their optimization.

Many B2B companies are not exploiting all the benefits of the digital marketing nowadays, thus creating potential opportunities to conduct a research regarding digital marketing in many B2B companies.

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