

Collaboratively and Sustainably Marketing Company X's Innovation

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<p>To address the plastic waste problem, Company X has developed a unique sustainable innovation. Given the complexities of sustainability, it is not immediately clear how these novel materials and products should be marketed. Company X would like to become an ingredient brand – the Gore-Tex of sustainable materials. Therefore, to answer the research question (RQ) “How can Company X collaboratively and sustainably market its innovation?”, this thesis will cover the concepts of sustainable marketing, collaborative marketing and competitive advantage. For Company X's brand to truly become an ingredient brand it should be recognizable among consumers, but the scope of this thesis focuses on company perspectives and left out the consumer perspective.</p> <p>Structured and semi-structured interviews were conducted with 3 specialized individuals with a working relationship with Company X during the time of the research. A survey with 39 respondents was conducted with a convenient and purposive non-probability sample of Company X's customers. Qualitative data was analyzed thematically and quantitative data was primarily processed through statistical graphs.</p> <p>Through theoretical concepts and the collected data, close collaboration, trust and open communication were identified to be vital components for building an ingredient brand that is sustainably and collaboratively marketed by both Company X and its customers. Through the data collection it was apparent that Company X and its customers highly value sustainability which creates a solid foundation for their sustainable and collaborative marketing. However, it is important that the sustainability message conveyed by Company X is consistent, clear and fully understood by its customers to ease the complexities of sustainability and build a strong and recognizable ingredient brand. Furthermore, Company X must provide more value in addition to sustainability in order to create more meaning for the ingredient brand and to truly meet its customers' expectations without compromises.</p>	
Keywords Sustainable marketing, green marketing, collaborative marketing, co-branding, ingredient branding, competitive advantage, sustainability	

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1 Introduction

This thesis covers very contemporary topics involving a sustainable innovation from the case company. This thesis examines the opportunities and challenges of marketing such an innovation sustainably and collaboratively. As the demand for sustainable alternatives to conventional products is increasing it is increasingly more relevant to gain understanding about how these alternatives should be marketed and branded. Both the case company and its customers have been interviewed to gain more perspectives on the core topics of sustainable marketing, collaborative marketing and the relationships between Company X and its customers overall.

This chapter provides further information about the background of this topic, the case company, key concepts, benefits and demarcation. This chapter also presents the Research Question (RQ) and Investigative Questions (IQs) for this thesis.

1.1 Background

Without a doubt the plastic waste problem is a very hot topic right now. The problem is clear to many, but a solution is yet to be agreed upon. More than ever companies desire to become sustainable and are demanded to do so as well by governments, international organizations and consumers. The problem is that it is not so clear what it means to be sustainable and how to communicate about sustainability. Many terms that relate to sustainability or “green” products are loosely defined and used in a confusing manner. Many of these terms are missing official definitions or their definitions are lackluster. Already the word “bio” causes confusion. Some bio-based bioplastics are not biodegradable while some fossil fuel plastics are (Parker 2018). The word “biodegradable” conveys the idea that a biodegradable product will just disappear into nature which unfortunately is not true in most cases. Therefore, labelling products as “biodegradable” has even encouraged littering as misinformed consumers believe no harm is done if a biodegradable product is left in a natural environment (Parker 2018). But what should companies then say about their truly sustainable, microplastic-free and biodegradable products and how should they market them? This is particularly challenging for smaller companies, like Company X, as they try to increase their market share and compete against much larger and more established companies that are more or less guilty of greenwashing either on purpose or due to a lack of understanding.

To avoid relying on the word “biodegradable”, Company X has attempted to market its products and material as microplastic-free sustainable material innovations. There is a challenge here as well since the word “microplastic” was only coined in 2004 and still does not have an official and internationally recognized definition either (Frias & Nash 2019). Company X wants its innovation to become known and used by many. Company X would like its brand to serve almost as a guarantee for sustainability the same way Gore-Tex guarantees to “keep you dry” (Gore-Tex 2020). But why would another business want to collaborate with Company X? Why would another business want to include Company X’s brand on their products? While figuring out the definition and guarantee of its product, Company X also needs to figure out how it should motivate and engage other businesses into collaborative, sustainable marketing and branding. Very few companies have been able to achieve the same status as Gore-Tex.

1.2 Research Question and Goals

This thesis has aimed to explore the ways Company X can market, to other businesses, itself and its sustainable material innovation. This thesis has also examined the different forms of collaboration Company X could have with its business-to-business (B2B) customers that may be business-to-consumer (B2C) or B2B sellers. Lastly, this thesis will provide development recommendations for the case company.

The research question (RQ) is: **How can Company X collaboratively and sustainably market its innovation?**

In order to answer the RQ above, answers must be provided to the investigative questions (IQs) below.

IQ1. What are Company X’s current marketing and branding strategies?

IQ2. How do customers perceive Company X’s marketing and potential marketing collaboration with Company X?

IQ3. How do the sustainability values of Company X and its customers correlate?

IQ4. What added value or benefits can Company X provide for its customers?

IQ5. What development recommendations can be made for Company X about collaboratively marketing its sustainable material innovation?

Investigative Questions	Theoretical Framework / Knowledge Base	Research Methods	Results (chapter)
IQ1. What are Company X's current marketing and branding strategies?	Competitive advantage, CSR, ingredient branding, sustainable marketing, green marketing	Desktop research, interviews with Company X executives	4.1.1 4.1.3
IQ2. How do customers perceive Company X's marketing and potential marketing collaboration with Company X?	Competitive advantage and differentiation, marketing and branding collaboration, sustainable material innovation	Survey with Company X's customers	4.2.2.
IQ3. How do the sustainability values of Company X and its customers correlate?	Sustainable marketing, green marketing	Interviews, comparative analysis	4.1.2 4.2.3
IQ4. What added value or benefits can Company X provide for its customers?	Marketing and branding collaboration, sustainable material innovation, green marketing	Interviews, desktop research, literature review	4.1.2 4.1.3 4.2.4
IQ5. What development recommendations can be made for Company X about collaboratively marketing and branding its sustainable material innovation?	Ingredient branding, sustainable marketing	Interviews, desktop research	4.2.5

The table below is the Overlay matrix which depicts the investigative questions of this thesis as well as the theoretical framework, research methods and results.

Table 1. Overlay matrix

1.3 Demarcation

The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) is a very interesting and relevant concept. However, this theory was not included in this research as Company X was not a publicly traded company, so its financial statements are not publicly published. Therefore, the author would have been unable to assess all aspects of the TBL with respect to Company X. The TBL was coined in 1994 by John Elkington (Kenton 2019). The idea of the TBL is to support the sustainable goals of companies and measure their financial, environmental and social performance. According to the TBL theory, profit should not be the only bottom line to look at when assessing a company as the people or social responsibility and planet or environmental responsibility should be considered too. (Kenton 2019.)

As Company X's product is a sustainable material innovation that biodegrades without leaving microplastics behind in nature, there is a clear emphasis on the environment. Therefore, this thesis did not focus heavily on the economic or social aspects of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but more on the environmental aspects.

Regarding sustainability and sustainable marketing, the influence of cultures and development status of the country was not considered as the focus was kept more on the businesses themselves rather than their contexts. Due to the limited scope of this thesis, the focus of this research was on B2B business instead of B2C business and consumer perspectives. Buying behaviors, decision making theories or stakeholder theories were not covered within the scope of this research. Furthermore, the precise methods of sustainable marketing were left out at this point but should be further studied later on.

Lastly, an initial idea for this research was to conduct interviews with other ingredient brands such as Gore-Tex to gain a deeper understanding of how they achieved their ingredient brand status. An interview requested was made to Gore-Tex, but at the time Gore-Tex responded that they did not have the resources to proceed with the interview (Appendix 4.). Furthermore, upon further consideration this would have made the scope of this research too broad. Instead, the focus was kept on Company X and its customers.

1.4 Benefits

Through this thesis Company X has gained insights from their customers about collaborative marketing. Company X also gained further information on how to improve their marketing and general activities. This thesis is provided initial information to Company X about the feasibility and potential of collaborative marketing including co-branding and ingredient branding. With this information, Company X will then be able to better evaluate how exactly they would like to implement collaborative marketing if at all.

The customers of Company X received an opportunity to voice their honest feedback and thoughts anonymously about collaborative marketing and the sustainable material innovation. This thesis helped to bridge any knowledge gaps and improve communication flow between Company X and its customers.

This thesis also aimed to provide some clarification about how new alternative materials such as Company X's sustainable material innovation could be marketed or communicated about. While this has been beneficial for Company X and its customers, this has also been beneficial for the general public and perhaps other companies with sustainable products that are in similar situations as Company X.

The author had a passion for sustainability and a strong interest in marketing and branding already in the beginning of this research. A major benefit of this research for the author has been the ability to deepen her knowledge and gain valuable connections within her areas of interest.

The benefit provided by this research to Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences was the focus on topics that are highly contemporary and not heavily explored yet. This research has introduced new information and fresh ideas for further research.

1.5 Key Concepts

The World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 (Emery 2012, 20) provided one of the first definitions for **sustainability**: "...a new era of economic growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable; an economy is sustainable if it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs".

Martin and Schouten (2014, 2) define **sustainable marketing** as “the process of creating, communicating and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital are preserved or enhanced throughout”. Kotler and Armstrong (2018, 596) define sustainable marketing as “meeting the needs of consumers, businesses, and society – now and in the future – through socially and environmentally responsible marketing actions.”

Collaborative marketing in this research is used as an umbrella term that encompasses all marketing activities that involve two or more companies such as joint-marketing, dual marketing and co-marketing since there is a variety of different definitions and methods for marketing collaboration (Cristal 2017).

Ingredient brands complement other brands without conflicting them and add value to them. The ingredient may not be identifiable visually which is why the brand itself is important. The message the ingredient brand holds carries over to the brand there are associated with and typically benefits the associated brand. (Kestenbaum 2018.) Ingredient brands are strong brand names which communicate specific features and advantages of a product. Ingredient brands are brands within brands that make the invisible components, the ingredients, visible for consumers. (Kotler and Pfoertsch 2010, XIII.)

1.6 Case Company X

Company X was founded within the European Union (EU) in the 2010s and currently directly employs roughly 30 people. Company X sells finished products as well as raw material. Both are or are made from its sustainable material innovation, which is a sustainable, microplastic-free alternative to conventional plastics (Company X 2019a). Products can be manufactured out of the new material by using existing production lines intended for plastic. (Company X 2019b.) Company X originally primarily operated within the cosmetics industry but has quickly expanded its offering internationally to other industries as well.

The case company has ambitious goals for itself which included developing a brand reputation that is so strong that other companies wish to use Company X's brand in their marketing to bring added value to their customers. In other words, Company X wants to become an ingredient brand. Company X hopes to become the Gore-Tex of sustainable materials. By becoming an ingredient brand, Company X desires to set a new standard for sustainability and help solve the plastic waste problem by leading by example. Through this research, Company

X wanted to receive more insights for how it could achieve its goals together with its customers.

2 Collaborative and Sustainable Marketing

This chapter outlines the main theoretical concepts considered and utilized in this thesis. These concepts build a base for the data collection. This chapter will explore topics that were relevant for Company X in its current situation at the time of this research without ignoring its future aspiration. The figure below (Figure 1.) roughly depicts the main theoretical framework.

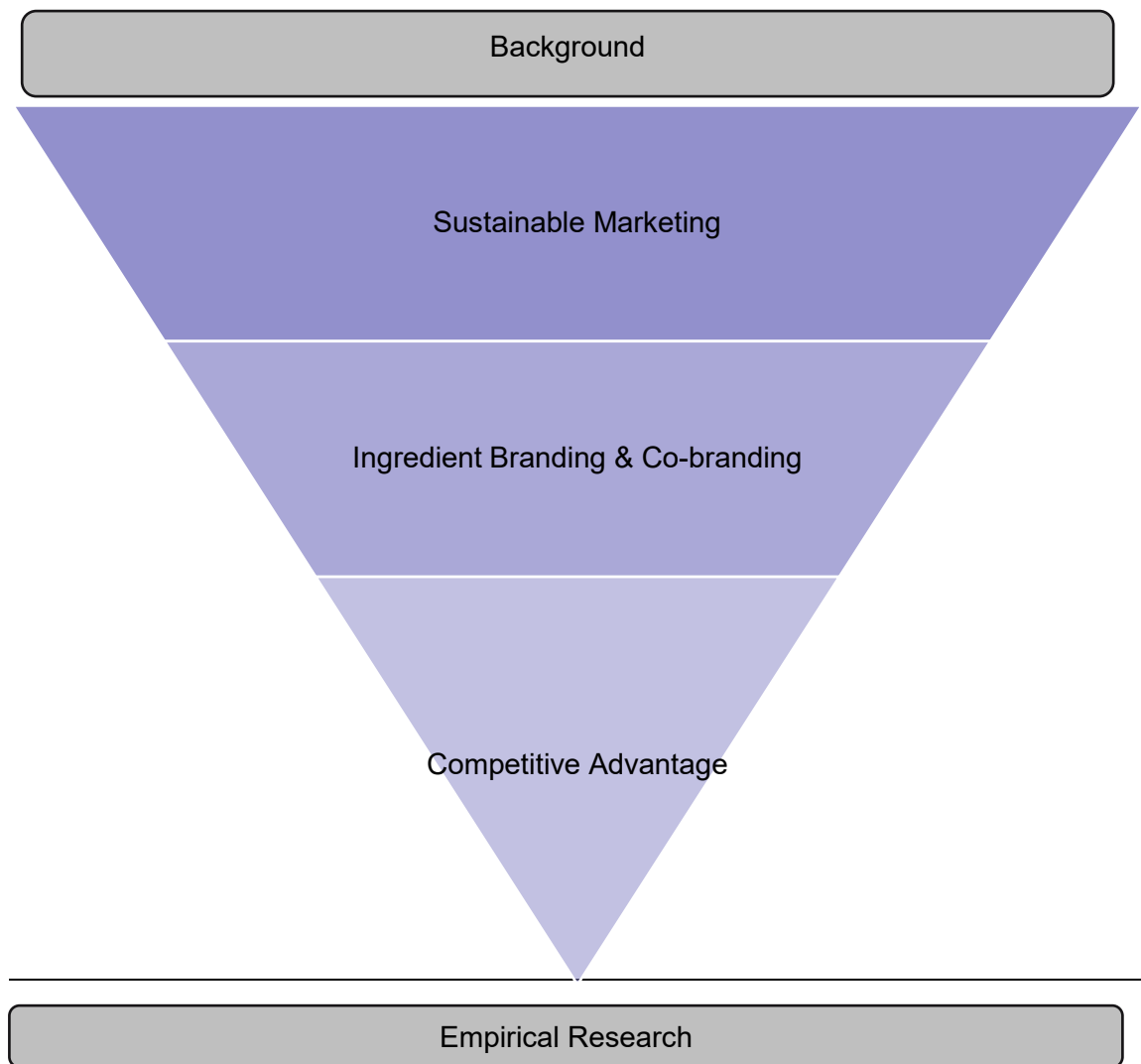


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework Pyramid

2.1 Sustainable Marketing

There are several definitions for sustainable marketing which is most likely a reflection of the fact that sustainability itself is already so complex and debated that it is hard to provide a definition for sustainable marketing that would not be heavily contested (Kemper and Ballantine 2019, 10). Martin and Schouten (2014, 2) define sustainable marketing as, “the process of creating, communicating and delivering value to customers in such a way that both natural and human capital are preserved or enhanced throughout”. Kotler and Armstrong (2018, 596) define sustainable marketing as, “meeting the needs of consumers, businesses, and society – now and in the future – through socially and environmentally responsible marketing actions.” Belz and Peattie (2011, in Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 299) prefer to use the term “sustainability marketing” instead of “sustainable marketing” because the word “sustainable” can be understood as durable or long lasting which may give the impression that the marketing is meant to drive long lasting (i.e. sustainable) relationships without any clear focus on actual sustainable development. In this case, sustainability marketing would more clearly reflect the goals of marketing the sustainable development agenda (Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 299). Hurth (2017, 7) explains that while many have tried to mend the sustainable marketing literature gap there is still “no simple representation of the core marketing world views and their implications for managing marketing’s role in advancing sustainability”. Having a precise definition for sustainable marketing is not as important as utilizing it as an umbrella term for enhancing and aligning both marketing practices and thought with the intention of fostering sustainable development (Hurth 2017, 12). In this research the author will refer to the “sustainable marketing” concept as previously defined by Kotler and Armstrong as well as Martin and Schouten.

Looking back, the principles and practices of marketing and sustainable development are overall drastically different. With one, marketing, the simple core concept is to encourage consumers to buy whatever is marketed while with the other, sustainable development, consumers are urged to conserve and limit their consumption. (Desmarais, Sauveur & Gancille in Varey & Pirson 2014, 216.)

The original core idea of marketing is to satisfy customer needs and provide profits for the business, and marketing is still largely driven by satisfying the needs and wants of stakeholders (Emery 2012, 7). Marketing facilitates the exchange where a customer gives a business money in exchange for goods or services (Emery 2012, 8). In fact, marketing and advertising have been criticized for their creation of value and promotion of meaningless commodities. Hurth (2017,4) agrees that marketing has been justly criticized for “encouraging unsustainable behaviors with exaggerated realities”. Conventionally marketing activities of companies result in beneficial outcomes for the company and its stakeholders however it has become increasingly more apparent that traditionally successful marketing activities have had unforeseen negative impacts on society and the environment (Gordon, Carrigan & Hastings 2011, 7). Gordon, Carrigan and Hastings (2011, 6) bluntly and clearly state that marketing has currently been doing precisely what it was intended to do which is encourage consumerism, drive sales of goods and generate profit irrespective of sustainable development. Marketing was not originally supposed to drive sustainability which why its potential role in this is often left unnoticed (Gordon & al. 2011, 6). However, marketing can also be a considerable driver for long-term wellbeing if it is used to showcase positive behaviors. Sustainable marketing is exactly the way how the negative impacts of marketing can be minimized, and the positive aspects maximized (Hurth 2017, 4.)

Sustainable marketing encompasses to major components: 1.) marketing sustainably and 2.) marketing sustainability. These two aspects go hand in hand, but it is important to understand their differences to holistically advance sustainable marketing. The concept of marketing sustainably refers to ensuring that all marketing processes are “environmentally and socially benign” while the concept of marketing sustainability refers to creating, advocating and supporting sustainable consumption by establishing it as a global cultural value and by setting consumption practices. The goal for sustainable marketing is to help create a society where environmental sustainability is the norm. (Martin & Schouten 2014, 2.)

It is evident that in order for marketing to have an appropriate role with sustainable development marketing itself must become sustainable. This means that all marketing practices must be based on and consistently guided by sustainable values. In addition to marketing practices, sustainability then needs to be a core component of marketing and be able to convey a convincing business case to consumers as well. (Gordon & al. 2011, 7.) As with conventional marketing, sustainable marketing must also satisfy the needs of consumers and facilitate the competitive advantage of the company (Martin & Schouten 2012, 10).

In 2010 over 50% of executives surveyed by McKinsey stated that sustainability is very or extremely important to them while only 30% said that sustainability is embedded in their company's strategy and business practices (Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 296). According to Martin and Schouten (2014, 2) a strong internal leader is required to implement sustainable marketing through the organization. The 2010 UN Global Compact-Accenture CEO study showed contradictory findings where 81% of the CEOs claimed that sustainability has been fully embedded into the strategy and operations of their company, but the qualitative interviews conducted with the CEOs indicated that sustainability was still held as a separate department or strategy instead of being thoroughly embedded in all organizational functions and strategies. It was recognized that "competing strategic priorities" such as financial or economic interests were one of the largest barriers against integrating sustainability better within the whole company strategy. (Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 296.) Another reason why sustainability is poorly implemented despite the recognition of its importance, as identified in the 2010 McKinsey study, is that there still is no clear definition for all of it (Bonini, Görner & Jones 2010). Only a fraction of companies have implemented sustainable marketing within and throughout their corporate strategies (Grubor & Milovanov 2016, 413). Daniel Franklin (2009, in Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 296) states: "Many companies pretend that their sustainability strategy runs deeper than it really does". Franklin (2009, in Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 296) continues to explain how its nearly self-evident and mandatory for the company management to claim that sustainability is part of their corporate strategy or "part of their DNA" despite not actively implementing it in company activities and functions.

Kotler and Armstrong (2018, 600) believe that to reach truly sustainable marketing close collaboration is needed among companies, policy makers and consumers. Grubor and Milanov (2016, 408) agree that synergy among all stakeholders is needed to holistically transform conventional marketing and business strategies into sustainable ones. Furthermore, to succeed sustainable marketing must be implemented in all company functions throughout the organizations. This starts at a managerial level since the efforts of the marketing department will be diminished or diluted if management does not actively support the efforts. Proper leadership in sustainable marketing, as in everything, is crucial for long-term prosperity. (Hurth 2017, 7.) Bonini, Görner and Jones (2010) agree that improved communication about sustainability between stakeholders as well as active CEOs' with sustainability at the top of their priority lists are more likely to be able to successfully implement sustainability and sustainable marketing throughout their company strategy.

2.1.1 Green Marketing

Green marketing is intended to facilitate the development and communication of more sustainable products while also encouraging the adoption of more sustainable practices (Gordon & al. 2011, 3). Sarkar (2012, 39) defines green marketing as the promotion of products that address environmental concerns. Phrases and words typically associated with green marketing and green products include terms such as: renewable, biodegradable, ozone friendly, recyclable, eco-friendly etc. (Sarkar 2012, 39). Sarkar (2012, 39) also highlights that green marketing encompasses broader product related activities as well such as production, design and packaging. Green marketing is typically used when focusing on products and services and should be a part of every eco-product focused company (Sarkar 2012, 43). Iannuzzi (2018, 195) explains that green marketing should enhance the other brand and product qualities: "The idea that it's a great product *and* "it has these sustainable attributes".

Iannuzzi (2018, 201) explains that a Green Gap" exists among consumers. This "Green Gap" is explained to be," the glaring disconnect between attitude and action as it relates to sustainable behaviors, practices, and purchases in the average consumer." People tend to think that "green" activities such as recycling, organic products and local foods are good (80% of Americans), but not very many people actually do these activities or purchase these products themselves (50% of Americans) (Iannuzzi 2018, 201).

Green marketing has several challenges such as greenwashing where companies make misleading or unsubstantiated claims about their environmental activities and impact (Berrone, Fosfuri and Gelabert 2017, 363). Green marketing is not easy, there are plenty of eco-labels but it is sometimes hard to tell what is relevant and legitimate. If mistakes are made the backlash can be severe. Green marketing that is insincere or insignificant can quickly create "greenwashing" criticism. Furthermore, consumers can get tired of the same green messages and visuals and "green fatigue" occurs as well. (Ottman 2011.) Green fatigue refers to the situation where consumers feel overwhelmed by all the green marketing buzzwords and are unable to separate genuine green products from gimmicks (Ottman 2011). Emery (2017, 223-224) explains that greenwashing occurs in many forms: 1.) spreading misleading information to hide negative environmental impacts and instead present a positive image 2.) making environmental claims that do not have any supporting evidence or are irrelevant distractions from

the bleak reality 3.) highlighting environmental benefits of a specific product to misdirect consumers away from the negative environmental practices of the company overall 4.) providing insincere statements and promoting a product as good for the environment even when it may not actually be so. Due to the challenges of green marketing and the skepticism caused by greenwashing a phenomena of “greenphobia” has been observed where consumers perceive green products to be, “more expensive, less effective, and aimed at a small niche of green consumers”. (Rettie, Burchell and Riley 2012, 422.) Unfortunately, green fatigue, greenphobia and greenwashing inherently and directly impact tangibly and intangibly the genuine and good-intentioned business like Company X (Ottman 2011). The negative consequences of greenwashing arguably impact honest green marketers even worse since their credibility is unjustly endangered because the irresponsible actions of others.

Another challenge with green marketing is identifying the right targets. Consumers are not consistently green with their consumption as some consumers may convey certain green behaviors but not others, and the green or sustainable buying behaviors change based on the market the consumers are in. Occasionally, it is also challenging to identify whether certain consumer behaviors are green or whether the behavior was economically motivated e.g. limiting electricity use. (Rettie & al. 2012, 423.) Often, consumers’ understandings of what is green behavior is based on social norms that are typically government incentivized e.g. recycling, bringing your own shopping bags and using energy efficient light bulbs. Consumers generally understand what is green and what is not, but whether they take green actions is heavily influenced by whether that action is seen to be normal (what other people do). Consumers assess green marketing practices, green behaviors and green products in the context of what is normal or mainstream for them. Therefore, green marketing should go beyond marketing green products and services and encourage consumers to adopt green behaviors by positioning them as normal and by positioning unsustainable behaviors as not normal. (Rettie & al. 2012, 421-422.) For example, bringing your own shopping bag instead of buying or receiving plastic bags from stores has been “normalized”.

Iannuzzi (2018, 180) also reminds that businesses should be precise with their green marketing claims and provide quantitative information when possible. Companies engaging in green marketing should also act as a resource for consumers and customers by providing additional information beyond the bare minimum (Iannuzzi 2018, 180). While serving as a resource companies can help to educate consumers to make them feel engaged and empowered in

environmental sustainability topics that have a meaningful impact on their daily lives and futures (Ottman 2011). Furthermore, green marketers should make sure to be consistent with their visuals and texts to avoid any unnecessary confusion and distrust (Iannuzzi 2018, 180).

Iannuzzi (2018, 200) claims that usually the disconnect between a solid sustainability strategy and weak marketplace presence results from a lack of understanding of the consumers. No matter how good a company's joint marketing plans and assets may be and no matter how seamless the collaboration with its partners is, nothing will work if the understanding of the consumer is not good. Ottman (2011) shares Iannuzzi's views and highlights how companies must understand the environmental values and beliefs of their stakeholders and work with them to create new products that will meet their expectations. Transparent and credible communication with stakeholders is essential for successful green marketing. Proactivity and going beyond the expectations of stakeholders is highly recommended as well as this will most likely, in addition to positively surprising the stakeholders, offer a competitive advantage. (Ottman 2011.)

2.1.2 Corporate Social Responsibility

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a voluntary concept that companies can include in their business model to help them be more accountable and responsible with their impact on the economy, society and environment (Chen 2019). CSR has had and has a multitude of different applications, interpretations and definitions but Archie Carroll's pyramid of CSR is perhaps one of the most well-known models of CSR (Carroll 2016, 1). Carroll's original definition of CSR which the pyramid of CSR was based on is: "Corporate social responsibility encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (philanthropic) expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (Carroll 2016, 2). The pyramid of CSR depicts the four expectations of society in order with economic responsibility being most important followed by legal, ethical and philanthropic responsibilities (Baden 2016, 1). Denise Baden (2016, 1-2) suggests the pyramid, particularly the primacy of economic responsibilities, should be reassessed and brought to the 21st century (Baden 2016, 1-2). Baden introduced a new version of the pyramid of CSR that places ethical responsibility including environmental responsibility as the foundation followed by legal, economic and philanthropic responsibilities (Baden 2016, 11).

As Emery (2012, 11) bluntly and clearly states: "We can no longer say that the business of business is purely business". CSR has developed and its original motivations are not the same as they are today. CSR was previously intended to improve business and increase profits instead of advocating sustainability. CSR was a PR tool that was heavily misused since the primary goal was to benefit business and whether the environment benefitted was secondary. (Emery 2012, 13.) Conventional or "old" CSR has failed because it has not effectively addressed the problems facing the world and instead has just acted as a way for companies to enhance their reputation, image and brand equity (Visser 2011 in Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 296). To counter this "old" CSR, Emery (2012, 14) introduces a concept of "new" CSR and suggests that corporate social responsibility could be reconsidered to be corporate sustainability. Contrary to old CSR, companies engaging in new CSR right from the start would focus on sustainable economic development to improve the quality of life of their stakeholders including their employees and their families as well as their community and society overall (Emery 2012, 14). Sustainable marketing can fill the gap between conventional marketing and CSR activities (Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 292). Instead of sustainable marketing, Hunt (2011, in Hurth 2017, 33-34) argues that even when faced with environmental threats and issues companies should target achieving superior financial performance as the ultimate objective. The profits can then be invested into sustainability causes and green activities. This heavily supports the old and narrow view of CSR where actual environmental impact is secondary to the benefits or profits of the company (Hurth 2017, 33-34).

According to Martin and Schouten (2012, 33) most companies agree and comprehend with the arguments for CSR, sustainability and ethical business, but they often do not know how to achieve these goals in a measurable and comprehensive way. Another challenge with CSR is the typical emphasis on specific aspects instead of a more comprehensive approach throughout the company. In these situations doing good things can unfortunately occasionally result in unintended harm. For example, hydroelectric power does not release as much CO₂ into the atmosphere as coal, but dams require a lot of resources and can cause serious negative problems to the natural environments they are placed in. To emit less carbon companies may inherently and unwillingly natural ecosystems and also create difficulties for other humans that may be reliant on a free-flowing river. (Martin and Schouten 2012, 33.) Therefore, before doing one seemingly good thing it is important to carefully evaluate all possible outcomes and consequences.

2.2 Collaborative Marketing and Branding

One of the biggest challenges and opportunities in sustainable marketing is collaboration. Sustainability requires new innovative ideas and new methods of value creation which often require collaboration and create new business relationships (Martin & Schouten 2012, 11). Ottman (2011) believes, “the currency of sustainable branding is innovation, flexibility, and heart”. Furthermore, brands and their reputations are created through the interactions and shared experiences of stakeholders (Martin & Schouten 2012, 140). It is apparent that collaborative marketing is needed for sustainable marketing and for sustainable brand creation. Brand partnerships, joint marketing, co-marketing, dual marketing and so on. Many terms are thrown around, but they all largely revolve around the same idea of companies collaborating in marketing activities (Cristal 2017).

The reason there is so many terms and not one clear term is because the marketing collaboration can occur in many different forms. Cristal (2017) outlines 10 main forms:

1. Affiliate marketing
2. Content marketing
3. Distribution
4. Marketing with a charitable organization
5. Joint product creation and marketing
6. Licensing
7. Loyalty
8. Product placement
9. Shared stores
10. Sponsorship

There is a common misunderstanding that ingredient branding, and co-branding are the same. This is partially understandable, however, due to strikingly similar definitions present in literature. Both do include the collaboration of two or more brands to enhance a product. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 23.) Kotler and Pfoertsch (2010, 24) explain: “If the product cannot be sold separately and/or is a component/ingredient of another product the ingredient branding strategy should be applied”. If brands seek to promote product(s) together while still keeping their brands distinct from each other, then co-branding strategies are suitable. Ingredient branding can be considered as a form of co-branding. In certain cases, both strategies can be

used simultaneously as they are not mutually exclusive but is good to understand their differences. Ingredient branding is typically a long-term relationship while co-branding may be for a limited time only e.g. for a special campaign or event. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 24.) Ingredient co-branding relationships have increasingly been adopted as viable marketing strategies (Erevelles, Stevenson, Srinivasa, & Fukawa 2008, 950).

2.2.1 Co-branding

Co-branding occurs when one product features two different established brands (Kotler & Armstrong 2018, 269). These brands can also engage with co-creation. Co-branding can offer significant benefits to the brands involved as they can take advantage of each other strengths, compensate for each other's weaknesses and potentially even enter into new markets or tap into new target audiences through each other. (Kotler & Armstrong 2018, 269.) The primary purpose of co-branding is to enhance the success of products by capitalizing on the equity of both brands (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 23). Co-branding often occurs when both brands are already established and well-known, but there are clearly identifiable advantages that can be gained when the brands are combined (Erevelles & al. 2008, 490). Threats from competition and competitive advantage are typical strong motivators for co-branding. Especially when a company is not price competitive with its competitor, the company may decide to enter into co-branding to increase perceived value of its products. Furthermore, joint marketing has a significant influence on prospering the success of the co-branding alliance and product. (Erevelles & al. 2008, 950.)

As nothing is perfect, co-branding has its weaknesses as well. A lot of trust is required from each co-brand as both must trust that the other will not tarnish their own brands and maintain the desired image. Issues with one brand can negatively impact the other brand as well. On top of trust, co-branding of course will require extensive and detailed contracts to clarify and coordinate the licensing and all associated activities. (Kotler & Armstrong 2018, 270.)

2.2.2 Ingredient Branding

Ingredient branding is a more recent strategy used to maximize brand potential. Ingredient branding fits under the co-branding umbrella. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 16.) Ingredient brands complement consumer brands without confliction. Ingredient brands typically add value in the eyes of consumers and consumer brands to the products that are made from the branded ingredient and/or contain the ingredient brand on their labels. (Kestenbaum 2018.)

Some famous examples of ingredient brands are Teflon and Gore-Tex (Tradii 2019). Ingredient brands focus their marketing efforts on attracting host brands which are often consumer brands that would take on the ingredient brand and be allowed the benefits from it while providing compensation to the ingredient brand (Tradii 2019). Despite often appearing on advertisements with the host brand, the goal of the ingredient brand is not to share marketing costs but to provide credibility and increase its own recognition. Ingredient brands usually brand ingredients, like the name states, which are usually raw materials, manufactured materials, components, or parts which will eventually be embedded in or utilized with a consumer product produced by a host brand (Kotler and Pfoertsch 2010, 17).

Ingredient brands can validate the product and increase the appeal of it. With a lot of products, it is hard to assess how good they will be until they are actually used (e.g. shoes, food products) which is why ingredient brands can add a lot of value to the products and help consumers feel confident with their purchases. (Quelch 2007.) It is rather undisputed that consumers will agree to pay a higher price for branded goods than unbranded. Brands can offer promises such as high quality or long-lasting functionality or brands can serve as status symbols. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 1.) When customers understand the value of a specific ingredient, they will seek out products that have them (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 16). The benefits and value that customers perceive of a specific ingredient is the most important factor for the success of ingredient branding. However, the customers must somehow be able to see, hear or feel the ingredient to prove its value. Ingredient branding is the way to make the often-invisible ingredients into something visible. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 19.)

There are not very many ingredient brands in world that are recognized and respected globally. Gore-Tex, however, is one of them and an excellent example of an ingredient brand. The product component or feature of Gore-Tex has become in many cases the main reason for that product to be purchased. Having the Gore-Tex brand on a product immediately clarifies the function and guarantee of the product. (Gore-Tex 2010.) When customers see a product with the Gore-Tex brand they know and can trust that the product will “keep you dry” (Gore-Tex 2010). For the sake of its own recognition and success as well as during a time of greenwashing and poor regulations on environmental claims, Company X desires to become and ingredient brand like Gore-Tex which would guarantee products to be truly sustainable and microplastic-free.

Ingredient branding can create a powerful partnership with a win-win situation if it is implemented in a well thought through manner (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010,1). However, ingredient brands and their relationships with host brands must be carefully managed. A risk exists

where the host brand may desire to copy the ingredient brand and ultimately become a competitor, but this can be avoided with proper contracts, trust and positive maintenance of the relationship between the brands (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 46). It is understood that the ingredient brand's brand value may eventually exceed the value of the host brand as consumers seek more products made with the specific ingredient regardless of who provides the product (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 21). Another challenge that ingredient brands face is how many host brands they should attach themselves to. More brands equal to more recognition, profits and less risk as all the eggs are not in one basket, but because of this the exclusivity and special value of the ingredient brand decreases. (Tradii 2019.) Through much trial and error, Gore-Tex developed a way to work with its many host brands without competing them against each other and diminishing their competitive advantage. Gore-Tex has limited its host brand partners to specific applications, industries or regions to avoid them weakening each other's market positions. In other words, one host brand will utilize Gore-Tex's ingredient brand with hiking equipment and another with sailing and another with cycling and so forth. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 22.)

To create and maintain an ingredient brand, strong and strategic brand leadership is crucially important. To maintain their competitive edge, ingredient brands must be actively managed through continuous innovation, networking and value chain analysis. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 269.) To succeed with an ingredient branding strategy the brand management has to be integrated in all company functions including marketing, R&D and manufacturing (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 293). Furthermore, ingredient brands must have continuous open communication with consumers. For example, Gore-Tex regularly surveys its customers and collects feedback. The better the trust and perceptions of consumers, the more likely it is to develop a price premium as well. The better the ingredient brand manages its relationships and reacts to consumer behaviors the better the price premium can be. (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 295.)

2.3 Competitive Advantage

Competitive advantage refers to how companies create value for their customers that surpasses the value offered by competitors (Johnson, Whittington, Scholes, Angwin & Regnér 2017, 210). Michael Porter believed that companies could achieve competitive advantage through one of two major ways: lower costs or differentiated products/services. Porter created the Three Generic Strategies model (Figure 2.) to illustrate his ideas of three basic strategies to gain competitive advantage. The three strategies are: cost strategy, differentiation strategy and focus strategy. (Johnson & al. 2017, 210-211.)

		Competitive advantage	
		Lower cost	Differentiation
Competitive scope	Broad target	1 Cost leadership	2 Differentiation
	Narrow target	3a Cost focus	3b Differentiation focus

Figure 2. Porter's Three Generic Strategies, first published in *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance* in 1985 by Michael E. Porter (Adapted from: Johnson & al. 2017, 211)

Sustainability can be a differentiator as well. As Ioannou and Serafeim (2019) explain: "Some companies are creating real strategic advantage by adopting sustainability measures their competitors can't easily match." Environmental needs will foster new market opportunities that will give companies the chance to reposition themselves and gain competitive advantage that will enhance their profits as well. CSR has also been identified as a "strategic marketing approach for sustainability". (Lii, Wu & Ding 2013, 15.)

Already in 1991 Porter stated: "Strict environmental regulations do not inevitably hinder competitive advantage against rivals; indeed, they often enhance it" (Porter 1991, in Gupta & Benson 2011, 122). Both reason and research indicate that sustainable practices actually strengthen competitive advantage over time. Relative to conventional practices a strategic push toward sustainability reduces waste, material and energy costs, secures resource supplies, drives innovation, reduces risks, strengthens brands, and attracts and retains talented workers. (Martin & Schouten 2012, 15-17.)

Ambec, Cohen, Elgie and Lanoie (2010 in Gupta & Benson 2011, 122), raise a critical view that going beyond government regulations and engaging in sustainable practices such as pollution reduction were profitable then surely profit-maximizing organizations would have significantly sought to take advantage of these practices already. This does not seem to be the

case, however, since only a limited number of companies have sustainability as a core part of their strategy. Perhaps a reason why these opportunities have not been seized by many is because conventionally businesses have narrowly seen sustainability as a type of threat that needs to be addressed or as a method to be altruistic and build up goodwill. These sustainability threats include the various climate change concerns such as resource depletion which may impact the businesses value creation or profitability. (Lowitt 2011, 22.) Lowitt (2011,22) explains that several companies see sustainability as a, “stakeholder imposed Gordian Knot: become sustainable or maximize financial performance. They simply want to find ways to cut or otherwise “deal with” the knot, then move on to other more competitive matters.” However, focusing on both sustainability and financial performance together can be a powerful method for company growth and competitive differentiation (Lowitt 2011, 22).

Martin and Schouten (2012, 15) argue that the primary goal of any and all marketing strategies is to provide companies a competitive edge in their markets. The prosperity of these strategies are typically measure through the generated sales revenues, market share, profits and stock prices. The interest in sustainability keeps increasing partially due to the ethical appeal of it but also more because of its economic appeal as well. (Martin & Schouten 2012, 15.) Martin and Schouten (2012, 15) continue to explain: “There are many economic reasons for businesses to pursue environmental and social sustainability in their marketing strategies. In the end, the reasons all come down to long term competitive advantage, and together they make the business cases for sustainability.” Kotler and Pfoertsch (2010, 11) agree that marketing and branding are the way to create differentiation and long-lasting competitive advantage. Previously, until the early 1980s, tangible resources were considered as means for competitive advantage but now increasingly there has been a shift towards intangible resources such as brand management and customer loyalty as means for differentiation and competitive advantage (Kotler & Pfoertsch 2010, 15). According to Kotler and Pfoertsch (2010, 150) ingredient branding is another “great way to differentiate and to maintain the competitive advantage”.

3 Research Methods

This section will focus on examining the methods of the conducted research. This section will also outline the sampling and interviewee selection process as well as the general research phases.

3.1 Research Design

A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was used in this research. The questionnaire was designed to be quantitative. This research integrated qualitative and quantitative approaches as they encompass different types of thinking that allow the author to gain a deeper and full understanding of the research topic overall. Single method research can limit perspectives. (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 19.) The survey questions were mostly straightforward simple questions starting with e.g. “what” and “how strongly” which provided more objective and quantifiable results allowing for a quantitative approach. While the interviews and the open questions of the survey asked more complex questions often starting with “how” and “why” and in some cases “what” where it was not possible to measure and obtain an objective result, a qualitative approach was necessary. (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 20.)

To get a holistic overview of feedback from customers, surveying them was more efficient. Conducting in-depth interviews with 30 customers or more would not have been in the scope of this research. Questionnaires are more effective for collecting feedback from a larger group of individuals. Questionnaires also allow information to be compared numerically and more objectively. Interview was used at the qualitative research method because it allows for more detailed data collection for understanding relationships and meaning. Interviews were important to gather the full opinions and ideas of the highly selected interviewees. Using a simple survey would not have been sufficient for collecting the thoughts of Company X particularly due to the limited sample size and due to the highly specialized knowledge of the interviewees. Therefore, qualitative was needed instead of quantitative.

Using mixed methods in this research was more practical and allowed for more richer data collection within the limited timeframe (Saunders & al. 2019, 182). Sequential mixed methods research approach was used since two phases of data collection and analysis took place. Qualitative research (interviews) was followed by quantitative research (questionnaire) to expand and elaborate findings further (Saunders & al. 2019, 182). Furthermore, the qualitative research was important for refining the survey questions in order to collect more suitable

data. Qualitative and quantitative elements were combined in this research in order to better answer the research question (Saunders & al. 2019, 184).

The first phase (Phase 1) of this research focused on the interviews. The interview results were analyzed through qualitative thematic analysis and comparative analysis. The interview questions were designed to primarily answer IQ1, IQ3 and IQ4. However, some answers to IQ2 and IQ5 were provided especially by Interviewee C as they were also an external party and not an official employee of Company X. The second phase of this research (Phase 2) focused on the questionnaire conducted with the customers of Company X. The Phase 1 interview results were used to help create the questions for the survey. The survey was intended to answer IQ2, IQ3, IQ4 and IQ5. The figure below (Figure 3.) outlines the research design.

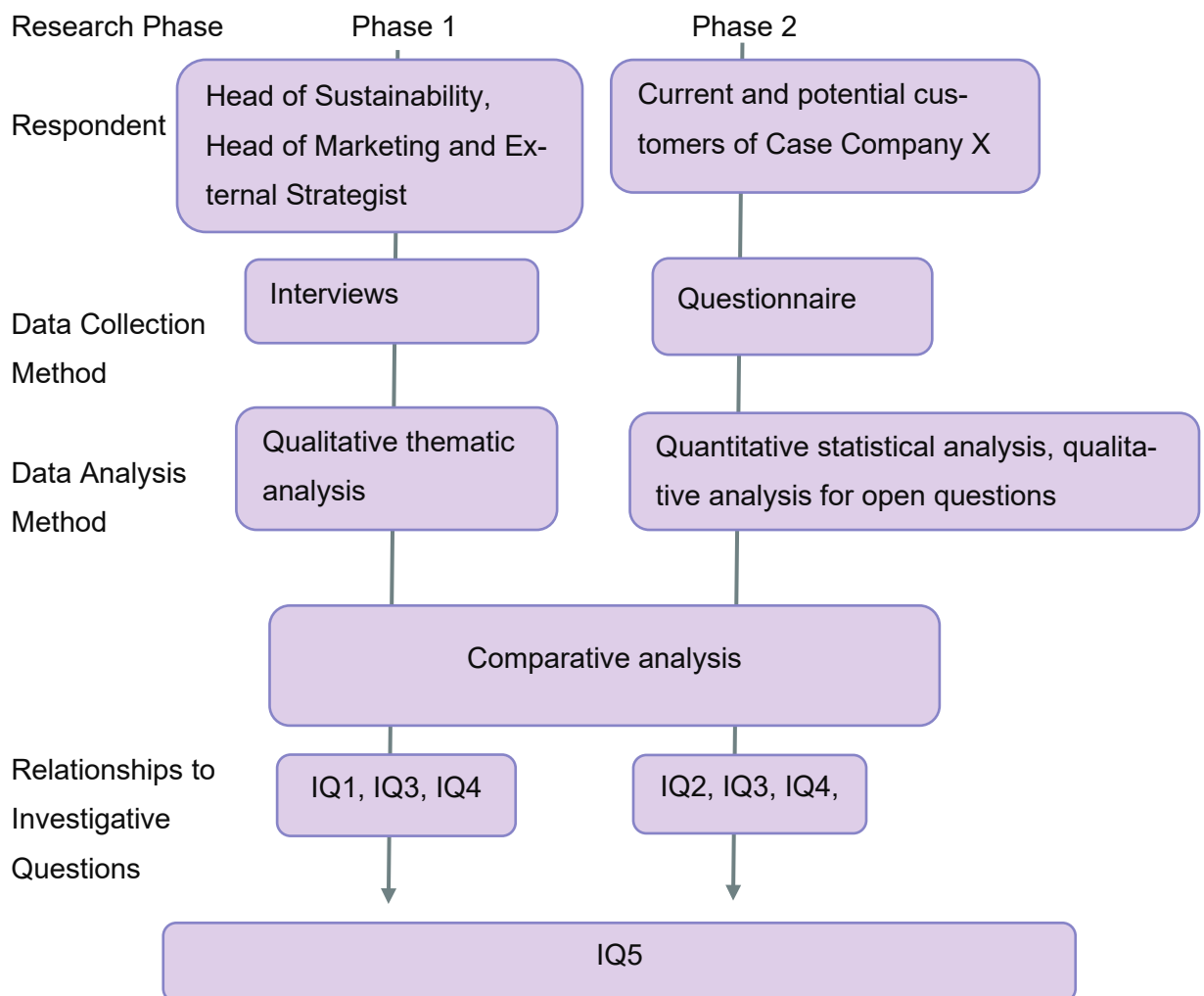


Figure 3. Research Design

3.2 Population and Sampling

The interviews were conducted with three experts in different fields with internal insights and working relationships with Company X. Interviewee A was the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) of Company X, Interviewee B was the Sustainability Director of Company X and Interviewee C was an external Branding Strategist working for Company X at the time of the interviews. Each interviewee had a major role in shaping the primary activities and future objectives of Company X which is why they were selected as the interview samples out of the total population of roughly 30 Company X employees. Each interviewee represented a different perspective while all still working towards the same ultimate goal of supporting Company X to succeed.

The Chief Marketing Officer (Interviewee A) was interviewed to gain an understanding of the current marketing and branding activities of Company X in order to help develop the questionnaire questions and compare the results of the questionnaire with the interview results of. The Sustainability Director of Company X was interviewed to get a better understanding of the company's unique sustainable material innovation as well as their current needs and thoughts for collaboratively marketing their sustainable material innovation. The Sustainability Director (Interviewee B) is overall an extremely valuable informant for the sustainability topic since they have been an advocate for sustainability for years and have worked as an advisor as well as a consultant on sustainability for profit- as well as non-profit organizations. These interviews provided some answers to the IQs and provided beneficial background information that was used to create the survey questions for the customers of Company X. Case Company X representatives were motivated to participate in the interviews is by preparing for them thoroughly, showing them the interview questions in advance and highlighting the mutual benefit that we can gain from this thesis work.

The external strategist, Interviewee C, was interviewed because he had just been in the process of creating a new brand image for the company by renewing some of their marketing materials, visuals and even the company logo. He knew the company well and was involved with the creation of the ingredient branding and collaborative marketing strategy. Interviewee C was happy to participate in an interview in order to further support Company X.

The customers of Company X were surveyed to collect general feedback and to gain their current thoughts about collaboratively marketing with Company X. The survey was meant to also provide insights whether the current strategic course of Company X seemed like the right

one. The survey was intended to also help identify any areas of improvement. The customers of Company X were encouraged to participate by explaining that they can respond anonymously and that this was an opportunity to truly voice their opinions to enhance their future business and collaboration with Company X. No material or tangible rewards were provided this time which is something that could be considered if the survey is intended to be repeated later on with the same sample or a modified broader sample of the total population.

The types of non-probability sampling used in this thesis were purposive sampling and convenience sampling. Some individuals were selected as recipients for the questionnaire as they were easily available for the researcher and were convenient from Company X's perspective as well (e.g. no business secret risks). However, though several respondents were convenient most of them were also purposive as when they were selected it was expected that they would be able to aid the research aim. In general, purposive sampling in research is used with small samples. (Saunders & al. 2019, 321 & 324.) The questionnaire was reviewed several times by Company X to make sure the right types of questions were asked to provide useful insights. The recipients for the survey were selected by the author from an extensive list of over 5 000 contacts that had to be narrowed down based on criteria established by the company and the author. The 5 000 contacts originated from Company X's Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and general address book so a large portion of them were not viable as they were not necessarily "customers" of Company X as some were suppliers, journalists, investors etc. The criteria for selecting the contacts were the following: 1.) there had to be active communication between the contact and Company X within the last 6 months, 2.) the contacts must have made a purchase or have a strong intent to make a purchase soon. Once the list was narrowed down by the mentioned criteria, the sales team of Company X still reviewed the list one more time to avoid any dissatisfaction internally and jeopardizing customer relationships. Certain customers that met the criteria were still excluded if the sales team felt it was not an appropriate time to invite them to be a part of the author's research. The final list included 134 contacts.

For non-probability samples the "issue of sample size is ambiguous" and there are no clear research rules. Therefore, it is important to consider how well the sample fulfils the research goals, RQs and IQS. (Saunders & al. 2019. 315). In this thesis, from a research point of view the samples size was small. Despite this, from the commissioning case company's perspective (Company X) the results still provided beneficial insights and interesting new perspectives.

3.3 Data Collection

With interviewees A and B, a structured interview approach was used as both were asked the same questions in the same order. These questions were also pilot tested to ensure they would fulfil their intended purpose. (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 388). The structured interview was conducted over email in English after which a phone call was held with each interviewee to also allow them to share more open comments and to ensure their answers were interpreted as intended. The email with interview questions for Interviewee A was sent on July 14th 2020. Responses were received on July 22nd and a phone conversation was held 29th of July to discuss the responses more. The email with interview questions was sent to Interviewee B on August 3rd 2020. Responses were provided on August 13th and a phone conversation was held on August 19th to further discuss the responses.

The interview with Interviewee C was conducted exclusively over the phone as this approach was preferred by the interviewee. The interview took place on July 2nd 2020. Interviewee C consented to recording the interview. The language for the interview conducted with Interviewee C was Finnish. The author is bilingual and a native speaker of both English and Finnish, so the translations were conducted by the author and not a licensed translator. Some human error and bias may have occurred with the translations. This interview was semi-structured as a list of questions and prompts was prepared beforehand but the intention was to follow them with flexibility to ensure the interviewee could freely express themselves while also guiding them to focus on topics relevant to the research (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 391). Certain structure and pre-determined themes were needed to help provide comparable data and to ensure that answers to the IQs can be gained through the interviews. It was impossible for the author to know with complete certainty what to ask in order to gain answers to IQs. Therefore, room for free discussion is also necessary so that the interviewee can express thoughts that may provide valuable information to the IQs despite not being direct answers to the pre-determined interview questions.

The questionnaire was created over Webropol and the questionnaire was sent as an email link to the selected sample of 134 contacts. No personal identifying data (age, gender, nationality etc.) was collected from the respondents as it is irrelevant to the research aims of this thesis and further protected the anonymity of the respondents. The email addresses were provided by Company X from their existing address book and CRM system. The ultimate number of respondents was 39 making the response rate 29%.

The first email with a survey link was sent Monday October 19th 2020. The first reminder was sent Monday the 26th of October. The original deadline for survey completion was October 28th, but at this point the number of respondents was only 32 with the total response rate of 24%. Therefore, a “last chance” reminder email was sent on October 29th announcing a 1-day extension. This was effective as seven more respondents were gained.

It is important to note that the data collection was conducted during the global Covid-19 pandemic and the recipients for the survey were located in several countries with varying situations. Certain respondents had been temporarily laid off or requested to have their holidays early. The general global situation also may have impacted the morale of the respondents and influenced their responses as well as their likelihood of even responding. The survey was postponed multiple times because of the global Covid-19 situation in order to maximize the number of respondents. Still, based on their automated email responses, 15 out of 134 were on mandatory leave or out of office when the survey was sent.

3.4 Data Analysis and Methods

A combination of deductive and inductive thematic approaches was used in order to provide some guidance for finding the themes. Themes were identified from the collected data with the research objectives serving as a guide for identifying the themes, but no strict framework was followed. (Saunders & al. 2019, 579.) The thematic approach began by thoroughly going over the data and slowly highlighting recurring concepts. While the data analysis was conducted the author attempted to stay as true as possible to the viewpoints of the interviewees, however, some room was also left for deeper and creative thinking as it is always important to think beyond the themes and answers to understand their implications (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 457). It is worth to note that the thematic analysis process is not effortless or unproblematic as some bias may have occurred due to challenges of confusion, indecision and varying interpretations (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 457).

Following typical quantitative analysis practices, graphs were used to understand and display the questionnaire data (Saunders & al. 2019, 581). Common bar graphs or bar charts were primarily used to express the data and clearly differentiate significant values from one another (Saunders & al. 2019, 583). To ensure clarity and consistency the same format of bar graphs was used throughout this thesis where the highest value is presented at the top of the graph

and the lowest value at the bottom with the “other” values beneath the lowest values. Qualitative analysis methods were used with the open questions of the survey. Webropol’s text mining tool was also used to categorize the most commonly used words in the open answers into groups. Some bias and human error may have occurred with the word group creation and categorization since it was done manually by the author alone.

Finally, the interviewee responses and survey results were compared with each other to provide recommendations for Company X.

4 Results

Due to this research focusing on two aspects, internal and external, or qualitative and quantitative, the results have been divided in this way as well. The internal view and qualitative data will be presented first, then the external view and quantitative data.

4.1 Qualitative Analysis and the Internal Perspective

This section will provide insights to: IQ1, IQ3, and IQ4. Through thematic analysis the following themes were identified: strategy, sustainability, marketing & branding, and challenges. This section will cover Company X’s viewpoint.

4.1.1 Strategy and Objectives

Based on the interviews, strategy and goals were one of the most important topics brought up frequently. As Company X is still a young company it is understandable that there was a lot of discussion about the future of the company. All three interviewees indicated that the goal of Company X and where they see Company X in the future is to set a standard for others and act as a leader in its industry of sustainable materials. However, each interviewee described slightly different ways to achieve this goal and different objectives.

Interviewee A wanted to increase brand awareness and brand perception. Interviewee A also saw demand generation as an important strategy with specific objectives being the number of leads and amount of revenue generated through these activities. Interviewee A saw that a part of Company X’s current marketing strategy is to understand its customers better which includes their buying preferences, price points, recycling preferences and how Company X’s

offering matches the customer needs. Important objectives according to Interviewee A also include content creation, content marketing, events, PR and digital media.

Interviewee B's list of strategic activities and objectives focused heavily on sustainable development and development in general. Developing bio-benign materials that would reduce the negative impacts on natural systems, while also being recyclable and competitive in terms of functionality and costs was noted as the main strategy. Interviewee B sees that some important objectives for Company X are outside the organization itself as Company X should more holistically participate in the total development of a circular economy with sustainable lifestyles. Interviewee B sees that Company X has a responsibility to raise awareness, educate, provide insights to the public, meet authorities and policy makers and foster collaboration between stakeholders.

While Interviewee C highlighted: "Our big goal is to make better products together that do not ruin the world but our role in that big vision is to inspire and amplify the speed with which large companies head towards a plastic-free world and think about the sustainability of products and what sustainable materials are available and that it actually is possible to use other materials instead of plastic to make products that look good, feel good and even sound good. If a world class brand does it, it opens doors and proves to the world that it can be done."

It is not a surprise that the Sustainability Director had sustainability objectives and the Chief Marketing Officer had marketing objectives but might be important to note is that they both need each other to achieve the ultimate goal. All interviewees recognize that sustainability is the core part of the company strategy. All interviewees also highlighted how Company X cannot work alone and needs others to achieve its goals. As Interviewee B put it "Company X's business model is based on partnerships & networks".

4.1.2 Sustainability

As already alluded in the previous subchapter, sustainability was a major theme within the interviews. Sustainability is integrated into every aspect of the company's operations. Interviewee B explained that sustainability is integrated within Company X's sourcing and partner selection processes as well and all internal policies even HR. Interviewee A commented that sustainability is important because it is of core importance to Company X's "mission, vision and values and the entire business idea".

Both interviewees A and B agree that one of the main unique aspects of sustainability that Company X addresses is the issue of microplastics. In fact, Interviewee A emphasizes that Company X's products and material are a truly sustainable choice exactly because, "the microplastic-challenge that you can avoid by using Company X materials". Both A and B also mention the impact on "policy makers" is an important aspect of sustainability for Company X.

Interviewee C also did not fail to recognize the utmost importance of sustainability for Company X. Interviewee C provided insight for the unique situation of Company X when compared to other ingredient brands and general green marketing. Interviewee C explains: "Typically if materials are somehow responsible or sustainable, they just tell about one specific aspect e.g. 30% less plastic or compostable or biodegradable and in X's case we want to tell these things but also give more meaning than just these claims." This further shows how sustainability for Company X and its brand is not just a temporary gimmick or one specific product featured that they should highlight, but instead it is the heart of the company and impacts everything they do.

4.1.3 Marketing and Branding

Adding value was brought up by each interviewee. However, some differences occurred with how the value is added or should be added. Interviewee B believes the unique look and feel as well as the luxurious appearance of the products made from Company X's material give "added value in branding". Interviewee A, however, goes beyond the comments of Interviewee B and mentions that being an ingredient brand would add value to the host brands of B2B companies which then in turn would add more value in the eyes of consumers. Interviewee C combines both comments from A and B and goes even further with their description of added value by saying that the value is added by considering the product from the sustainability point of view and not just how it performs or looks like.

Interviewee C goes on to explain that Company X differs from commonly known ingredient brands like Teflon, Kevlar and Gore-Tex where the added value is usually something very functional e.g. non-stick surface because in the case of Company X there is more meaning created to the tangible or observable added value. Interviewee C states: "Yeah, it is a [biodegradable] material but there is also some greater idea behind it. More than just a material." All

interviewees agreed that Company X's products are somehow special and unique and something that according to Interviewee C "brands should want to communicate about, and consumers want". Interviewee C believes the consumer angle will eventually become increasingly important to Company X. Interviewee C continued to explain how, for example, Gore-Tex has its own consumer fans that always seek Gore-Tex products. This could be a long-term reality for Company X as well, where Company X's brand could become a household name that most people recognize.

Collaboration methods were discussed about as well especially in relation to brand building. All interviewees again agree that different "joint" activities should take place, but the interviewees listed slightly different activities. Interviewee B would like to see more joint sustainability campaigns to take place with Company X and its partners or customers while Interviewee A mentioned joint marketing to be an important activity. Interviewee C indicated multiple times that Company X cannot achieve its goals alone indicating that joint activities are needed, instead of highlighting specific types of joint activities Interviewee C believed it is important to take a closer look at the types of partners Company X does joint activities with or collaborates with. According to Interviewee C, some partners will bring in the cash needed to get through daily operations while some partners will be less beneficial financially but more beneficial in terms of brand and reputation building. As Interviewee C explains: "Have to think what value and values the [collaborating] brands can give to each other."

Reaching the hearts and minds of consumers was also a core topic brought up by all the interviewees within the marketing and branding discussion topic areas. One of the joint sustainability campaign examples Interviewee B highlighted was "citizen science" where consumers would be able to "participate in the science, sustainability and product development". It is clear that collaboration especially in various joint activities is of vital importance for the long-term development of Company X.

4.1.4 Challenges

Interviewee B being the Sustainability Director understandably highlighted multiple legislative and sustainability related challenges such as regulatory changes, political tendencies, discrimination towards novel materials in waste management and recycling, sustainability metrics, waste management systems [for materials like X material], circularity metrics, limitations

of life-cycle assessment (LCA) analyses, official definitions to sustainability terms such “recyclable” and new guidance from the EU Commission. Interviewee A also mentioned that the different regulations between EU, USA and Asia are a big challenge. Interviewee A seemed to agree with Interviewee B at least conceptually. Interviewee B discussed the needs and challenges of sustainability metrics while Interviewee A mentioned, “I also hope that very soon we have capability to measure in numbers what that “standard” [in sustainability] means”.

Interviewee A and C had common ground related to the challenges of being and becoming an ingredient brand. Interviewee A mentioned that a challenge for Company X is identifying and confirming the precise angle that would add most value to the host brand. It is also equally important and challenging for Company X to define how to support the host brands through marketing means. Interviewee C identified that another challenge is getting the customer brands to use the marketing materials and logo of Company X and also mention the brand of Company X somewhere on their product.

In addition to their comments about branding, Interviewee C highlighted that strategy is just paper until it is enacted. Conscious effort and investment are required from Company X to enforce its recently reviewed and updated strategy. Interviewee C mentions that a challenge with the ingredient brand is that “it would be easier if the product just had a sustainability claim on it, now the ingredient brand creates another layer in between since now the consumers must understand what Company X means and represents”. According to Interviewee C, mentioning Company X and/or its brand alone on a product will not immediately explain all of the product features, which is a challenge while most average consumers are not aware of Company X. Interviewee C continues to explain that it is challenging but incredibly important for Company X to clearly define its message and vision so that it applies to all of its products now and in the future. Essentially, Company X must define its core communication so that room is left for future developments without leaving the definition too broad and indistinguishable which is not a simple task. Interviewee C reminds that for the sake of building a strong ingredient brand it is possible to have slightly different product specific claims but the mission-based message that the whole brand strives for should be consistent with every product.

Interviewee A brought up the pricing challenges Company X has faced. By becoming an established brand Interviewee, A hopes that Company X will avoid always ending up in tough price negotiations as the customers will understand and appreciate the added value Com-

pany X's brand will bring beside the premium price. Interviewee A points out that it is also expensive to reach consumers in order to build the brand reputation while Company X still has limited amount of marketing investments. Interviewee C pointed out that part of the reason Company X has an ingredient brand strategy is to provide added value with the brand since it is known that low prices is not the way that Company X can differentiate from its competition.

4.2 Quantitative Analysis and the External Perspective

This section will express the results of the questionnaire that was sent to the 134 customers of Company X. The data will be presented quantitatively primarily through statistical graphs. The section will provide insights to IQ2, IQ3 and IQ4.

4.2.1 Introduction to Respondents

All of the respondents provided information about the company types they work for, what department they work in, the size of the company they work for, the industry they work in and the factors that separate their companies from their competitors.

Most (36%) of the respondents of the survey represented a consumer brand company (figure 4). However, there was a good mix of other company types as well such as converters and distributors.

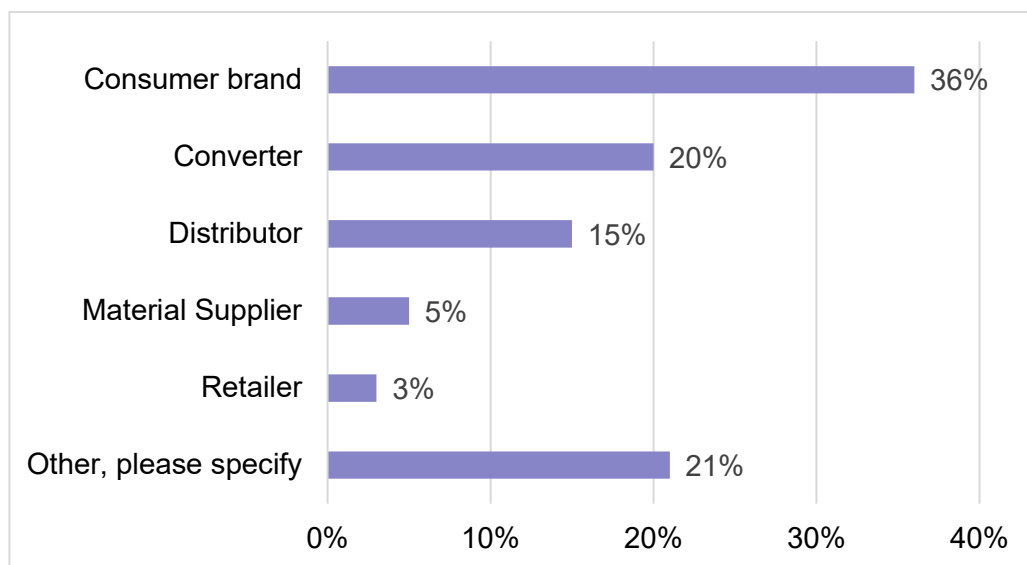


Figure 4. Survey Respondent's Company Types (n=39)

The majority of the respondents worked within R&D (figure 5). Among the “other” category, “management” was mentioned most often. Company X is young as are its business relationships making it understandable that many of the customer projects are still in the R&D phase meaning many of the contacts of tend to be in the R&D department.

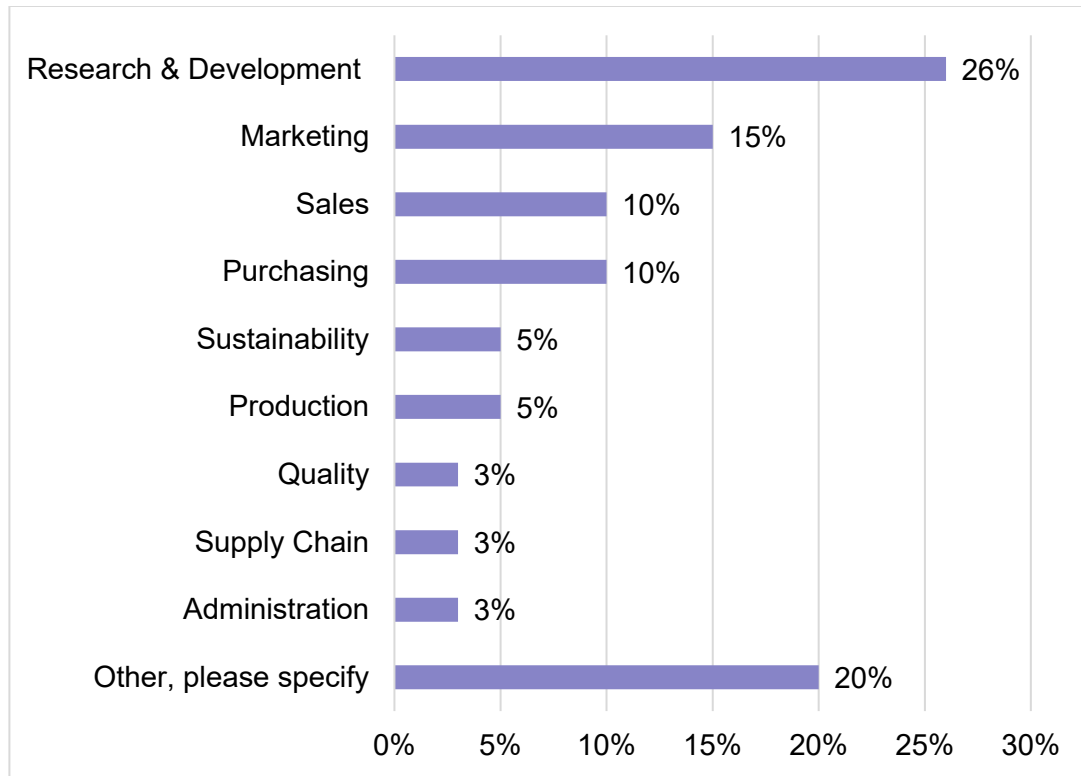


Figure 5. Survey Respondent's Department or Function (n=39)

The majority (46%) of the respondents' companies were from companies with 50 employees or less (figure 6). However, there is a good representation of larger companies as well. This allows for nice variety among responses and shows that different perspectives were captured.

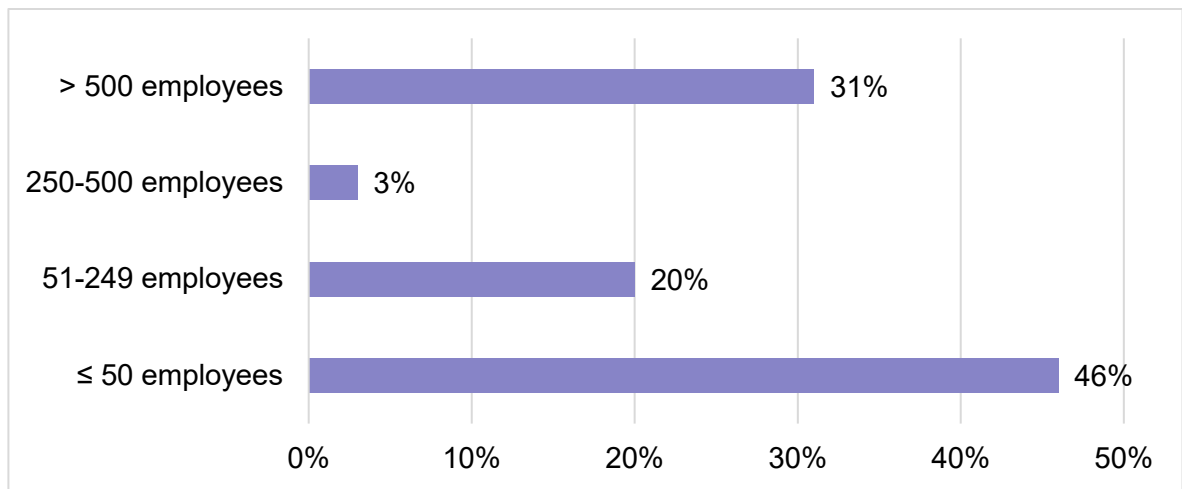


Figure 6. Size of Survey Respondent's Company (n=39)

To indicate the main focus operations and price points of the respondents' companies, they were asked to pick which of the descriptive phrases fit their company the best (figure 7). Some of the "none of the above" responses included mentions like "luxurious sustainability" and "from high luxury to fast fashion".

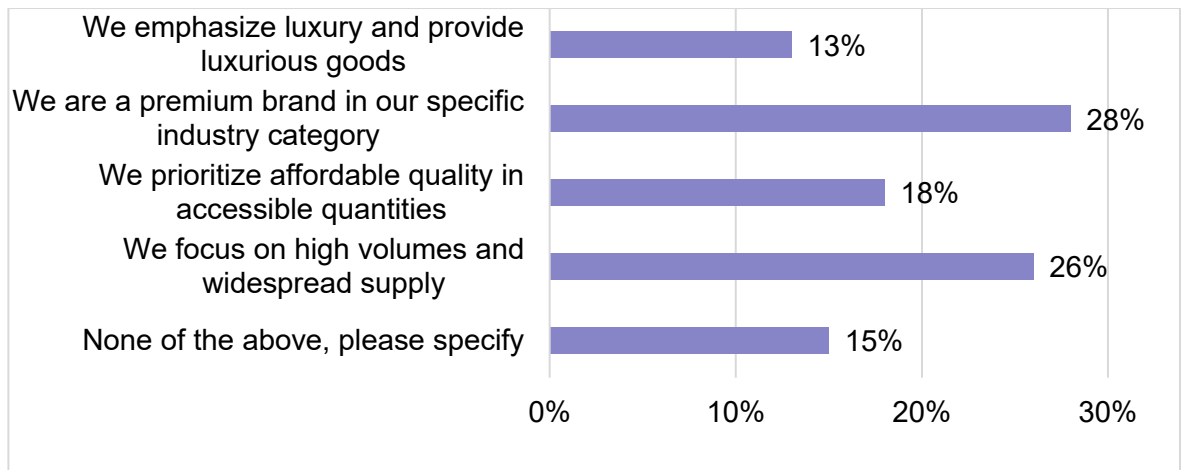


Figure 7. Type of Company (n=39)

Most (26%) of the respondents worked within the cosmetics industry (figure 8). This was expected given that Company X started in the cosmetics industry and still has a strong presence within cosmetics. However, there is a good mix of companies from other industries. This again provides for more diversity and different points of view. It also indicates how Company X's innovation shows promise in several industries. Among the "other" category, "health" was one of the most mentioned industry categories.

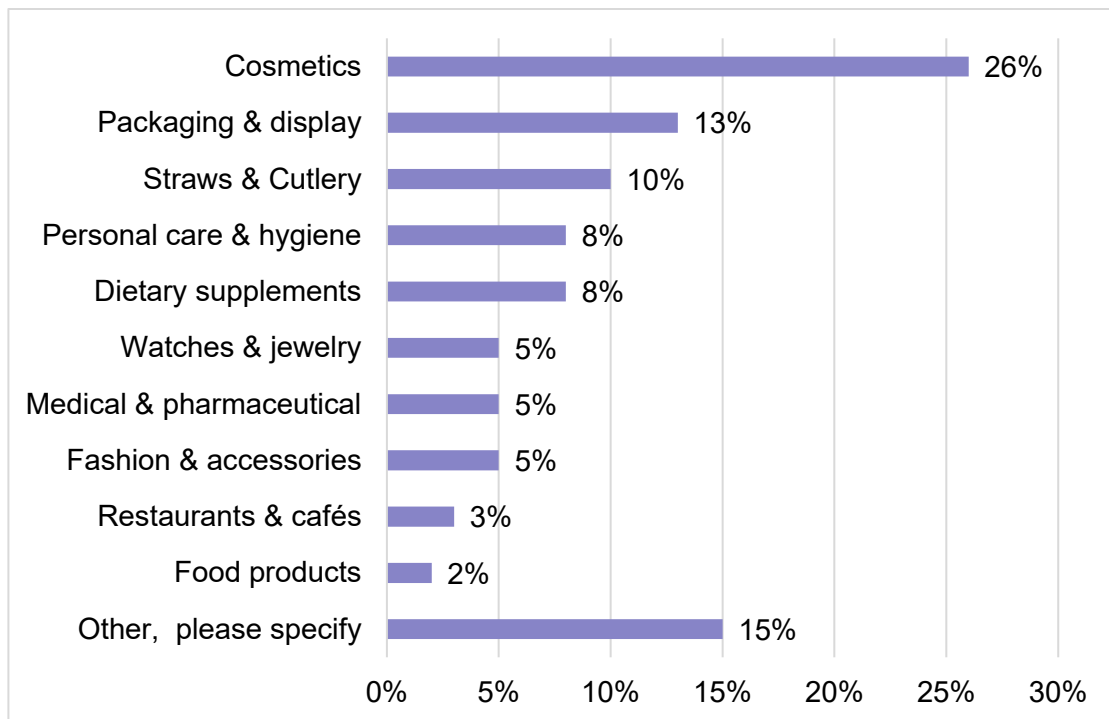


Figure 8. Industry of Respondents' Company (n=39)

Figure 9 depicts the answers to a multiple-choice question where the respondents picked one or more different features that they saw separate their companies from their competition. Based on their responses, Company X's customers are very quality conscious as 64% identified their quality to be one of their main competitive advantages. Sustainability was mentioned as a strong second (54%) with reputation & story coming in third with 44%.

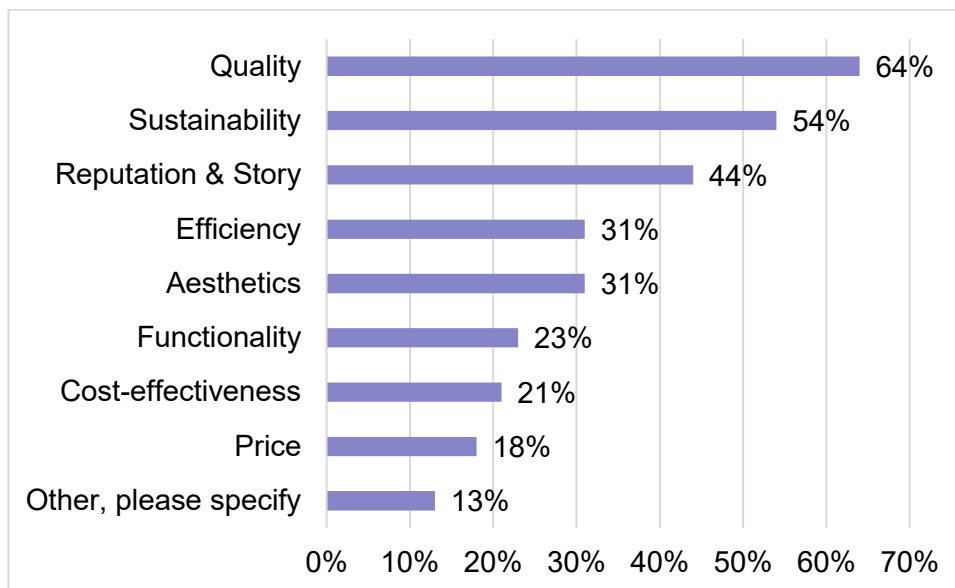


Figure 9. The Features that Separate the Respondents' Companies from their Competition (n=39)

4.2.2 Customer perceptions of Company X's marketing and collaboration

When asked about how helpful the Company X's marketing assets have been, the sample boxes were considered to be most helpful (figure 10). The scale of helpfulness was from 1 to 6 with 1 being not helpful at all and 6 being very helpful. The number of respondents ranges between 30 and 39 because it was also possible for a respondent to skip the rating of a specific asset and mark it as "have not seen or received" if they were not familiar with the asset in question.

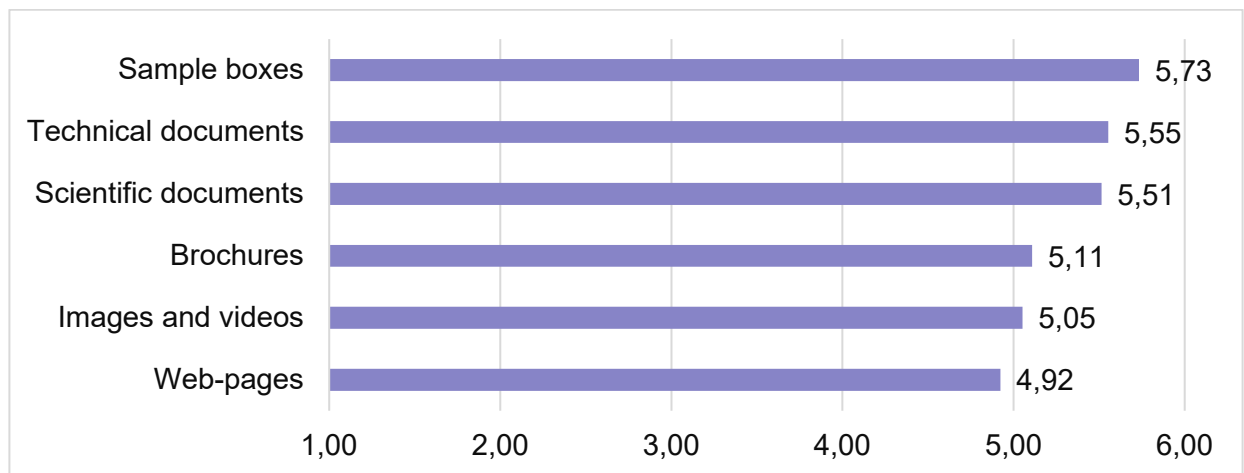


Figure 10. Helpfulness of Company X's Marketing and Communication Assets (n=30-39)
6= very helpful, 1=not helpful at all

Furthermore, 84% of the respondents reported that their experience with Company X's customer support and communication has been good or very good. Simultaneously, 78% of respondents reported that their experience with Company X's products or material has been good or very good.

As figure 11 shows, the most requested type of support that the respondents and their companies would like to receive from Company X was "latest sustainability news" and "technical support". Technical support is something Company X actively provides but perhaps there are more ways it could be done or methods to increase customers' access to it. Company X does not necessarily actively share latest sustainability news but perhaps this is something they could consider doing considering the high demand for it. It is a positive indication that when navigating the complex world of sustainability, Company X's customers would like to turn to

Company X for the latest updates and information. It is clear that there is a good trust relationship between Company X and its customers. The desire for technical support also indicates trust and openness among Company X and its customers.

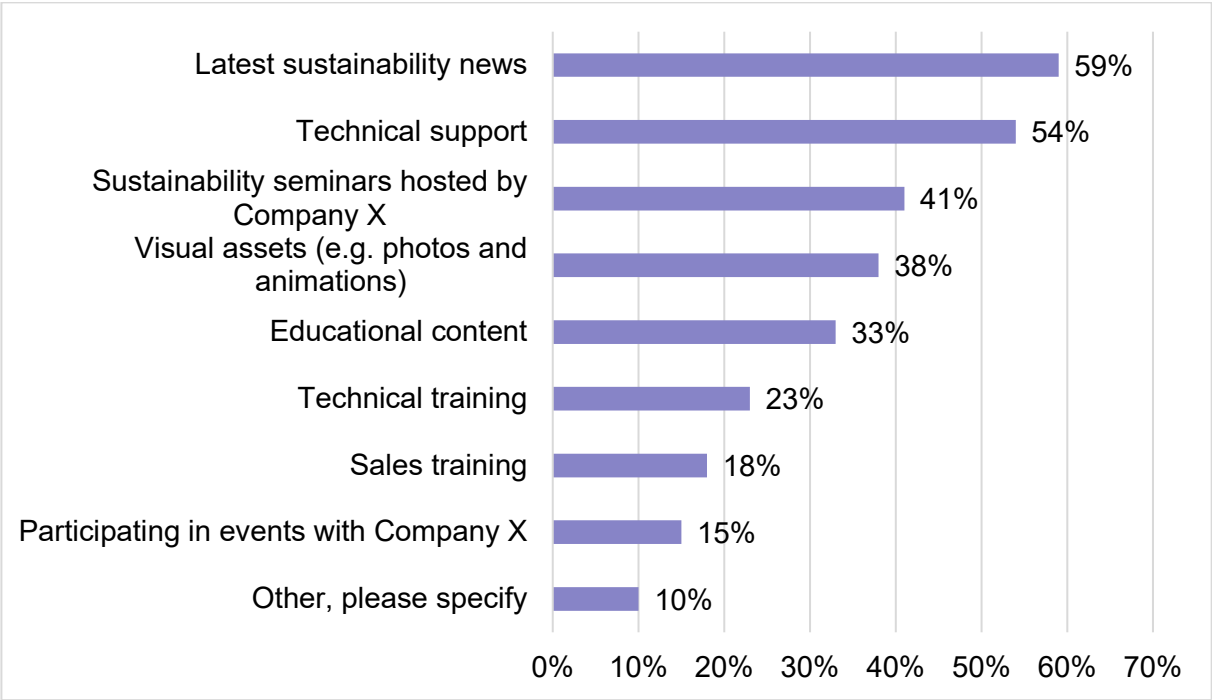


Figure 11. Desired support from Company X (n=39)

Over half of the respondents (51%) would like to collaborate with Company X in joint marketing activities (figure 12). This is definitely a positive when considering the ultimate ingredient brand goals of Company X. However, there still is improvement since nearly half of the respondents did not seem to have an interest in marketing collaboration.

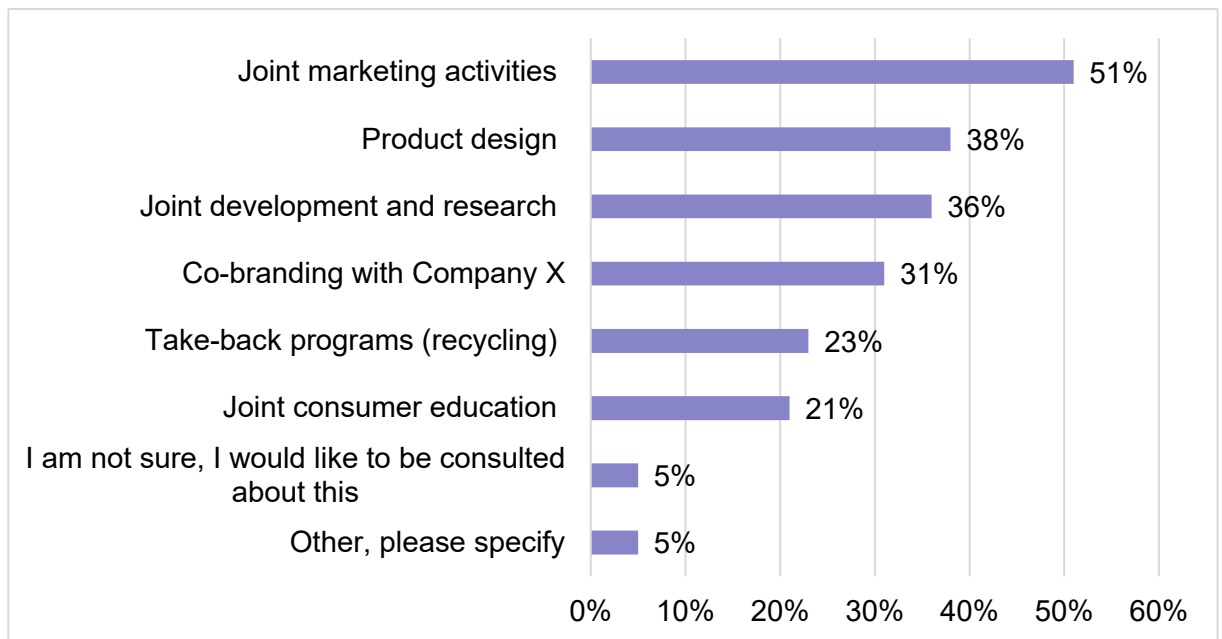


Figure 12. Desired collaboration with Company X (n=39)

4.2.3 Sustainability Values of Customers

When asked about the importance of sustainability, 100% of respondents said sustainability is very important or important. When asked about how sustainability is depicted in the company's activities 72% of respondents said sustainability is included in the company strategy (figure 13). It is excellent to see that Company X seemingly is already working with like-minded businesses that understand the significance of sustainability.

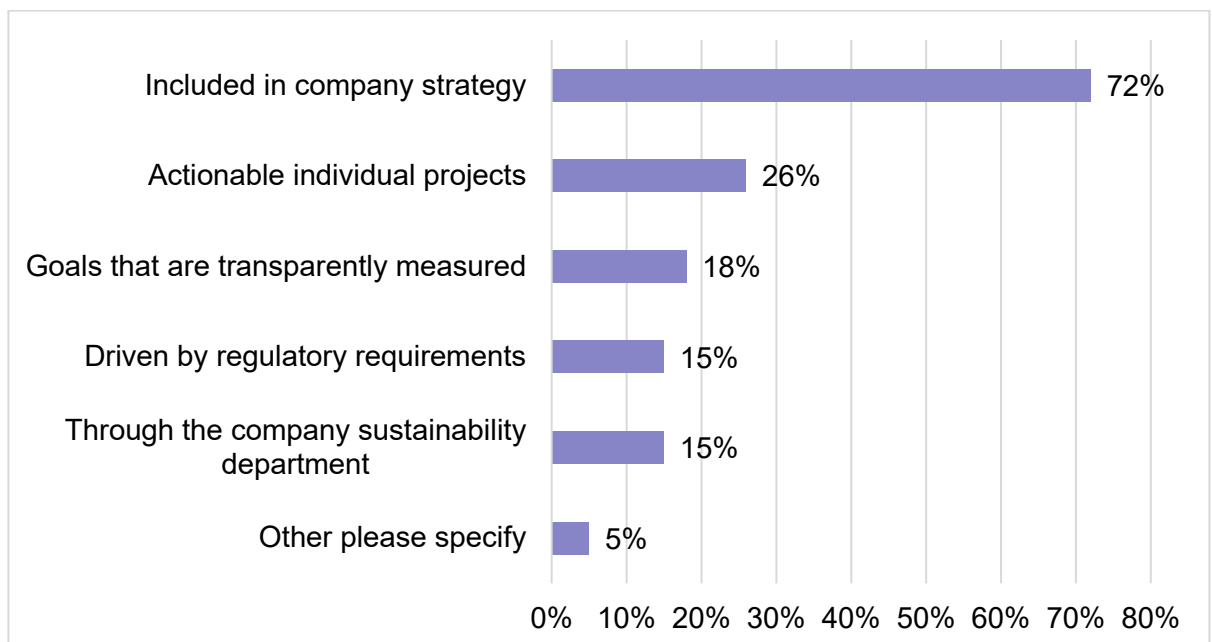


Figure 13. Implementation of environmental sustainability in company function (n=39)

As figure 14 shows, when asked about the environmentally sustainable actions that the respondents' companies promote "biodegradable raw materials or products" (74%) was picked the most often followed by "reducing plastic" (69%) and "biobased raw materials or products" (62%). All of these point towards Company X. What needs to be noted is that Company X does not prefer to position its products as "biodegradable", but this seems to be what their customers do or desire perhaps due to a lack for a better word.

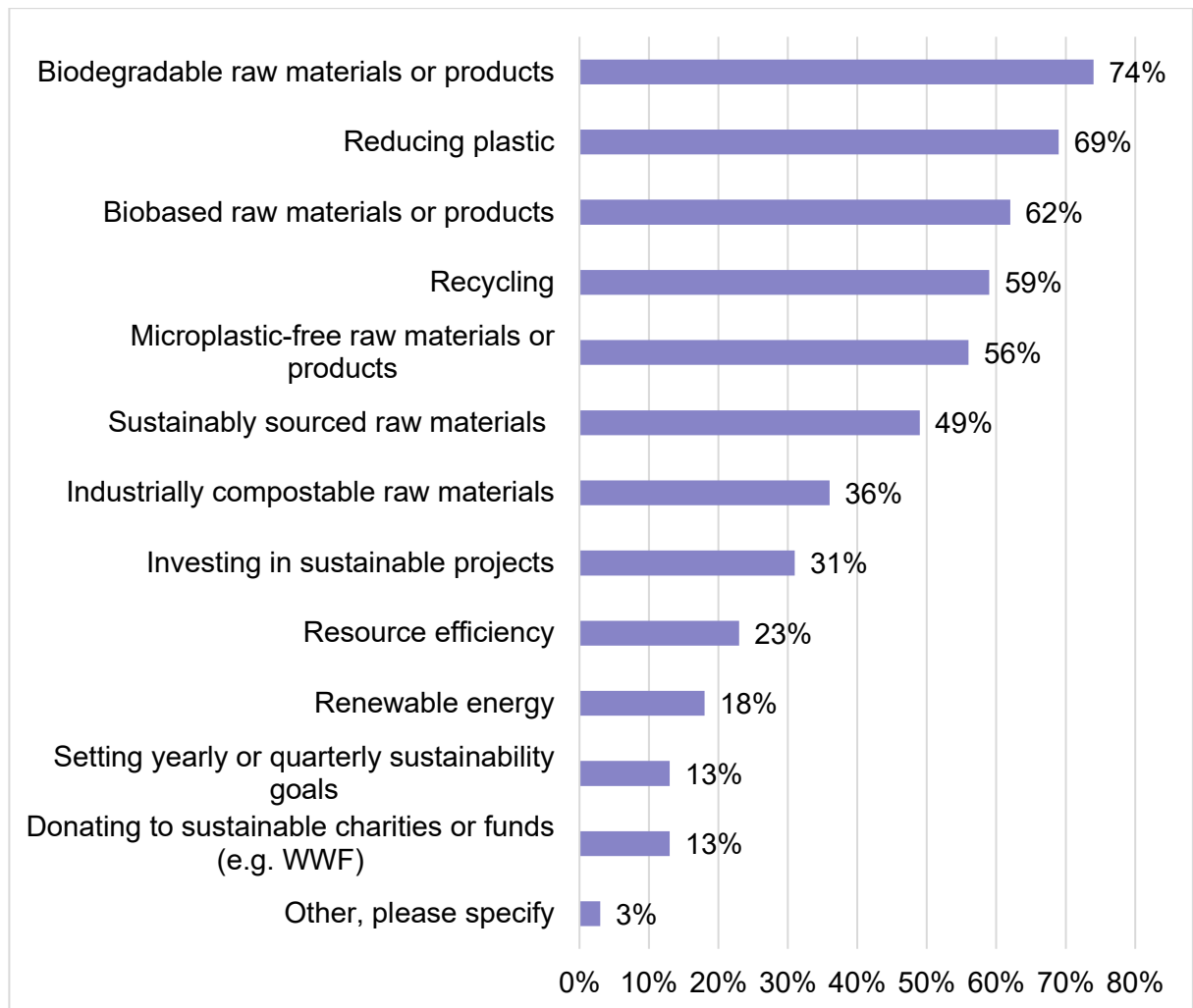


Figure 14. Environmentally sustainable actions promoted by the respondent's company (n=39)

85% of the respondents said the reason why environmental sustainability is important is because it is part of the company's vision and/or strategy indicating that sustainability should be one of the company's core drivers and implemented throughout the company (figure 15).

Regulatory influence was only picked by 10% which shows that most of the customer companies are organically motivated for environmental sustainability and not engaging in sustainable development just because they are required to do so by regulations.

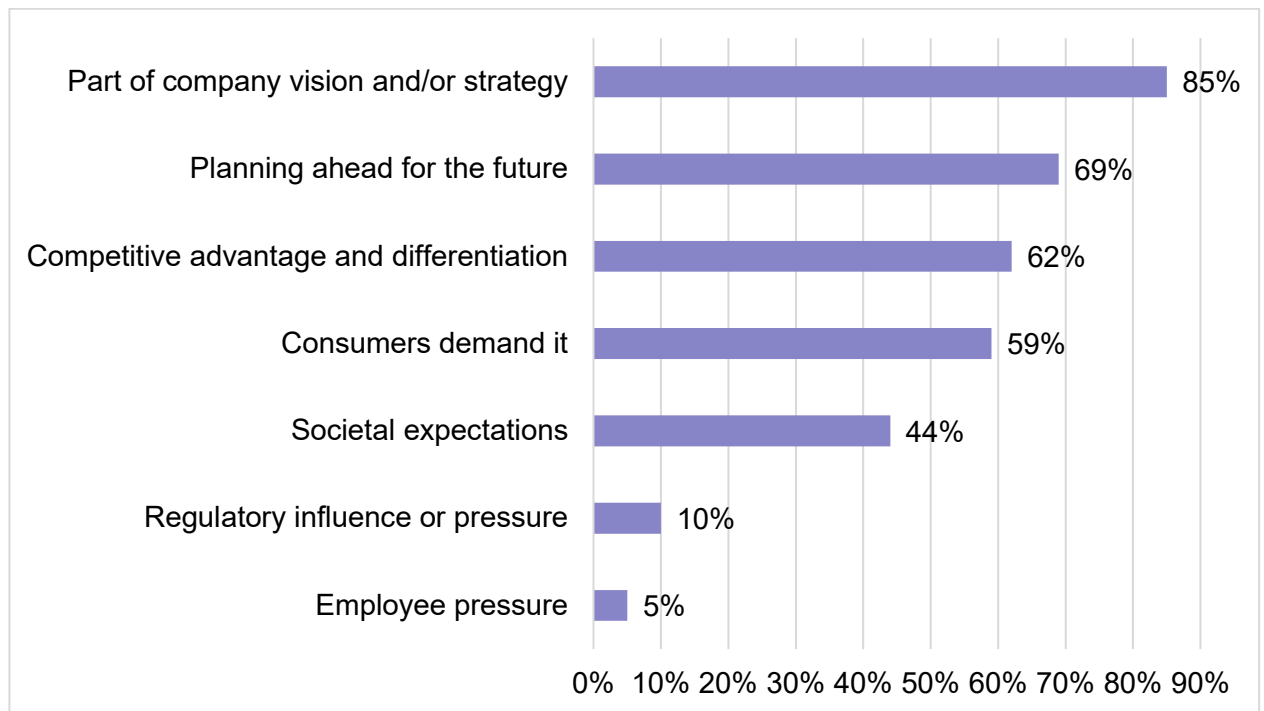


Figure 15. Reasons for the importance of environmental sustainability (n=39)

4.2.4 Added Value or Benefits that Company X Provides to its Customers

98% of respondents answered that they strongly agree or agree with the following statement: "Company X can add or already adds value to my company's products or services." Sustainability was clearly the strongest value adding feature of Company X with 87% of respondents mentioning it (figure 16). Following sustainability, competitive advantage and differentiation was mentioned by 54% as one of the main ways Company X adds value to them.

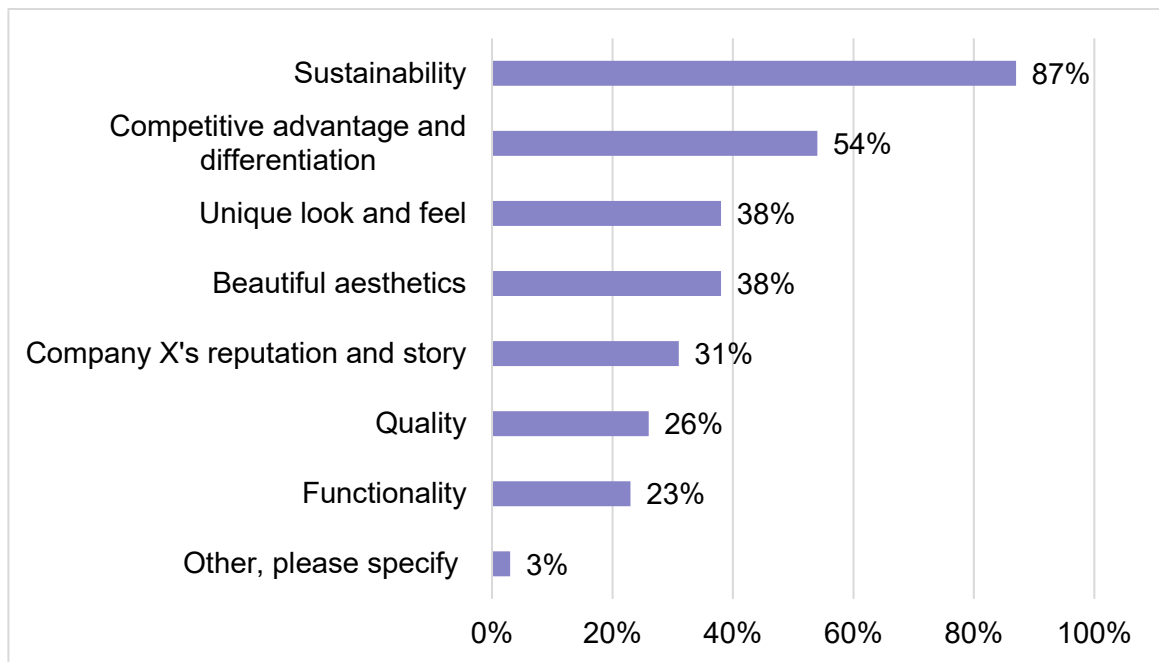


Figure 16. The value adding features of Company X (n=39)

Furthermore, when asked about the stakeholder feedback the customers received when using Company X's material or products 87% respondents indicated they have received positive or slightly positive feedback.

When asked "Why did you choose Company X or why are you considering choosing Company X?". The most mentioned reasons were the uniqueness, aesthetics or the story of Company X. Using Webropol's text mining tools the most commonly used words to answer this question were categorized into groups. Out of all the different words mentioned about why Company X was chosen the most popular answers related to the sustainability, uniqueness, aesthetics or story of Company (figure 17). 80 unique words were used in the answers.

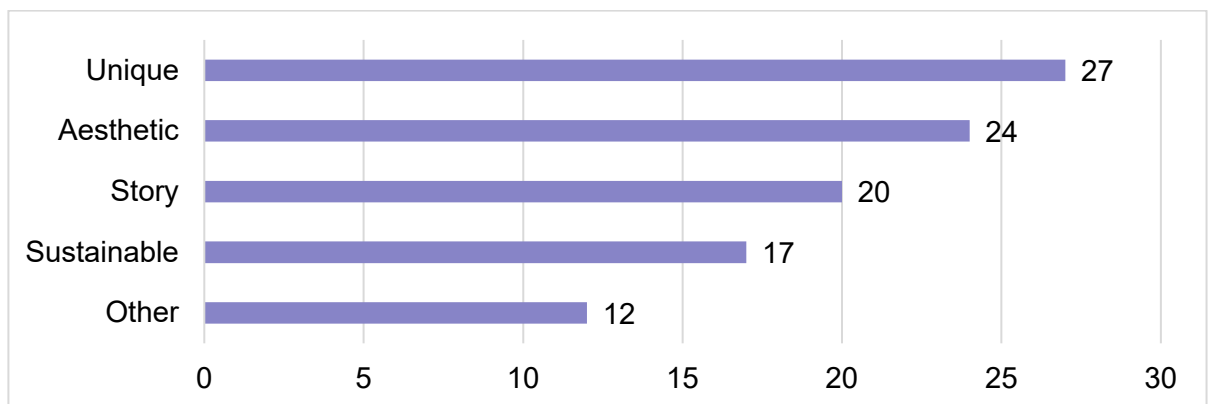


Figure 17. Why the Respondent's Companies are Choosing Company X (n=39)

4.2.5 Customers' Improvement Advice for Company X

The final question in the questionnaire was the optional open question: "Do you have any improvement advice for Company X?" 22 out of 39 total respondents decided to write answers to this question as well. Out of the 22 responses, the most frequently mentioned area of improvement was price which was brought up eight times. The products and material were cited to be too expensive or have too high prices or a price reduction was requested. New product features (e.g., water-resistance, heat resistance, transparent material, flexible material) or expansions to the offering (more size and shape options, EU SUP Directive compliance) were requested by five of the 22 respondents. Other notable mentions that came up at least twice were: local production, cooperation possibilities and allowing smaller minimum order quantities. Four respondents also separately wrote that they are had no improvement suggestions and were happy with the current situation.

5 Discussion

This chapter combines what has been discussed in this research so far and provides conclusions to the IQs and RQ. This chapter covers the key findings, recommendations for Company X, suggestions for further research, feedback from Company X, the authors learning as well as the ethics, reliability and validity. In this section the findings based on the investigative questions will be outlined in order to answer the research question: “How can Company X collaboratively and sustainably market its innovation?”

5.1 Key findings

Company X wants to become an ingredient brand. Company X wants to set the standard for sustainable materials and wants consumers to seek products made with Company X's materials. To become an ingredient brand with the recognition and reputation of e.g. Gore-Tex a lot of time, dedication, resources and collaboration is required. It was great to see that over half (51%) of respondents said they want to do joint marketing with Company X while 31% also said they would like to engage in co-branding with Company X. This is a positive sign but objectively the values could be higher or should be higher in order to help fulfil the ingredient branding goals of Company X. However, as commented by Interviewee C, some companies may be better as marketing partners while some will be less valuable in collaborative marketing and branding but instead bring in the needed profits for Company X to survive and keep growing. Perhaps some of the respondents represent companies that would help build Company X's brand while some may be more important for profitability. Furthermore, as indicated by Tradii (2019), Company X should also be careful with how many host brands to connect with in order to mitigate risks such as copying or tarnishing or devaluing the ingredient brand. Therefore, even with the 51% of companies interested in joint marketing the relationship and specific collaboration needs to be carefully considered and managed. Regardless, all interviewees agreed joint activities should take place, so it was reinforcing to see that at good amount of questionnaire respondents agree. Creating a brand especially an ingredient brand that is sustainably marketed requires lots of effort not just from Company X but also from its customers. Furthermore, if marketing is supposed to help transform the whole society to be more sustainable then its leadership role should be recognized in its organization and marketing strategy should be considered as the whole businesses strategy and implemented accordingly.

Typically, ingredient brands just have some specific functional ingredient, component, part of feature, but with Company X it goes beyond that. The “ingredient” is sustainability, but far more meaning is created for it than just its functional performance. There is a whole story to learn and know for this ingredient. Rarely are the full value chains of ingredients showcased. For example, with Gore-Tex, the functional feature of the ingredient is indisputable, but other aspects about sourcing, end of life, especially regarding sustainability are not necessarily considered or communicated. Knowing this, it is clear how multidimensional and complex the sustainable marketing and ingredient branding strategies are. This makes what Company X is doing even more unique and further emphasizes the strong need for different types of collaboration to share the message and increase awareness. Gore-Tex’s main selling point is that it will “keep you dry” but minimal emphasis is put on e.g. what happens to the product when it is discarded. Company X provides more than just the functional feature. If Company X would not want to be an ingredient brand then the products could just be marked as e.g. micro-plastic-free but that is not the strategy that has been selected. By adding the brand and extra layer of difficulty is added in the short-term but in the long-term the brand adds meaning that is far more substantial than just the functional feature of the ingredient. It is of utmost importance that everyone within Company X understands this. By being an ingredient brand Company X could provide a solution to the struggle of vague sustainability terms and greenwashing. When consumers and businesses see the Company X logo on products, they would be able to know and trust the product is truly sustainable. The ingredient brand is also needed to fulfil Company X’s mission of saving the world from the plastic waste problem. It is obvious that Company X cannot do it alone and host brands are needed to adopt the ingredient into their products to actually concretely save the world.

Company X hopes to be a leader in the sustainable material industry and show how sustainable materials can bring in profits and competitive advantage to customers. Sustainability is obviously at the core of Company X’s existence and strategy. It is also apparently important to Company X’s customers based on the survey responses as 72% claimed sustainability was part of the company strategy (figure 13) and 85% said sustainability is important to the company because it is a part of the company’s strategy or vision (figure 15) while 54% also claimed sustainability is already a feature that separates their companies from their competitors (figure 9). 100% of the questionnaire respondents, Company X’s customers, said sustainability is important or very important which is something Company X clearly agrees with. Many companies claim sustainability is important to them, but few have it as a core part of their strategy and integrated in every part of their operations. Therefore, Company X has a great starting point with its customers for collaboration as they already have similar values

and an understanding of importance for sustainability. However, given that sustainability was claimed to be a part of the company strategy by 72% it was somewhat surprising to see that only 26% of respondents claimed their companies implemented sustainability through specific actionable projects. There was quite a big gap between these numbers which raised some concern about how sustainability is then enforced throughout the company. Much like Franklin (2009 in Manuel Pedrosa 2012, 296) explained, it is very easy and almost automatic for companies to say sustainability is important and in their strategy despite taking very little action for it. It is possible that some customer may be unintentionally greenwashing or engaging in old CSR by pinning most of their sustainability responsibility on Company X without doing much else. However, it is important to note that every company starts from somewhere. It may be that the one and only thing some customers are doing for sustainability is using Company X's products and material, but as long as there is continuous improvement and a holistic understanding it is a positive start. Open communication, education and close collaboration between Company X and its customers along with their stakeholders can help to mitigate unintended greenwashing and harm.

Sustainability was also seen as one of the main value adding factors that Company X can provide to its customers since 87% of respondents indicated sustainability is how Company X adds value to them. This was also reflected by the desired support that the respondents would like to receive from Company X as latest sustainability news were requested by 59% and sustainability seminars hosted by Company X were requested by 41%. Company X's customers seem to agree with Company X as well as Martin and Schouten (2012, 15) that sustainability can provide long-term economic benefit and competitive advantage. A lot of trust is placed into Company X by its customers especially with sustainability. In general trust is highly important when engaging in collaborative marketing as indicated by Kotler and Armstrong as well (2018, 270).

38% of respondents agreed with Interviewee B that the unique look and feel of Company X's material and products is also what brings value. As Interviewee C expressed, since the idea behind Company X's unique ingredient branding strategy is to provide further meaning to sustainability claims it is important to forget to consider other aspects of the product that is provided such as its appearance and functionality. Providing exceptional products that are also sustainable should be the main focus of Company X. This very much follows the green marketing ideas of Iannuzzi (2018, 195) where sustainability is the norm and other product features should be highlighted as well. Furthermore, as 64% of respondents identified quality as the primary differentiating feature with sustainability second with 54% (figure), it is clear the

products offered by Company X in addition to being sustainable must be of high quality as well. If Company X's products and material are "only" sustainable it may not be convincing enough for customers and may not be able to provide enough additional meaning behind the ingredient brand.

There is a great deal of challenges that must still be overcome by Company X to reach its goals. Some of the challenges e.g. current pricing were identified by 8 survey respondents and Interviewee A. This shows that there already is some mutual understanding in obstacles to collaboration. Therefore, it could be possible for Company X to resolve some challenges by working more closely with its customers as they may even have some solutions for the challenges that Company X may not have been able to think of on its own. It is understandable that when something new is being created there will always be some adversity and risks to take. Being a pioneer is brave and it is obvious that all the effort Company X puts in to navigate the complex world of sustainability is highly appreciated by its customers.

5.2 Research Ethics, Reliability and Validity

To ensure that data would be collected ethically and confidentially, questionnaire respondents were informed that participation was optional, they could opt out anytime and that their answers will be fully anonymous. The data collected has been handled anonymously and confidentially and protected by the General Data Protection Regulation without providing any information that might reveal the personal identities of the respondents. In fact, no personal information was even collected from the respondents as it would not be relevant to the research. There was one questionnaire respondent who clearly works in a separate industry from everyone else. Their answers are equally valid as they have the relevant experience with the case company to provide the answers, however, to respect their anonymity the author will not separate the answers of this respondent or any respondent for Company X but will treat the data as a whole to act ethically to the respondents who were promised respectful and anonymous treatment. The specific opinion of one respondent should not matter over the holistic overview of the responses.

Literature was critically reviewed to avoid spreading misinformation or outdated information. Literature that has been written by established theorists, researchers, journalists or authors that have considerable experience and knowledge in their respective fields that they are writing about was utilized.

To address reliability, pilot testing was conducted with few individuals before commencing full data collection. Based on the pilot test the questions were modified, if needed, to allow for more reliable data collection. To further address reliability, the author wrote down and kept track of all the steps she took to increase the chances that the data collection can be repeated with minimal differences in results and processes. Furthermore, a method of “alternate form reliability” where slightly different versions of the questionnaire were administered to similar respondents before sharing it to the target sample was used as well to enhance reliability (Williamson and Johanson 2018, 162). The administration of similar surveys allowed to correlate the preliminary results and modify the questionnaire accordingly to ensure the questions would be understood in the intended way.

Regarding validity, the author asked for outside opinions from individuals such as peers, and Case Company X representatives to assess the interview questions and survey questions to help objectively determine whether they will provide answers to the determined IQs. According to Williamson and Johanson (2018, 161) there are four ways to test for validity of a questionnaire. This research utilized two of the four ways for testing for validity. This research utilized face validity which “is an informal review of a questionnaire by non-experts, who assess its clarity, comprehensibility, and appropriateness for the target-group” (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 161-162). Content validity was utilized as well and it included “a formal assessment by subject experts, to determine appropriateness of content and identify any misunderstandings or omissions” (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 162).

Some coverage error occurred as the “selected sampling frame is not fully representative of the chosen population and certain segments of the population are inadvertently excluded or under-represented” (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 162). The population selection was heavily influenced by Company X and certain key respondents were also intentionally excluded. Therefore, a sampling error occurred as well generalization should be approached cautiously to avoid misrepresenting the broader population based on the small subset sample (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 163). As this thesis features a non-probability sample it is not possible to exactly determine the degree of sampling error, in other words it is not possible to clearly state to what extent the selected sample represents the broader population (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 163). Non-probability sampling typically as in this research includes “an element of subjective judgement” which is something to be aware of when interpreting the results (Saunders & al. 2019, 315). The response rate was 29%, the lower the response rate

the higher the non-response error and the higher the response rate the more accurate generalizations of the sample (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 163). There are many reasons for non-response, and it is difficult to pinpoint a specific reason for each individual, usually it is a combination of factors but broadly put the busy lifestyles most modern people is a big impact and the Covid-19 pandemic was presumed to have an impact in this case as well. Furthermore, one of the greatest challenges is to motivate respondents to complete the questionnaire. It is a possibility that the respondents were not motivated enough to participate in the survey. (Williamson & Johanson 2018, 163.) From a research point of view the sample size was small, however, from the case company's perspective beneficial information and useful insights were still provided by the questionnaire's respondents.

5.3 Recommendations for Company X

Company X should start inside out to make sure its goals are internally understood and make sure its strategies are implemented throughout the organization including management. The company message and value promises must be consistently and clearly understood internally in order to effectively communicate them externally. The core messages should not regularly change and should be able to stand strong now and for years to come in order to create the desired ingredient brand reputation.

If becoming the Gore-Tex of sustainable materials is the ultimate goal for Company X it would not hurt to remind everyone internally. Furthermore, it is essential for Company X to fully recognize that the ingredient brand strategy is not just a marketing strategy but a company strategy that should be understood by all. Just like ingredient branding, sustainable marketing is also not "just" a marketing strategy but something that should be comprehended and implemented throughout the company. Therefore, it is important to align goals internally to make sure everyone is working towards the same ultimate targets. Of course, each department has separate objectives as indicated in interviews with Interviewee A and Interviewee B, however it would be strongly recommended for Company X to regularly remind the whole organization of the big picture and long-term end goal of being an ingredient brand, the Gore-Tex of sustainability. Just like Interviewee C said, strategy is just a piece of paper until it is actually implemented.

Furthermore, becoming a sustainable ingredient brand requires collaboration. It is important for Company X to never lose touch with its customers and be open to constant communication. Company X could consider collecting feedback more regularly through surveys or other means to ensure it fulfils the high expectations and truly provides the perceived added value of sustainability, quality and competitive advantage to its customers. Company X should make sure that customer needs are regularly checked, updated and addressed.

Company X must make sure what it communicates is in-line with what their customers are asking for. Furthermore, if Company X has a specific and preferred way of communicating about its innovation it should be fully understood by the customers as well in order to make sure the customers communicate accurately to the consumers. For instance, if Company X calls its innovation “microplastic-free” while its customers simply call it “biodegradable” it would be vital for Company X to understand why customers use their preferred terminology instead of what Company X recommends. Perhaps providing the latest sustainability news that customers requested could also help to address any communication gaps. If the terminology used by Company X and its customers differ when talking about the same innovation, it can get very complicated for the end consumers and further amplify the green fatigue and greenphobia which can hinder the formation of a recognizable household name. It may be valuable for Company X to conduct further research with its customers about how exactly they communicate about Company X’s innovation to their end-customers and/or consumers.

Interviewee A mentioned that a challenge is having price as an issue and the majority of the questionnaire respondents mentioned that price is an area of improvement for Company X. Some disconnect exists here. Either the respondents do not see past the price and understand the total value provided by the company or the company should re-evaluate their pricing. Perhaps a combination of both. It is known that environmentally friendly products do typically cost more than their traditional alternatives. It was a surprising disconnect as well that majority of the questionnaire respondents mentioned that sustainability is one of their own competitive advantage which should mean they have some deeper perspective to the price issue. However, it could be that some of the respondents despite having sustainability as one of their competitive advantages are still not yet as deeply involved in it or do not have it thoroughly implemented throughout their company. Furthermore, majority of the respondents (87%) stated that Company X brings value to them through the sustainability aspect. Perhaps this alone is the competitive advantage for some or perhaps for some Company X is the only way they engage in sustainability for now. Over half of the respondents (51%) said they

would like to engage in joint marketing activities. This joint marketing could be joint sustainability marketing which could potentially open respondents' eyes more to a comprehensive overview of sustainability.

Despite the respondents to the questionnaire being vetted by the whole sales team of Company X the response rate and engagement was low. Perhaps the impact of Covid-19 was more significant than expected. It could be worthwhile for Company X to re-send the questionnaire to the same respondents and more later-on especially once Covid-19 does not have as big of an impact. Furthermore, it may be beneficial to send the survey to other customers that were previously not on the list of contacts to collect some comparative data. Since conducting the survey, Company X has undergone a visual brand transformation. The communication has also been clarified and simplified so it would be even more valuable to collect further customer feedback and compare the answers to those that were collected within this research. Company X could also conduct or commission research to collect consumers insights about its innovation as well. Capturing and understanding the consumer perspective would also be highly valuable for becoming an ingredient brand, a household name. Furthermore, since Company X was still a smaller company during the time of this research it did not have very much market power which may have impacted its cobranding relationships and how its customers viewed the marketing collaboration opportunities. In the long run it would be beneficial investigate and keep track of how Company X's collaborative marketing dynamics change and develop when it has more or less market power and brand recognition than its host brand(s).

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

As this thesis focused more on B2B relationships and perspectives, it would be valuable to conduct further research on the consumer perspectives about sustainable marketing and about Company X's products overall. It would be interesting to examine the extent of the impact of greenwashing and greenphobia especially when considering Company X's innovation.

Since this thesis focuses on a company that has built its business around sustainability and is not just doing the bare minimum to meet regulations it would be interesting to conduct further research on the environmental regulations and their impact on businesses as a whole.

Clearly there are companies that are motivated to stay ahead and go beyond regulations, but

the exact methods and motivators for how this is done should further be examined without forgetting to consider the perspectives of organizations that do not act in this way. There are not many companies that have thoroughly implemented sustainability throughout their business strategy and operations. Therefore, this has been a limitation of this research but is also something that should be researched more in the future.

The sample size of this thesis was small so it would be recommended to build upon the research of this thesis and go deeper into the B2B perspective by collecting more data. Company X on its own or through another commissioned work could conduct in depth interviews with their customers and partners, and also distribute the questionnaire to a larger sample. Then it would be possible to further compare and contrast to this research and potentially provide more insights on collaborative and sustainable marketing of Company X's innovation.

Brand relationships and ingredient branding are complicated. Only a few companies have been able to become globally recognized ingredient brands. Therefore, conducting deeper research about these different companies (e.g. Gore-Tex, Kevlar etc.) to gain more insights on the exact methods, goals and objectives the companies had to get where they are today. Most often, no one size fits all strategies exist, but perhaps more patterns or common practices could be identified.

This research focused on sustainable marketing as an overall concept, therefore, it would be valuable further expand on the methods of sustainable marketing. Collaborative marketing could also be further expanded especially regarding the outcomes of different types of collaborative relationships and their outcomes. This research elaborated on the concepts and provided insights for why companies engage in these collaborative activities but did not dive deeper into how the collaboration was done and what concrete outcomes there were. Furthermore, it would be valuable to examine the differences in collaborative marketing including co-branding between B2C and B2B businesses.

Consumer purchase behaviors and decision-making theories should be further research with respect to green marketing and the concepts of greenphobia, green fatigue and the Green Gap. In general, the consumer perspectives on sustainability would be valuable to expand upon.

5.5 Commissioning Company Feedback

Two phone conversations were held with separate Company X representatives. The first call was held on Tuesday May 4th 2021 with the Chief Marketing Officer or Interviewee A. As Interviewee A was involved at the very beginning of this research it was highly valuable to collect feedback from him about the overall research and results. The second phone call was held on Thursday May 6th 2021 with a member of the Sales Team. This sales representative was involved with the original sample selection making it extremely interesting to hear their feedback. Most of the phone conversations focused on the results of the questionnaire. The questionnaire results were particularly interesting as Company X had not conducted this type of research before with its customers. Overall, the feedback given by the commissioning company to the author about this research was positive and lead to a lot of insightful discussion.

Both Interviewee A and the sales representative were happy to see a good mix of companies both small and large from a variety of industries not only cosmetics. Interviewee A was also very pleased to see that there were companies who focused on luxury and companies who focused on high volumes (figure 7).

Interviewee A expressed their appreciation to the author for the theory provided especially about ingredient branding. Given that the ingredient brand concept is not as well-know or widely implemented, Interviewee A felt it was covered very well in this research and was beneficial for increasing the understanding of the concept even within Company X. Next, Interviewee A quickly pointed out how figure 9 “The Features that Separate the Respondents’ Companies from their Competition” and figure 16 “The value adding features of Company X” were very in-line. Interviewee A mentioned how it was flattering and positive to see that what the customers valued in themselves is something they saw to be valuable in Company X too, it shows they know what they are talking about and know what they are looking for. Sustainability as number one value adding feature was obvious to Interviewee A, but it was great to see the ones that came after sustainability (competitive advantage and differentiation, unique look and feel & beautiful aesthetics) as they provide support for the strategic decisions that have been made. The very positive rating of the assets also proved what a strong base and context has been created for the product. Company X needs to make sure all of its products now and in the future consistently match the expectations and provide the perceived value. Interviewee A believes this especially is something it would not hurt to remind everyone in the company of.

Interviewee A pointed out how this research did not focus as much on collecting customers' feedback about Company X's products specifically. The research seemed to be more focused on the perceptions of the company overall. Based on the survey the customers perceive Company X to be very sustainable and high quality with a unique and beautiful product. Company X can add value to the customers or the host brands that they cannot create themselves. Interviewee A felt this was a nice proof of what is working and what should not be forgotten to be prioritized. This also emphasizes how Company X must uncompromisingly meet these perceptions and expectations with the actual product. This showed that there is very little room for slip-ups particularly when the current brand image was even seen as a value adding feature of Company X. Because the survey did not cover the products in high detail, Interviewee A was considering the survey could eventually be repeated especially product specifically and/or industry specifically to see how Company X performs in each defined category. More in-depth interviews could be conducted with customers as well.

Since the desire for "latest sustainability news" was so high (figure 11), Interviewee A immediately felt these news should now be added to the company's monthly newsletter. Similarly, since technical support was also so highly demanded each newsletter should mention the availability of technical support or the accessibility to the technical support people of the company could be enhanced. Interviewee A was already actively thinking of ideas how to address the needs and wants of the customers.

Seeing that 51% of the survey respondents wanted to collaborate in joint marketing (figure 12) was a big but positive surprise to Interviewee A. Interviewee A explained that in their point of view most companies engage in joint marketing when they already have strong business relationship and higher sales volumes not so much in the early stages. Given that Company X is young and many of its customer relationships are fairly new, it means that the customers see Company X as a springboard for achieving their sustainability goals which is something they want to highlight through joint marketing, or they already see some genuine value in joint marketing overall.

According to Interviewee A, it was very valuable to see which environmental sustainability activities the customers' companies supported. It helps to identify as well what types of features and activities Company X should promote about itself to appeal to the customers. An apparent challenge of course is the fact that the customers seemingly seek biodegradable products and material, but Company X does not prefer to position its product and materials as biodegradable due to the varying interpretations, definitions and regulations in different countries.

Interviewee A invited the author to join one of the next leadership team meetings to present the results of the research in detail.

The sales representative said there were no major surprises with the types of companies and representative departments. They were expecting cosmetics to be the largest category and they were right, in fact they thought cosmetics would have had an even higher share. The sales representative felt there was some lack of clarity with how the customers see sustainability already as their competitive advantage. The sales representative wondered do the customers already see themselves to be very sustainable without Company X, or do they see themselves to be sustainable because of Company X or do they see that Company X just strengthens their already existing sustainable competitive advantage and solidifies their unique market position. The sales representative felt it was good to know 72% say sustainability is in the strategy but wanted to know better how it is a part of the customers' companies' strategy. The sales representative felt it would be interesting to deep dive into this topic with some customers to get a better understanding of their sustainable strategy. Regardless, the sales representative felt it was important to see sustainability so pivotal.

Regarding the high demand for "latest sustainability news" (figure 11), the sales representative said it was very reinforcing to see that Company X is considered to be a reliable source for sustainable news and that its customers trust it to convey the information to them. However, the sales representative felt Company X needs to tread carefully with this and make sure any new information or e.g. regulatory changes are researched in great detail and completely understood before sharing forward in order to avoid sharing incorrect information and increasing misunderstanding. The sales representative highlighted how great credibility also leads to great accountability.

The 51% desire for joint marketing (figure 12) was interesting because if certain customers see that Company X provides them with a competitive advantage, then they may be less likely to want to do joint marketing as then they worry they may let their competitors know their "secret" which could lead them to lose their competitive advantage if the competitors switch to Company X material as well. It is challenging because Company X wants to have more brands using their products and materials while co-branding or joint marketing to share Company X's message and increasing the brand awareness.

The sales representative said it would be good to do this survey again at some point and add some more questions that go deeper into Company X's value adding features e.g. microplastic-free to learn more about how the customers truly perceive and understand these aspects. Similarly, the sales representative agreed with the authors recommendations and felt it could also be interesting to do a comparative study of Company X and its competitors to better capture how do the customers and consumers view the differences, advantages and disadvantages. This study could or should include competitors that provide products made from conventional materials as well and not just other sustainable material competitors. Furthermore, the sales representative claimed it would be interesting to know in more detail what features do customers notice and value e.g. is microplastic-free something they look for.

5.6 Reflections on Own Learning

Through this research the author was able to develop herself significantly in many different ways. The author has a passion for sustainability and marketing which was one of the primary reasons for this research topic. Through this research the author has been able to further amplify her passion and increase her knowledge. The author has gained a deeper understanding of sustainable marketing and collaborative marketing including ingredient branding. The author is thankful for the connections made through this research with the interviewees. It has been valuable to learn about the developments of Company X and understand the reasoning behind some of their strategic choices. The author has a huge appreciation and deep respect for what Company X is doing for the world with their sustainable material and practices.

Prioritization and time management skills are something the author could further develop on. It was admittedly challenging to work full-time and conduct research simultaneously especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. The author had to adjust to new working methods and had to find ways to get past certain new obstacles such as libraries being closed among others. The author was definitely able to enhance her creativity and problem-solving skills in order to advance with the research. Admittedly, the research could have been conducted faster but arguably the end results may then have differed. Furthermore, by being able to collaborate with Company X over the course of several months the author was able to increase her own understanding of Company X's business and industry to also expand her own knowledge about sustainable marketing overall. It has been incredibly vibrant and fascinating work closely with a company like Company X. Considering the author's future career aspirations, it

has been extremely valuable to enhance knowledge in marketing and especially in sustainable marketing given the increasing importance of sustainable business practices.

At times it was difficult to proceed with the research in a way that would be equally beneficial for the author, Haaga-Helia and Company X. Through this, the author certainly was able enhance her critical thinking abilities and perseverance in order to effectively guide the research forward through compromises and minimal sacrifices by any of the involved parties. Negotiation skills were enhanced as well especially when defining the scope of this research. Furthermore, with a topic as dynamic and complicated as sustainability it is easy to get lost and lose focus. Even in this research the author was inclined to add more information related to sustainable development overall, but this was beyond the scope of this thesis. Occasionally it was challenging to maintain the focus on sustainable marketing without diverting to sustainable development as a whole.

The author has been able to develop her research skills significantly and increased her understanding of research methods and types. This research also creates a solid foundation for future research and academic aspirations. The author feels far more confident in conducting research now than what she did in the beginning of the thesis process. She has been able to learn more systematic ways for reviewing literature and data. In fact, if the author would do this research again, she would be able to process data more efficiently and would most likely slightly alter her research methods. If the author would re-do the research now, she would most likely conduct some in-depth qualitative interviews right away with Company X's customers to gain more answers to the "how" and "why" questions such as "how is sustainability implemented in company strategy?" This would have allowed the author to provide even more detailed insights for Company X and the research overall.

The author would like to express her gratitude to the interviewees (A, B and C) as well as her thesis advisor for the support given throughout this research. It has been a great joy and privilege to receive insights from individuals that are such esteemed experts in their fields. The author learned a lot of valuable information from these individuals that was beneficial for this research but also will be beneficial for the author in the long run as she continues to build her own professional and academic experience.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview Questions for Interviewee A and B

Company

1. Where do you see Company X in 5 years?
2. Currently, what are Company X's most important objectives in marketing (Interviewee A), in sustainability (Interviewee B), and overall? How will these objectives be reached?
3. What are Company X's greatest challenges in marketing (Interviewee A), in sustainability (Interviewee B), and overall?
4. How does Company X pick which companies it works with? (Customers, subcontractors, investors, suppliers)
5. Interviewee A only:
 - a. Why was an ingredient brand approach selected for Company X?
 - b. How do you define an ingredient brand?
 - c. What are Company X's greatest challenges with ingredient branding?

Market

1. Who are Company X's key competitors and how does Company X differentiate from them?
2. What value does Company X bring to other brands and their products?
 - a. Why would a company want to do joint marketing / co-branding with Company X? (Interviewee A only)
3. How does Company X support its customers? (What has been effective what has not?)
4. How can Company X collaboratively communicate with brands to end-users/consumers?
5. What kind of current or future collaboration would you like to see Company X do with its customers/partners?

Sustainability

1. Why and how is sustainability important to Company X?
2. What makes Company X "a truly sustainable choice"?
3. What kind of role does Company X have in shaping future sustainability expectations/demands/criteria?

Appendix 2. Interview Guide for Interviewee C

1. Why did you select the ingredient brand approach for Company X?
 - a. Why did you think it was a good strategy for Company X at this point?
 - b. How can an ingredient brand status be gained and earned?
2. How was Company X's role in saving the world from plastic waste redefined?
3. I heard you originally resisted the ingredient brand approach for Company X, could you elaborate why and what were the challenges or concerns that you had?
4. What are the greatest challenges for Company X with ingredient branding and their new strategy?
5. What kind of information, feedback or collaboration does Company X need from its customers or partners to reach its goals and build an ingredient brand?

Appendix 3. Customer Questionnaire

1. In which function or department do you, as the respondent, work in? Please choose one. *

- ☐ Administration
- ☐ Marketing
- ☐ Production
- ☐ Purchasing
- ☐ Research & Development
- ☐ Sales
- ☐ Supply Chain
- ☐ Sustainability
- ☐ Quality
- ☐ Other, please specify

2. What company type do you represent? Please choose one. *

- ☐ Consumer brand
- ☐ Converter
- ☐ Design Agency
- ☐ Distributor
- ☐ Material Supplier
- ☐ Retailer
- ☐ Other, please specify

3. What is the size of the company you represent? Please choose one. *

- ☐ > 500 employees
- ☐ 250-500 employees
- ☐ 51-249 employees
- ☐ ≤ 50 employees
- ☐ Prefer not to say

4. What describes your company the best? Please choose one. *

- ☐ We emphasize luxury and provide luxurious goods
- ☐ We are a premium brand in our specific industry category
- ☐ We prioritize affordable quality in accessible quantities
- ☐ We focus on high volumes and widespread supply
- ☐ None of the above, please specify

5. What industry does the company you represent primarily operate in? Please choose one. *

- ☐ Cosmetics
- ☐ Dietary supplements
- ☐ Fashion & accessories

- ☐ Food products
- ☐ Household goods
- ☐ Hospitality & tourism
- ☐ Medical & pharmaceutical
- ☐ Packaging & display
- ☐ Personal care & hygiene
- ☐ Restaurants & cafés
- ☐ Straws & Cutlery
- ☐ Watches & jewelry
- ☐ Other, please specify

6. What separates your company from its competitors? Please choose one or more.

- ☐ Aesthetics
- ☐ Cost-effectiveness
- ☐ Efficiency
- ☐ Functionality
- ☐ Price
- ☐ Reputation & Story
- ☐ Sustainability
- ☐ Quality
- ☐ Other, please specify

7. How important is environmental sustainability to the company you represent? Please choose one. *

- ☐ Very important
- ☐ Important
- ☐ Somewhat important
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat not important
- ☐ Not important
- ☐ Not important at all

8. How is environmental sustainability implemented in your company's functions? Please choose one or more. *

- ☐ Included in company strategy
- ☐ Actionable individual projects
- ☐ Goals that are transparently measured
- ☐ Driven by regulatory requirements
- ☐ Through the company sustainability department
- ☐ Other please specify

9. What environmentally sustainable actions does your company promote? Please choose one or more.*

- ☐ Biodegradable raw materials or products
- ☐ Biobased raw materials or products
- ☐ Donating to sustainable charities or funds (e.g. WWF)
- ☐ Industrially compostable raw materials
- ☐ Investing in sustainable projects

- ☐ Microplastic-free raw materials or products
- ☐ Recycling
- ☐ Reducing plastic
- ☐ Renewable energy
- ☐ Resource efficiency
- ☐ Setting yearly or quarterly sustainability goals
- ☐ Sustainably sourced raw materials
- ☐ Other, please specify

10. Why is environmental sustainability important to your company? Please choose one or more.

*

- ☐ Competitive advantage and differentiation
- ☐ Consumers demand it
- ☐ Employee pressure
- ☐ Part of company vision and/or strategy
- ☐ Planning ahead for the future
- ☐ Regulatory influence or pressure
- ☐ Societal expectations
- ☐ Other, please specify

11. Does your company currently use Company X's material in its manufacturing or within its products and/or services? Please choose one. *

- ☐ Yes, and we will continue using
- ☐ Yes, and we may keep using
- ☐ Yes, but we do not want to use
- ☐ No, but we want to use

- ☐ No, but we may want to use
- ☐ No, and we do not want to use

12. How strongly do you agree with the following statement: *Company X can add or already add value to my company's products or services*. Please choose one. *

- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Slightly agree
- ☐ Slightly disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Strongly disagree

13. Through which aspects could or does Company X add value to your company's products and/or services? Please choose one or more. *

- ☐ Beautiful aesthetics
- ☐ Competitive advantage and differentiation
- ☐ Functionality
- ☐ Quality
- ☐ Company X's reputation and story
- ☐ Sustainability
- ☐ Unique look and feel
- ☐ Other, please specify

14. What kind of feedback have you received from your stakeholders (e.g. customers or partners) about using Company X? Please choose one. *

- ☐ Positive
- ☐ Slightly positive
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Slightly negative
- ☐ Negative
- ☐ Have not received any feedback

15. How helpful have Company X's assets been to you? Please rate all. *

Image of Company X's assets.
This image has been removed for confidentiality reasons. It was included as intended in the survey sent to the customers.

	Very helpful	Helpful	Slightly helpful	Slightly unhelpful	Unhelpful	Very unhelpful	Have not seen or received
Brochures	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Images and videos	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sample boxes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Scientific documents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Technical documents	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Web-pages	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. What has your company's experience been like with Company X's customer support and communication? Please choose one. *

- ☐ Very good
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Somewhat good
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat bad
- ☐ Bad
- ☐ Very bad

17. What has your company's experience been like with Company X's products or material? Please choose one.*

- ☐ Very good
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Somewhat good
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Somewhat bad
- ☐ Bad
- ☐ Very bad
- ☐ No experience yet

18. What kind of support would your company like to receive from Company X? Please choose one or more. *

- ☐ Educational content
- ☐ Latest sustainability news
- ☐ Participating in events with Company X
- ☐ Sales training
- ☐ Sustainability seminars hosted by Company X
- ☐ Technical support
- ☐ Technical training
- ☐ Visual assets (e.g. photos and animations)
- ☐ I am not sure, I would like to be consulted about this
- ☐ Other, please specify

19. What kind of collaboration would your company like to do with Company X? Please choose one or more. *

- ☐ Joint marketing activities
- ☐ Co-branding with Company X
- ☐ Joint development and research
- ☐ Product design
- ☐ Joint consumer education
- ☐ Take-back programs (recycling)
- ☐ I am not sure, I would like to be consulted about this
- ☐ Other, please specify

20. Why did you choose Company X or why are you considering choosing Company X? Please describe.

21. Do you have any improvement advice for Company X? Please describe.

Appendix 4. Email Response from a Gore-Tex Representative

