

# **More members, more benefits**

## **Member acquisition through strategy development**

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## Abstract

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Abstract <p>The purpose of this design research was to find out how a non-profit tourism association can acquire new members by developing its strategy. HelsinkiNorth RA is a new tourism association. It was established with the help of EU funds, and its aim is to continue in action in the future, on yearly membership fees. To achieve this, the association requires approximately 50-70 members, 60 000 euros as membership fees. Now there are 19 members. The strategy of the association is to acquire and retain members by offering them benefits they would not have unless they were members of HelsinkiNorth. Another goal of the association is to create constant and ever enlarging co-operation between members and other actors on local hospitality and event industry.</p> <p>The research question was how to improve member acquisition. The first task was to conduct qualitative research among potential members: hospitality and event companies which operate on the area of HelsinkiNorth, but which are not members yet.</p> <p>Once the interviews were conducted and results interpreted, strategy development was suggested to the board of the association. Workshop was organized, and the board members were asked to join brainstorming. The result will be developed strategy.</p>		
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## 1 Introduction

Tourism, hospitality, and event industry is a complex combination of different factors which all work towards the same goal in a certain physical environment. It is defined by nature, economic relations, society, culture, communication methods, infrastructures, and investment. In locations where tourism plays an important role in the economic profile, it is included in the processes of municipalities' planning. There is a link between the economic developments of municipalities with the development of the tourism industry (Shahraki 2022). Sustainability in tourism, hospitality and event industry has settled in the terminology and it is closely tied with responsibility in tourism. Without responsible tourists and tourism industry, sustainable tourism is not possible to achieve. Tourism is expected to show responsibility towards nature, towards cultural aspects of society and economic developments. Sustainability and responsibility have influenced expectations – if not demands – on sustainable tourism (Saarinen 2021).

Tourism industry has grown since the 1950's to date, approximately 4% annually worldwide. It has put pressure on local areas on different sectors in infrastructure – energy consumption, transportation, and accommodation (Leroux & Lusson 2019). The combination of these aspects of seeing tourism, has led the new trend to immerse in tourism in the 2020's which is living like locals and experiencing the backdoor moments (Duxbury 2022). This trend suits small entrepreneurs in Finnish municipalities whose strength lies in offering sustainable and nature-friendly services to local consumers and tourists.

HelsinkiNorth RA is young, only two years old (established in January 2020) regional tourism development association. It was established in order to bring prosperity for operators in hospitality and event industry. It is a non-profit business-driven association of which budget is based on yearly membership fees. It works across municipal borders north of Helsinki. One of the association's main goals is to promote co-operation between companies operating in the tourism and event industry and other type of companies which offer services to tourists – and to locals – e.g., restaurants, experience and sports companies, cinemas, and shops (HelsinkiNorth 2021-2022).

The co-operation brings benefits for the members and for the tourists and other users of the services offered by the members. HelsinkiNorth organizes joint marketing, promotes its members, offers education and consulting, and acquires useful partners. All these benefits create the reason for HelsinkiNorth's existence and performance (HelsinkiNorth 2021-2022). HelsinkiNorth requires more members, and it needs to develop its communication and marketing.

As a result of this research the developed strategy was designed, and action plan created to give HelsinkiNorth tools to improve its communications and marketing and enhance the benefits for members. It means that there will be more members joining, and the image of the association will be uplifted and therefore there will be more benefits to offer for new members and also for existing members. HelsinkiNorth will eventually reach the required number of members to run independently, without EU funds or municipal support. The required number is 50-70 members - and now it has not more than 19 (Appendix 2.). There must exist a strategy for member acquisition and for retaining existing members (Fabbri 2019). For this research and development of strategy, the goal for the number of members was set to 32, to nearly double it during the following year (2023) (Kokkonen & Pakkala 2022).

Since HelsinkiNorth is recent, the international aspect has been left out from this research. International co-operation and marketing will be part of the plan in the future, and it will be coming into the picture together with the growth of the association. In the defined region where HelsinkiNorth operates, there is a lot of potential in increasing the national awareness, too. Therefore, the time of the international expansion will come later (Kokkonen & Pakkala 2021).

There are two municipalities, Hyvinkää and Mäntsälä which are supportive members at the moment. If all municipalities of HelsinkiNorth region were members, there would be also Hausjärvi, Järvenpää, Kerava, Loppi, Nurmijärvi, Riihimäki, Tuusula, and Vihti, based on the geographical location defined when HelsinkiNorth was established. Those municipalities are all within approximately one hour reach from Helsinki to the north. However, for this research the municipalities were left out. The main reason being that municipalities are not like other members; they are not commercial businesses and the decision-making in municipalities is political and more complex than in commercial enterprises. The municipalities on this area have solved the tourism management in different ways. Some have a separate organization or department for tourism sector, some have their own personnel working on it, and usually the municipalities get funds for setting up tourism organizations. Some municipalities have long tradition of co-operation and networking, some seem to do nearly nothing to attract visitors – especially if the websites are studied (websites of the 10 municipalities on the area of HelsinkiNorth 2022).

The strategy of the association is to acquire and retain members by offering them benefits they would not have unless they were members of HelsinkiNorth. Another goal of the association is to create constant and ever enlarging co-operation between members and other actors in local tourism industry (HelsinkiNorth 2021-2022). The association has named

these benefits for the members: common marketplace, media coverage on the website, media coverage in the social media channels, improved customer flow, networking, opportunities for cross-selling, product development work, training opportunities, and member information (Kokkonen & Pakkala 2021).

The research question is how to improve member acquisition which is vital for the association's future and continuity. The research was undertaken by firstly conducting qualitative research among potential members: tourism companies which operate on the region of HelsinkiNorth, but which were not members yet – what would be the reason for them to join and why haven't they joined yet. What is the level of willingness to participate and willingness to collaborate (Hager 2021). The purpose of the research was to find out how member acquisition could be best implemented in order to reach the required number of members. The aim of the research was to find the ways to develop the strategy of HelsinkiNorth. Major changes in strategy are possible if it is required to reach the goal (Kokkonen & Pakkala 2021).

Once the interviews were conducted in spring 2022, and results interpreted in autumn 2022, strategy development started in a workshop for the board of HelsinkiNorth. The board members were asked to join brainstorming. The result will be developed strategy for HelsinkiNorth. With the help of the strategy the member acquisition and retaining existing members will be more structured, more defined, and more effective. There will be 32 members by the end of year 2023 and it will be doubled eventually to be around 50-70 members which is the required amount for the association to be financially independent.

Since the association was established in the beginning of 2020, it has received funds from two different projects from European Social Funds. The first one finished in August 2021, and the ongoing one will finish in the end of July 2023. It is a common project with Hyria Education Ltd., and it is called: *HelsinkiNorth & Hyria Laboratories - Increased turnover from travel ecosystem*. With this funding HelsinkiNorth covers 80% of executive manager's salary costs, and for marketing and communications costs the association has been pinpointed 10 000 euros (ESF 2021).

HelsinkiNorth's member acquisition methods have been: marketing letter sent by email to potential members, phone calls to the ones which showed interest, organizing information events – both live and online events, taking part in relevant events where the potential members were also participants, encouraging existing members to acquire new members and relying on the help of Hyvinkää and Mäntsälä, the two municipalities which are members, so that they would encourage companies in their regions to join (Pakkala 2021).

The covid pandemic has changed the situation of members and members-to-be with the extent that it is reasonable to believe it affects the result of this research. All companies in hospitality and event industry have faced different type of unexpected losses, lack of business action - lack of customers - being the main ones. The pandemic started almost as soon as HelsinkiNorth was established, so there is hardly any experience from “normal times” yet. As the pandemic continued in the end of 2021, the member acquisition was changed from active to passive. Passive acquisition means that instead of asking potential members to join, the benefits of membership have been communicated by enhanced marketing actions and the laboratories which are organized together with Hyria Education Ltd. The question is whether the step from active to passive was taken too early. It will be found out how wide the awareness of HelsinkiNorth is among potential members and end customers. It will be found out also whether the potential members know the benefits and if they do, do they believe they would get their membership fee's worth of growth in their turnover and is being part of the network increase co-operation between other members (Mc Dermott 2021).

At the time of this research (April 2022) the hospitality and event industry was recovering from the pandemic. Domestic tourism had increased remarkably. The year 2021 showed a considerable recovery in domestic tourism, the growth of 1120 million euros compared to the year 2020. It was also found out that the domestic tourism was even higher than before the pandemic. The location of HelsinkiNorth gives it a beneficial starting point since the regional impact of the tourism is in Uusimaa area. From the municipalities of HelsinkiNorth, 7 out of 10 are in Uusimaa. Over 50% of the income from tourism industry is achieved in this area (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland 2022).

In the light of these promising figures of the increase in hospitality and event industry, HelsinkiNorth's prospective members should have potential to join the association. The problem is that HelsinkiNorth is not known among its prospective members. Their businesses are running, and industry is growing. However, most of the tourist business in the HelsinkiNorth area are small entrepreneurs whose business plans are stagnant, they have no resources, nor they want to put effort on marketing or not even on future growth. Co-operation and cross-selling which are some of the benefits HelsinkiNorth offers, will be worth pinpointing in the strategy. As Kokkonen (2022) pointed out: *Rivals as partners can create something bigger and better*. Co-operation is the key, but before it can open the lock, the stakeholders – potential members and customers – must know about HelsinkiNorth, must know what it is and what it does.

HelsinkiNorth has succeeded in retaining the members. That is a proof there are some benefits of being a member. The board of HelsinkiNorth (Appendix 3.) has named teams for member acquisition, for marketing and communication and for development of digital technology. The roles of these teams are not put in action, though, the main reason being there are no named team leaders who would take responsibility and oversee the results. Activity and engagement of present members would need some improvement, too.

Member acquisition being the first point on the list of HelsinkiNorth action plan, the second point is to develop service design, and to achieve more active marketing actions of services the members offer for consumers. This contains the common website and the platform from where the services can be acquired (Johku online shop). There will be morning coffees and other events where members will have a chance to meet each other and get into the network. There will be also educational events where the members can improve their business skills and learn about new trends in tourism industry and information about the current issues in the region of HelsinkiNorth.

In the action plan of HelsinkiNorth there is an emphasis on developing digital marketing. The website is the main tool for external communication. Co-operation is being planned to enhance with other regional tourism associations and other actors outside the HelsinkiNorth region, and with VisitFinland – especially when the activities towards international actions will start with full potential in the future (Kokkonen & Pakkala 2021). The internal communication is executed by membership letters via email. The research will show how much internal communication is needed to activate and engage the members.

This research will start with a theoretical study of strategy, marketing and communication, and their relation to non-profit associations which operate in a business-like manner. In Chapter 2 the theoretical framework is explained. There are five different strategical views to achieving members in an association: content, education, event, communication, and analytics (Duchatel 2018). And organization strategy is looked at from the most recent point of view: human strategy (Kilpinen 2022). In the theoretical part of this research also tourism associations and their networking and co-operation are studied. The situation elsewhere in Finland is looked at in the light of previous studies on local tourist associations and how municipalities have tackled the tourism issue and from where they get resources for it.

Research methods were qualitative, and the research was conducted by using the framework and advice especially designed for University of Applied Sciences students (Kananen 2015). Research guide, checklist of evaluation of the research plan was conducted by using the advice for research-based development projects (Saunders et al. 2019).



The interviews were conducted between April and August 2022. The questions were formed in collaboration with HelsinkiNorth, and interviewees were chosen in such a way that there was one from each municipality of HelsinkiNorth area. The researcher was welcomed in 9 of 10 cases, only in one municipality the interviewee had to be changed. The interviewees gave an impression they were happy to share their thoughts and appreciated they were being heard. They also gave very important information on their reasons for not joining HelsinkiNorth. With the help of the information the board members could see what has to be done for HelsinkiNorth to continue existing. And not just existing: with the help of the developed strategy HelsinkiNorth will have good prospects to gather enough members and reach its future goals. Their choices are explained in the Chapter 4 which introduces the outcomes of the research together with the suggested strategy developments.

Chairman of the board, Vesa Kokkonen and executive manager, Roni Pakkala from HelsinkiNorth welcomed this research and development project because it offers information to what comes to knowing the prospective members and exploring their expectations. Now HelsinkiNorth has facts on which to take the future steps, and ideas how to develop strategy.

## 2 Non-profit associations and their strategies

### 2.1 Member acquisition linked to strategy

Non-profit association is defined to be an organization which does not aim for commercial profit and has no shareholders (Cutt & Murray 2000). Theoretical framework for this research was studied from different angles as regards non-profit associations, and keeping focus on *more members, more benefits* which is the starting point of this research (HelsinkiNorth 2021). Member acquisition and – also retention – is about *more members*, and *more benefits* is about networking and co-operation. In theoretical framework member acquisition is linked to strategy, marketing and communication resources, and networking and co-operation is linked to service design.

Any company, association, group of people with a goal to achieve, must form an action plan where its goal and the ways to achieve the goal are defined. So that everyone involved knows what is being done and for what reason. This is called strategy. Strategy guides decisions, it defines the ends, ways and means. Ends mean the goals the organization wishes to achieve, the ways are the skills used in the process, and the means are the resources available (Khalifa 2020). Strategy can be an excellent tool for planning a company's future and a tool for the management to use but at the same time, strategy is reachable for hardly anyone in a work community, and that there are very few who know where they stand in the big picture of the strategy. The strategy is an institutional must-have and not a road map which would lead the whole work community to its destination. A new point of view has been raised to look at strategy. When people are tied into the strategy there will be a great deal of new energy and potential. People will be tied better if they are treated as humans, not as just balls in a game. Strategy is one of the last aspects in leadership where the humanization has not yet found its way. Human strategy means that when the meaning of the strategy is clear to all parties in the organization, and everyone knows his/her role as reflected to the meaning, the organization is capable to work for it every day (Kilpinen 2022).

Humanizing business is a way to look at it from different point of view. Not everything can be defined by numbers and forecasts made only by statistics. Several different strategy processes of listed companies were compared, and it was found that there were flow charts which explained how information was collected, processed, how decisions were made and how they were communicated to the field. From top to bottom, the traditional way but that there were no organization which would have succeeded in collecting and analysing such data which their competitor would not have had. This data can be found by using anthropo-

logical analyses. In the field of travel and tourism, and especially in the field of travel associations, the strategy must lay on value propositions which are based on human behaviour. When an organization is established, the strategy is formed and defined (Leskelä 2020).

Strategy in non-profit association works in the same way as in any organization. The effectiveness of the strategy is measured by the power of gaining and retaining members instead of profits achieved by commercial actions. Members who see themselves as co-workers reaching the common goal. Members who see themselves as important factors with important roles. Defining a strategy for non-profit association is different from an organization which forms a clear unity. Strategy for non-profit association is created without knowing exactly who the players are. And once the players join the association, they become members who are offered different roles and tied to the strategy in every possible way so that they will remain, and so that they work for the common goal and hopefully bring more members. The purpose in a non-profit organization is essential to figure out regardless of the lack of clear unity as in commercial organizations. An organization should think whether its purpose is qualified or not. The first question is about the reason for existence and what these reasons mean to the members of the organization. These are useful guidelines for any new organization to take into consideration when the strategy is given its shape (Saarinen & Suokko 2020).

While strategy is being formed there must be a balance in what comes from top to bottom and by whom the purpose of the organization is defined. That affects the organizational effectiveness in non-profit associations because the members cannot be given obvious common goal like in commercial businesses. The board of the association is dependent on the members because the members bring the turnover, so they need information from the potential members. Otherwise, they would not be able to set up the action plan to fulfil their expectations. For the strategy to be effective all stakeholders must be listened to, and their point of view taken into consideration. That means the board of the association must be involved in the everyday operation, not only in the process of creating strategy (Minciullo & Matteo 2019).

Creation of indispensable engagement is an integral factor in the strategy of association. This argument is based on the human aspect and the question of purpose which has been mentioned above. Non-profit association needs engagement which derives from other values than financial profit for the members. In this case the difference between association and a commercial company is significant: the members of an association must be connected to it on the emotional level because the financial benefit cannot be the reason, they

are members. So, they must love it and be proud of being part of it. Indispensable engagement comes from being attached to the organization. And the more attached the members are, the more satisfied they are and the most probably they retain as members (Bell 2020).

There are different ways to look at membership engagement. There are different levels of engagement among members. Those who are very active are usually interested in being involved also on management level or otherwise give more effort towards the goal of the association. Engagement level depends also on the expectations of benefits. That leads to the fact that there are different engagement types and also the engagement level of a single member varies in time. There are five different strategies for member achievement: content, education, events, communication, and analytics. Once these strategies work, they involve and engage the members within association. These five strategies rely on each other and together they form a unity where each member finds his/her place and a role and working towards the common goal gets smoother. And ideally, in this way the association attracts new members and eventually there will be a point where new members have to wait to be invited to join which is the ultimate goal of non-profit associations.

Content means that in the action plan there is constantly content which is relevant for members' interests. Education means that there is always something new to offer to learn and different learning methods are used. Events means there are the type of events which interests members and of which they know they get either new social contacts or experience they value more than time spent in doing something else. The fourth strategy is communication which means internal communication between members. Open communication invites members to share their information and the channel stays frequent. The fifth strategy is analytics which is using website tracking and other digital forms of analytics, but which can be seen also as being alert and collecting information from members continuously to be sure the association's goals are being reached (Duchatel 2018).

Making connections is seen an important reason for new members to join. Members value connections which bring them benefits within the association and also in entrepreneurs' private life. Strategically it is significant how these connections are made. Digital connections are easily generated, but some new members would feel connections made face to face more valuable. This is a communication issue: the skill to reach the members with relevant content at the right time and place. When it concerns non-profit associations, these questions cannot be raised without first communicating and making the existence of the association known to the stakeholders and potential members. Communicating and marketing are closely intertwined especially in the beginning. The prospective members must be informed –otherwise they would not know they are potential members (Bell 2020).

## 2.2 Member acquisition linked to marketing and communications

When the purpose of the non-profit association is defined and the strategy along with it, it is time to clarify the marketing and communications strategies. The goals of marketing and communications is defined, then the ends, the ways and the means to get the strategy clarified. The message is the ends: what is to be said, the ways is with what channel it is said, and the means is to whom the message is reaching (Dragilev 2022). Non-profit associations are limited in their marketing resources, so the channels must be carefully chosen. And what is more important than the channels is the target group. The message cannot be shot in the air and hoped the potential members will hear it. The founders of the association must know to whom they communicate their message.

As well as value proposition must be defined, and it must be clearly communicated so that it attracts potential new members. It is necessary that associations define (and redefine) a strong value proposition and how to communicate it to the members and to the prospective members. The first step is to look at the vision of the association and to make sure the value proposition supports the vision, and the right steps are taken to achieve the vision. That requires constant evaluation. There are three qualities of a strong value proposition: it focuses on benefits and outcomes, it uses carefully planned communication, and it's not repetition of a fancy slogan. All these three qualities work only if an association has clarified them. Benefits must be proven to exist, something concrete to attract the members and retain them. Specific, meaningful language also means the way to communicate, and the channels of communication. The message must be reached and understood (Hager 2022).

An association proves its reason to exist by the way it attracts members and retains them. It is a chain of elements: acquisition, engagement, and retention. When these three elements are in balance, an association can go for implementing its action plan. Referrals is an effective form of acquisition. Satisfied existing members refer to others and invite them to join. Even better, if existing members feel engaged and they feel they have added value to the association, it is more likely that they refer association to others. In today's environment members can be reached and engaged in the most effective way by online channels. It goes without saying that nowadays the website must be mobile friendly, and the association must be found on the first page of Google for easy and fast access. Once the communication channels are working and the members engaged to use them, the content of the communication plays an important role in retaining members. If an association can identify the needs and preferences of its members, the content can be made meaningful, and the channels will be used, and the messages go through successfully (Duchatel 2018).

Referrals work also when an association develops its strategy. It is useful to see how other associations have solved similar problems. And then from there the best tactics can be chosen. The emphasize must be kept in both member acquisition and member retention. This also includes the idea of maximum growth: how much each member brings added value compared to the work it requires to keep them. What type of members would be more desired – a few big companies with large turnovers or several smaller companies (Pakkala 2022). All studied theoretical material pinpoints the importance of knowing the prospective members, because from knowing them the best methods to reach and keep them can be chosen and implemented. The best strategy for member acquisition requires time and the knowledge of both prospective members and the market situation. Also creating content which attracts members requires constant work. The most effective characteristics of member acquisition strategy are the word-of-mouth recommendations, email, and events. This was found in the report which is called Membership Marketing Benchmarking by Marketing General Inc. report. These results apply in the United States, almost 750 associations took part in the survey. The word-of-mouth recommendations was the most effective tactic according to 57% of the replies. It was explained by the fact that people trust reviews and use them before making decisions. A reward for bringing in new members by word-of-mouth system is worth considering. And working in an online community where some parts of the information is only for members would increase the value of membership. In the same survey of Marketing General Inc, it was found out that 63% of associations see networking with other members as one of the main reasons to join the association. The second tactic is email. It is considered personal even though sending emails especially in big associations is automated process. If there is an offer in the content of the email it is more effective. And to find the right offer, it must be known what interests the potential members. Events organized by the association are seen as the third important way of attracting members and retaining the existing members. According to the survey, 40% of associations see their events attracting members in an efficient way. The reason for this is that events communicate the value and the culture of the association. This applies also to the virtual events. Another interesting point of view which appeared in the Membership Marketing Benchmarking report is that almost one third of the associations managed to increase their member acquisition in 2021. The main reasons for this were said to be that those associations had the best articulated value proposition, pointed out the best reasons to join and used the most effective communication channels. These tactics would work continuously if they were an integral part of the strategy of an association (Jarvis 2021)

An association must find the most effective communication channels and best ways to implement marketing actions. Usually the marketing budgets are limited, so it requires careful

consideration what marketing actions will be chosen. Traditional advertising, for example in printed media, is expensive and it might not reach the potential members at the required extent. In the case of travel and event associations, the end users of members' services are also the target audience. This means the advertising has two separate audiences which both must be reached in the most profitable way. The more the association manages to increase its visibility, the more it attracts both new members and the more it activates the end users. The first step in increasing awareness is the visibility of members' websites and all marketing materials. Especially the fairs are proven to be effective way to increase visibility and to reach target audience. Keskipiste Travel Association Ra, which is similar to HelsinkiNorth, chose different themes when starting the marketing efforts. Keskipiste picked up tourism fairs and general fairs to be the main channels to raise awareness of its existence. The marketing plan of Keskipiste Travel Association was based on first dividing the tourism into cultural and rural and planning the action accordingly. Cultural tourism is defined to include historical sites, museums, festivals, events, and all activities which emphasise area's authenticity and uniqueness. Rural tourism emphasises those two latter attributes but is based on natural resources of the rural areas. Services are offered in the nature. The marketing challenge of travel association differs from marketing challenge of a single organization of which target audience can be clearly defined, because travel association's members operate on different fields of business. For example, the hotel operator versus horse-riding entrepreneur. Ideally, an association can lean on its members' engagement and knowledge of their customers, so that the marketing plan can be designed accordingly to suit any chosen audience. Customer research for the purpose of the association is important to conduct regularly. Both association members as customers, and their customers are important to know properly. This knowledge is effectively reached if the networks are in good condition and used actively (Repo 2010).

### 2.3 Non-profit association and service design

When a non-profit association gathers the different elements in what it provides to its members and to the members' customers, a service design is worth looking at as one of those elements. Service design makes services usable, desirable and something to easily explain. Service innovation creates value to service products (Yu & Sangiorgi 2018). Tourism is defined according to what type of experiences it offers to the end user. Experiences are services and therefore they are products in this context. Experiential services can be looked at from the point of view of values, of the different values which the customer experiences and expects to receive. The multidimensional perspective of customer value is divided into

functional, emotional, social, and epistemic value. Functional value is the level of organization of the experience and value for money. Emotional value is about how many different (positive) feelings the experience had given to the tourist/consumer. Social value is mostly about how the tourist/consumer would look in the eyes of his/her social circles and about feeling of belonging to the group. Novelty value is about creating the feeling of being adventurous, satisfying curiosity and getting an authentic experience. Value of satisfaction is reached by getting the feeling it was worth it, and it was worth it the best possible way, and the experience fulfilled the expectations and the needs of the tourist/customer (Williams et al 2001). For travel association this service design point of view is worth taking into consideration. Especially so, in the context of networking and co-operation between members of the association, as indicated in the survey of Marketing General Inc (2022). When the members can see potential in co-operation and feel networking adds value to every member's business, service design can be planned systematically, and the result can be very satisfying experiences to the end users, and very profitable operation to the members. In tourism industry, once the different elements have been analysed, the process of service design can start.

The Double Diamond model is widely used in service design and product development. Diamond phases can be used both in explaining the process of designing services for the members of the association as well as for the services of the end users. There are four phases: discover, define, develop, and deliver. First the starting point must be defined, i.e., discovered. Where the development starts and what for. Discovering requires looking at the problem in a fresh way and trying to see it differently or at least from a new angle. At this point research is important tool to gather information. With the results of the research, the second quarter of the diamond can be processed. That is when the problem is clarified. It answers to the questions of what must be done first and how the project is defined – what its goal is and how it will be processed. In the third part of the diamond the solutions are searched for. This is the phase for trial and error – ideas will be refined and developed. The fourth and final quarter of the diamond is the delivery phase, the product or the service comes out in its final form. At this stage it is the time to do evaluation and to get feedback from the target group (British Design Council 2005) (Figure 1.).



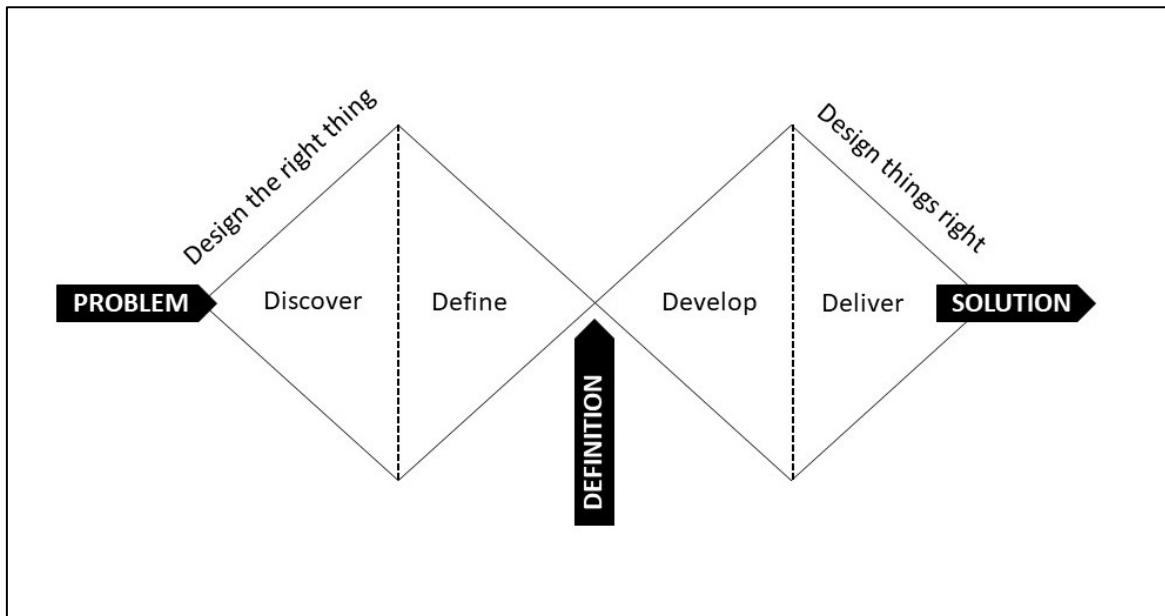


Figure 1. Double diamond is a design process model which is adapted from the divergence-convergence model (British Design Council 2005 according to Bánáthy 1996).

In service design the value aspect is important. When service design is implemented with co-operation and by using member engagement, the result will be one significant benefit for members. And also, to end users, because they will be offered systematically designed services. In Hämeenlinna region the travel and event industry formed *companion packages* which the companies had a chance to achieve added value to their operations. Added value was enlarged business area, sharing the risk between other companies and increased turnover and better position in the competition. The goal was to create something within a network (package) what one company alone would not achieve. The companion packages were designed in such a way that the special marketing and promoting campaigns could be purchased according to the needs (Toivanen 2018). In the shape of companion package, the service system embraced internal and external resources, image, hospitality, business mission. Internal resources mean the functionality and the culture of the organization - its personnel, leadership, entrepreneurship. External resources are the physical elements of the association, its partners, equipment, and destination resources. There are slight differences between the consumption experience, customer experience, total customer experience and service experience, and to make it a little more complicated, the tourist industry brings along leisure experience, travel experience and tourist experience (Konu 2016). Networking is seen as one of the main benefits of travel association (Kokkonen 2022). An association takes a role in marketing and providing possibilities for co-operation between its members. This applies to other regional travel associations. They are leaders in organizing

co-operation events, and in searching for direction of future development and improving the strategy. If the association is active and respected by its members it can truly attract more visitors and enhance tourism in the particular area, also to get investors in the field. Engaged members form networks and the co-operation comes along with it (Laukkanen 2010).

The regional co-operation in tourism industry is organized different ways in different municipalities in Finland. In Uusimaa and Häme areas where HelsinkiNorth operates, there are some municipalities which are active in organizing their tourism issues and some municipalities prefer to get an operator from outside its own organization. A study has been conducted about networking in the Oulu area in the northern Finland. There networking in the travel and event industry was seen fruitful mainly in the marketing issues. Also, if there was financial support available in the network, the small entrepreneurs could consider expanding their operations. The networking process was seen as something very local, within a small area, and then, with time it would expand to cover larger area in the Northern Finland. Networking and co-operation are based on the common goal. In the margin there are operators which are not directly in the travel business, but they can affect the network from inside. These could be investors, political decision makers and regional municipality coalitions. On the outline of the network there are other operators, those which are not directly linked to tourism, such as clothing stores or grocery shops (Savikoski 2010).

For the municipality, there is a difference of how the travel and event industry is organized. Municipalities in Finland have decided independently how they handle the tourism market. For example, in Sulkava there was a study conducted and the main question was, what the entrepreneurs think of co-operation. The purpose of this thesis was to study tourism collaboration in the municipality of Sulkava. The small business owners listed their needs and requirements for co-operation, also they thought about pros and cons of networking. Entrepreneurs were asked to list the prerequisites and benefits as well as the barriers of successful networking. The result of the study was that co-operation and networking was not very active, or at least it was not organized. It seemed to happen "on its own" by entrepreneurs contacting each other if they needed help or advice, or if they had excess of customers who needed to be served. The results show that entrepreneurs also appreciated networking, i.e., live meetings, increased visibility, and reduction of costs. The cons were listed to be jealousy, lack of organization on tourism issues. The research was concluded that for the co-operation to be successful, it requires engagement, confidence and emergency, and the interest in networking and co-operation must come from the members own will (Pulkkinen 2011). Another study has been made in Satakunta region in order to see what the municipality's role is in organizing, developing, and promoting tourism in the area. And also,

the expectations of the municipality were found out. The findings were that municipalities have difficulties in defining their role in the tourism industry. Somehow, they feel they should be coordinators, supporters, and marketers instead of tourism companies which get the profits in the end (Närä 2015).

The third study related to tourism associations and regional co-operation, found out whether there are prerequisites for establishing a regional travel organization and if there are, what type of organization it would be. At the background for the study there was a travel strategy which had previously been made by the municipalities of Kotka and Hamina. According to that strategy it had been decided there should be a travel organization which directs the regional co-operation in marketing and selling of the products of tourism and event industry. The study was ordered by Cursor Oy, which is owned by the municipalities of Kotka, Hamina, Loviisa, Pyhtää and Virolahti. The entrepreneurs on the area were asked what their expectations for regional travel organization would be, and what benefits would they expect to get and, in overall – would there be enough reasons to establish such an organization. They were also asked about the membership fees, how much money they would be prepared to invest. The basic research question was: is regional organization needed? One reason for the organization to exist would be to sell tourism services which the municipality cannot do. Another way to organize the tourism services would be that entrepreneurs would pay the regional organization for coordination and providing marketing actions. The entrepreneurs wanted to know what benefits they would get, and would there be real, concrete benefits from marketing and advertising actions. It was found out the entrepreneurs did not know which marketing activities are significant in bringing them customers and income. The reasons for regional travel organization to be established could be found from the benefits the organization would achieve and how far in the region the benefits would spread. The amount of income from tourism industry, and the increase in income for tourism related business in the area which might affect investments to the municipalities and the increase in taxes. Also, not all benefits can be measured financially, i.e., developments elsewhere in the municipalities' area. It was indicated that the regional travel organizations operate in the field of tough competition. Marketing and promoting tourism services are being offered by private companies, both domestic and international. The information which can be found from the websites of different travel related pages usually adds on to the paid marketing efforts but sometimes might take their attention elsewhere. The study presented different scenarios without giving advice nor reasons to establish or not to establish a regional travel organization. The scenarios were 1., a business owned together by the municipalities, private companies, and Cursor Oy, 2., a tourism services unit include in Cursor Oy's organization, and 3., remaining in the current system (Taimela 2013). Now, after 9 years since the

study, the scenario number 2 was chosen. There are 12 people working in the travel development team of Cursor Oy ([www.visitkotkahamina.fi](http://www.visitkotkahamina.fi)). The regional travel organization was not established.

There are different ways the municipalities have tackled the issue of promoting travel and event industry. However, in any case, networking and co-operation are seen relevant in providing tourism industry chances to develop and flourish. They are in charge of promoting other livelihoods as well, so the tourism industry is not privileged in the municipalities' list of priorities. That is where the regional travel associations step into the picture and take their place. Theoretical framework indicates the travel associations, especially when they are non-profit associations, must put a lot of effort to developing their strategy in order to gain and retain enough members. The NABC Framework is useful to indicate the field of non-profit associations. The NABC model was created for defining the idea and for seeing where its value and potentiality is. N stands for need, A stands for approach, B stands for benefit, and C stands for competition. The model was developed at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI International) (Figure 2.).

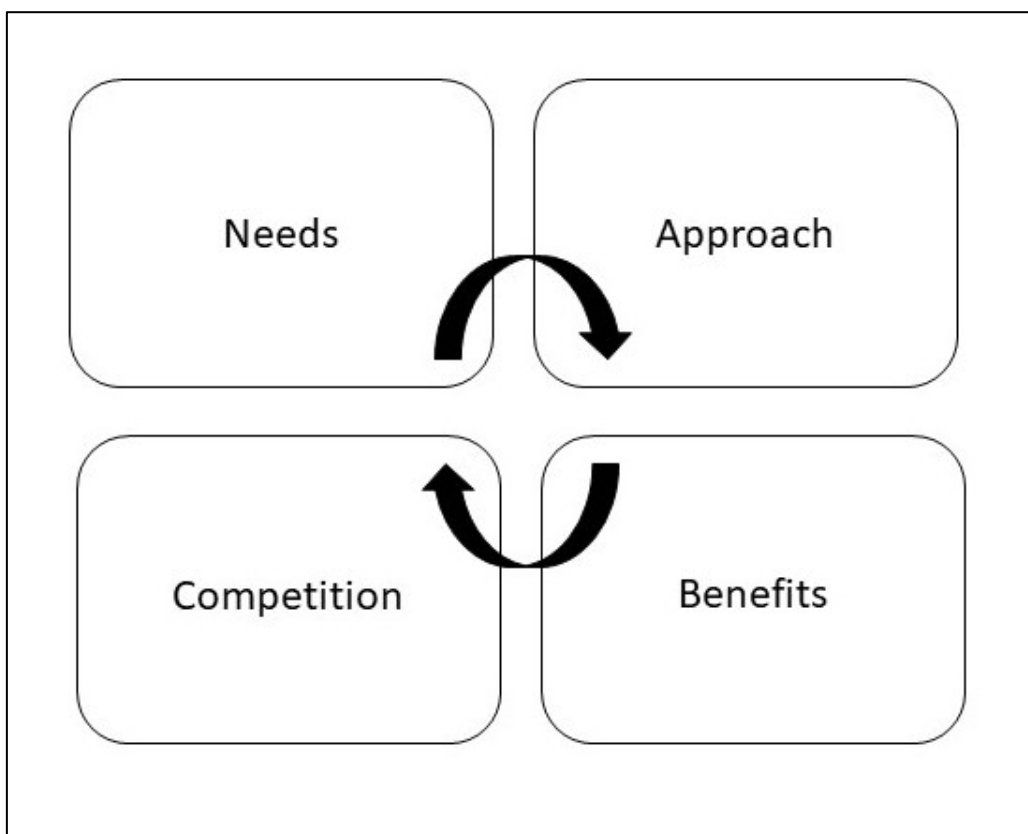


Figure 2. The NABC model was created for defining the idea and for seeing where the value and potentiality of the idea is. The model was developed at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI International).

Tourism services are needed to be organized and the co-operation arranged. The *need* is there in every municipality, and it is either a local travel association or the municipality's own organization which tackles this need. *Approach* to the need is the expertise of the travel association in the tourism industry, and the *benefit* is the fact that travel association can concentrate on the tourism industry only, and its activities are organized by the members within the industry. *Competition* arises when travel associations and municipalities are playing in the same field with overlapping actions, e.g., both offering training for the entrepreneurs (Carlson & Wilmot 2006).

### 3 Potential members interviewed

#### 3.1 Methods of research

Design research is the type of research with which something is improved or developed, e.g., products, systems, or practices. Design research is implemented within certain time and place. It differs from qualitative and quantitative research which both are conducted after defining the question, after collecting the information and studying the theoretical framework, and then analyzing the results. Action research is similar to design research because in both development is combined with research. Reality is researched in order to change it and the other way round the reality is changed in order to conduct research on it (Hautamäki 2015).

Like design method differs from qualitative and quantitative methods, qualitative method differs from quantitative method. Qualitative method deals with people, there is a human aspect in it which brings creativity to the method. The researcher is like an artist who knows his/her medium and tools and knows how to adapt them in research situation with intensity, concentration and being able to look at things with a new perspective if needed (Puusa & Juuti 2021). Quantitative method is not so personal, it is about numbers. There are many units to be collected data from and usually a form is used. With analysis methods quantitative research brings results which can be presented visually in graphs and diagrams. Quantitative research differs from qualitative method also because it cannot be conducted unless the phenomenon is familiar to the researcher. The definition of questions requires certain amount of knowledge on the topic (Kananen 2015).

The research question is how to improve member acquisition through strategy development. Once the answer has been found for that, the main objective will be to apply the acquired data and develop HelsinkiNorth's strategy in such a way that more members would join with less effort and that more members would be retained. The budget of HelsinkiNorth is based on membership fees, which consist of joining fee 100 euros and annual fee according to turnover of the member company. Since the association was established, for two years now, it has received funding from EU Social Funds, but when those will have been used (in July 2023), the association must have enough members to exist (Pakkala 2022).

To get an answer to the research question, design research was conducted. It is a combination of research and development, together they become design research (Kananen 2015, 33.). The starting point for the design research is the need to change something to become better than before, to improve the current status. Because design research is a type of blended research, it normally relies on qualitative methods and its target is always

improvement. It is possible to use also quantitative methods, however, usually only combined with qualitative methods (Kananen 2015, according to Barabi & Squire 2004).

In this research the strategy itself is the required change and the intervention is directed to it. After the strategy will be developed, it can be evaluated. The member acquisition is easy to measure before and after. Numbers will tell. There is a model about the necessity of intervention (Kananen 2015). It starts with a problem, which is defined and then it is questioned whether the intervention i.e., change, is necessary. The next step is to decide in which form the intervention is processed in order to reach the goals. After that the strategy is developed (Figure 3.). In this research, which is clearly design research by its character, there was no need to conduct quantitative research of any sort. Quantitative research raises its questions from theories and the number of replies should be as big as possible to get reliable results. Whereas qualitative study is not as limited by the choice of questions. The questions are raised by the problem or issue which will be solved with the qualitative study. The methods to collect information are divided into primary and secondary sources of information. Primary sources are collected precisely for the research, for example interviews, and secondary sources are existing documents, for example websites or documents (Kananen 2015).

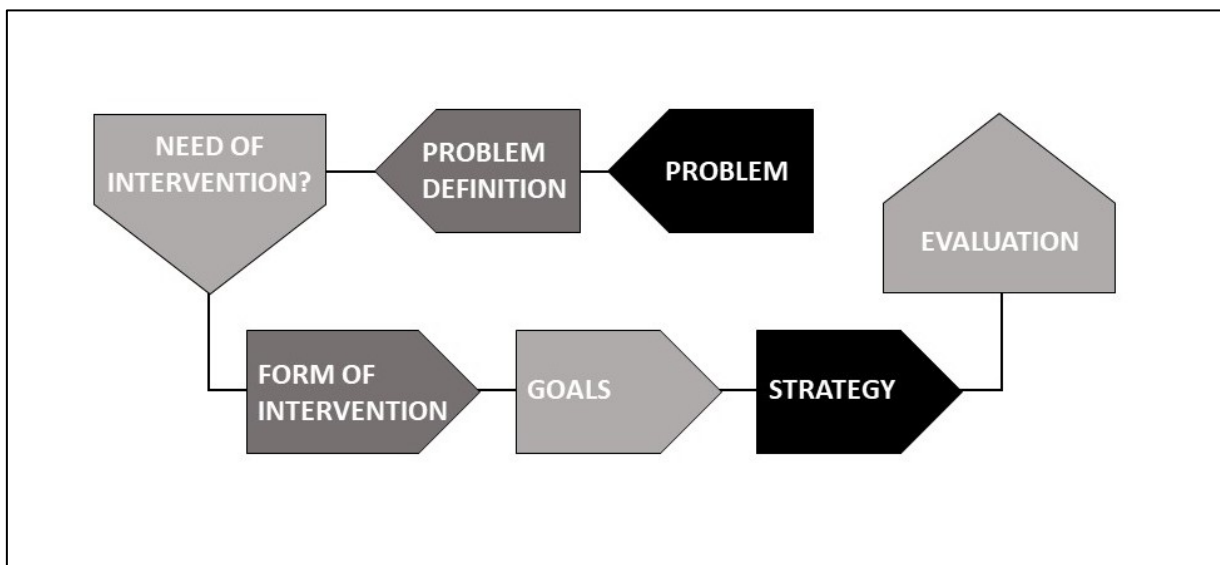


Figure 3. Adapted from Kananen's model about the necessity of intervention (Kananen 2015).

The primary source of information in this qualitative research were interviews among the potential members. One company from the related field of tourism or event industry in each municipality of HelsinkiNorth was chosen. The choice was made by the researcher by going

through the websites of the municipalities, and then choosing small enterprises which operate in the field of hospitality or event industry. The website of each chosen company was studied, and information collected. Then a set of questions were defined together with HelsinkiNorth staff and the board. The board consists of members, so the board was first interviewed in order to collect background information and to see what had made them to join, what were their expectations, and how do they see the requirements of member acquisition and the future of HelsinkiNorth.

Qualitative method was chosen also because there were several benefits of interviews. It was possible to hear “loud thinking” which would not have ended into a questionnaire form, and the interviewee felt free and was more willing to ask clarifying questions. The interviewee had also a chance to explain the company’s activities and the interviewer got better understanding of their business environment. The interviews were conducted within a planned time frame – within two months. Face-to-face interviews were chosen because the sample was relatively small, and because it was expected to get deeper insight by meeting each potential member in person. In addition, a personal contact was meant to communicate emphasised importance of the interviewees’ views and opinions. Since the research problem was so clear the questions rose easily. The opinion of potential members was required as regards of joining the association, expected benefits, opinion about the fee and the level of interest in co-operation and cross-selling. The benefits of interviews are that the data collected is true and genuine and opinions of interviewees are heard. Also, the interviewees’ point of view as regards of solving the problem i.e., improvement will be said aloud, and their ideas can be used in concluding the design research. In this research 10 interviews were conducted, each lasting about half an hour. The travelling time to meet the interviewees was from 15 minutes to an hour each way. The time to fit the interviews to the calendars of both interviewees and the researcher, was not calculated but it did require some organizing. These are the drawbacks of using interviews for collecting data (Kananen 2015).

### 3.2 Data collection

The potential members were all asked the same set of questions regardless of their area of business, their size of business or their business status. The interviewees were contacted by email. The researcher explained shortly what the research was about and asked the recipient to suggest a time which suits his/her schedule best. It was promised that the inter-



view would take less than an hour of their time. The research questions were sent beforehand by request, and all the interviewees requested. Before the interviews of the potential members were conducted, the members of the board of HelsinkiNorth were sent a list of questions by email (Table 1.).

1. What made you join HelsinkiNorth?
2. What benefits have you got so far?
3. What kind of benefits would you expect to get in the future?
4. Do you have any ideas/wishes for developing HelsinkiNorth?
5. What ideas do you have as regards to the interviews of the potential members?

Table 1. The list of questions sent by email to the members of the board of HelsinkiNorth.

From ten recipients (Appendix 3.) three replies were received. The board consists mainly of the members who were in the group of founders of HelsinkiNorth. The ones who replied had positive expectations on HelsinkiNorth's future. They appreciated the idea of HelsinkiNorth to become regional travel association which will enhance the common marketing goals. They also expected to get to the international market with the help of HelsinkiNorth. One recipient mentioned the education: co-operation with Hyria Education Ltd. and EU funded project which brings possibilities for the students of Hyria to get in touch with the tourism industry. One had found HelsinkiNorth by accident: she had happened to be present when HelsinkiNorth was established and was asked to join, and to join also to the board.

The benefits so far have been the networking and getting to know other entrepreneurs. The board members said they have got ideas and support from others in the same situation (pandemic). Also, the two EU funded projects and the development plans were seen as benefits. The benefits expected in the future were: deeper co-operation and development of the online shop, so that it would bring more income to the entrepreneur. More income and international customers were expected also, and common products (service design) together with other members. Also, other funded projects were in the list of expectations.

EU funded projects are important in the future, too. They are seen to be in a remarkable role for enabling HelsinkiNorth to operate. At this point member acquisition was not mentioned. The board members wished other members – and new, prospective members – to

be more active and to take part in the development of the association. Co-operation was hoped to result for the amazing experiences for customers without municipality borders, the whole region working together. Board members did see the association being too local. They mentioned most of the members are from nearby Hyvinkää. So, they wished to get members from wider geographical range. They mentioned it would be important to find out what benefits the potential members would expect and what the association would get from them in return. The board members did not mention it would be a problem of any sort to have competitors as companions within the association. They emphasized the co-operation and wide area from where the members could come from, but no concrete examples were given what that co-operation could be, and what is it exactly the members could give in return to the association. They all reacted positively to the research plan and said it is interesting to see what the potential members say and how they see the role of HelsinkiNorth.

There was one potential member chosen from each municipality of the area of HelsinkiNorth (Table 2.). None of them had had any contact to HelsinkiNorth before, i.e., they had not attended any events, nor had they been contacted by phone or email campaigns. All except one of the companies were privately owned businesses. The interviewee in Kerava was a collective. That was the only interview, which was conducted by email, because the interviewee could not find time from her calendar for face-to-face interview.

Hausjärvi	Lepolan talo
Hyvinkää	HyviGolf
Järvenpää	Pajula
Kerava	Jalotus
Loppi	Jalo-lautta
Mäntsälä	Story Hill Oy
Nurmijärvi	Tarinakoru Oy
Riihimäki	Riihimäen Messut Oy
Tuusula	Gustavelund
Vihti	Kotitalli Hersir

Table 2. The list of interviewees. There was one potential member chosen from each municipality in the territory of HelsinkiNorth.

The potential members were asked seven questions during the interviews. The questions are presented in Table 3. The first question was very basic and easy on purpose, to start the conversation. The second question was also leading to the main point of the interview. It was asked to see whether the entrepreneur has networks – in a way it was thought that if networking is familiar, one more association to join might be possible. The third question was divided into a) and b) depending on the answer to the question one. It went straight to point because it was about benefits. For those who had heard about HelsinkiNorth the question was do they know the benefits, and for those who had not heard about HelsinkiNorth the question was what they would expect the benefits to be. The fourth question was about the fee. The interviewer explained about the joining fee and the annual fee of 1% of the yearly turnover. The fifth question was also divided into two versions: a) was for those who might have considered joining HelsinkiNorth but had not, and b) for those who had not considered joining the question was that would they consider joining. The sixth question was a direct question whether the interviewee sees there is something HelsinkiNorth could do to make the interviewee join the association. This question was raised thinking there might be some good ideas to improve the member acquisition of HelsinkiNorth. The last question was the open one, the interviewee was asked if there is anything what comes to his/her mind as regards to the interview and HelsinkiNorth. Before the questions were asked, the researcher discussed the interviewee's business and how it was going now and with some of them there were a few words exchanged about the future as well. Every interviewee was happy share their thoughts and ideas, and they were helpful and had positive reactions towards the research.

1. Have you heard about HelsinkiNorth RA before?
2. Do you belong to any other local travel association? Or any other association?
3. a) For those who know HelsinkiNorth: do you know the benefits which HelsinkiNorth offers to its members? b) For those who do not know HelsinkiNorth: what benefits would you expect to get from being a member in a travel association?
4. HelsinkiNorth's membership fee is 100 euros when joining, and later 1% of the turnover/year. What is your opinion of that?
5. a) If you have thought of joining HelsinkiNorth, but haven't – what is the reason? b) Would you consider joining HelsinkiNorth?
6. Is there anything HelsinkiNorth would do to make you join?
7. Is there something else you would like to point out regarding this interview and its topic?

Table 3. The list of questions presented to each interviewee.

**Question 1 - Have you heard about HelsinkiNorth RA before?**

With the first question the interviewer found out whether HelsinkiNorth was known among its potential members. 8 out of 10 had never heard of HelsinkiNorth. They had seen the website of HelsinkiNorth after receiving the interview questions from the interviewer by email. The 2 who knew HelsinkiNorth were from Hyvinkää and from Riihimäki. The one from Hyvinkää had business relations to one of the HelsinkiNorth member, Hotelli Sveitsi. The other one who knew HelsinkiNorth before had been in contact with it on the municipal level.

**Question 2 - Do you belong to any other local travel association? Or any other association?**

This question was presented to find out what kind of network the interviewees might have. The other travel associations were VisitRiihimäki, VisitHäme, VisitNurmijärvi, VisitVihti, VisitEspoo, VisitTuusulanjärvi and other associations were Chamber of Commerce, local entrepreneurs' associations, Business Finland, Cinema associations, and horse-riding related associations. Some of the interviewees had to memorize whether they were members somewhere or not. Some said they had been in the past, but nowadays find it unnecessary.

**Question 3 - Do you know the benefits which HelsinkiNorth offers to its members? / What benefits would you expect to get from being a member in a travel association?**

The question about the benefits of HelsinkiNorth was designed in such a way that if the interviewees did not know the benefits, they would tell the interviewer what they would expect the benefits of this kind of travel association to be. The most frequently mentioned expected benefits were help in marketing and communication, networking, training, co-operation between members, online shop for services and products of the members. Also visibility and image was mentioned. And some ideas of operation were mentioned, too. It was suggested that HelsinkiNorth would be like a tour operator and organize trips for tourists. Question about benefits was linked directly to the membership fee. The interviewees considered the benefits in relation of the membership fee. They said it would be "nice to know" how much income the benefits would bring them.

**Question 4 - HelsinkiNorth's membership fee is 100 euros when joining, and later 1% of the turnover/year. What is your opinion of that?**

All the interviewees considered membership fee to be high. They said they are small enterprises, so they would find it more reasonable to pay only for what they need. A yearly sum sounded too much – they would be prepared to pay for example for a single advertisement or for a specific event rather than a large sum from which they could not figure out the benefits clearly. So, it is very straightforward: 1 % of the turnover is too much, there were doubts whether they would get the money's worth in a year.

5/10 interviewees mentioned that municipalities offer training and marketing for free for the entrepreneurs, so they would not find any reasons to pay for them in the form of membership fees. The municipalities also give advice on funds and other financial support systems for small businesses – it seems they have their network in the municipalities' circles.

**Question 5 - If you have thought of joining HelsinkiNorth, but haven't – what is the reason? / Would you consider joining HelsinkiNorth?**

None of the interviewees had thought of joining HelsinkiNorth. And none of them would consider joining. There were two reasons: membership fee is too high, and no such benefits were seen which would be worth paying for or which the entrepreneurs would not get from elsewhere – mostly from the municipalities. They would have wanted "hard facts" about benefits in order to change their minds. One interviewee mentioned she would want to be sure the sales increase with the help of HelsinkiNorth membership or something else which one can measure in real results or numbers. Another interviewee said the reason for her not to consider joining is that she does not need networking nor co-operation. She has been an entrepreneur for such a long time and that is why her network is good enough for her purposes. But she said she would see HelsinkiNorth worth joining if an entrepreneur needed networking and co-operation, and also education.

**Question 6 - Is there anything HelsinkiNorth would do to make you join?**

An idea was pointed out: 2/10 would consider joining if the first year would be for free so that they would see if it were worth being a member. Also, the benefits would need to be identified more in detail and proven to really exist. Another idea was that if HelsinkiNorth would be a mobile application, something like Get your Guide or even an organiser of tours

for tourists. *There could be HelsinkiNorth brochures in hotels and tour guides would collect tourists from hotels! The old-fashioned way, but it might work!* If HelsinkiNorth would expand and be a bigger player in the travel and event industry, it might make one interviewee join. Another one said if there were a need for more customers, joining HelsinkiNorth might be worth trying to expand clientele. And if HelsinkiNorth would attract more international clients and bring visibility among tourists in Finland, the association might get more members.

### **Question 7 - Is there something else you would like to point out regarding this interview and its topic?**

This topic was important according to the interviewees, but they wondered whether there is space for another travel association which would operate overlapping local associations. There are too many operators operating on this same, small market – VisitFinland is the biggest one in which other Visit+municipality belong to. Where would HelsinkiNorth be in this picture? How would the customers find it? Where is it marketed, how and to whom? There are many small entrepreneurs in travel and event industry who would like to get help in sales and marketing, but in an adequate amount. Too much is not good either because there is usually just the owner or a small team operating the business. Their time is limited.

### **The type of companies which were interviewed**

Event organizer (Erämessut) of which customers come from all around Finland and which finds local travel association not so useful for its purposes, but which finds *co-operation between partners who are not competitors positive*. The event organizer found municipal co-operation stronger than that organized by a non-profit travel association. It was seen as two overlapping systems.

Golf operator (Hyvigolf) which has enough customers and has *nothing more to sell* (full capacity in use) supports the idea of local travel association because of its networking ability. The type of customers was seen as a bit different from a stereo-typical tourist – golf players could benefit from services offered by members of the association, though.

Jewellery maker (Tarinakoru) in the countryside which receives groups of tourists to see the workshop where they make unique jewellery is a very small company which has not resources on marketing or organising events – wishes to get practical, concrete actions from travel association.

Restaurant and catering service provider (Lepolan talo) operates in the countryside and wishes to develop their line of business of offering historical menus and events, but who has no time nor financial resources to organise events on their own – would have use of practical, concrete actions from travel association.

Bed & breakfast and helicopter service provider (Pajula) offers travellers experiences which *I would want myself, if I were a tourist*. The entrepreneur is concentrating attracting only travellers who are willing to pay for the service and experiences, because *nature must be preserved and consumed less – the same amount of income coming in from fewer, but better paying visitors*.

Cinema operator (Story Hill) is a representative of small entrepreneur who would like to enlarge the business network and widen the market – however, realising its limits but *finding all co-operation positive*.

Horse-riding and nature experience provider (Kotitalli Hersir) has been in business for ten years and is satisfied with the company's size and with the workload the entrepreneur has. *But of course, there is some space in the booking lists, so co-operation in the field of marketing would be useful, but with no extra work, if possible! Online shop development would be welcomed*.

Entrepreneur who offers experience in a unique floating sauna on the private lake and SUP paddling safaris (Jalo-lautta) has been in business long enough for taking part in different co-operative functions the municipality's travel department has offered. *Maybe for those who are new in tourism business, HelsinkiNorth would be worthwhile to join, especially if it offered properly organised joint-marketing actions, not just training. I would also be interested in common platform from where SUP paddling safaris could be booked and sold*.

Operator on the upcycling collective (Jalotus) would not expect commercial benefits as such from HelsinkiNorth but would be interested in synergy and product development as well as help in marketing and communication activities. *Our operation is different from usual commercial tourism but maybe we could offer our knowledge on brand building for HelsinkiNorth members*.

Conference, accommodation, and restaurant entrepreneur (Gustavelund) could not see any chances for competitors to be partners. *We are a family business; it is very hard for me to see any benefits coming from an association of which members are so different in size and character. Anyone can throw ideas up in the air, but are they realistic?*

### 3.3 Analysis of results

Since HelsinkiNorth is recent organization without any burden of traditions, the executive manager and the chairman of the board recognise the possibility of required changes in the membership policy and business operations (Pakkala & Kokkonen 2022). The required number of members for the organization to be able to keep on operating is very high compared to the number of potential companies in the region. This is a problem and brings extra challenge for membership acquisition. There was no background research conducted on the potential members. HelsinkiNorth area is wide with its ten municipalities, but for example in Kerava, which is fairly large municipality with its 37 000 inhabitants, there is only one self-service hotel and no other privately run tourist attractions ([www.kerava.fi/kerava-info/mat-kailu](http://www.kerava.fi/kerava-info/mat-kailu)). That is an issue in all municipalities – private companies in the hospitality and event industry are few. Tourist attractions are mainly museums or sights in the nature.

The fact that the interviewees were found with small effort (only one rejected) is a sign that the entrepreneurs are prepared for networking within the local tourist industry. Entrepreneurs of small businesses are open for any chance of synergy, even though they do not actively seek for it. The material collected in qualitative research is usually text, videos, recordings. In this case, the material was text, the interviews were not recorded. The researcher wrote the answers down by hand, and after each interview the conversation was typed and saved in a file. If there had been bigger sample, more organized system would have been appropriate, but in this case ten conversations were a reasonable amount to type as text. There was no need to compare them in a table or some other graphics, for example. The collected material was organized by questions, but any in-depth comparison was not needed (Kananen 2015, 89). Sorting it out question by question and then interpreting it was the most practical choice and answered the research question.

Qualitative study results cannot be generalised, especially in this study of which the sample was very small. But two clear signals came up which must be considered when the member acquisition strategy is developed. Or **the strategy must be reformed, and its goals set differently**, if the results of this study are taken into consideration. The first signal was that the benefits are not clear, they are not reliable, and they are not unique. The second signal was that HelsinkiNorth operation overlaps too much with regional travel associations and/or with the activities municipalities conduct with local entrepreneurs. The potential members did not consider themselves as potential, the main reason being the lack of proof of the benefits. This research was designed to achieve a change, in this case there were two desired changes. They are increase in the number of members and a new strategy to help



achieve it. There were two cycles in the process. The first cycle was about research and the second one about change.

The second change cycle in this research will be realised later (the number of new members will be expected to raise during the year 2023), so it is left outside of the scope of this first phase of research cycle. That is why the plans of the new strategy can be evaluated for the purpose of this research. And it will be in the future when the last arrow can apply which is the answer i.e., result, to the research question and to the evaluation, i.e., result of the change (Figure 4.).

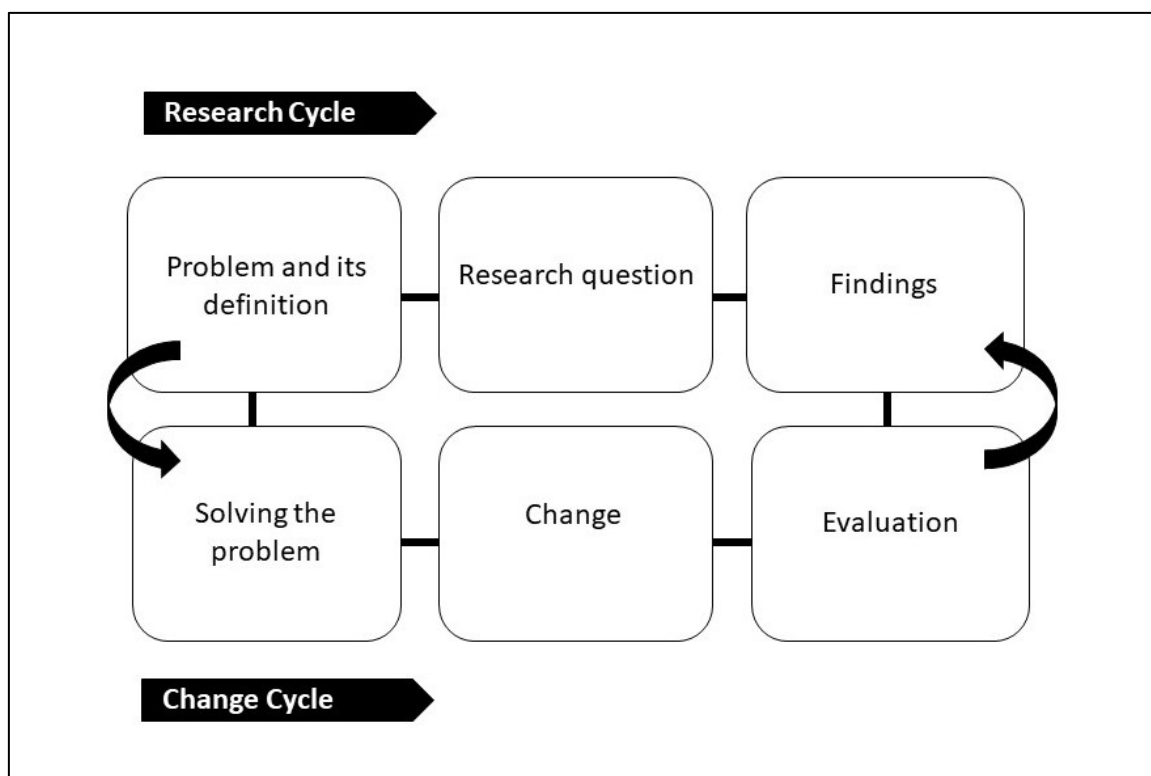


Figure 4. Two cycles of design research, adapted from Kananen's model (Kananen 2015, 40). Design research differs from qualitative and quantitative research because the problem will be solved, and change implemented before evaluation.

After going through the change cycle, the problem will be solved, and change implemented. In evaluation phase it will be seen whether the change has actually happened. If HelsinkiNorth had more members, it would attract more members and there would be proof that the implemented action plan and strategy work. The communication and marketing in the right channels to the right target group plays a crucial role as this research has indicated. It will be made sure there are no potential members who have not heard about HelsinkiNorth. That is one of the issues to which developed strategy will find a solution.

## 4 Outcomes of the research: strategy development

### 4.1 Workshop for the management

It was planned since the beginning of this design research project that the board of HelsinkiNorth will be involved in developing the strategy in a special workshop, once the results of the research are ready. In September there was a meeting with chairman of the board Vesa Kokkonen, executive manager Roni Pakkala, and the board member Jaana Nordensvan, and the workshop was discussed. It was decided it was better to plan the workshop in a small team before presenting ideas to the whole board. Kokkonen, Pakkala and Nordensvan were shown the presentation (Image 1.). They had expected that the results would show the need of rather big reforms to the strategy and the action plan of HelsinkiNorth. They claimed that according to the research results, 8/10 interviewees had clearly not understood the idea of a local travel association. They could not see the power of co-operation, nor could they see that competitors could be partners.

### Outcome of the interviews:

<p>Benefits are NOT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) adequate</li> <li>b) clear</li> <li>c) plausible</li> <li>d) essential</li> </ul>	<p>Membership fee IS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) too expensive</li> <li>b) would prefer to purchase services with member prices, would pay only for what is needed and what is useful</li> </ul>	<p>Too many overlapping operations with municipalities/other associations. HelNo must offer something:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) better</li> <li>b) unique/different</li> <li>c) cheaper than others (e.g. visit websites)</li> </ul>
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**HelsinkiNorth is not known!**

**From where can it be found?**

Image 1. In the first slide of the presentation the results were divided into three separate issues.

The outcome of the research showed that for HelsinkiNorth to achieve enough members to continue its action after the financial support from EU funds will end, some big decisions must be made. The most important findings from the interviews could be presented in three parts: 1) benefits, 2) membership fee, and 3) nature of action plan. The results show that

benefits are not adequate, they are not concrete, they are not plausible, and they are not necessary. The membership fee was said to be too expensive, and the potential members would rather pay for what they use. That is why they see the membership fee depending on the yearly turnover being unfair. The nature of the action plan of HelsinkiNorth was not seen unique enough, there are too many overlapping operations with other associations and municipalities. Something better and cheaper were expected from HelsinkiNorth.

Image 2. shows the ideas what were presented to the board of HelsinkiNorth. These were the ideas the researcher suggested based on the interviews and research. Kokkonen, Pakkala and Nordensvan agreed that these points would be presented to the board of HelsinkiNorth. Image 2. was also divided into three parts: benefits, membership fees and communication and marketing. For the new strategy it was suggested the benefits were made clearer and more concrete, and there ought to be more variety so that every type of member, i.e., hotel, event, shop, or restaurant owner would all find enough benefits to meet their needs. Benefits would attract members-to-be if they were useful and would give a feeling of them being worth the membership fee. And the membership fee would need to be developed. In the interviews it was mentioned that if it was free to join and if the first year was free too, it would be easier to decide of joining HelsinkiNorth.

## What could be done?

<p><b>Benefits MUST</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- be clarified</li> <li>- be something for everybody</li> <li>- be essential</li> <li>- not be empty promises</li> </ul>	<p><b>Ideas for membership fee</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- first year for free?</li> <li>- include help in developing website and social media channels</li> <li>- prizes for being active, smaller membership fee?</li> </ul>	<p>Communication -&gt; creating active society, where members receive and reciprocate = retain membership</p> <p>Marketing -&gt; members retain and HelNo will be wanted partner</p> <p>Competitions for end customers -&gt; prizes are members' products in turns (cross-selling)</p>
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**HelsinkiNorth MUST be made known/famous both among potential members and end customers.**

**Ways to do it? -> feeds and advertising in social media, competitions, discounts, campaigns...**

**Co-operation with other operators in the hospitality and event industry: HelNo logo (and the link) to be placed on every member's website and social media channels.**

Image 2. The future tasks were also divided into three parts: benefits, membership fees and communication and marketing.

From marketing point of view of HelsinkiNorth is only in the beginning, or merely has started. The fact is that HelsinkiNorth cannot be found from the Internet nor from the social media. There are no links to the website of HelsinkiNorth anywhere. So that would be the very first step in marketing and promoting HelsinkiNorth. And it could be done by adding the link first to the members' websites and to the platforms of the municipalities. In fact, it could be an idea of a concrete and true benefit of joining HelsinkiNorth to help members in developing their website and social media profile while agreeing about adding the link. This kind of benefit would serve the present members, too, judging by their websites.

Another point in membership fee issue would be a chance to diminish the membership fee by being active in the association. That could be defined more in detail by the board in the developed strategy, it could be in different levels, so that the benefits would really be worth it. The last issue the board was asked to consider was communication and marketing. There should not be any company in the travel and event industry in the territory of HelsinkiNorth that would not have heard about HelsinkiNorth. That is possible to achieve by creating a precise list of companies in each municipality and choosing the best way to communicate to all of them what HelsinkiNorth is and what it will be when it has enough members. And in the meantime, the present members would need to made feel they are part of the HelsinkiNorth community, and their participation would be highly appreciated and needed. This would help them retain as members (Duchatel 2018). Marketing could be organized in different ways which would increase the merchandise among the members, and which could make the demand of HelsinkiNorth service and products higher. This would improve the benefits and attract new members. One form of activating the members would be competitions in which the prizes were products and services of the members (cross-selling).

The last but the most important point in the presentation is the issue of promoting HelsinkiNorth. A proper and effective agenda for this purpose is a must. HelsinkiNorth must conduct a campaign which makes it known both to the potential members and end users. It will be up to the board to find the best strategy for the campaign, but the easiest and fastest way would be to add HelsinkiNorth logo together with a link to all websites of the ten municipalities and to all the sites and social media platforms of its members. A logo with a link on the website of VisitFinland, even if it costs something, would be worth it, too. After that some sort of a competition in social media platforms would be worth a try, especially if the prize would be attractive enough. Naturally, it would be a service or a product of HelsinkiNorth member or members. In addition to that, discounts would be worth experimenting. Discounts attract end users and might bring a boost to the cashflow of the members.

In the workshop Image 3. with a title: *To be considered* was presented and discussed. It is divided into three parts like the previous illustrations. First, it must be decided how to make benefits better and concrete. And after they will be communicated to the target audience, it must be checked they are clear. This applies specially to benefits which will realize by time, i.e., deepening co-operation and networking. The benefits must be valid. The members must see them in their financial reports or in the effect on their image and reputation. The next point to consider very carefully are the financial facts: HelsinkiNorth will need the minimum of 60 000 euros from membership fees for operation costs only. It would come for example from 60 members each paying 1000 euros or 120 members 500 euros each. Keeping in mind that membership fee which is 1% of turnover is considered too expensive. This fact will lead to weighing the options. HelsinkiNorth could continue as a local association just in Hyvinkää area, or it could become a local association in the ten municipalities, or it could try to enlarge even further. It was pointed out that there might not be enough companies operating in tourism and event industry in this area which is now considered to be HelsinkiNorth's territory: Hausjärvi, Hyvinkää, Järvenpää, Kerava, Loppi, Mäntsälä, Nurmijärvi, Riihimäki, Tuusula and Vihti. So, it would be worth considering expanding the types of businesses to be eligible members, starting from restaurants, cafeterias and shops and services like beauty salons, hairdressers etc. From the point of view of end users this aspect might be attractive, especially if there were discounts available which would make them get to know HelsinkiNorth's members' services.

## To be considered:

<p><b>Make sure the benefits:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- are clarified</li> <li>- are understood by everyone the right way</li> <li>- keep what is promised</li> <li>- bring extra cash flow or shows up otherwise in the financial outcomes of the members</li> </ul>	<p><b>Membership fees should make up 60 000 e/year:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 60 members x 1000 e?</li> <li>- 120 members x 500 e?</li> <li>- NOTE: 1 % of turnover is considered too expensive</li> </ul>	<p><b>Alternatives:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- expand the territory further (increase the number of municipalities which are considered to locate at the HelNo area)</li> <li>- get larger variety of business to join, especially restaurants, because there are not too many business at the area of HelNo = not enough potential members at the moment</li> </ul>
<p><b>HelsinkiNorth MUST be made known/famous both among potential members and end customers.</b></p> <p><b>First step to take immediately would be to put HelNo logo (and the link) to every member's website and social media channels, and include it all communication. Start planning a campaign with a competition to increase visibility and activate end customers.</b></p>		<p><b>Why present members retain?</b></p> <p>How the benefits of co-operation could be communicated to the potential members?</p> <p>Is it possible that co-operation across the regional borders would happen?</p> <p>Could the municipalities purchase HelNo services in the future?</p>

Image 3. The management was shown a slide where the points to be considered were listed for the developed strategy.

The very first thing to do is to inform all the stakeholders and target audience about the existence of HelsinkiNorth. At the moment, there are not much content on the website, which is because there are not many members yet, but a little effort to add more content to the site for example in the form of discounts and competitions, and links to the members' sites and social media platforms would increase the knowledge of HelsinkiNorth's existence within a very short period of time. Next, there is an idea which was considered in the workshop. It is about how to use social media for that purpose and at the same time involve present members and help them get visibility as well.

In the action plan of HelsinkiNorth the intention is to increase and develop digital marketing. There is clearly a need for that. Since the results were so prominent that the visibility of HelsinkiNorth desperately requires improvement, even before the strategy will be reformed and its goals set differently, it was suggested to the board that the next phase would be to concentrate on marketing and communication in the social media. Today social media is a fast, effective, and financially reasonable way to do marketing and business promotion. That is why in this part of the strategic planning the websites and Instagram profiles of HelsinkiNorth, and the present members were looked at keeping in mind today's media environment. Social media is more than website and Instagram, but for the purpose of this research those two were chosen. In general, the websites of HelsinkiNorth members seem to be made with not much ambition and some of them have not been updated for months, e.g., the websites of Solttilan maja or Elämyksen taika. And there is even one present member whose website is empty (Vega Adventure). Even though Hager (Hager et al. 2017) mentioned that value proposition should *not be just a catchy slogan*, that is what HelsinkiNorth has: *HelNo to boredom!* This is on the front page of HelsinkiNorth's website (Image 4.).

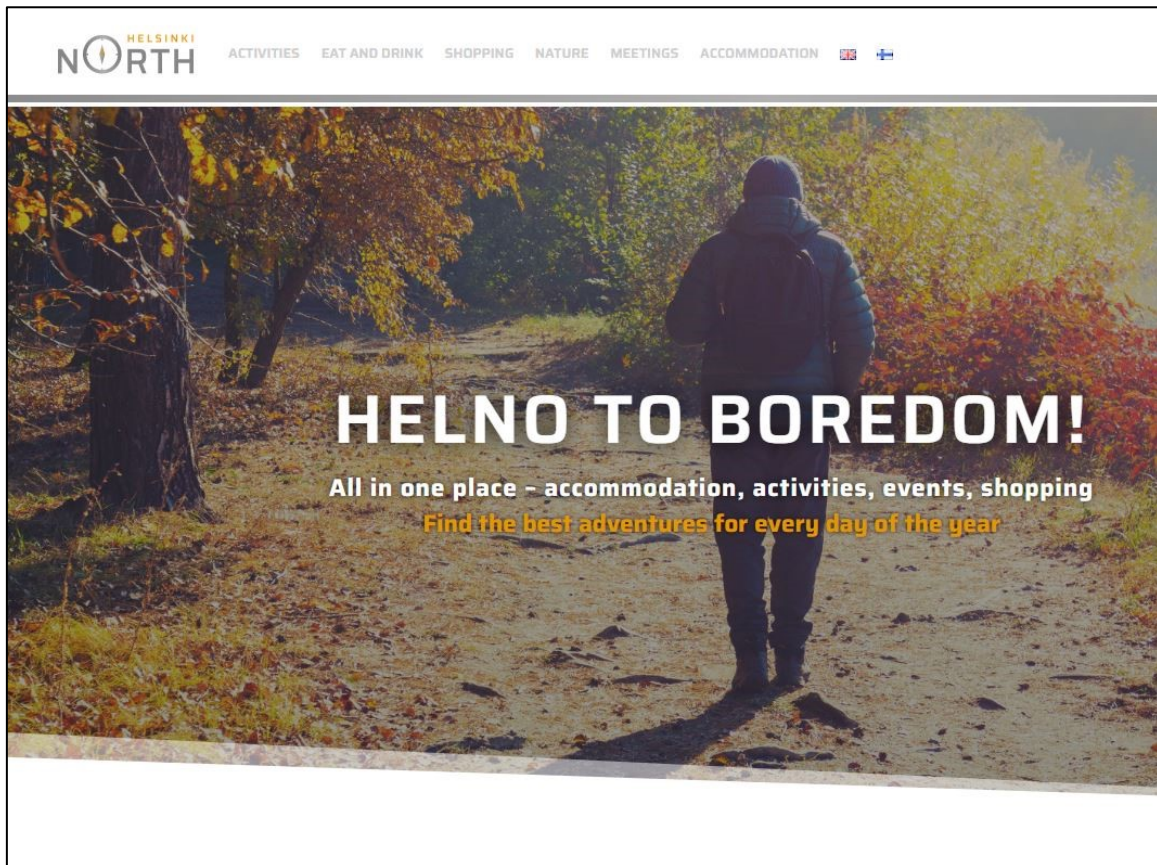


Image 4. On the front page of HelsinkiNorth a promise is given about getting accommodation, activities, events, and shopping all in one place.

There is a danger that the value proposition of HelsinkiNorth truly is just a catchy slogan. The website leads the visitor to the online store, Johku. There are a few articles to purchase online but with only so few of them the boredom might remain (Table 4.). The bigger variety of articles there were on the website, the more attractive it would be for the visitor. The variety should be so vast that he/she would visit the pages again and would tell his/her friends about them, too. But the question is: how is the website of HelsinkiNorth to be found from the Internet? HelsinkiNorth is not even on its members' websites apart from three of them (SeikkailuSveitsi, SveitsiRent and Touhux). In an ideal case, the members would be so proud to be part of HelsinkiNorth association that the HelNo logo was on their front page. Not even the two municipalities, Hyvinkää and Mäntsälä, which are supportive members of HelsinkiNorth have placed the HelNo logo on their websites. But for this there is a reason: only one member of HelsinkiNorth comes from Mäntsälä, so the municipality cannot advertise just one company. The role of municipalities is difficult and as mentioned before, will not be discussed in this context at this precision.

Activities	7
Eat & Drink	4
Shopping	1
Nature	9
Meetings	4
Accommodation	4
Events	2

Table 4. The number of articles to purchase from HelsinkiNorth online shop (September 2022).

A closer analysis of the websites and Instagram profiles of HelsinkiNorth and the present members can tell there are some basic steps easily to be taken which will increase the knowledge of the existence of HelsinkiNorth by thousands. First, HelsinkiNorth is not following its members on Instagram. That is a surprising observation, which fortunately can be quickly corrected. The Table 5. indicates the number of followers of HelsinkiNorth, and its present members in Instagram (September 2022). There is also an average number of likes of ten most recent photos.



Instagram profile name	Number of followers	Average likings of last 10 photos
helsinkiorth (HelsinkiNorth)	165	7,7
hotelsveitsi (Hotel Sveitsi)	3547	25,3
seikkailusveitsi (SeikkailuSveitsi)	1103	14,4
usmatkat (Uudenmaan Seuramatkat)	216	9,1
hyria_matkailuala (Hyria matkailuala)	443	19,5
soltilanmaja (Soltilan maja)	81	18,7
elamyksentaika (Elämyksen taika)	893	31,8
kauppakeskuswilla (Kauppakeskus Willa)	3241	14,0
sveitsirent (Sveitsi Rent)	681	31,8
mood_of_finland (Mood of Finland)	1518	82,6
rautatiemuseo (Suomen rautatiemuseo)	2143	105,0
touhuxoy (Touhux)	156	32,6
uudenmaanerammatkat (Uudenmaan Erämatkat)	266	62,1
redcarpetfestari (Red Carpet Festival)	4484	58,5
steelfest_official (Steelfest)	445	45,33*
Vega Adventure	-	-
scandichotels** (Scandic Hotels)	44 500	190,3
primehotels_finland*** (Prime Hotels)	1550	28,5
hyvinkaankaupunki (Hyvinkää)	2975	151,9
mantsalankunta (Mäntsälä)	1019	27,2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>69 426</b>	<b>1515,23</b>

Table 5. The number of followers of HelsinkiNorth, and of its present members in Instagram (September 2022).

There is also an average number of likes of ten most recent photos \*Steelfest had only 3 photos. \*\*The number of followers is affected by the chain of Scandic Hotels, \*\*\*Prime Hotel chain was included in this figure because Hotel Sveitsi belongs to the chain of Prime Hotel.

By asking the present members to place a HelsinkiNorth related photo in Instagram, nearly 70 000 followers would see it. If that was repeated a few times, HelsinkiNorth would be known to a wide audience. Even if each photo would get “only” 1515 likes, which was the average number of likes of 10 most recent photos, the visibility would still be high compared to what it is now. And this would be one very concrete benefit for the members: offering visibility of 70 000 followers. And further, if there was a link to a competition on the website of HelsinkiNorth and of its present members, some action could be expected to happen on those sites. This is a scenario of the fast and easy promoting campaign which does not require many resources nor financial input. What it does require, is communication. The idea should be communicated to the members and the follow-up should be conducted, to make sure all members added a photo and to calculate the number of likes. And naturally, it would require that the websites were updated and if there was a competition organized the prizes would have to be planned carefully so that they attract the audience and that they are beneficial to the members i.e., they are members’ products or services, or just vouchers to use with the next purchase.

The use of Instagram would be worth considering in the future, too because it would work in international framework and worldwide it has over a billion users. Instagram is like a search engine of photos, it fills up the social need of bonding, and the companies have a great platform to make stories and enlarge their audience in the form of entertainment. Also, dialogue with customers is possible and relatively easy to achieve. Brand building is not complicated either in Instagram, as long as some careful planning is done, and the target audience and the themes are thoroughly thought. There are analytic tools to measure the visibility and the number of followers in Instagram. It is not difficult, nor it takes many resources to give a thought to SEO (search engine optimization) and plan the content of the information in social media very carefully (Verronen 2022). HelsinkiNorth could suggest key words, themes, and offer any kind of help to its members for creating content to the social media. That is another plausible benefit.

The board agreed to getting active in Instagram and making sure the links will be added to the websites of present members (Image 5.). The association carries some great power within. Members sharing actively each other’s content would accumulate the visibility of everyone without financial input. *Together we are bigger* (Kokkonen 2022). And in the future when the end users would share the content, too, the circle gets bigger and visibility levels

raise. When the audience will grow it will be time to get to know it properly. From that knowledge different target audiences can be picked up and the marketing and communication can be directed straight to the right audience. For that there are tools in social media, too. Surveys, feedback, engaging customers to brainstorm to influence services and so on. Constant updating and carefully planned content are important in keeping appearance in social media. As an association HelsinkiNorth could offer help in that also in the form of guiding and not just giving ideas. This would meet the need of *help in marketing* which the interviewees mentioned as one of the benefits they would expect from an association.

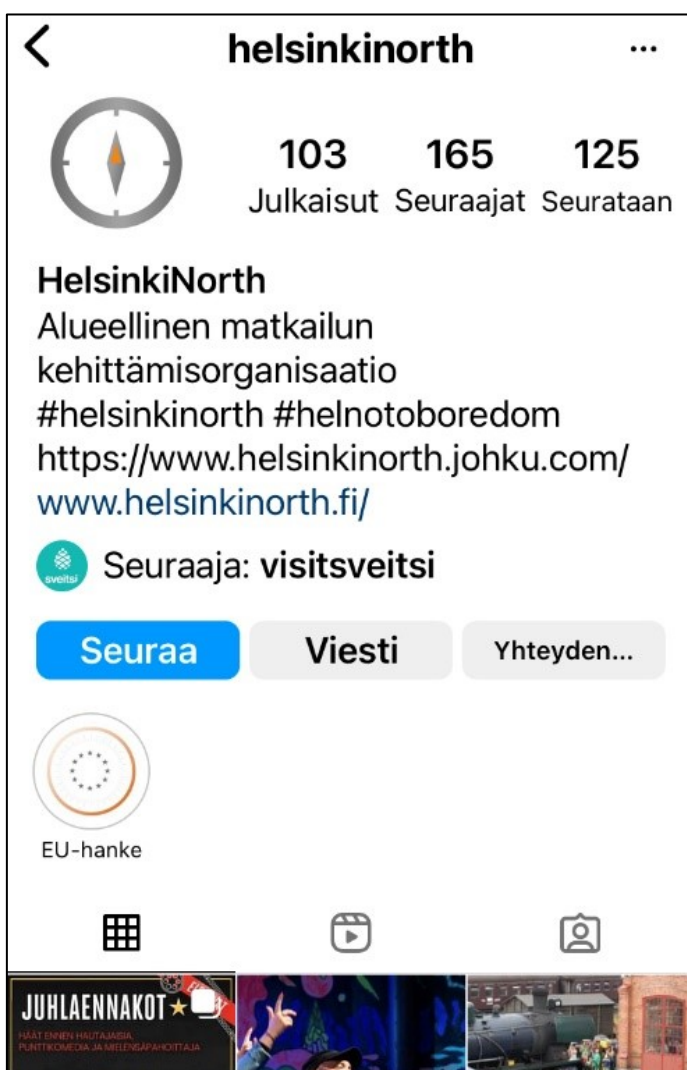


Image 5. The board agreed to add links of present members to the social media channels as well as the link of HelsinkiNorth to the social media channels of present members.

The board admitted some of the benefits listed on the website (September 2022) (Image 6.) are not existent in reality. In the list of benefits HelsinkiNorth promises to its members. They are common marketplace, visibility on the website of HelsinkiNorth, visibility in social media, more customers (customer flow), networking, cross-selling opportunities, product development, education, member information.



Image 6. The benefits are listed on the website of HelsinkiNorth.

There is no visibility in the channels of social media, no customer flow coming in, the online shop has too few articles, education is organized by the European Social Fund. It is understandable that the interviewees pointed out the benefits must be concrete and not just *empty promises in the air* as one interviewee mentioned. A non-profit association is different organization from commercial business. In fact, HelsinkiNorth as a non-profit association exists for the end users of its members' business activity. Every action in HelsinkiNorth's agenda should be meant to lead to better performance of its members, and that means their end users will benefit eventually. And that will show up as raising figures in members' bookkeeping. But until the members will realize – and believe that - they need to join and become active in the association. An idea was raised at the workshop: the hierarchy chart of HelsinkiNorth could change in such a way that the end customers would hold a higher position. At present, customers are at the bottom and that group is vague. In the future

HelsinkiNorth would place the customer to the top and the association is the base for all activities. That will lead to more members and HelsinkiNorth will expand and succeed (Figure 5.).

The board of the association makes the decisions, and the board consists of members, but the income comes from the customers of the members. The position of the end user was raised, and the members would be in the middle to present how the income of the members comes from the end users. The board was explained that benefits must be concrete, plausible, and true, and they must bring positive outcome for the members, preferably immediately. It was considered to be surprising that the potential members do not see what they could give in return to the association. The reason is that the potential members do not see it that way because they do not understand the potential of co-operation and cross-selling. They do not see their products or services, or professional skills attract other members in the association. Here comes the issue of communication again. For example, the trip organizer (Uudenmaan Seuramatkat) could organize trips to the jewel maker's workshop (Tarinakoru).

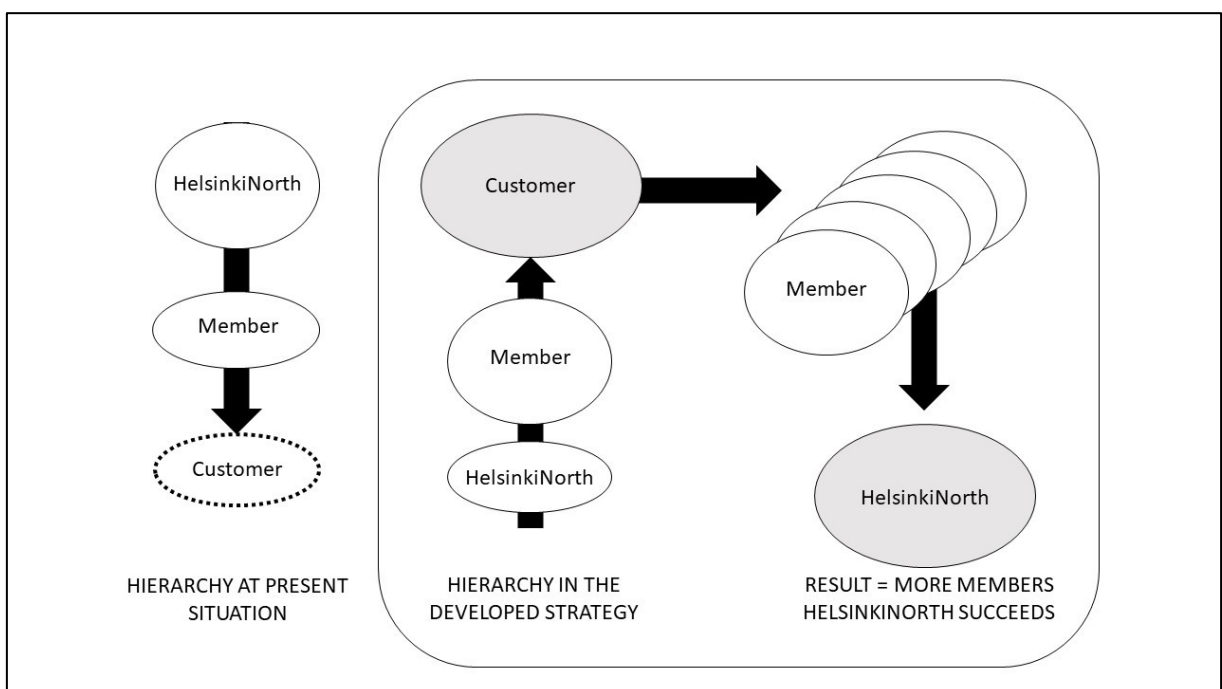


Figure 5. A suggestion of the re-organization of the hierarchy of HelsinkiNorth which would result to gaining more members.

In the strategical questions of HelsinkiNorth it is important to keep in mind the members but also their customers, the end users. The study on customer value supports the idea of customer-oriented perspective. It emphasises the experience the customer gets by using or purchasing the service or the product. The more pleasing the experience is, the more value customer gets and the more often returns to the supplier (Taipale 2015). Other study has shown that co-operation in some areas between tourism associations is nearly non-existent. The management is in too many different organizations, municipalities and whole provinces have different practices and the financial issues, sources of funding are different. This situation has been tried to be improved by organizing joint development in service design and tourism products, together with training (Dahl 2015). These are the same issues which are in the action plan of HelsinkiNorth.

At the workshop the board of HelsinkiNorth discussed the strategical questions. A presentation of the results was presented at the workshop. The board acknowledged the fact that HelsinkiNorth requires mostly and immediately more promotion and communication. The workshop of the board of HelsinkiNorth was held in September, the 30th. The following people were present: Antti Tähkäpää from Vega Adventures, Janne Welling from SeikkailuSveitsi, Marika Nieminen from Scandic Hotels and Jaana Nordensvan from Uudenmaan Seuramatkat (Image 7.). Vesa Kokkonen from Hotel Sveitsi, Jaana Jetzinger from the municipality of Mäntsälä, Jenni Hakala-Deiro from Hyria Education and Roni Pakkala, the executive manager of HelsinkiNorth attended via Zoom.



Image 7. The workshop for the management of HelsinkiNorth was held in September 2022.

It was pointed out that the association is new and still taking its starting steps. The board said it is on its way to what it will be in the future. But for the road it needs as many passers as possible to walk to the same direction. After the results were presented from the qualitative research among the potential members, it was evident for the board that there is much to do in improving communications, much more than the campaign in social media. It was decided that the action should start with forming the message very clearly, because it was found out the potential members do not understand the purpose of HelsinkiNorth the same way as the board sees it. When the content of the message is ready, the next step would be to collect a complete list of entrepreneurs (in the field of tourism, hospitality and events/experiences, entertainment, transport, shopping centres) in all of these 10 municipalities together with their contact details. Subsequently, entrepreneurs would be contacted and invited to join HelsinkiNorth event free of charge. It should be a lavish event with some luxury in it to really attract the members-to-be. And if the campaign was running on the website and in social media at the same time, it would increase the interest of the target audiences (both customers and potential members) and the message would be received and understood better. But they admitted that the association might not be able to continue when EU funding will finish (July 2023) unless new members join. The wish for lower membership fee was taken into consideration but it was pointed out that it is not possible for the members to pay only for the service they use, because the operating the association also requires the certain amount financial resources. Communication campaign and adding logos in social media agreed to be conducted as soon as possible. In fact, the campaign was already being designed by the executive manager.

The strategic planning two years ago when HelsinkiNorth was established, started with the idea of first collecting the members and then together with them it was meant to define the association's action plan according to what members wanted. So, the question why HelsinkiNorth exists was not given a thought. Now the board sees that purpose of HelsinkiNorth is to increase co-operation within the local tourism and event industry, and to offer a common platform where the customers of the members would find them.

The definition of HelsinkiNorth by geography was also given a thought in the workshop. That could be another part which will change in the developed strategy. HelsinkiNorth board discussed at the workshop about a possibility of changing strategy radically and be solemnly a tourism organization of municipality of Hyvinkää. The territory of the ten municipalities has been vague on purpose. It has given the association more freedom to look further compared

to if the area was defined more precisely, because it would both limit the number of members but also limit the required number of members (Pakkala 2022). If the nature of business of its members were enlarged, and more emphasis was given to restaurants and shops and other service providers which are not only meant for travellers but serve everyone, the association would have more potential members. Tourism is seen like a separate branch of business even though it is like any other business, so this must show in HelsinkiNorth communication plan – the benefits have to be explained carefully and there must be something for everyone (Kokkonen 2022).

There are scientific measures to see how the developed strategy will work, even though in this case the number of members and continuous operation of HelsinkiNorth should be enough. There are function measures, operational measures, and strategic measures. Function measures is mostly about human resource effectiveness, i.e., how efficient the employees are, how much they are on sick leave, whether there are any accidents and how much money is spent in education. Operational measures are about financial elements of an organization, like profitability and productivity, but it can also measure customer service, and return on investment (ROI) in general. Strategic measures are about planning, seeing into the future and matching current resources with it. It is implemented usually by the management but since it is product of planning process, it is a matter of the entire organization which should be involved (Macpherson, 2001). In the case of non-profit association, the operational measures are important up to the level of financing the operation of the association, there is no need to make profit for the sake of making profit. Function measures are also slightly different in non-profit environment than strategic measures because the human costs account a great deal of the costs, and there should be enough resources to cover them regardless the number of members.

The board discussed that in the future, when the operation would have been stabilized and strategy proven to work, the same model could be offered to other municipalities. When the ideas start flowing this far, it is useful to go back and think about the purpose of the association. It is non-profit association which operates business-like but of which aim is not in reaching profit. Its purpose is to offer experiences to its members' customers. Here comes the turning point if the purpose is thought from a different point of view. HelsinkiNorth does require members, that is true, but members require customers to make members' existence possible. And when they stand on steady base, they are prepared to join and start enforcing co-operation and networking.



## 5 Conclusion

This design research was conducted because HelsinkiNorth wanted to improve its member acquisition and this non-profit travel association was prepared to make changes in the strategy, and the goals were prepared to set differently. The qualitative research which was conducted in the form of interviews was expected to bring a valid starting point for strategy development. The interviewees were chosen from each municipality in the territory of HelsinkiNorth. They were sent the questions beforehand and they were explained the reasons for the research and the goal of the development process. Qualitative research is not meant to generalize but to understand what is going on (Kananen 2015). Design research aims for development of the decided target, in this case it aims for development of strategy. The research question was **how to improve member acquisition through strategy development**. Answer to the research question is that the change is inevitable, and the solution is communication. **The strategy development must include improvement in communication**. This is how member acquisition will be improved. The accountability of a research can be defined by two concepts: reliability and validity. The research is reliable if it can be repeated by using the same attributes. The research is valid if the results give an answer to the research question (Hirsjärvi et al 2012).

Reliability of this research is fulfilled because it can be repeated, interview questions can be asked again from different group of interviewees. Validity can be measured by seeing whether the solution for the research question was a driving force for change, whether it caused a change (intervention) which in this case is a developed strategy – and later it will be seen whether the change, the strategy including improvement in communication, worked in a desired way. In the meantime, there are other issues which might affect the member acquisition, for example the changes in economic situation, new entrepreneurs coming to the market, present entrepreneurs moving out or businesses closing, changes in technology (marketing and communication channels), changes in personnel of either HelsinkiNorth or of the companies in the territory of HelsinkiNorth, and even changes in the global scene. This research is valid because the changes in the strategy of HelsinkiNorth will actualize and the social media campaign will be realized by the decision of the board of HelsinkiNorth.

The reliability of this research cannot be questioned because the results were achieved by interviews, and the interviewees' let their names be published. They were told what the interview was about and what it was for. The reliability of this design research actualized also in the form of the workshop. It was organized as planned, and there were enough participants. Participants who are in the position to make decisions. In the workshop the results of the interview were presented, and a thorough discussion occurred. According to

that it was decided that communication will be improved immediately with the suggestions of the researcher, and further improvements will be planned when the strategical developments will be decided. The researcher concluded that workshop was a valid and effective opportunity to communicate the results of the interviews to the board of HelsinkiNorth and to bring the thoughts of potential members to their knowledge. The board is the group of people who can make changes in the strategy. In the case of HelsinkiNorth they are the most active members in whose interest the continuity and prosperous future of the association is. Also, most of them have been members of HelsinkiNorth since the establishment. As they pointed out, they see the situation now – too few members – being part of the starting phase of the association, but still they are prepared to develop the strategy and put effort to communication. Because of the research, now they understand the absence of communication. They see now why it is so difficult to acquire new members. And they know how change that, and they are prepared to work on it.

When this research is looked at from the point of view of theoretical framework it is seen that it complies the theories of communication, marketing and membership acquisition, engagement and retaining. In case of non-profit associations there is seldom professionals organizing or implementing communication and marketing actions, and the budgets are limited. This diminishes the association's ability to see the role of communication and marketing as prominent as it should be. Instead, the membership acquisition and retention are usually seen as inevitable parts of action plan and the association must prepare for it some way or another. The benefits are for that purpose. The benefits are there to attract members and to retain them. This research pointed out to the board of HelsinkiNorth that benefits must be communicated and made sure they are understood the way they are meant to be understood, and also that they are proven to really exist and that they are seen as benefits by present and potential members. That is the strategy with which *more members, more benefits* will be made possible.

Theories of strategies comply to this research result as well. Strategy of a non-profit association does not differ much from any other type of organization. Strategy is about future; it is the definition of means to achieve set goals within a certain period of time. When defining – or developing – strategy, there are theories which guide through the process. Operative opportunities and risks must be recognized and prepared for. To the level it will be chosen in the strategy of an organization. Strategy is formed from several point of views to different aspects of operation and it is a collection of choices. Scenarios and predictions are always subjective. No one can forecast the future, but the decisions have to be made with the knowledge there is available at the moment the strategy is formed. Strategy work deep

down is about believing in the future, trusting there is continuity (Toikkanen 2022). This is the case regarding the board of HelsinkiNorth. They believe in the future, and they see the difficulties being part of the starting process only. They are open for new ideas and prepared to reform their original ideas. HelsinkiNorth board is prepared to change strategy and the research helped to start the developing process.

The role of non-profit associations in travel, tourism and event industries in Finland has been studied in several research, and previous research has shown it is a complex issue and municipalities have organized it in many ways. The biggest problem here is, to HelsinkiNorth and to other local associations, that in municipalities tourism industry is seen as separate section of entrepreneurship from all other industries. Another problem is that input to organize and build networks and co-operation in tourism and event industry is usually funded by EU projects or some other funds outside the usual municipal budget, so their continuity is sure only as long as the funding lasts.

Partly because of this view of tourism and event industry being separate from usual entrepreneurship the non-profit local travel associations get their purpose. They are needed to form networks and create co-operation because no other organization does that in municipalities. Elements of purpose of these associations derive from the void in the organizational culture of municipalities which means the associations are needed. It derives from strategy in which the future is seen as a chance, and it derives from responsibility to develop tourism and event industry. Purpose is on the top of the strategy chart, and it answers the questions of what is wanted to achieve both within and outside of the organization, why the organization exists and what would happen if it did not exist. Underneath those there are the will, the view to the future, achievements in the future, the promise: what makes the organization worth being in contact with, why is the organization unique and what makes its members proud of it and what are the values and principles of the organization. All the above stand on the basic questions of what it is the organization works for (Saarinen & Suokko 2020, 109-111). Purpose and the basic questions deal with ethics, too. Ethics is about doing things right and doing the right things. It is also a requirement for achieving success in organization. Purpose makes organizations to be established and ethics lead them to the right direction. *Rivals as partners* as the chairman of the board of HelsinkiNorth (Kokkonen 2022) said, keeps within a delicate issue of purpose and ethics. Members in travel association might have the same purpose and they compete with each other for the same customers, but still they are suggested to be partners. *Together we are bigger* is another saying of Kokkonen (2022) and it brings up the ethical issues: rivals co-operating, combining their strength and power but doing it right, for the good of the customer. That makes all of them

bigger and the customer is satisfied because better service and better products will be offered with a reasonable price. Purpose takes its form according to by whom is defined. In a non-profit association purpose can be seen as something of immaterial value versus commercial organization.

Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment has published tourism strategy for Finland (for the years 2022-2028). The strategy defines the measures for the development of tourism until 2028. The goal is for Finland to achieve the first place as the most sustainably growing tourist destination in the Nordic countries. The strategy is named: *Together we are more - sustainable growth and reformation for the travel in Finland*. There are four focus areas which are digitalization, sustainability, accessibility, and competitiveness. However, co-operation is the main focus area according to which the strategy is actually named. The strategy got its focuses from research which was conducted in 2019. The results were that domestic tourism offers potential growth within the industry, but co-operation needs to be enhanced and there is a need for national coordination to promote domestic tourism (link in references). Local travel associations could play an important role in helping the coordination on regional level if they were active and would have enough members to represent the hospitality and event industry on the particular area.

In this research there was only one interviewee who mentioned sustainability in the tourism business, and it has not been a topic in the strategical discussion of HelsinkiNorth during this research. One could be optimistic and think the reason is that sustainability is already so integral part of hospitality and event industry operations that it is not even mentioned, or it with a little pessimistic tone: the small enterprises are not prepared to consider it yet as their asset. Sustainable and responsible organization is also run ethically, because the three concepts are tightly linked together. In the field of hospitality and event industry these concepts are also relatively easily detected by stakeholders. The tourists choose the destination where they travel according to their own ideas of sustainability, responsibility, and ethics. They must balance their ideals to their likings and desires and that affects their choice of destination. Finland is famous for the nature, pure water, and fresh air – VisitFinland promotes that so that the effects of it are felt in local travel associations. But this is more important when the international emphasis comes into the agenda of HelsinkiNorth later. First in the development process the chain of three elements has to be tackled: member acquisition, engagement, and retention. Improved and professionally managed communication is a prominent part along the whole process. With the help of the strategy the member acquisition and retaining existing members will be more structured, more defined, and more

effective, and most of all it will be predictable, and like that it will make the future of HelsinkiNorth guaranteed.

This research has given HelsinkiNorth facts on which the strategy can be based and developed. The direction of future steps is known which saves the association time and there will be less trial and error in the future. HelsinkiNorth is young organization, so it is still in the process of forming its value proposition, its traditions and culture. The goal of HelsinkiNorth which must be communicated as thoroughly as possible: the more members the more benefits. It is like a snowball which gets bigger and bigger the more snow attaches to it while it is being rolled on the ground. There is not one without the other. If there are not enough members which pay the membership fees, the association will not have resources to bring enough benefits to the members (Kokkonen 2021). In a non-profit association which operates like a commercial business (HelsinkiNorth 2021-2022) it is also very important to retain the existing members while new ones are coming in. So, there must be something new to offer, service design must serve both old and new members. Value proposition must be evaluated and kept up-to-date frequently (Hager 2022). HelsinkiNorth is a new organization, so it is still forming its value proposition and in the beginning of forming its traditions and culture.

When the awareness of HelsinkiNorth's visibility will be improved, and the campaigns in social media will be started, there is the time to look at improvements in internal communication. HelsinkiNorth uses membership letters via email. There is no need to change that but to make sure the letters involve the members and activates them. The least would be that they will be expected to reply to the letter, and that they are active enough to do it. Internal communication must be defined and planned ahead in the communication plan. It is very important that the membership letter will be published regularly and that eventually it will be waited for by the members. It is also worth noting that the social media campaign works internally, also. When members see each other's photos in Instagram they get to know each other better and new members will be introduced smoothly to the association. With simple tactics the activity levels can remain high. And members retain when they are involved in the campaigns in social media and when they feel they are part of the association, and they have a role in it. The focus of the action plan is crucial: narrow focus instead of one big idea will bring the wanted result (West 2018). HelsinkiNorth can focus on improving communication and measuring it, with right tools and collecting data, it will be seen if the direction is right.

Member acquisition and strategy development of travel association offer several topics for further research. If either of them was combined with sustainability issues and other trends

in tourism it could bring a new point of view to this subject area. As regards this particular research, naturally the effects of developed strategy would be a valid topic for further research. And the efforts put in improving communication – were they successful and what effect they had on member acquisition of HelsinkiNorth. Strategy work of non-profit associations in general is worth research, and if a researcher would find an association which is just about to be established, the strategy process would be interesting and useful research topic. Especially from a standpoint where all the theories of communication, vision building and purpose definition, mission and goals could be put in action since the beginning. It would be great if this research could be one piece in the chain of developing the organization of Finnish hospitality and event industry in such a way that it would serve end users better, and for experiences to be found. Every region has something unique to promote, and ideally the end user would find the information of it easily, and *rivals as partners* would show up as a strong asset to everyone involved.

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Cursor Oy: [www.cursor.fi](http://www.cursor.fi)

VisitFinland: <https://www.visitfinland.com/en/>

**Websites of the members**

[Hotel Sveitsi](#)

[Scandic Hyvinkää](#)

[SeikkailuSveitsi](#)

[Uudenmaan Seuramatkat](#)

[Elämyksen Taika](#)

[Solttilan Maja](#)

[Vega Adventure](#)

[Kauppakeskus Willa](#)

[Hyria](#)

[Mood of Finland](#)

[Touhux](#)

[Suomen Rautatiemuseo](#)

[Sveitsi Rent](#)

[Red Carpet Festari](#)

[Steelfest](#)

**Websites of supportive members:**

[Hyvinkään kaupunki](#)

[Mäntsälän kunta](#)

**Websites of interviewees and of their municipalities:**

Hausjärvi: Lepolan talo

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[Etusivu - Kotitali Hersir](#)

## Appendix 1. Member list 2021

1. Elämyksen Taika
2. Hotel Sveitsi
3. Hyria
4. Hyvinkään kunta
5. Kauppakeskus Willa
6. Mood of Finland
7. Mäntsälän Kunta
8. Scandic Hotels
9. SeikkailuSveitsi
10. Solttilan Maja
11. Suomen Rautatiemuseo
12. Sveitsi Rent
13. Sveitsin Kiinteistörahasto
14. Touhux
15. Uudenmaan Erämatkat
16. Uudenmaan Seuramatkat

## Appendix 2. Member list 2022

1. Elämyksen Taika
2. Hotel Sveitsi
3. Hyria
4. Hyvinkään kunta
5. Kauppakeskus Willa
6. Mood of Finland
7. Mäntsälän Kunta
8. Red Carpet Festari
9. Scandic Hotels
10. SeikkailuSveitsi
11. Soltilan Maja
12. Steelfest
13. Suomen Rautatiemuseo
14. Sveitsi Rent
15. Sveitsin Kiinteistörahasto
16. Touhux
17. Uudenmaan Erämatkat
18. Uudenmaan Seuramatkat
19. Vega Adventure

### Appendix 3. The board of HelsinkiNorth 2021-2022

Vesa Kokkonen, Hotel Sveitsi, Chairman of the Board

Jenni Hakala-Deiro, Hyria

Mari Kivi, Solttilan Maja

Julia Loukia, Elämyksen Taika

Sirkku Mäkelä, municipality of Mäntsälä

Marika Nieminen, Scandic Hotels

Jaana Nordensvan, Uudenmaan Seuramatkat

Janne Welling, SeikkailuSveitsi

#### *Deputy members of the board:*

Mirva Lemmetty, Kauppakeskus Willa

Sari Lindberg, Hotel Sveitsi

Anne Oksanen, SeikkailuSveitsi



#### Appendix 4. The board of HelsinkiNorth 2022–2023

Vesa Kokkonen, Hotel Sveitsi, Chairman of the Board

Jaana Nordensvan, Uudenmaan Seuramatkat, Vice Chairman of the Board

Jenni Hakala-Deiro, Hyria Education

Jaana Jetzinger, municipality of Mäntsälä

Mari Kivi, Solttilan Maja

Marika Nieminen, Scandic Hotels

Janne Welling, SeikkailuSveitsi

#### *Deputy members of the board:*

Julia Loukia, Elämyksen Taika

Anu Nylund, Mood of Finland

Antti Tähkäpää, Vega Adventure

Jasmin Yrjö-Koskinen, Hotel Sveitsi