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# **DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING IN THE BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS CONTEXT**

**A Case Study on Marketing Communications Agencies**

Master's Thesis  
in Marketing

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## Table of contents

1	INTRODUCTION .....	5
1.1	Background for the study .....	5
1.2	Aims, focus, and structure of the study .....	7
2	WHAT IS DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING? .....	9
2.1	Definition and usage of digital content marketing .....	9
2.2	Blogs.....	11
2.3	Social media networks.....	13
2.3.1	Facebook.....	13
2.3.2	LinkedIn.....	14
2.3.3	Twitter.....	15
3	REASONS TO USE DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING .....	17
3.1	The change in marketing communications.....	17
3.2	Increasing importance of digital B2B branding .....	19
3.3	Buying behavior of B2B customers .....	22
4	SUCCESSFUL WAYS TO EXECUTE CONTENT MARKETING FOR B2B COMPANIES .....	26
4.1	Digital content marketing plan .....	26
4.2	Blogging strategies and best practices.....	29
4.3	Best practices with social media .....	31
5	METHODOLOGY .....	34
5.1	Research approach.....	34
5.2	Selection of the case companies.....	35
5.3	Data collection.....	37
5.4	Analysis of the data .....	39
5.5	Evaluation of the reliability and quality of the study .....	41
6	FINDINGS.....	43
6.1	Digital content marketing in marketing communications agencies .....	43
6.2	Reasons why marketing communications agencies use digital content marketing .....	49
6.3	Best practices of digital content marketing .....	52

6.3.1	Best practices with blogging.....	52
6.3.2	Best practices with social media.....	56
7	DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS .....	59
7.1	Discussion of results.....	59
7.2	Suggestions for future research.....	62
7.3	Managerial implications.....	63
7.4	Limitations .....	64
	REFERENCES .....	66
APPENDIX 1	OPERATIONALIZATION TABLE .....	76
APPENDIX 2	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS IN FINNISH.....	77
APPENDIX 3	INTERVIEW QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH .....	78

## List of figures

Figure 1	Traditional marketing communications model .....	18
Figure 2	Revised marketing communications model .....	18
Figure 3	Brand equity.....	21
Figure 4	Corporate blog attached to buying behavior of B2B customer.....	25
Figure 5	Corporate blogging strategies .....	30
Figure 6	Grapevine on Pinterest .....	48
Figure 7	Digital content marketing funnel. ....	49

## List of tables

Table 1	Advantages and disadvantages of producing content in-house and outsourced. ....	27
Table 2	The case companies and dates of the interviews.....	38
Table 3	Social media platforms that the case companies are using .....	47

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background for the study

*In a world with little trust, where information is at our fingertips, where Google is the place we turn to for answers, where social networks are trusted more than traditional media, valuable content is what we seek.*

-Jefferson & Tanton (2013, 21).

Digital marketing is an umbrella term for marketing in digital media. Digital marketing includes e.g. social media marketing, mobile marketing, display advertising, and search engine marketing (Financial Times 2015). During the last few years, digital marketing has been the fastest growing segment in marketing. In 2014, digital advertising expenditure in Finland grew by 12.3% whereas expenditure on television advertising decreased by 3.5%, magazine advertising expenditure decreased by 15.6%, and newspaper advertising expenditure decreased by 9.4% (TNS Gallup 2015, 10-11). In 2013, digital advertising expenditure grew by 5.8% while television, magazine, and newspaper expenditures decreased by 1.7%, 12.7%, and 15.8%, respectively (TNS Gallup 2014, 10-11).

Digital marketing can be viewed to be important to all kinds of businesses. Hervet, Guérard, Tremblay, and Chtourou (2011, 708) stated that the Internet “has become an unavoidable media for advertisers”. Marketing experts are already talking about “post-digitalism” and “post-advertising” (Savaspuro 2014; Hakola & Hiila 2012, 26, 195). However, traditional display advertisement banners on websites are beginning to lose their effectiveness. As the amount of digital advertising has increased, people have started to avoid internet advertising (Cho & Cheon 2004, 89-90). The concept of “banner blindness”, i.e. the unconscious ignorance of banner advertisements, was introduced by Benway as far back as the late 1990s. Nowadays up to 86% of consumers experience banner blindness (Infolink 2012). In addition, the average click through rate, i.e. the percentage of viewers clicking a banner advertisement, is as low as 0.1% compared to 2% in 1995 (Infolink 2012; Nielsen, 2000)

The need for more effective tools than display advertisement banners on the websites has brought two subtypes of digital marketing into spotlight: *content marketing* and *inbound marketing*. The former is delivering interesting or informative content for customers, potential customers, and other stakeholders. Examples of content could be blog posts, videos, web casts, e-books, or articles. The aim of content marketing is to become “influential hub” and to get new customers (Murthy 2011, 31; Brennan & Croft 2012, 106). An “influential hub” type webpages can be defined as a collaborative community where like-minded people can gather and connect with each other (Halligan & Shah 2014, 9). Digital content marketing has longer lasting results than online advertise-

ments. This is called the “long tail” effect of content marketing (Kaw 2009). Informative, high-quality content is shared in social media. In addition, by linking content across different sites, the search engine rankings for that company’s website improve. High-quality content also helps companies and their employees to establish a reputation as experts and thought leaders (Kortesuo & Kurvinen 2011, 40; Salmenkivi & Nyman 2007, 161; Salminen 2014).

Inbound marketing is closely related to content marketing but is used more by practitioners than academics. Inbound marketing is a set of marketing strategies and practices that instead of pushing the message, are pulling the potential customers towards the company’s website and other digital channels where the company’s content is presented. Inbound marketing utilizes blogging, social media, and search engine optimization (Steenburgh, Avery & Dahod 2011, 1; Hakola & Hiila 2012, 26). Thus, content marketing can be perceived to be one subtype of inbound marketing. This study focuses on content marketing and acknowledges that the concepts of inbound marketing and content marketing are overlapping.

Business-to-business marketing is defined as “the marketing activities of any kind of organization which has exchange relationships with other organizations or businesses” (Turnbull, 1994). The term has evolved since the 1960s and 1970s when it was referred to *industrial marketing*, marketing in an industrial context. Nevertheless, as the number of service organizations increased, the term *B2B marketing* emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. Recently, since 2000s, it has been argued that principles of marketing could be applied to any organization, even for non-profit charities. Therefore use of term *organizational marketing* has increased. However, *business-to-business marketing* is still a commonly used term (Ellis 2011, 6). Digital content marketing can be beneficial notably for knowledge intensive B2B companies because they typically have a lot of information that could be interesting to their possible customers. Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto (2015, 733) found that delivering relevant content through various social media channels can benefit the brand of the B2B company.

Content marketing for B2B companies has not yet been researched extensively. Most of the research on this topic has been done over the past five years and focused only on B2C perspective (see e.g. Lipsman, Mudd, Rich & Bruich 2012; Mount & Martinez 2014). There are also studies on social media use that do not distinguish between B2C and B2B companies (see e.g. Barnes & Jacobsen 2013; Lee, Hwang & Lee 2006). There are only a handful of studies on social media marketing and digital channels usage of B2B companies only (see e.g. Michaelidou, Siamagka & Christodoulides 2011; Brennan & Croft 2012; Järvinen, Tollinen, Karjaluoto & Jayawardhena 2012; Huotari, Ulkuniemi, Saraniemi & Mäläskä 2015; Karjaluoto, Mustonen & Ulkuniemi 2015; Keinänen & Kuivalainen 2015). Yet, there is a scarcity on literature on digital content marketing in the B2B context (Rowley 2008, 518). Holliman and Rowley (2014) wrote

one of the few academic articles on this topic and claim it as the first one of its kind (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 271). It can be assumed that this research topic is emerging and within a few years there will be more academic research on digital content marketing. This study will provide new information on this topic as digital content marketing has not been applied to marketing communications industry in previous research.

## **1.2 Aims, focus, and structure of the study**

The purpose of this study is *to examine how business-to-business companies utilize digital content marketing in their own marketing and what are the best practices with the selected digital content marketing channels*. The business-to-business context is chosen because digital content marketing can be expected to be beneficial especially for knowledge-intensive business services that sell their services to other companies. Of business-to-business companies, marketing communications industry can be expected to be one of the leading industries in digital content marketing. Therefore, it is valuable to study this phenomenon with marketing communications agencies who currently utilize digital content marketing in their own marketing efforts. The case companies are marketing communications agencies that currently utilize digital content marketing for marketing themselves in the B2B context.

Currently, digital content marketing in the B2B context has very limited previous academic research (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 271; Koiso-Kanttila 2014), which increases the importance of studying this topic.

Sub-questions of this research are the following:

- 1) What is digital content marketing?
- 2) Why do B2B companies use digital content marketing?
- 3) How should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media?

Digital content marketing includes many different platforms and therefore it is not possible to research them all in depth in a Master's Thesis. This study will be limited on blogs and the three most popular social media networks in the B2B context: Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Michaelidou et al. 2011, 1155-1156; Brennan & Croft 2012, 113; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 70). The reason to study specifically different social media channels and blogs is that they present fast and personalized interactions between customers and companies and therefore build stronger relationships. Strong relationships are one of the key elements in B2B sales. Thus, using social media can be seen as a very suitable way of communication for B2B companies (Kho 2008, 26; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 5).

The structure of this thesis is the following. Chapter two describes what digital content marketing is and what possible channels exist for conducting digital content marketing. In this study, the chosen channels are blogs, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. This chapter is focused to discuss the themes of sub-question number one: What is digital content marketing? Chapter three discusses the reasons why it could be beneficial for the business-to-business companies to shift from traditional marketing communications to digital content marketing. These reasons include recent changes in marketing communications and themes related to digital B2B branding and buying behavior of B2B customers. This chapter discusses sub-question two: Why do B2B companies use digital content marketing? Chapter 4 describes how a content marketing plan can be built and further describes blogging strategies and best practices on social media. Chapter four discusses sub-question three: How should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media? The whole operationalization process can be found at Appendix 1. In Chapter five, the research methods are described. Chapter six summarizes the findings of the study according to the research sub-questions. Chapter seven presents conclusions of this research.



## 2 WHAT IS DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING?

### 2.1 Definition and usage of digital content marketing

*Digital content marketing is an inbound marketing technique and hence offers a solution to the declining effectiveness of traditional interruptive marketing techniques.*

-Holliman & Rowley 2014, 269.

Content marketing can be defined as “a strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly defined audience – and, ultimately, to drive profitable customer action” (Content Marketing Institute 2015). Digital content marketing is content marketing conducted on digital platforms. While content marketing has been conducted for a long time (Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 27), digital content marketing is a fairly new phenomenon and it has not yet been researched extensively in the business-to-business context. In fact, the research on inbound marketing and digital content marketing is still “virtually non-existent” and there is clearly a need for further research (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 271; Koiso-Kanttila 2014). The term *digital content* has previously been used to imply digital content as a commodity, i.e. digital products business (Koiso-Kanttila 2004; Rowley 2008; Bradley et al. 2012). Those paid content can be, for example, digital music or online newspapers (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 275). However, more recently the term *digital content* has come to refer to blog posts, white papers, or anything that gives value to the reader for free (Fouts 2009, 26). Jefferson and Tanton (2013, 24) make the distinction between content and valuable content. According to them, content refers to written words, knowledge, or information; whereas valuable content is “content with a bigger purpose; useful information created for a particular audience; content that hits the mark”. Further, they elaborate that valuable content is useful, clear, compelling, focused, high quality, and genuine. The purpose of digital content marketing is to provide valuable and remarkable content to potential and returning customers (Scott 2010, 202).

*Content marketing* and *inbound marketing* are closely related terms and can be used almost interchangeably. There is no common opinion among practitioners and academics regarding the exact difference between the two (Lin & Yazdanifard 2014, 55). Lieberman (2013) suggests that content marketing is merely one inbound marketing technique and therefore a part of inbound marketing. Inbound marketing is also referred to as *pull marketing* or *attraction marketing* (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 269; Fouts 2009, 26). The idea behind inbound marketing is that instead of pushing content, customers are pulled towards the content because they find it interesting. In this way, the the company

develops a relationship with the customer, which may lead to customer loyalty or result in a sale in the future (Fouts 2009, 26; Lin & Yazdanifard 2014, 53). One advantage of inbound marketing is that it attracts attention over long period of time. For instance, when one blog post is published, it may attract readers, comments and shares in different social networks. Because of this attention, other people may find the content months later and consequently comment on it or share it again, thus rediscovering the blog post. When this happens search engines notice and rank the blog post higher in their search results. This might attract even more readers in the future. The ultimate goal of inbound marketing is to be a “resource of information” that gives readers unbeatable value (Fouts 2009, 26).

The most thorough study of business-to-business digital content marketing was conducted by Holliman and Rowley (2014). According to them (2014, 270), the aim of digital content marketing is to use digital content, such as blog posts or videos, as a mean to draw potential B2B customers to some online website or social media page. One distinctive characteristic of digital content marketing is that it is located on owned or earned media, compared to traditional advertising where the advertising place is bought. While the distribution of content marketing is free, content marketing requires a significant time effort to conduct (Lieb 2012).

Rose and Pulizzi (2011, 21-23) list the possible goals of content marketing, from which businesses can choose the most desired one: 1) Brand awareness or reinforcement. Content marketing is very suitable for this goal as it is authentic and presented on platforms that are not paid for. 2) Lead conversion and nurturing. A lead has different meanings for different companies, but in the content marketing context it means to get a marketing permission through giving free, valuable content. 3) Customer service. Content can be used to benefit customers after the sale and therefore enhance customer relationships. 4) Customer upsell. When customers are in a “subscribe model”, it is easier to engage them with additional products or services by providing right kind of content. 5) Passionate subscribers. When subscribers are “evangelists”, they are likely to create content on their own about the company, service, or product. Content made by satisfied customers can be the most influential way to reach goals.

Content Marketing Institute conducts annual research on how companies conduct their content marketing. According to their research focused on small-sized (10-99 employees) B2B companies based in North America, 86% of the respondents currently utilized content marketing. The five most important goals for content marketing for the interviewed companies were lead generation, brand awareness, engagement, lead nurturing, and sales (Pulizzi 2015). These findings are in line with the recent research conducted by Holliman and Rowley and Regalix. According to their research, the most common objectives for digital content marketing were lead generation, raising brand awareness and brand building, achieving thought leadership position, and generating

traffic to websites (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 280-281). According to Regalix, the most important objectives were nurturing prospects, generating leads, creating awareness, thought leadership, and engaging customers to build loyalty and advocacy (Regalix 2015, 4). B2B advertisers try to achieve these goals by using social media content, blogs, e-mail newsletters, articles on their websites, case studies, white papers, webinars/webcasts and videos (Pulizzi 2015; Regalix 2015, 7).

The most popular platforms for distributing content were websites, e-mail, events, search engine marketing, blogs, and social media, of which LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook were considered to be the best channels (Pulizzi 2015; Regalix 2015, 9). The key benefits of content marketing include increase in brand awareness (89% of the respondents agreed), thought leadership (81% of the respondents agreed), lead generation (76% of the respondents agreed), and increased traffic to the websites (60% of the respondents agreed) (Regalix 2015, 5). The five most common challenges with content marketing were: 1) producing engaging content (58% of the respondents), 2) producing content consistently (53% of the respondents), 3) producing a variety of content (45% of the respondents), 4) lack of budget (40% of the respondents), and 5) measuring content effectiveness (40% of the respondents). When asked how the respondents wanted to develop their content marketing in the future, the four themes were recurrent: understanding their audience better, developing and documenting content strategy, creating a subscription model, and understanding better what kind of procedures and contents are effective (Pulizzi 2015).

The major digital marketing channels are discussed below in more detail. Chapter 2.2 describes blogs in the marketing context and chapter 2.3 introduces the three most common social media networks in B2B marketing: Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Michaelidou et al. 2011, 1155-1156; Brennan & Croft 2012, 113; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 70).

## **2.2 Blogs**

Blogs are an essential part of digital content marketing. The idea of content marketing is that companies share valuable information with possible and current customers for free and transparently. Blogs provide an efficient way to convey this valuable information. One possible reason for blogging actively is to establish the expertise image of the writer and therefore establish a thought leadership position (Kortesuo & Kurvinen 2011, 40; Salmenkivi & Nyman 2007, 161).

A blog can be placed either on the company's own website or a media website. Companies also have the option of buying blogging space on a popular media website, such as Kauppalehti or Tietoviikko. This form of blogging is called "sponsored forum".

The advantage of paid blogging space is that the reach of the blog is significantly higher than for a blog on the company's own website. However, it can be a very expensive option (Kortesuo & Kurvinen 2011, 101-102).

Lee, Hwang & Lee (2006, 319-320) distinguish five different types of blogs that companies can utilize. 1) An *Employee blog* that is written by one employee of the company and usually hosted outside the company website. 2) A *Group blog* or *collaborative blog* is maintained by several employees. Blog post subjects are usually around a specific topic. 3) An *Executive blog* is a channel for company CEOs and such to blog. 4) A *Promotional blog* that is mainly made for advertising purposes and is therefore controversial because blogs are not supposed to be commercial. 5) A *Newsletter blog* is an official-style blog to publish company news and product information. In the context of digital content marketing, the most suitable forms of company blogs could be employee blog, group blog/collaborative blog, or executive blog, provided that they distribute useful information to the readers.

The advantage of blogging is that blogs are usually cheap or even free to maintain. If the companies choose to use free platforms, such as their own website for blogging, the only cost is the time commitment to write blog posts and participate in dialogue on the blog. In addition to cost efficiency, blogs are a very fast communication channel and can be utilized, for example, in an emergency situation (Kortesuo & Kurvinen 2011, 40; Salmenkivi & Nyman 2007, 161). Salmenkivi & Nyman (2007, 161-164) describe the possible benefits for a company blog as the following: 1) cost-efficiency and fast communication; 2) excellent findability because of links to the blog; 3) successful information management; 4) potential reach of thought leaders; 5) dialog with customers and other stakeholders; 6) efficient information collection; 7) PR; and 8) creating a pioneer image.

There are also challenges associated with blogging. Most companies are concerned with possible negative feedback in blog comments, leak of confidential information or spreading information that can benefit their competitors, and the lack of monetary return of investment on blogging. However, while blogs may not cause direct sales, they may raise word-of-mouth among the potential clients (Scoble & Israel 2006, 171-176; Lee et al. 2006, 329). One common mistake is to write too cautiously, therefore making the blog boring to read and not getting frequent readers or comments (Scoble & Israel 2006, 197).

According to Kortesuo and Kurvinen, one practical advantage of digital content marketing with blogs is that the readers of the blog will notice that the companies provide concrete solutions, most commonly services, to their problems. In addition, readers will see how knowledgeable on the subject the company is. Thus, readers are more willing to go to the expert than try to manage on their own (2011, 40). In addition, a blog can reach potential clients at different stages of the buying process. Active

blogging leaves a long-term digital footprint on the Internet. Content can be read and commented on years after the blog post is initially published (Kortesuo & Kurvinen 2011, 100; Hakola & Hiila 2012, 90). Blogging strategies and best practices are further discussed in chapter 4.2.

## **2.3 Social media networks**

Social media consists of numerous different platforms, for instance social media networks, shared photos, wikis, blogs/microblogs, discussion forums, social bookmarking sites, service ratings websites and podcasts (Hanna, Rohm & Critenden 2011, 266; Mangold & Faulds 2009, 358; Ngai et al. 2015, 782). Social Media Networks/Social Networking Sites (SNS) are the most common form of social media. In social media networks, such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn or similar, people create their own profile and interact with friends or like-minded people in order to share information. People engage in conversations they are interested in and anyone can create content. What is very distinctive about social media is real-time, 24/7 global communications, that has revolutionized the way people communicate (Michaelidou et al. 2011, 1153; Scott 2010, 38; Fouts 2009, 7; Mangold & Faulds 2009, 359; De Kare-Silver 2011, 48; Hanna et al. 2011, 267). Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 9) conclude that social media is one part of a well-planned content marketing strategy and is ideally adjusted to business objectives. Social networking contributes to the paradigm shift of marketing. It could be more beneficial for companies to pull potential customers to their content instead of pushing marketing communications messages through online advertising (De Kare-Silver 2011, 61). This paradigm shift is explained further in chapter 3.1.

Of the 15 most visited web sites in Finland, six are connected to social media. Facebook ranks as the third most-visited web site, YouTube the fourth, Wikipedia the fifth, Blogspot the 12th, LinkedIn the 13th, and Twitter the 14th (Alexa, 2014). According to the literature, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter are the most common social networks used in the B2B context (Michaelidou et al. 2011, 1155-1156; Brennan & Croft 2012, 113; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 70). Therefore, they were chosen to be included in this study and will be introduced more in detail.

### ***2.3.1 Facebook***

Facebook was founded in 2004 with the mission “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected”. By the time of writing this research, it has 890 million daily active users. That makes Facebook the world’s largest social media

network (Facebook Newsroom 2015; Brennan & Croft 2012, 108) In addition to personal Facebook accounts, companies are able to create their own company Facebook page and individuals can choose to follow their updates (Halligan & Shah 2014, 70). What makes company Facebook pages more powerful than traditional company websites, is the virality of Facebook. When a person performs actions on Facebook, her or his network will notice (Halligan & Shah 2014, 69). At the moment, the fastest growing demographic in Facebook is people aged 45-54 years (Halligan & Shah 2014, 69-70). This demographic is a very potent target for B2B companies.

Facebook's reach is divided into organic and paid reach. Organic reach means the reach that is obtained without Facebook advertising whereas paid reach means the reach that is achieved through advertising (Yu 2015). Since so many stories show up on Facebook's news feed, in 2010 Facebook developed its own algorithm, EdgeRank, to decide what stories will be shown on each individual's news feed organically. This means each user does not see all the updates that their friends are publishing, let alone updates from the companies that they are following. Facebook strives to improve EdgeRank constantly and therefore EdgeRank is being adjusted and changed often. Recently, Facebook made it more difficult for company pages' updates to show up on individuals' news feeds. There are different rules for news feed exposure for the updates of company Facebook pages versus the updates of individual users. EdgeRank consists of three elements.

- 1) *The affinity score*, i.e. how close the person is with the publisher, for example how often the person likes, comments, or shares the content provided by the company.
- 2) *The weight*, i.e. photos and videos are more likely to be shown on news feed than status updates or likes.
- 3) *The time factor*, i.e. the newer the information, the more relevant it is (Patterson 2015; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 130-131).

### **2.3.2 LinkedIn**

LinkedIn is a social networking site for business purposes (Halligan & Shah 2014, 73). Founded in 2002, it now has 347 million registered users (LinkedIn – About LinkedIn 2015). Similar to Facebook, LinkedIn utilizes news feed and companies are able to create company profiles on LinkedIn (Halligan & Shah 2014, 73; Rindell 2014). LinkedIn users have a choice to follow companies and their updates on LinkedIn. LinkedIn company pages can be used for content sharing as a company (LinkedIn - Company Pages 2014).

LinkedIn also has an advertising function, which allows it to target advertisements according to company size, industry, and other demographic aspects (Halligan & Shah 2014, 75; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 107). Currently LinkedIn provides two types of advertisements. The first type is display advertising that can be only a text or a combination of a text and an image. These kinds of advertisements are visible on the LinkedIn main page, profile pages, groups, and company profiles. This type of advertising is the most suitable for better brand visibility. The second type is sponsored status updates, similar to Facebook advertising. This type of advertising allows companies to choose who can see their updates by means of advanced demographic targeting. The advertisements are shown on individuals' news feeds. This kind of advertising is very suitable for B2B content marketing (Digitys 2014).

### ***2.3.3 Twitter***

Twitter is a microblogging site. A microblog can be described as a blog, but each blog article, called a Tweet, is a maximum of 140 characters long. All Tweets are public and users can choose to follow other users' Tweets. Hashtags, words or phrases preceded by a hash symbol (#), are used to differentiate topics on Twitter. One example of hashtag is #DigitalMarketing (Halligan & Shah 2014, 76-78; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 111-114). Twitter has 288 million active users monthly and 500 million Tweets are published every day (Twitter - About the company 2015). The majority of people using Twitter are working-age professionals who are between 25 and 54 years old (see Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 115). When Twitter was launched in 2006, people used Twitter to post quick updates about their daily life, because Twitter's website asked the question "What are you doing?" However, nowadays Twitter is more focused on dialogue, links, and real-time information about world events (Twitter Milestones 2015; Halligan & Shah 2014, 77; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 109).

Typically companies use Twitter for press releases and to promote new content published by the company (Brennan & Croft 2012, 108). Hakola and Hiila (2012, 142) suggest that Twitter could be a successful channel choice for B2B companies who want to reach experts and thought leaders of their industry. Companies are able to create profiles on Twitter, but unlike in Facebook and LinkedIn, they do not differ from personal profiles. All profiles look the same and have same functionality on Twitter (Halligan & Shah 2014, 78). Twitter is based on following that does not need to be reciprocal. If a person chooses to follow a company, he or she will see the company's tweets in his or hers feed. If the company wants their tweets to be seen, they have to commit to long-term building of the follower base (Halligan & Shah 2014, 79). Twitter has advertising options as well. It is possible to promote tweets, trending topics, or a Twitter account

(Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 124). Companies can advertise on Twitter to achieve five different goals: 1) grow followers; 2) gain website clicks or conversions; 3) increase Tweet engagements; 4) generate app installs or engagements; and 5) generate leads (Twitter Business Solutions 2015).



### 3 REASONS TO USE DIGITAL CONTENT MARKETING

#### 3.1 The change in marketing communications

Now is the era of post-advertising, where traditional, one-way advertising is not as efficient as a two-way dialogue and communication (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 26, 195; Dahlén, Lange & Smith 2010, 451). The growth of the Internet has changed communications and marketing tremendously (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 7). Vollmer and Precourt (2008, 5) describe this era as “consumer-centric digital age”. The continuous flow of communication is part of modern marketing and companies can now be seen as publishers (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 137; Holliman & Rowley 2014, 280). Traditional, interruptive advertising is not as effective as before because people are sought out in an environment where they decide what to see and click instead of companies or advertising agencies deciding what they are shown (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 26; De Kare-Silver 2011, 88; Lin & Yazdanifard 2014, 53). In fact, power has shifted from marketers to customers (Goldstein & Lee 2005, 216). Furthermore, traditional, interruptive communication can be seen as negative experience. For example, when someone is reading an interesting article, interruptive advertisements can be seen as annoying (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 137).

Fouts (2009, 25) describes traditional marketing communications to be “outbound”, or pushed, communication. In traditional marketing communications, the message is pushed through direct mail, magazine advertisements, e-mail, telemarketing, or banner ads on websites, for example. The average person sees thousands of these kinds of marketing messages in any given day and usually do not pay attention to most of them. Pendleton, Lundstrom and Dixit (2012, 153-160) introduce a revised marketing communications model that reflects the changes in consumer behavior and digitalization. The traditional marketing communications model (see Figure 1) is typically one-way communication: the marketer decides the message that is conveyed to the consumer through mass media. The feedback from customer to the company can occur, for example, when the company is conducting a survey research.

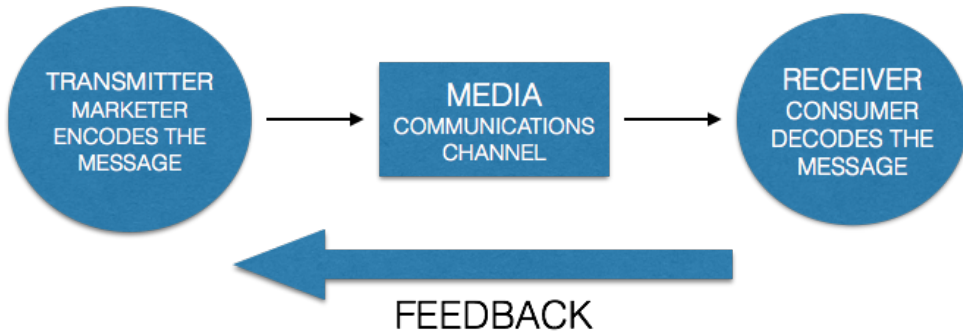


Figure 1 Traditional marketing communications model (Pendleton et al. 2012, 158)

Nowadays, the communication process is much more complicated (see Figure 2). The main change is that instead of one-way communication from a company to consumers, customers are now also communicating to the company. In other words, it is now two-way communication, potentially dialogue (Pendleton et al. 2012, 153-160). Marketers are now utilizing more personalization and interaction in order to communicate better with their target audience (Constantinides 2006, 413). The concept of media has also changed drastically as digitalization has evolved. Companies can now approach their potential customers through blogs, social media, or different websites. These digital channels provide an opportunity for two-way communication as customers are able to communicate to the companies (Pendleton et al. 2012, 153-160). One-way communication has changed to providing useful information to the customer at the point when he or she needs it (Scott 2010, 7).

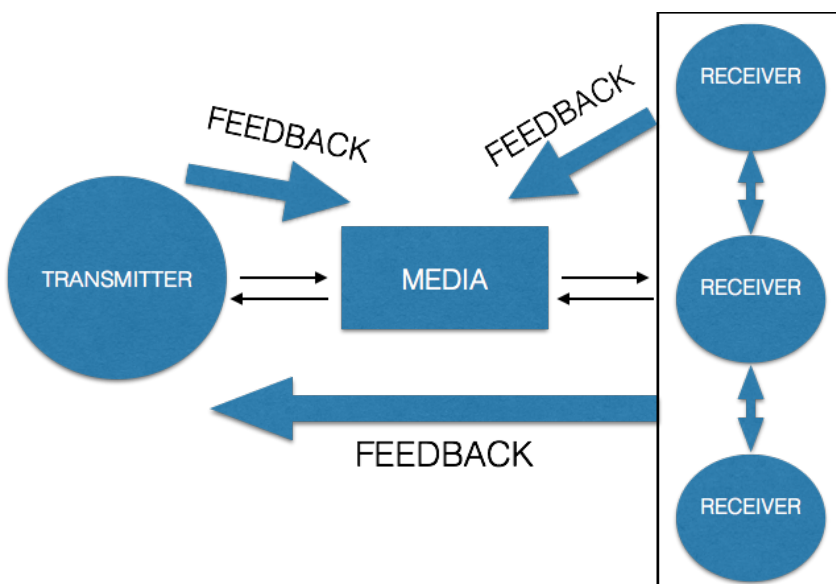


Figure 2 Revised marketing communications model (Pendleton et al. 2012, 158)

The aforementioned facts have changed many conventions of marketing communications. Succeeding in this new era of internet communication requires understanding that the person receiving content is active and independent (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 136). Consumer power and sophistication are higher than ever because of affordable technology and easy access to the online world (Constantinides 2006, 413). He or she consumes only the content that provides some additional value to him or her. If the content is not interesting enough, he or she will not return to the web page. In order to make communication successful, the company has to know what the additional value is and make it concrete, thus forming a holistic strategy that steers all the actions of the company on the Internet. Currently, content has to be planned according to a target group. If content is made for the wrong audience, it will not achieve its objectives. It is vital not to ignore the target group point of view (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 136-137). In other words, decreasing traditional marketing communications and using inbound marketing techniques might be beneficial for the marketers.

### **3.2 Increasing importance of digital B2B branding**

Another reason for conducting digital content marketing is the increasing importance of digital branding. Research on digital B2B branding is scarce (Lipiäinen & Karjaluoto 2015, 733). There are few studies that have touched the subject, among them are Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto (2015), Michaelidou et al. (2011), and Andersen (2005). Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto (2015, 733) conclude in their study that “for an industrial organization, becoming an opinion leader is a strategy well-suited to branding and can be supported by creating relevant content subsequently delivered through various social media channels”. This conclusion supports the idea that digital content marketing is an efficient way to conduct branding online.

A corporate or company brand is not only the company name, logo and visual elements. Instead, it is a set of the core values that company possesses (Ind 1997, 13). According to Harrison, Hague and Hague (2010, 10), the most overlooked marketing opportunity in the B2B context is branding. Leek and Christodoulides (2011, 830) further note that branding has been considered irrelevant in the business-to-business context. Some research has established the value of branding for B2B firms (Michaelidou et al. 2011, 1154; Baumgarth 2010, 653) but according to Kuhn, Alpert and Pope (2008, 40) and Mudambi (2002, 525), B2B branding is still under-researched. However, the importance of B2B branding is increasing due to the recent decrease in personal customer relationships because of digitalization and the increasing complexity of products and services (Baumgarth 2010, 654). Findings of the study by Mudambi (2002, 531-532) suggest that B2B branding has a pivotal role in B2B decision-making and that the com-

pany brand is the main component of B2B branding strategies. Further, B2B branding can be beneficial when considering differentiation and enhanced customer loyalty.

According to Balmer (1995, 24), corporate brand management could instead be called “strategic corporate identity management”. Also, corporate branding and reputation are interconnected concepts (Balmer 1995, 31). Branding can be even more influential in the B2B context than in the B2C context as branding can reduce associated risk, which is prevalent in the B2B buying context, by providing quality assurances to the buyer (Ellis 2011, 189). In the B2B context, it is more common that buyers and sales personnel interact, not customers and brands as in the B2C context (Kuhn et al. 2008, 49-50). Balmer (1995, 40) and Ind (1997, 66) have also observed this by stating that employees are major “spokespersons” and “the main determinant of image” for any company. Ind (1997, 83) goes even further by stating that “people are the corporate brand”. It is challenging to maintain consistent quality with all employees (Ind 1997, 66).

Producing content, such as blogging, is one form of company branding. It positions the company as a thought leader or as a group of interested experts and directly affects the company brand (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 148; Scott 2010, 34; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 33). Ind (1997, 4-12) suggests that the differences between a corporate brand and a consumer brand are intangibility, complexity, and responsibility. Usually with a consumer brand a physical product can be bought and is therefore a tangible experience. With corporate brands, the brand is usually intangible. Even though consumer brands also have intangible elements, company brands are far more intangible. Complexity of corporate brands makes controlling them quite challenging. Continuity of experience is easier to attain with consumer brands than with corporate brands. Responsibility with corporate brands refers to social and ethical aspects of responsibility for corporations.

Business-to-business corporate branding is based on the same concepts as product branding. Aaker introduces the concept of brand equity, that can be applied to B2B branding and the benefits of digital content marketing. According to Aaker (1996, 8; Aaker 1991, 15-16), brand equity is “a set of assets linked to a brand’s name and symbol”, whereas brand equity management is creation and improvement of these assets (Aaker 1996, 8). Aaker (ibid) adds that each brand’s equity component create value to the brand in different ways and overall brand equity creates value both to the company and the customer. See the components of brand equity below in Figure 3. Next, the key components linked to digital content marketing will be discussed more in detail. Those components include brand loyalty, name awareness, and brand associations.

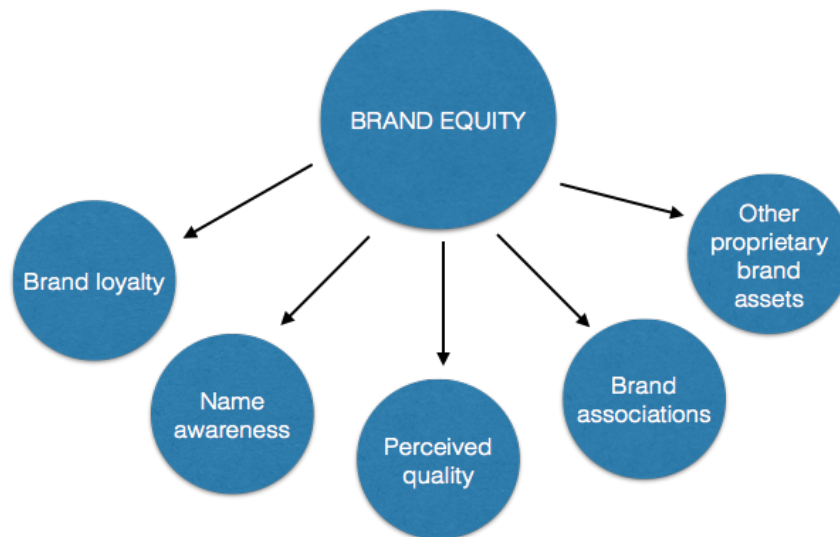


Figure 3 Brand equity (Aaker 1991, 17)

- *Brand loyalty*. This aspect is important for the company financially, because loyal customers mean predictable future sales. Additionally, it is more cost-effective for companies to retain customers instead of acquiring new ones (Aaker 1996, 21). One strategy to strengthen loyalty is to enhance relationships with current customers (Aaker 1996, 23). One possible way to enhance relationships is to conduct content marketing, i.e. to provide valuable information to current customers. Brand loyalty among current customers also provides assurance to the possible buyers, especially when considering an expensive and risky purchase (Aaker 1991, 48), such as in the B2B service buying situation.
- *Name awareness*. Name awareness refers to how present the brand name is in the consumer's mind and is measured by the degree to which consumers remember the brand. The range, from the lowest to the highest, is recognition, recall, top of mind, and dominant (Aaker 1996, 10; Aaker 1991, 61). Awareness is crucial in buying behavior, because the first step of the buying process is to choose which brands to consider, "the consideration set". In order for the company to be a part of this consideration set, it has to be known. An unknown brand does not even enter into the consideration set (Aaker 1991, 19; 66-67). When a customer is considering different companies and there is no clear winner, brand awareness might be the deciding factor (Aaker 1991, 65). According to various studies, name/brand awareness is considered to be the key benefit of conducting digital content marketing (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 21-23; Pulizzi 2015; Holliman & Rowley 2014, 280-281; Regalix 2015, 5). By producing useful content, companies can improve the name awareness of their brand.
- *Brand associations*. All associations linked to a brand is the elemental base of a brand name (Aaker 1991, 20). Brand associations are closely related to brand

positioning and differentiation. Further, associations are linked to purchase decisions, creating positive attitudes or feelings, and brand loyalty (Aaker 1991, 110-111). Conducting digital content marketing can be linked to better brand associations.

As noted by Rose & Pulizzi (2011, 21-23) Pulizzi (2015), Holliman & Rowley (2014, 280-281), and Regalix (2015, 5), the most important goal for business to business marketers with digital content marketing is raising brand awareness. Therefore, enhanced brand image is one of the possible positive outcomes when conducting digital content marketing.

### **3.3 Buying behavior of B2B customers**

B2B marketing differs from B2C marketing in the way that the buyer is another company or organization, not an individual consumer. Because of this, they are more demanding than B2C buyers. They have bigger responsibility to make the right purchase decision (Harrison, Hague & Hague 2010, 11). In fact, buying a B2B product or service usually requires some expertise or understanding from the buyer (Harrison et al. 2010, 4). Nevertheless, psychological and sociological factors are relevant in B2B buying decisions too (ibid). Mudambi (2002, 529) describes three different purchase situations in the B2B context. The first is a low-risk purchase that usually goes routinely. The second is an average, product-oriented situation. The third is making a risky, very important purchasing decision.

The B2B buyer has formalized, highly complex decision-making procedures or a decision making unit, and they seem to act more rationally (Isohookana 2007, 81; Constantinides 2006, 423; Harrison et al. 2010, 2; Kuhn et al. 2008, 49). In B2B services, the intangible attributes of the service provider seem to be more important than the actual performance attributes of the service. The intangible attributes refer to reputation and brand of the service provider (Shaw, Giglierano & Kallis 1989, 51). Other distinguishing features of B2B buyers include personal relationships with sales personnel, which are important considering that B2B customers are long-term customers in most cases. There are fewer B2B customers than in B2C market and their purchases are usually much more valuable. The benefits of acquiring or losing a B2B customer are more remarkable. It is characteristic for B2B companies to focusing on a few key accounts and treat the relationship as a partnership (Harrison et al. 2010, 6-9). Since the purchase decision is risky, they need to be convinced that the service provider is trustworthy (Ellis 2011, 189). Content marketing provides one way to communicate that trustworthiness.

According to the literature, B2B buyers can be divided into the following groups based on their behavior and needs:

1. *Low interest or indifferent buyers*. None of the product or service attributes are more important than the others (Mudambi 2002, 529-531)
2. *Highly tangible*. Traditional, moderate and objective. Focuses on prices and physical product attributes. Does not seek any extra services (Mudambi 2002, 529-531; Harrison et al. 2010, 7)
3. *Branding-receptive buyers*. Takes into consideration the following: the reputation of the manufacturer, the past relationship with the manufacturer, and overall the brand image of the manufacturer. Described as sophisticated and buys in large volumes. In addition to brand, focuses on the quality of the product or service (Mudambi 2002, 529-531; Harrison et al. 2010, 7).
4. *Service-focused buyers*. Require high quality and service before, during and after the sale (Harrison et al. 2010, 7).
5. *Partnership-focused buyers*, who seek trust and strategic partnership with the supplier (Harrison et al. 2010, 7).

Digital content marketing can be beneficial for companies that have branding-receptive buyers, service-focused buyers, or partnership-focused buyers because content marketing enhances the company brand, provides additional services (beneficial information) and builds trust. In the case of marketing communications agencies, it is possible that their clients are most likely service-focused buyers or partnership-focused buyers. Therefore, it is valuable for marketing communications agencies to use digital content marketing.

The buying behavior of B2B customers has transformed recently the same way as B2C buying behavior. Traditional, interruptive advertising is experienced as disturbing (Murthy 2011, 31). There are three trends that have recently changed the buying behavior of both B2C and B2C customers. The first trend is the rise of the Internet and digitalization, as now customers use the Internet as the first place to search for information. Blogs, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Wikipedia and other digital information affect the decision making process when B2B buyers are searching information before the buying decision (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 119-120; Mangould & Faulds 2009, 360; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 15-19). The second trend is the lack of trust. People are getting more skeptical towards the information they receive and do not trust companies as much as before (Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 15-19; Lin & Yazdanifard 2014, 53). The third trend is the rise of the social web, i.e. social networking (Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 15-19). Digital content marketing responds to all of these three trends. Digital content marketing utilizes both the Internet and the social web. One way to overcome the trust issue is that instead of pushing marketing messages, companies can prove the expertise and usefulness by helping the potential customers.

Currently people have multiple roles online, so they might be reached even during their free time on social media (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 119-120; Mangold & Faulds 2009, 360). B2B buyers can be reached on multiple channels. B2B service organizations have to be able to communicate their services and expertise on every possible channel where they can encounter their possible clients. Because there are more and more channels, B2B companies need to plan a communication strategy that can help them to reach their target groups in continuous and meaningful ways (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 147-148). Content marketing has proven to be an efficient way to engage B2B buyers who are looking for information online before making a buying decision (Murthy 2011, 31). Producing content, such as blogging, and providing it for free, positions the company as a thought leader in the industry. Further, it directly affects the company brand by showing readers that the company is more credible and helpful and the employees are experts in their field (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 148; Scott 2010, 34; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 41). Thought leadership is an important factor in buying decision: according to research by ITSMA, 60% of B2B buyers consider thought leadership as important or very important when they are choosing new service providers for their companies (Murthy 2011, 31). In other words, content marketing might position the company as a thought leader in the industry and enhances the company brand. These factors are important in making a B2B buying decision.

Kortesuo and Kurvinen (2011, 106-107) describe how corporate blogging can be connected to the buying process of a B2B customer. In the first stage of buying process, the blog can help the buyer to recognize the problem and the company can illustrate potential solutions to the problem. At this first stage it is important that the company speaks transparently about best practices and research results. The aim of this stage is to pique the interest of the B2B client. In the second stage, the blog can describe how the problem can be solved, for example through different case studies. It is beneficial to describe how the problem should be approached, what to take into account when solving the problem and how to execute the solution. Openness is important during this stage: it is valuable to speak about typical mistakes and challenges. Finally, when the B2B customer is in the purchasing stage, he or she should be convinced, through the blog, that this exact company and its services are the right solution for him or her. In other words, it should be clearly communicated what the company offers, along with concrete examples. Overall, blogs can help companies in customer acquisition if they are able to convey their expertise through their blogs. Blog posts can act as references for new customers (Kortesuo & Kurvinen 2011, 101). This linking of blog to buying process can be seen in Figure 4.





Figure 4 Corporate blog attached to buying behavior of B2B customer (adapted from Kortesoja & Kurvinen 2011, 106-107)

## 4 SUCCESSFUL WAYS TO EXECUTE CONTENT MARKETING FOR B2B COMPANIES

There is a lack of academic research regarding how B2B companies can conduct digital content marketing successfully. However, there is some literature describing the components of digital content marketing planning process, blogging strategies, and social media success factors. Next, the digital content marketing plan, blogging strategies, and best practices with social media are introduced. The digital content marketing plan chapter lists many of the best practices that apply for the whole digital content marketing.

### 4.1 Digital content marketing plan

Having an explicit content plan takes companies' digital communication to a more strategic level (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 66). The reason that a content plan is so beneficial for companies is due to the fact that social media has become more popular and there are more and different kinds of platforms. Therefore, the amount of content is increasing at an accelerated speed. Companies are using several platforms to publish content. The content plan is "the assembling idea" for all of these platforms. Also, there is a need for consistent communication in order to reach divergent target audiences on different platforms. Continuous communication is the only way for companies to create ongoing contact with their target audiences and therefore brand themselves as thought leaders in the industry. Being branded as a thought leader in the industry means that when it is time to make a purchase decision, the company is a top-of-mind brand (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 71-72; 82; 90). According to a survey made by Content Marketing Institute for small-sized B2B businesses who use content marketing, only 39% of the respondents said that they have a content marketing strategy that is documented, whereas 47% said that they have a content marketing strategy, but it is not documented. 12% of the respondents stated that they do not have a content marketing strategy (Pulizzi 2015). In this study, terms *content plan*, *content marketing plan*, *content marketing strategy*, and *content strategy* are considered to be interchangeable.

Instead of having fixed-term campaigns, it is more beneficial to publish content that evokes that conversation and engagement even months after the content is released online (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 90). Scott (2010, 119) emphasizes that companies should forget their own product or service and focus their attention on their target audiences. Also, when creating content, companies need to focus on the language they are using. They should use the same terms that their audience is using. Firstly, it is important in order to build a positive relationship with the potential buyer, but secondly and more

importantly buyers will use their own terms when searching for information. The content cannot be found if it does not use the same language as the target audience (Scott, 2010, 128). One important question to consider is whether to produce content in-house or outsource the content production. Jefferson & Tanton (2013, 202) list the advantages and disadvantages of both options.

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Producing valuable content in-house	Cost efficiencies Known quality This is where the subject matter knowledge lies	May not have skills in-house Takes time Too close to the subject matter to give an independent view
Outsourcing valuable content production	Saves time – focus on core capabilities Specialist skills Independent, third party view	Higher cost Unknown quality Takes time to gain the specialist knowledge of the business

Table 1 Advantages and disadvantages of producing content in-house and outsourced (Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 202).

Next the key concepts of the content plan will be described more in detail.

*Themes.* The key question is which kind of subjects the company wants to generate conversation with and which themes are interesting to the target audiences. The examination of key themes is important, since if companies are communicating only about their products or services, they will seem to be too advertising-oriented. This means that identification of broader themes is beneficial. However, the themes should be somehow connected with the company's offering and be useful both to the company and the target audience (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 136-138; 145).

*Channels.* Choosing the right channels and producing the right kind of content for each channel is crucial. The company does not have to be visible on every possible digital channel. Channels are chosen according to the target audience that the company wants to reach. It is important not to duplicate the same message on every channel, since the target audience and the nature of the channel are different on each channel. Different channels have different roles and audiences (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 136; 141-145; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 78; Ramsay 2010, 259).

In the context of digital content marketing, social media networks are considered mainly as content distribution channels. According to research conducted by Content

Marketing Institute, small-sized B2B companies consider LinkedIn to be the most effective distribution channel (60% of the respondents think that way), whereas Twitter and YouTube were the second most effective channels (56% and 44%, respectively). Facebook was considered to be an effective channel only by 28% of the respondents (Pulizzi 2015). Jefferson & Tanton (2013, 76) suggest that Twitter is the best channel.

*Goals.* All planning should start with concrete, measurable goals, including how they will be measured. The goals should guide the creation of content. A goal can be, for example, visibility, greater awareness, or leads. In order to reach this goal, a company has to create content that spreads easily in different digital channels. The content strategy must always be consistent with the business goals of the company. Those goals can be, for instance, increasing sales, increasing market share or being a thought leader (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 67; 136; 143-145; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 192-193). Rose and Pulizzi (2011, 17) argue that ROI (return of investment) is not a suitable for evaluating content marketing. Instead, they suggest measuring for example engagement, awareness before and after conducting content marketing, or tracking the difference in sales.

*Measurement.* Marketers need to choose the right metrics that take advantage of available data and give insights as to how the content plan can be adjusted (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 150). Content Marketing Institute suggests four different types of metrics for measuring digital content marketing: consumption metrics, sharing metrics, lead generation metrics, and sales metrics. These metrics are divided further into specific metrics. Consumption metrics includes downloads, social chatter, and views for pages, videos, or documents. Sharing metrics include likes, shares, tweets (in Twitter), +1s (in Google+), pins (in Pinterest), forwards, and inbound links. Lead generation metrics include form completions and downloads, e-mail subscriptions, blog subscriptions, blog comments, and conversion rate. Sales metrics include online and offline sales, manual reporting and anecdotes (Content Marketing Institute 2012). Jefferson & Tanton (2013, 205-206) list tools that can help measure the results of content marketing: Google Analytics, blog software analytics, e-mail marketing software statistics, social media tools, and link shorteners such as bit.ly provide some basic statistics.

*Target audiences.* The key is to define the most important audiences, what kind of content they are interested in, and how they consume content. By understanding why the audience meets the content made by the company, the company is able to plan more effective and reachable digital communication (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 81; 87; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 178).

*A team who conducts content marketing.* Rose & Pulizzi (2011, 101-104) emphasize the importance of gathering a team among employees who will conduct content marketing. They suggest that the content marketing team consists of at least the following team members: 1) The manager, i.e. Chief Content Officer (CCO). This person is responsible for managing and executing the whole content marketing initiative. 2) The managing

editor(s). The editors edit the content made by various employees. They also help employees to develop and write content. 3) Content producers. This refers to persons who are creating the platform where the content is presented, such as web page designers. 4) Chief "listening" officer (CLO). This person monitors social media and other content channels and maintains ongoing conversation. In practice only about 49% of small-sized B2B businesses utilize this kind of team, 14% consider having one, and 37% do not have plans to establish one (Pulizzi 2015).

*Editorial calendar.* This is an editorial plan for each distribution channel, that contains a list of what is being published, assigned writers and editors, meta data, such as target persons, SEO keywords, or content type, and dates for creation and publishing. The editorial calendar can also include tone and desired action and can be modified according to each advertiser's needs (Rose & Pulizzi 2011, 82, 105-106; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 200-201; Hakola & Hiila 2012, 153; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 81).

## 4.2 Blogging strategies and best practices

The other possible way to conduct successful digital content marketing is to utilize the results of blogging research, since blogging is one essential part of digital content marketing. Lee et al. (2006, 320-322) introduce five different corporate blogging strategies. The five strategies are categorized into bottom-up and top-down blogging based on the officiality of the blog, i.e. does the company allow the employee blog or not. A bottom-up strategy allows any employee to blog, whereas in top-down strategy there are selected persons to create content. In the bottom-up, *company-wide strategy*, companies encourage all their employees to blog and there may be several different blogs for different purposes.

Top-down strategies are called promotion, group, individual and top management commitment strategies. *The promotion blogging strategy* is controversial because they are often too commercial and lack human voice and authenticity. Usually the company that utilizes this strategy has only one blog and the purpose is to advertise their products or events. *The group blog approach* takes advantage of expertise of a select group of employees. The purpose of this strategy is to provide quality content on a specific, niche topic. This strategy may minimize the risks of personal blogs. In the *individual blogger strategy*, a few employees from different parts of the organization write their own blogs. The objective of this strategy is to establish personal branding and thought leadership. One possible threat in this strategy is the low number of readers. Finally, the *top management commitment strategy* represents blogs written by company executives. The goal is to evoke thought leadership or communicate with various stakeholders. In the study by Lee et al. (2006, 327-328), most Fortune 500 firms use top-down blogging

strategy, demonstrating that they want to maintain a high level of control. They also found out that companies that utilize bottom-up blogging strategies usually focus on customer service and product development, whereas companies using top-down strategy aim to achieve thought leadership or promote their content.

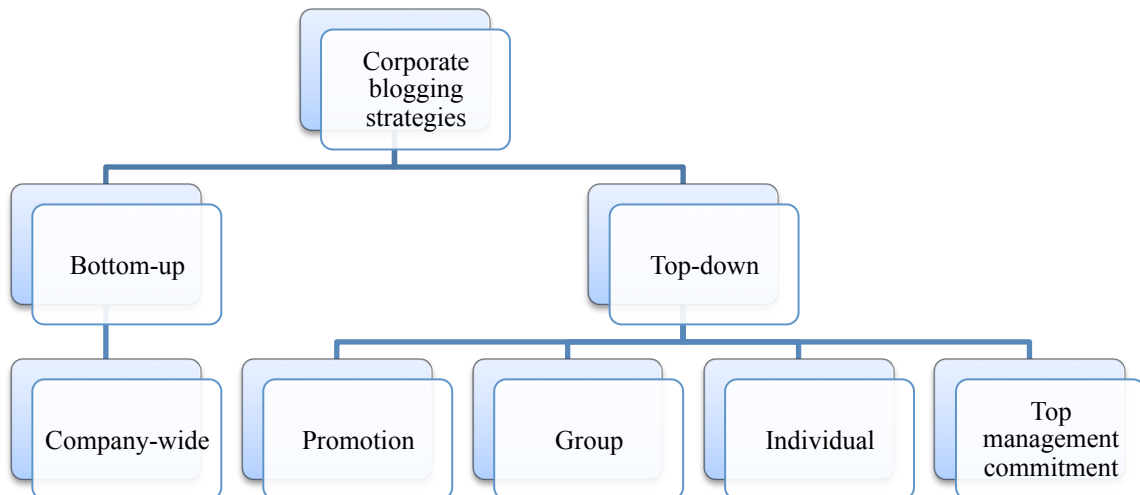


Figure 5 Corporate blogging strategies (Lee et al. 2006, 320-322)

According to various authors, some of the best practices with blogging are the following:

- The title of an article is important. The title of the article needs to capture the reader's attention instantly and convince them to click (Halligan & Shah 2014, 32; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 84).
- The content of the blog article could optimally be a numbered list, such as "8 Quick Tips to Search Google Like an Expert". Content like this is more effective because they are fast to read, they add structure, and provide a way to deliver a lot of information. However, the optimal number of points is a maximum of ten (Halligan & Shah 2014, 33; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 61).
- Authenticity. Being artificial is one of the worst mistakes in blogging (Lee et al. 2006, 329; Scoble & Israel 2006, 181-183).
- The writing style should be at the same time passionate and professional (Scoble & Israel 2006, 209-210, 231).
- Bloggers for the company blog can give new insights about their company culture and therefore enhance the trustworthiness of the company (Lee et al. 2006, 329).

- Too promotional or selling language is not recommended. Instead, the focus is to help the readers (Scoble & Israel 2006, 182; Holliman & Rowley 2014, 281; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 38; Ramsay 2010, 259).
- Too neutral or cautious writing style should be avoided (Scoble & Israel 2006, 199).
- If powerful people make links to the content of the company, the company can achieve much greater reach to the content of the company and enhance their brand as an expert. In addition, sharing buttons are highly recommended as they make it easier for individuals to share the content (Scoble & Israel 2006, 211; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 62).
- It is recommended to enable comments. A successful blog is not a one-way PR channel but a place for dialogue. Marketers have to accept that they cannot control what is commented on the blog (Scoble & Israel 2006, 211-212; Halligan & Shah 2014, 35). Furthermore, there should be a call to action for readers to leave comments, for example by asking a question in the end. More comments might convince new readers that the content is good and worth reading. It is also important to answer the comments in order to stimulate conversation (Halligan & Shah 2014, 34-35; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 61).
- Inviting guest bloggers, such as local professors, or analysts in the industry, is beneficial, since they might provide new fresh content for the audience (Halligan & Shah 2014, 30-31; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 92).
- The optimal frequency of posting new content is at least once a week (Halligan & Shah 2014, 31; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 63). In addition, it is important to be consistent and produce content on an ongoing basis (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 88).

### **4.3 Best practices with social media**

This subchapter lists suggestions from the literature how to use social media successfully in the digital content marketing context. First, it is important to understand that social media is not about the company, but the audience. The main goal of social media is to create relationships with other people who are potential customers. Companies can build relationships with customers by giving out resources or information. It is beneficial to actively provide solutions to their potential clients' problems and be genuinely interested in them (Fouts 2009, 27-28). The challenge for companies is that social media is based on dialog and reciprocity. The audience is not interested in dull or predictable content. In order to create engaging, valuable content, companies need to forget traditional, one-way marketing and shift from campaign oriented thinking to continuous content creation. The companies can now think themselves as publishers who continuously

create different kinds of content to different target audiences. When the company is acting as a publisher, the company starts to conduct two-way communication in digital channels, i.e. evoke conversation and create dialogue (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 28-29; Holliman & Rowley 2014, 280). One key function of social media in the digital content marketing context is to share content that a company has created (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 19-20). Yet, different social media channels need different approaches as they are different in nature (Hakola & Hiila 2012, 136; 141-145; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 78; Ramsay 2010, 259). Next, the possible best practices with Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter will be discussed.

As for the best practices for Facebook, Jefferson and Tanton (2013, 85-87) and Content Marketing Institute (2014) note that as Facebook is used mainly for entertainment, it calls for a different strategy than other social media networks. The content on Facebook should be beautiful, funny, or inspiring. Further, it is suggested that Facebook company page should be updated at least once a day but the optimal amount depends on the company (Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 85-87; Content Marketing Institute 2014; Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 131). Halligan and Shah (2014, 71-73) state that a Facebook page is essential for a company and can be seen as an extension for a company web site. In addition, Facebook provides an ideal marketing platform combined with a large amount of users. The marketing platform allows marketers to target their advertisements by demographics or interests. Companies can promote their posts or Facebook page even with a very limited budget. However, as increasingly more advertisers want to advertise on Facebook, the cost of advertising is increasing too (Lafferty 2014).

As stated in chapter 2.3.1, Facebook is divided into organic and paid reach (Relevance 2015). Organic reach is important because according to studies, over 90% of the people who like a company page will never return the page. Instead, they read and interact with the content in their news feed (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 130). However, it has been claimed that Facebook decreases the organic reach of the companies intentionally in order to get more advertising money from them (Relevance 2015). Another possible reason is that there is simply so much information coming to news feeds every day (Beck 2015). The organic reach has decreased from 16% in 2013 to only 2% this year (Zara 2015). This means that on average, only 2% of the people who have liked a company page are likely to see a post by the company in their news feed organically. Socialbakers studied organic reach even further and concluded that between October 2014 and February 2015, the average organic reach for posts including text was 5.8%, for the posts including photos was 3.7%, and for posts including video was 8.7% (Beck 2015). From this study, it can be concluded that currently Facebook favors posts that include video. Facebook's strategy is to become a more video-focused platform in five years (Beck 2015). For marketers, the practical implication is to use posts that include video if they are not willing to spend money for advertising in Facebook. However, in order to



reach even 20% of the people who have liked the page, companies have to utilize Facebook advertising.

The content strategy for LinkedIn is different from the other social media networks because of its special characteristics as a business-oriented social media network. Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 108) emphasize the importance of a completed company profile and organized content sharing. Content Marketing Institute (2014) and Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 103) acknowledge that the groups in LinkedIn can be utilized for discussing industry trends and following relevant conversations. This can be one way to raise thought leadership position. Jefferson and Tanton (2013, 83) suggest that LinkedIn is a great platform to promote deeper content, such as leadership-type articles, industry guides, or white papers. Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 102) agree that company updates should be business-focused. Also, LinkedIn should be utilized less frequently than for example Facebook; a couple of times a week is the best strategy (Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 83). When advertising content on LinkedIn, Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 107) suggest to start the process by thinking the potential prospect and target advertisements according to the demographics of that ideal prospect.

Twitter is more focused on dialogue and knowledge sharing than pushing one-way messages or self-promotion. Twitter helps to build relationships and is therefore an optimal platform for B2B businesses. It is an ideal place to make links to blog posts or other valuable content (Ramsay 2010, 260; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 70; Content Marketing Institute 2014). Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 116; 120) stress that it is important to choose the company name as a Twitter username because of search engine optimization. Anything that helps the company to be found from search engines is valuable. The same applies for keywords in tweets; appropriate keywords show up in potential customer's search engine results.

Many B2B companies struggle with Twitter because they do not know how to act in Twitter. One easy way to start is to follow regularly the terms, or hashtags, that are important for the company's industry (Bodnar & Cohen 2012, 109). Jefferson and Tanton (2013, 82) suggest that companies post at least three Tweets a day: "one that offers up their own content, one that shares somebody else's, and one that's part of a conversation". Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 103) introduce similar type of rule for all social sharing. They call it 10-4-1 rule: 10 updates share someone else's content, four updates are about the company who is posting and one is a link to a landing page.

## 5 METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Research approach

This chapter will explain the research design and approach. Further, the different methodological choices will be presented and justified. The purpose of this study is *to examine how business-to-business companies utilize digital content marketing and what are the best practices with the selected digital content marketing channels*. This study is a qualitative type of research because the aim is to gain in-depth understanding of the researched subject. There are two reasoning approaches when conducting research: deductive and inductive. The deductive approach is based on theory whereas inductive research is based on examining empirical data (see e.g. Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2007, 57, Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2002, 95-99; Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 160; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 136; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 82). In inductive research, the researcher progresses from individual observations into more generalized arguments (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 83). The inductive approach is commonly used in qualitative research (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 160; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 83). Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, 26) suggest that inductive, theory building approach is justified for research topics that do not have a great deal of related theory because of the lack of preceding research. In this study, inductive approach was chosen because of the subject has not been researched extensively and the fact that inductive approach is ideal for research topic that has not been researched substantially, such as the phenomena of this study, digital content marketing in the B2B context.

In qualitative research, the researcher can combine different research approaches such as combining their own observation with interviews (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, 23). Using different methods in study increases the validity of the research (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 228). The concept of combining different methods, data or theories in research is called triangulation (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 69; Denzin 1978, 28). In this study, data and method triangulation are utilized. A part of this study was a pre-research during which the researcher observed and analyzed blogs and social media channels of different marketing communications agencies. This pre-research helped to select the case companies, as the objective was to choose agencies that currently utilize digital content marketing and seem to conduct it quite successfully. The pre-research also contributes to sub-question one, examining what is digital content marketing for the case companies. Findings of this pre-research are presented in chapter six as part of the overall findings.

The concept of research strategy refers to the collection of methodological decisions. Three traditional research strategies are experimental study, survey study and case study

(Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 128, 130). Case study can be described as an empirical inquiry that studies one or several cases in order to produce detailed information of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin 2003, 13-14; Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 130-131; Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 25). Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, 25) note that case studies are the starting point for inductive research approach. As stated before in this chapter, this research has inductive, theory building approach. When the aim of the study is theory building, multiple cases often yield more testable and robust theory than studying single cases (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, 27). Multiple case study was chosen as the research strategy because the aim of the study is a holistic understanding of the researched phenomenon that is digital content marketing (see e.g. Stake 2005, 443; Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2007, 130-131, 157; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 59).

This is an exploratory study. Exploratory studies are used especially when a research phenomenon is not yet researched extensively and focuses on describing and exploring different circumstances, situations or processes. It is usually associated with *what* type of research questions (Gray 2009, 35-36; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 39). The three research questions in this study are the following:

- 1) What is digital content marketing?
- 2) Why do B2B companies use digital content marketing?
- 3) How should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media?

Next chapters will present the selection process of case companies, data collection, analysis of the data, and evaluation of the reliability and quality of the study.

## 5.2 Selection of the case companies

In qualitative research, the selection of case companies should be selected premeditatedly and based on theoretical aspects, not by randomly sampling. Companies should also be similar enough so that the researcher can form a new theory or verify an existing theory (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 160; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 122). Further, as the research approach is inductive and the purpose is to develop theory, theoretical sampling is suggested by Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, 27). Pre-research was conducted in order to choose suitable case companies. During pre-research, the researcher observed what social media channels are currently used by the interviewed companies. The selection of case companies was done by purposive sampling and thus utilizing the researcher's prior knowledge of digital marketing and the marketing communications industry in Finland (Neuman 2012, 149). The aim was to find companies that are at least a somewhat homogeneous group. According to Saunders et al. (2007, 207), homo-

geneous sampling is a subtype of purposive sampling. The other subtypes are extreme case, heterogeneous, typical case, and critical case.

The selected case companies are either small- or medium-sized marketing communications agencies based in Helsinki and Turku. They could also be described as knowledge-intensive business services or KIBS (Aarikka-Stenroos & Jaakkola 2012, 16). The criteria for selecting companies were the following: 1) The company is a digital-focused marketing communications agency; 2) the company has a blog or blog-like articles on their website; and 3) the company is active in social media, such as Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter. Those social media networks were selected since they are the three most popular social media networks in the B2B context (Michaelidou et al. 2011, 1155-1156; Brennan & Croft 2012, 113). All of the case companies conducted digital content marketing at the time of the research and the researcher considers them to be advanced in that field. Below is introduction to each of the case companies.

**Kurio** is a social media agency that offers research, training, public speaking, strategic planning, and creative planning services. They describe themselves as open-minded, academic and born digital. The company was founded in 2012 and currently employs five people (LinkedIn - Kurio).

**Valve King** is a holistic marketing communications agency that is part of Valve Group. In 2014, the marketing communications team Valve was combined with the advertising agency King. Nowadays, they provide their company customers insight analysis, brand strategy, digital strategy, social media planning, advertising planning, company and packaging designing, video and film producing, as well as analytics. Valve King consists of 20 employees (Valve King 2014).

**Vapa Media** is a content strategy agency that was founded in 2010. They offer auditing, concept planning, strategy planning, content creation and content marketing campaigns. Vapa Media's goal is "to activate our customers' digital environments and find the best ways and platforms to communicate their digital message". Currently they have 19 employees (LinkedIn – Vapa Media).

**Digitys** is a marketing communications agency that has a strong focus on inbound marketing. They help their clients to respond to the changed buying process by providing them with inbound marketing services, consulting, strategy planning, training, and digital media advertising. Their services are suitable specifically to knowledge-intensive B2B companies. They have four employees (Digitys 2014, 31; LinkedIn - Digitys).

**Company A** is a digital media agency that specializes in search engine marketing and creating responsive websites. The company was founded 2009, and currently they have three offices in Finland and 63 employees.

**Grapevine** is a goal-oriented social media agency that was founded in 2009. Currently they have nine employees. Their services include social media training, community management, content marketing, consulting, social media advertising, web pages,

strategy, Facebook contests and apps creation, and digital marketing campaigns (LinkedIn – Grapevine; Grapevine).

**Dingle** is a marketing communications agency that specializes in social business. Most of their services include social media, process consulting, concept planning, and creating content and technology. Dingle was founded in 2009 and employs 60 persons (Dingle; LinkedIn – Dingle).

It is important to notice that in purposive sampling, the selected cases are not representative of the entire population or the industry (Neuman 2012, 149). In qualitative research, the criteria for scientificity of data is not the amount but the quality of it. The aim was not to find statistical generalizations but to find the most informative material for the research questions (Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen 2005, 273; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 18). Therefore in qualitative research, only a relatively small sample is researched (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 18). Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen (2005, 273) suggest even ruling out the idea of sampling in qualitative research because sampling is more suitable for quantitative research approach. Hirsjärvi et al. (2007, 177) mention a concept of saturation. When there is enough data, new cases do not provide any novel information regarding the research problem. At this point saturation has occurred and there is no need for researching new cases (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 62; Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 177). After conducting seven interviews in late 2014, the researcher felt that the point of saturation was reached.

### **5.3 Data collection**

The data collection method should be chosen according to research questions (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 200; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 77). As humans are preferred as the instruments of information collection in qualitative research and acquiring information from experts suits research questions, the main research method chosen to this study is interviewing (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 160). In this study, the data is collected from the case companies by first observing their social media channels, including blogs, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn and then interviewing the company representatives who are closely working with the digital content marketing management.

According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008, 80), there are three different categories of interview: 1) structured and standardized; 2) guided and semi-structured; and 3) unstructured and open interview. In this study, semi-structured interviewing approach is utilized and the face to face interviews were conducted in November and December in 2014. The interview questions can be found at Appendix 1 (in Finnish) and Appendix 2 (in English). All the interviews were recorded with smartphone and transcribed later to Microsoft Word program. Kvale (1996, 5-6) defines semi-structured interview as “an

interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena”. In this type of interview, there are the same, predetermined questions for every interviewee but the interviewer has an option to decide the wording and the order of questions according to the situation.

The selected 10 companies were approached by e-mail stating the purpose of the research and why they were chosen as case companies for this study. A total of 8 companies answered and were willing to participate in the research. However, one of them discontinued communication and was therefore dropped from this research. The case companies were interviewed individually in November and December 2014. A semi-structured interview method was used. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for further analysis (Neuman 2012, 149). Interviewees were able to choose where the interviews were conducted. Most of them were held in companies’ offices. One of them was conducted in a cafeteria. Table 2 summarizes the names and titles of the case company representatives, when and where the interview was held, and the duration of the interview.

<b>Company</b>	<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Time &amp; Place</b>	<b>Duration</b>
Kurio	Jari Lähdevuori	Co-Founder & Creative Director	24.11.2014, Helsinki	35 minutes
Valve King	Topi Manu	CEO	24.11.2014, Helsinki	30 minutes
Vapa Media	Ida Hakola	CEO & Partner	9.12.2014, Helsinki	20 minutes
Digitys	Joonas Rinne	CEO	26.11.2014, Turku	35 minutes
Company A	Person B	Content and Communications Strategist	28.11.2014, Turku	30 minutes
Grapevine	Marika Siniaalto	CEO	1.12.2014, Helsinki	30 minutes
Dingle	Jesse Ketonen	Account Manager	1.12.2014, Helsinki	35 minutes

Table 2 The case companies and dates of the interviews

The advantage of a semi-structured interview is that while the questioning is systematic and thorough, the interview remains quite informal and conversational (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 82; Eskola & Suoranta 1998; 87; Robson 2002, 270). In addition, the researcher has an opportunity to clarify the answers of the respondents, following up with interesting responses and probe for more information. While not originally planned to be a part of the interview, such probing can bring up relevant information for the research questions and thus helping the objectives of the study (Gray 2009, 370-373; Robson 2002, 272-273). A possible downside of a semi-structured interview is that the interview may bring up material that is not relevant to the study and interviewing in

general is time-consuming (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 36; Robson 2002, 273). Additionally, it is challenging to standardize the behavior of the interviewer, i.e. for him or her to ask the questions exactly in the same way from all the respondents. That problem is called as *the interviewer effect* or *the interviewer bias* (Gray 2009, 376).

Silverman (2006, 117-148) describes three different typologies of interview studies: positivist, emotionalist, and constructionist. Each of them has a different approach and different types of research questions and thus interview questions. The positivist interview research approach is interested in facts, or the true picture, that can be obtained through various standardized information questions with random samples. The emotionalist approach is better if the researcher is interested in participants' experiences. The interview questions are not as informational, but they are trying to capture participants' perceptions, emotions, conceptions etc. With an emotionalist approach, open and unstructured interviews are usually utilized. Third, constructionist interview research approach focuses on the meanings that are outcomes of the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. In this research, emotionalist interview research approach is chosen because the focus is on the perceptions and experiences that the interviewees have had when conducting digital content marketing. The defect of emotionalist approach can be that "interviews do not tell us directly about people's experiences but instead offer indirect representations of those experiences" (ibid, 117).

Ethics of the interviewing were taken into account while conducting this research. Kvale (1996, 153-154) lists three important points to take into consideration while interviewing. The first is informed consent. The interviewees should be aware of the purpose of the interview. All the interviewees of this research were informed about the purpose and aims of this research. Also, respondents were told that they had the opportunity not to answer to any question that made them feel uncomfortable. The second point is confidentiality. In order to secure confidentiality of the respondents, the interviewees had an option to answer anonymously. One of the respondents chose to do so and therefore I will refer to this company as "Company A" and the interviewee as *Person B*. Additionally, the responses of the interviews were handled confidentially all the time. The third point is possible consequences of the interview, such as changes in self-concept. This point was not emergent in this research since the interviews were not too personal or needed sensitive information to be revealed.

## 5.4 Analysis of the data

Yin (2002, 116-117) introduces five techniques to analyze case studies. The first four are meant to both single-case and multiple case research whereas the last one is only for multiple-case research. Those techniques are 1) *Pattern matching*, where the researcher

tries to find patterns from interviewing data and compare them with the existing theory; 2) *Explanation building*, where the researcher searches for causal links from the interviews; 3) *Time-series analysis*, where the focus is on tracing when different events have happened; 4) *Logic models*, where chains of events are tried to be arranged on cause-effect patterns; 5) *Cross-case analysis* that does not compare different cases but treats all the cases individually. In this study, mostly pattern matching is applied, as this study is an abductive study. Theory was the starting point for the analysis and the findings were compared to the existing theory throughout the analysis process.

When the purpose of the research is explanatory, usually statistical analysis and conclusions are used. Whereas when the purpose is understanding, qualitative analysis and conclusions are utilized. The most common analyzing methods of qualitative data are dividing data according to different themes or types (coding), content analysis, discourse analysis, critical incident analysis and narrative analysis (Hirsjärvi et al. 2007, 219; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 130; Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 161). There is no standardized way to analyze qualitative data (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 136) and usually analyzing combines different analyzing methods (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 162). Processing qualitative data includes both analysis and synthesis. Analysis categorizes the data and synthesis tries to form a general view and see the phenomenon in a new perspective (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 143).

Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2001, 135-136) stress that analyzing process starts already when gathering data for the research. The interviewer can observe different themes during the interview, for example by noticing how often certain themes occur in the speech of the interviewee. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 130) add that even though multiple cases are used, the analysis begins within each case separately and followed by cross-case analysis where the researcher is comparing similarities and differences in each case. This study has inductive research approach. Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007, 25) emphasize that in order to build theory, the researcher has to circulate through case data, emerging theory, and literature. This circulation took place during the analysis process.

The main part of the analysis of the interviews took place in May, June, and September in 2015. The first part of the analysis was to read actively through all the transcribed interview material and categorize the material according to main themes of this research (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 151; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 143-147). Those main themes are the same as the sub-questions of this research: 1) What is digital content marketing, 2) Why do B2B companies use digital content marketing, and 3) How should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media.

Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 154-156) and Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2001, 141) introduce the concept of thematic index or coding, where the data is split into different themes in order to facilitate analysis. When reading the transcribed interviews, the text is marked according to the different themes. All the interviewing data was organized according to



these themes and made into new text files on computer. Thus, thematic analysis introduced by for example Eskola and Suoranta (1998, 179) was utilized. Thematic analysis is a common method when practical research problem is being studied (*ibid*). In order for thematic analysis to succeed, there has to be interaction between theory and empiric data (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 176). The next step was to start the analysis process by pattern matching that is one type of case analysis suggested by Yin (2002, 116-117). All the quotes were passed to the interviewees before submitting this study in order to verify interpretations and to establish the credibility of the findings. The findings can be found in chapter six.

## **5.5 Evaluation of the reliability and quality of the study**

The starting point in qualitative research is to admit the fact that qualitative research is highly subjective. The main criterion for quality is the researcher and therefore the validity evaluation needs to be applied to the whole research process (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 211; Corbin & Strauss 2008, 32). In quantitative research, criteria for quality are reliability, validity and generalizability (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 291). Because qualitative research is different from quantitative research, evaluating the quality of the research is not straightforward (see e.g. Corbin & Strauss 2008, 297). There are substitutes for reliability and validity in qualitative research, whereas generalizability is not usually possible or even the aim of qualitative research. The researcher is an essential part of the process. The researcher has to be able to document all the relevant decisions he or she has made during the research process. Reliability can be seen in whether all the data has been taken into account, is the data transcribed in a relevant way and do the findings reflect the thoughts of the interviewees (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 188-189). For validity, Hirsjärvi & Hurme and Bloor (1997, in Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 189, 228) suggest triangulation where the researcher combines the data collected through interviews to other available data. The aim is to get consensus in data. According to Kvale (1996, 242), validity in qualitative research can be accomplished by continuous checking. Checking means that the researcher writes explicitly his or her opinion and describes why alternative interpretations are not taken into account. Additional ways to increase to the validity is that the research was done purely on academic and professional interest, not for monetary purposes.

On the other hand, Corbin (in Corbin & Strauss 2008, 301-302) argues that concepts of validity and reliability do not fit to qualitative research. He suggests a new concept of credibility when evaluating qualitative research. Credibility can be defined as “findings are trustworthy and believable in that they reflect participants’, researchers’, and readers’ experiences with the phenomenon but at the same time the explanation is only one

of the many possible plausible interpretations possible from data". In this study, the interview data is combined to secondary data collected from the Internet in order to increase the validity of this study. The secondary data was collected as pre research.

When conducting interview, the quality should be observed during the different stages of the research. Factors contributing to a quality research interview are good interview structure, that the interview is recorded properly and that the interview is transcribed as soon as possible after the interview (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2011, 184-185). This was taken into account in all the stages of interviewing process. As a research method, interviewing presents possible weaknesses for validity and reliability for the research. Yin (2009, 102) notes that interviewees might give only favorable information to the interviewer. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008, 82) point out that all interviews are very different from each other, which makes comparing the empirical materials very difficult.

Case studies aim to capture detailed information about the research phenomenon in question. One problem with case study is generalization as only a few cases are researched. The issue is more evident with one case studies but still applies to multiple-case studies too (Koskinen, Alasuutari & Peltonen 2005, 167; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 125). Therefore there is no possibility for generalization of the findings of this study. Findings of this research may apply to companies in the field of marketing communications but not at any field of business. Another question is that is the data representing (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2001, 60). On the other hand, the aim of qualitative research is not to make statistical generalizations but to describe or understand the research phenomenon (Eskola & Suoranta 1998, 61). However, considering the limits of a Master's Thesis, the researcher thinks that seven interviews provide enough information of the researched topic.

## 6 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the research results of the empirical part of the study. The results will be presented according to the three sub-questions of the research. The first sub-chapter reports how the interviewed marketing communications agencies currently utilize digital content marketing and which digital marketing channels they are using, therefore answering the first sub-question *what is digital content marketing?* The second sub-chapter describes the reasons why the case companies use digital content marketing and the outcomes of conducting digital content marketing, answering the sub-question *why do B2B companies use digital content marketing?* The third sub-chapter presents the best practices with blogging and social media, the aspects of digital content marketing that are being studied in this research. The third sub-chapter answers the sub-question *how should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media?* The citations from the respondents, which were translated from Finnish to English, are written in italics.

### 6.1 Digital content marketing in marketing communications agencies

The interviewed companies had similar conceptions of what digital content marketing is in practice. The following quotes illustrate how each case company currently conduct digital content marketing.

Jari Lähdevuori of Kurio summarizes the concept of digital content marketing by saying the following:

*I connect content marketing to being active and sharing on digital channels, telling something interesting to people for free and therefore generate interest and grow awareness.* –Jari Lähdevuori, Kurio

Topi Manu of Valve King links their goals of digital content marketing to everything that they are doing on their blog and social media:

*We are doing our own content with expert and thought leader angles.*  
–Topi Manu, Valve King

Company A was the only one who mentioned e-mail marketing when discussing about digital content marketing:

*We have mostly focused on our blog where we plan and produce content. Then we are sharing the content on different channels. And we also utilize e-mail by using a newsletter tool. –Person B, Company A*

Vapa Media emphasizes their role as publishers:

*We are quite active publishers through our own web site, we have a blog there that has various different content that our experts are writing and more journalistic content. In addition, we are using social media channels regularly. –Ida Hakola, Vapa Media*

Joonas Rinne of Digtys emphasizes the importance of blogging presents research and guides as part of digital content marketing:

*Blogs are certainly the most important; additionally we are conducting research and producing guides. We are also sharing various content on social media, such as our own content and relevant content from the industry.*

–Joonas Rinne, Digtys

For Marika Siniaalto of Grapevine, content marketing is digital and includes many different forms of content.

*All our content marketing is online, we are producing different digital content, such as blog posts, Slideshare material, infographics, and then we are trying to be invited in different digital publications.*

–Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine

Jesse Ketonen of Dingle emphasizes the importance of reaching the right audience by conducting digital content marketing. He had the most sales-oriented approach of the informants.

*We are constantly trying to reach our core target audience online. That audience include decision makers in marketing, sales, and executives. We believe that the majority of the potential clients are making the decision before they have contacted us or we have contacted them.*

–Jesse Ketonen, Dingle

Many of the respondents noted that conducting digital content marketing is natural to them, as for example Kurio describes itself as a research driven agency:

*We are doing research so much anyway ---, so we are distributing information related to our research in different channels. –Jari Lähdevuori, Kurio*

The other insight is that for many of the agencies, digital content marketing is a cornerstone of everything that they are doing and dominant compared to other marketing communications.

*We can say that it [content marketing] is the major part of everything [that we do], we have experienced that it is the best and the most interesting [type of marketing] for a company like ours, because we really produce this unique and high quality research data, so basically it is quite a good starting point to do that kind of marketing, where you should only arouse the interest of the receiver with your content, so that comes around quite naturally. We have tried several other marketing techniques too, but that [content marketing] is clearly the most central and then maybe PR, when we release some kind of research. But we have used quite minimally any paid advertising, such as campaigns in social media or search engine marketing. –Jari Lähdevuori, Kurio*

*When considering working hours, around 70-80 per cent of our own marketing is content marketing. –Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine*

Further, Jesse Ketonen of Dingle concludes:

*I would see that the whole way of doing in marketing is going towards content marketing. –Jesse Ketonen, Dingle*

Informants at Company A, Dingle, Digitys, Grapevine, and Vapa Media said explicitly that blogging is their most important medium for content marketing. Kurio was the only company to state that they do not have a blog. However, they do have blog-like articles on their website and they do guest blogging for Digitalist Network, MTV, IAB, ProCom, and Markkinointi & Mainonta. This way, they can reach readers in other platforms than their own website and that is clearly contributing to raising awareness of their company, which is their main goal when conducting content marketing. Valve King was also utilizing guest blogging in addition to their own blog on their website.

They guest blog for partnering media and Markkinointi & Mainonta. Dingle also uses guest blogging, or blog partnership as they call it, with IAB and Digitalist Network. However, it is important to note that guest blogging might not be free but a paid platform, which deteriorates its function as a form of content marketing. One characteristic of content marketing is that it is conducted on owned, free media. Joonas Rinne of Digtys discusses the differences of blogging at different platforms and concludes that blogging on the company's own website might be beneficial for the most companies:

*Blog on your own website is always a better idea in a way that it is a owned medium, you have the complete access to that, however if you guest blog to Markkinointi & Mainonta, Talouselämä, or Kauppalehti, there are of course a lot of [readers], but they [blogging on own website and guest blogging] are quite different because in my opinion the other is a paid medium. At least in Finland, very few have a right to guest blog anywhere for free. So usually there is that medium aspect that you have to pay for it in order to get there. However, I do not think that they are mutually exclusive, rather they complement each other, it is a strategic choice. –Joonas Rinne, Digtys*

The basic concept of digital content marketing in B2B marketing communications agencies is the following: they are planning and producing content to their company blogs and then share it on different channels, such as Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. In other words, the blog is “the content hub”, and social media platforms work as distribution channels. However, social media platforms are used also in other functions. It is important to note that different social media platforms need different kinds of messages, as Grapevine elaborates:

*The target group is not changing, rather the genre of the message changes, for example in Facebook it is more like dynamic, a little lighter content, whereas in Twitter it is more like engaging in conversation and so forth. And of course in Twitter there is an additional target group, the press. Every channel has its own goal and own purpose.*

-Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine

Among the interviewed companies, Facebook and LinkedIn were two the most common platforms used. Blogs, Twitter, Slideshare, and LinkedIn were also utilized by almost all of the companies. Table 3 summarizes the current social media platforms that the interviewed companies are using:

Platform	Kurio	Vapa Media	Valve King	Digitys	Company A	Dingle	Grapevine
Blog		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Facebook	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Twitter	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Slideshare	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
LinkedIn	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Instagram	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓
YouTube			✓		✓	✓	✓
Google+					✓	✓	✓
Pinterest		✓					✓

Table 3 Social media platforms that the case companies are using

Grapevine utilizes blogging and is present in eight social media platforms, which is really expansive online presence for a small company of six employees.

*Our content marketing is basically around our blog and other written material, and that material is then distributed through the other media.*

–Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine

The previous quote illustrates the practice of Company A, Dingle, Digitys and Vapa Media as well. One interesting point to note is that Grapevine is present also in Pinterest, a social media platform that is not typically considered as a B2B platform. They have a variety of different boards, digital folders where they can collect different kinds of content, mostly pictures. Those boards were named for example Grapevine’s blog, social media, B2B and social media, Finland social media, tips on social media, Facebook, entrepreneurship, our cases, services, etc. They have 144 followers on Pinterest. You can see Grapevine’s Pinterest profile in Figure 6.

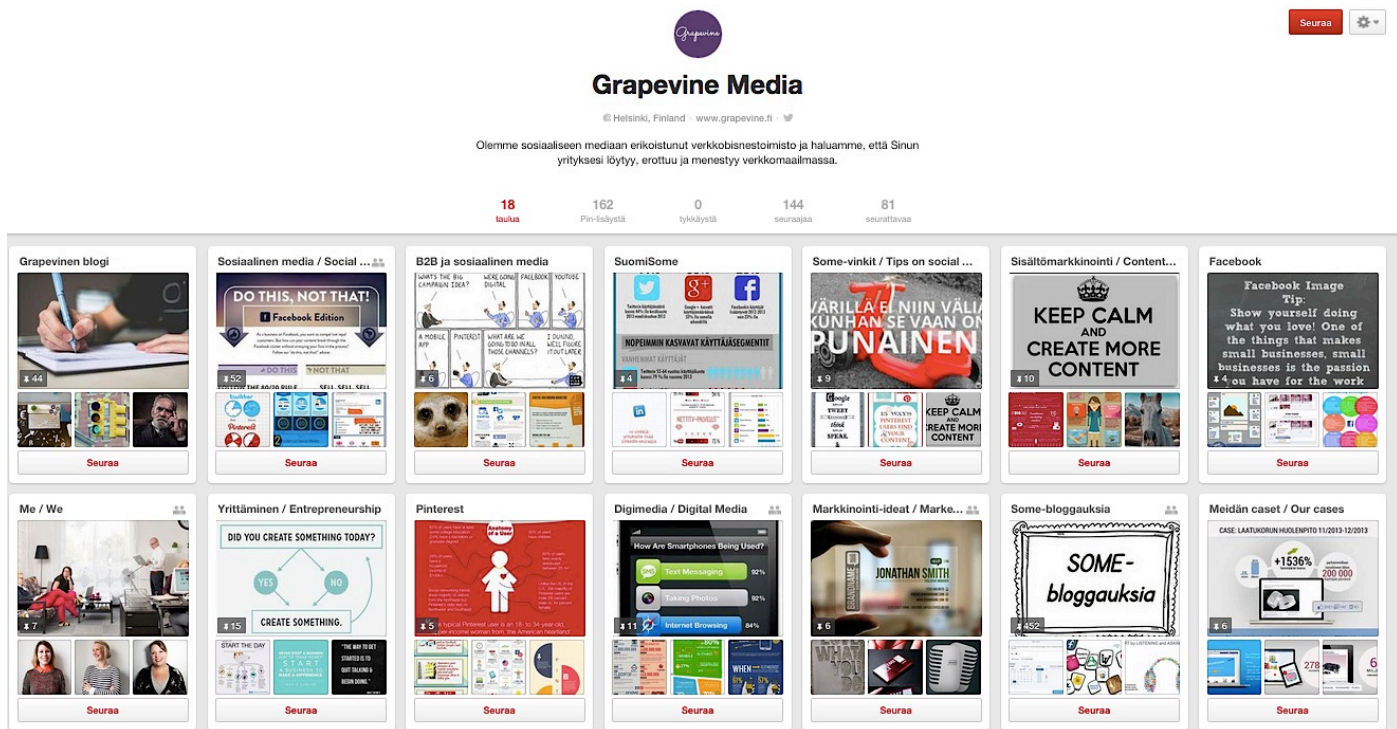


Figure 6 Grapevine on Pinterest

Derived from the answers of the informants, the following digital content marketing funnel can be proposed. A company website, that usually includes a blog, is the content hub where the company wants their target audience to arrive. That target audience is reached on different digital channels, such as social media, search engines, or referral traffic. The visitor might have seen the content on social media and got interested because of the title, or he or she searched the topic from search engines. The aim is that the content will help the visitor in his or her problem. Consequently, one of the following paths might take place:

1. The visitor will remember the company as an expert that helped in his or her problem. This will improve the brand of the company.
2. The visitor will provide his or her contact information to the company, for instance by subscribing to their blog content or ordering a free e-book from them. The company will utilize the contact information by personalized selling. This action might lead to sales.

Figure 7 is summarizing the digital content marketing funnel. The arrow represents the company's website or blog, the content hub. After the prospects have visited the website, they results might be either the sales or improved brand image.



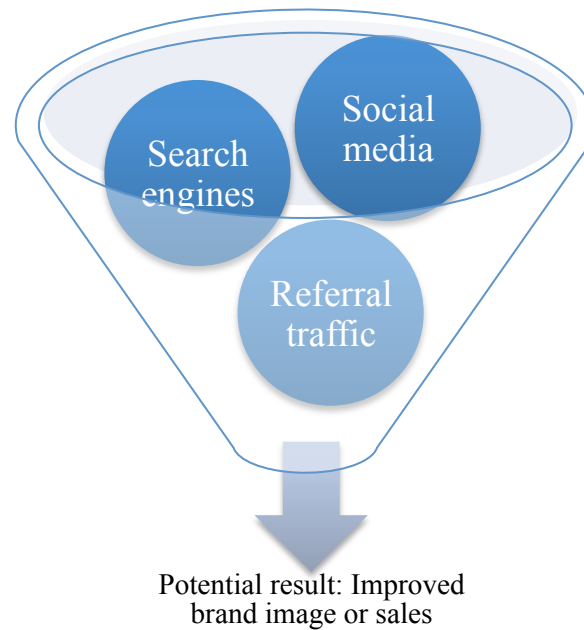


Figure 7 Digital content marketing funnel.

## 6.2 Reasons why marketing communications agencies use digital content marketing

When asked why the case companies conduct digital content marketing, three key themes came up: branding, selling, and demonstration of their own knowledge and skills. Branding and selling are bigger themes as they have different aspects. All three key themes will be introduced more in detail below. Later in this chapter, concrete results of digital content marketing will also be discussed.

All of the interviewed companies mentioned branding as their goal of digital content marketing efforts. For Kurio and Vapa Media, their goal with content marketing was creating awareness, whereas for Valve King, Grapevine, Company A, Dingle and Digitys it was more of branding themselves as thought leaders or experts in the field. Those are two different aspects of branding. The following quotes illustrate both aspects of branding.

*For the most part, it [the goal] is awareness. As we are a new agency, the company is founded around two and half years ago, it [digital content marketing] has been a really important way to create awareness. –Jari Lähdevuori, Kurio*

*[By conducting digital content marketing], we are illustrating our know-how and raising our thought leadership position. –Joonas Rinne, Digitys*

Selling was the ultimate goal for Vapa Media, Grapevine, and Dingle. An important part of selling is lead generation that was one of the goals for Digitys and Company A as well.

*[Our goal is] clients. Sales, of course, but before the sales process happens, we have to be visible, [the potential clients] have to know us and then we have to typically get traffic to our website. Thus, our potential clients get to know us better through our blog and web site.*

-Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine

As marketing communications agencies are knowledge intensive service businesses, it is important to be able to demonstrate the skills and know-how of the company. Demonstration of knowledge and skills can contribute to sales or branding objectives, or both.

*We have been offering these same solutions ourselves, so in a way our well spread reputation is the demonstration of our skills.* -Ida Hakola, Vapa Media

Jesse Ketonen of Dingle links demonstrating their knowledge to sales:

*Yes, we are pursuing that our expertise [is being transmitted through content marketing], I mean that people are hearing from us and know what we are doing, in a way the image of us is that we are experts and that we know what we are doing. And this is supposed to generate into sales, in a way when we are meeting these same people who have seen and read our messages already, it is far easier for us to communicate with them and we get a better reaction from them to us.* –Jesse Ketonen, Dingle

Joonas Rinne of Digitys concludes:

*Everything else [than content marketing] seems to work much worse.*  
–Joonas Rinne, Digitys

One interview question was about concrete results of digital content marketing for the companies. The most common outcomes of conducting digital content marketing were leads and different aspects of branding. When discussing branding, raised aware-

ness was mentioned by Kurio, Vapa Media, and Digitys, thought leadership was mentioned by Vapa Media and Digitys, and Company A and Dingle noted the acquired status as experts. Leads, customer cases, and new customers were positive outcomes for Digitys, Company A, Grapevine, and Dingle. Additional answers included better presence on search engines (Valve King), that the company was asked to be a speaker in a professional event (Dingle), that recruiting is easier (Vapa Media & Company A), and that right kind of people are sharing their content on social media (Valve King). The following quotes are examples of concrete results of digital content marketing.

Ida Hakola of Vapa Media illustrates how digital content marketing helps their recruiting process:

*[Content marketing] clearly helps us to recruit, and our recruiting processes are not that heavy as people already have an idea of what kind of paradigm we present. –Ida Hakola, Vapa Media*

Jari Lähdevuori of Kurio noted that digital content marketing has affected the awareness of Kurio as a company.

*We have had this impact with awareness, that despite the small size and young age of the company, we come across regularly to situations where clients or potential clients have heard about us before --- Even though it is not a really systematic metric of how well we are known in the whole market, it indicates that we have done something right. –Jari Lähdevuori, Kurio*

Topi Manu of Valve King lists search engine optimization and change in the brand image of Valve King as concrete results of digital content marketing:

*One concrete result is increased visibility on Google. –Topi Manu, Valve King*

*We get the right people to share our content on social media, such as Twitter and LinkedIn. These actions are supporting our thought leadership position. –Topi Manu, Valve King*

Joonas Rinne of Digitys emphasizes that digital content marketing has aided them to acquire cheaper sales leads:

*When thinking about hard goals, such as lead generation, we are able to acquire leads much cheaper through content marketing than any other way. –Joonas Rinne, Digtys*

Jesse Ketonen of Dingle states that they have gained an expert image and thus they are invited to be speakers at different professional events and therefore get even more visibility and possible customers. In addition, he also mentions leads like Joonas Rinne of Digtys did.

*That we are asked to be speakers at some event. We have acquired this expert image so media and event organizers are calling us. --- But leads are the most concrete [result] and sales after that. I believe that the image that the client has about us even before meeting us, is really important. –Jesse Ketonen, Dingle*

None of the companies could come up with negative outcomes of conducting digital content marketing, other than the time consuming nature of digital content marketing. Many interviewees mentioned that they would like to use more time to do digital content marketing but they are too busy with their client cases so they do not have enough time to do marketing for their own company.

## **6.3 Best practices of digital content marketing**

### ***6.3.1 Best practices with blogging***

The interviewees were asked to describe what they consider as success factors when blogging in the B2B context. These opinions from the advanced digital content marketers can be seen as suggestions of best practices with blogging. The main themes that came up during the discussions were writing style, choice of title and topic, frequency of posting new content, collaboration with other media, and sharing the blog posts on relevant media. Those topics will be discussed below.

When considering the writing style of a blog, Kurio recommends stating opinions and a thought-provoking writing style, avoiding lukewarm/unexcited writing style. Grapevine adds that the content should be concise and skimmable. Grapevine and Kurio highlighted the importance of the interesting title of the blog post. One important point is to use the words that the audience is using, for example by using the keywords that

they are searching on search engines. This point was stated explicitly by Topi Manu from Valve King.

*You have to give up and use the words that the people are actually using, not maintain your own jargon. –Topi Manu, Valve King*

Marika Siniaalto of Grapevine continues the same idea, stating that the whole blog article should be written from the viewpoint of the reader, not from the company. Company A states that it is essential to establish the concise writing style of the company, the company's own voice.

The themes of blog posts are just as important as the writing style. Dingle, Valve King, Vapa Media and Company A all emphasized the value of reactivity to current topics or news. The faster a company is able to react to prompt issues or news, the better. However, especially Topi Manu of Valve King noted that even though the topic would be very topical, not all topics are suitable for B2B companies to blog about.

*In my opinion, we should not take part to the discussion about the topics that are irrelevant to our field of expertise. –Topi Manu, Valve King*

Vapa Media stated that new viewpoints can be valuable:

*When blogging, you should not just repeat the same things that the others are talking about, but rather provide new viewpoints --- for example simplify complicated phenomena and make them more understandable. –Ida Hakola, Vapa Media*

Grapevine selects the blogging themes from their own expertise:

*For the most part, the themes for our blogging come from our own expertise, our job is to be the first ones to find out. –Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine*

*In a way it is the same that we are telling to our clients, but we are also telling that publicly. We are not hiding the information. –Jesse Ketonen, Dingle*

When asked how many times a week a company should write a new blog post, the interviewees gave different answers. Ida Hakola of Vapa Media says that it depends on the goals of blogging. Company A stated that two times a week would be optimal. Jesse

Ketonen of Dingle suggests that the optimal frequency for blogging depends on the audience. The idea behind this practice is that the company is producing such diverse content that different people find content according to their various needs. Thus, blogging even two times a day is not too much. In conclusion, there is no one definitive answer how frequently a company should blog. Rather, it is more important to focus on the content and quality of the blog posts.

*It is always more important what is the content, because one content interests one person and the other content interests another. People are clicking on blog posts according to their headlines and see whether the content is relevant to them. It is not recommended to produce exactly the same content with every blog post or publish two exactly same kind of blog posts during a day. You should be able to produce various kinds of content that follow your main goals for different target groups. The optimal amount of content really depends on your audience and chosen channels. –Jesse Ketonen, Dingle*

When asked how many persons are blogging in their companies, most of the respondents stated that ideally all the employees should blog. Only Digitys and Company A had appointed one person who is responsible for blogging. Vapa Media and Grapevine had a practice of circulating responsibility, that for instance every week a new person is responsible for producing content. Grapevine introduced this practice in 2012 and lists the benefits as the following: 1) the company is producing content regularly; and 2) the employees are thinking which themes are relevant.

*One [person is responsible] at a time, we have an idea that if we have a company full of experts, in practice all the experts produce content.*

–Ida Hakola, Vapa Media

*On every Monday meeting, it is somebody's turn to use 10 minutes and tell us others some new information or make some unclear topic clear. These themes have to connect with helping our clients. For example, if the advertising tool of Facebook has changed, someone will find out during the previous week that what has changed and writes a preliminary blog post. On Monday, he or she will introduce the blog post and everyone else is learning the change at the same time. If there are no comments or changes, the blog post is published after that.*

–Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine

Two companies, Kurio and Dingle, use a strategy of doing blog collaboration with the organizations that are important to their field of business. Those organizations include for example Digitalist Network and IAB (The Interactive Advertising Bureau). Kurio does not have a blog on their own web site, but rather go where the audience is, such as on Digitalist Network, IAB, MTV Spotti, ProCom (The Finnish Association of Communication Professionals), and Markkinointi & Mainonta. Dingle has its own blog on the company website but practices blog collaboration with IAB and Digitalist Network as well in order to reach more people and increase their brand as being experts in the field.

*At the moment, we are doing blog collaboration with IAB and Digitalist Network. In my opinion, this is a rational model [for a company like ours]. We are blogging at platforms that gather the people of our field. MTL (The Finnish Association of Marketing Communications Agencies) could also start this kind of blog collaboration with the companies.*

–Jesse Ketonen, Dingle

*The reason of not having a blog of our own is that we rather go to platforms where the audience is than asking them to come to us. We have previously blogged at Digitalist Network and IAB, and done collaboration with MTV's blog Spotti, ProCom, and Markkinointi & Mainonta. Of course we have pursued to use various channels and therefore have been present in many places. –Jari Lähdevuori, Kurio*

One important practice after blogging is to distribute the content across different channels. Most companies utilize their own social media channels for distributing blog posts. Digtys, Grapevine and Vapa Media emphasized this practice explicitly. Furthermore, Digtys, being an SEO- and SEM-focused company, highlighted the importance of search engine optimization and that the content should be discoverable on search engines.

*The other important point is that how you can gain readers to your blog, you are taking care of distribution on social media, SEO, and how to be found on search engines. –Joonas Rinne, Digtys*

*Good content marketing requires two main things: Valuable content and good distribution plan. It is important that you promote your content and do not just leave it there for someone to accidentally find it. –Ida Hakola, Vapa Media*

*Do not forget to tell forward in different channels.* –Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine

In conclusion, most of the interviewed companies suggested that all the employees should take at least some responsibility for blogging. One concrete example to keep the blogging process ongoing is to include blogging as a topic in weekly meetings. The best themes to blog about are timely topics that affect the target audience of the company. When writing the blog, the writer should take account of search engine optimization, such as using the words that their audience is using when searching from the search engines. The typical mistake is to write the blog post from the viewpoint of the company, however it is more beneficial to think from the viewpoint of the reader and what is the benefit for the reader when he or she reads the blog post. After the blog post is finished and published, it is important to share it on relevant digital media, where the audience can be reached. The most common digital media for this are Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

### **6.3.2 Best practices with social media**

The best practices with social media were collected the same way as the best practices with blogging. The informants were asked what practices in social media they perceive to be beneficial in the B2B context. The importance of target group thinking and goal setting were emphasized by many respondents. Grapevine and Vapa Media stated that the first step with social media is to define the goal to each social media channel.

*The first thing is to define the goals for each channel and procedure, and then make a plan according to those goals.* –Marika Siniaalto, Grapevine

According to Grapevine, the success factors in social media could be consistent presence on social media, production of the content, monitoring the results, and analyzing the past. Dingle adds the aspects of employee advocacy and social selling. In the B2B business, personal relationships are important. By sharing their company's content, the employees of the company can increase the credibility of the company in the eyes of current and potential customers.

*I think that it is important to choose your own social media channels where you believe that you can affect your target audience. Further, you must think about what kind of content your target audience will resonate*



*with. --- And especially in the B2B context, I would consider employee advocacy and social selling, that how you can engage your own employees to the content creation process and sharing because personal relationships are important in B2B sales. Employees are media.*

–Jesse Ketonen, Dingle

Most of the respondents highlighted the importance of target group thinking: what does their target group need and want and where they can be reached from? These observations should define the social media channel selection and the message.

*The target group thinking is the most important practice; that you know your target group, know how those people use different communication channels.* –Ida Hakola, Vapa Media

*It is important to choose your own channels, where you believe that you can affect your target group. You also have to figure out what kind of content is appealing to your target group.* –Jesse Ketonen, Dingle

Kurio recommends to forget channel-centric thinking:

*Not thinking about too much one specific channel but thinking about some specific content and how to harvest everything out of it, posting it to different [digital] channels and reposting it later. The idea is to find new angles to the content and remake it as a new kind of content, with pictures for example. In a way, you shatter your content marketing because the digital media environment is so shattered.* –Jari Lähdevuori, Kurio

Digitys suggests using social media for sharing all kinds of content that is useful for the target group. They list the two worst mistakes on social media: the company talking only about themselves, and the company only providing information and not engaging in conversation with their target group. Digitys pursues to be the information channel for their clients and potential clients.

*Our starting point is that by following us, our followers are able to keep up with our services and the themes that we want to talk about, such as content and inbound. We are gathering news from everywhere according to these themes and share them so that our followers can stay on with the*

*conversation, even though we are not producing all the content by ourselves.* –Joonas Rinne, Digtys

Digtys has established a 10-4-1 rule:

*In practice, if there are for example 15 tweets, 10 of them are something related to our field of business, something different than our own content, four of them are our own content, and one of them contains a clear call to action.* –Joonas Rinne, Digtys

To summarize, only a fragment of shared content on social media should be about the company who is sharing. Rather, most of the content is ideally something that interests or benefits the target audience. This is one of the most profound changes when transiting from outbound to inbound marketing. When considering on which social media channels to be present, the most essential matter to consider is where the audience is spending time and can be reached. Additional best practices include clear goal setting and not forgetting to measure and analyze the results.

## 7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

### 7.1 Discussion of results

The aim of the research was *to examine how business-to-business companies utilize digital content marketing in their own marketing and what are the best practices with the selected digital content marketing channels*. This objective was further divided into three research questions:

- 1) What is digital content marketing?
- 2) Why do B2B companies use digital content marketing?
- 3) How should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media?

As there is a clear research gap on the subject, the contribution of this study is to provide new information about digital content marketing in the B2B context. The purpose of this subchapter is to discuss the findings of this study from the theoretical perspective. In the next subchapters, suggestions for future research, managerial implications and limitations of this thesis will be presented.

The first research question asked what is digital content marketing. This study's empirical part examined how marketing communications agencies perceive digital content marketing and how they currently conduct digital content marketing. There are various ways to conduct digital content marketing, but in this study the research focus was on blogs, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Six out of seven companies utilized blogs in their marketing, all utilized Facebook, six out of seven used Twitter, and all were actively present on LinkedIn. Furthermore, the majority of the case companies were actively present in additional social media channels. The case companies have adapted into the current marketing communications model presented by Pendleton et al. (2012, 158), where companies can approach their potential customers through blogs, social media, and different websites and are open for dialogue and feedback.

The informants perceived digital content marketing quite similarly as stated in the literature. Holliman and Rowley (2014, 270) state that the aim of digital content marketing is to use digital content, such as blog posts or videos, as a mean to draw potential B2B customers to website or social media page. However, the informants emphasized the role of social media as a content sharing platform whereas usually company website or blog was the main target where to draw potential customers. Pulizzi (2015) agrees with this view. According to the literature, the major platforms for distributing content are websites, e-mail, events, search engine marketing, blogs, and social media, of which LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook are considered to be the best channels in the B2B context (Pulizzi 2015; Regalix 2015, 9). The majority of the case companies in this study

perceived blogs to be the center of their content marketing, whereas social media and other digital channels draw potential customers to their blog.

When considering working hours, Grapevine estimated that around 70-80 per cent of their own marketing is content marketing. According to the answers to the interview questions, it can be assumed that the other companies use similar amounts of time to conduct digital content marketing as their own marketing. Most of the informants of the case companies considered that digital content marketing is their most important way to market themselves. These findings are in line with research by Regalix (2015, 3) that concludes that 98% of marketers agree that content marketing is the core of their overall marketing strategy.

The second research question asked why do B2B companies use digital content marketing. For the interviewed companies, the three most important reasons for conducting digital content marketing were different aspects of branding, selling, and demonstration of skills. Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto (2015, 733) noted the importance of digital branding by means of creating digital content and distributing it online. The findings of the empirical part of this study are similar to the digital content marketing goals researched by Pulizzi (2015), Holliman & Rowley (2014, 280-281), and Regalix (2015, 4). The only difference was that respondents in this study did not mention engagement or traffic generation as their goals.

Related to the second research question were the concrete results of digital content marketing. In this study, company representatives mentioned mostly leads and different aspects for branding as concrete results of digital content marketing. Regalix (2015, 5) studied the key benefits of content marketing for B2B marketers. The results were partly the same as for the interviewed companies, the most common three being increase in brand awareness, thought leadership, and lead generation. For example, recruiting was not one of the possible outcomes in the study by Regalix. However, in this study two out of seven respondents mentioned recruiting.

In the literature part of this study, brand equity model by Aaker (1991, 17) was presented. It was suggested that digital content marketing can affect three components of brand equity: brand loyalty, name awareness, and brand associations. From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that digital content marketing improves name awareness and brand associations. Brand loyalty was not mentioned during the interviews. One example of improved name awareness include Jari Lähdevuori of Kurio stating that they have come across regularly to situations where clients or potential clients have heard about them before, despite the small size of the company. Additionally, two company representatives mentioned that recruiting is now easier. Brand associations can include an expert image or a thought leadership position that were mentioned by various informants as concrete results of digital content marketing.

Lead generation and sales can be linked to B2B buying behavior, that was suggested in the literature to be one of the reasons to conduct digital content marketing. A majority of the informants emphasized the viewpoint of the audience when discussing about the possible best practices with digital content marketing or social media channel choices. These findings support notions that this era is “consumer-centric digital age” (Vollmer & Precourt 2008, 5) and that power has shifted from marketers to customers (Goldstein & Lee 2005, 216). Especially Ida Hakola of Vapa Media and Jesse Ketonen of Dingle noted that digital content marketing is suitable for the B2B context because of the characteristics of B2B buying behavior. For instance, they are able to decrease the perceived risk associated with B2B buying as producing digital content is demonstration of their skills. Ellis (2011, 189) states that branding can reduce associated risk, which is prevalent in the B2B buying context, by providing quality assurances to the buyer. It can be assumed that digital content marketing, that is one technique to improve the brand image, could therefore decrease the associated risk.

The third research question asked how should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media. According to the results, the company can blog on their own website (owned media), on some organization’s website or digital media website (paid or earned media), or both. Most of the studied companies chose to blog on their own website, but two companies utilized paid and earned media as well. They argued that they can reach a much wider audience by blogging on different platforms.

This study found that the best practices for blogging include writing from the viewpoint of the reader, i.e. thinking of what benefits or helps the reader, reacting to the current topics or news, and using thought-provoking writing style. This reader viewpoint was noted by various authors in the literature too (Scoble & Israel 2006, 182; Holliman & Rowley 2014, 281; Jefferson & Tanton 2013, 38; Ramsay 2010, 259). The importance of an interesting title came up from the results of this study. Halligan & Shah (2014, 32) also stated that the title is critical for the success of the blog post. Thus, the interviewees and literature agreed in many parts when considering the possible best practices associated with blogging.

Lee et al. (2006, 320-322) list five different company blogging strategies: company-wide, promotion, group, individual, and top management commitment. The blogs of the case companies seemed to utilize either company-wide or group blogging strategies. In a company-wide blogging strategy, anyone in the company is encouraged to blog, whereas in the group blog approach some specialists are chosen to blog. Company A, Vapa Media, and Digitys have chosen employees to produce content, thus using group blogging strategy. Grapevine and Dingle encourage all the employees to blog and are using company-wide blogging strategy.

Jefferson and Tanton (2013, 202) list the advantages and disadvantages of producing content in-house and outsourcing content production. All the case companies had cho-

sen to produce their content in-house, possibly because they are knowledge-intensive service businesses and that they are marketing and communications professionals themselves. They did experience the advantages listed by Jefferson and Tanton: content production is free, quality is high, and they are experts on the field they are blogging about so they find it easy and interesting to produce content. However, they also experienced one of the disadvantages: content production in-house takes time. Almost all of the informants mentioned that digital content marketing takes a lot of time.

Most of the studied companies emphasized the importance of social media for distributing their content marketing content. This function of social media was also noted by Pulizzi (2015) and Jefferson and Tanton (2013, 76). However, social media platforms are used also for other kind of functions. It is important to note that different social media platforms need different kind of messages, as many interviewed companies noted. This is also noted in literature by for example Hakola and Hiila (2012, 136; 141-145); Jefferson and Tanton (2013, 78) and Ramsay (2010, 259). Also, the social media channel decision should be driven by where the ideal audience is present.

## **7.2 Suggestions for future research**

As digital content marketing is still a very insufficiently researched topic, it could be beneficial to study more in-depth and across different industries and also in the B2C context. Because of current trends in marketing and digitalization, it can be predicted that digital content marketing and digital marketing in general will be more researched in the future. As the phenomenon of digital content marketing is under-researched, there are many possible research paths to follow. Some of the possible research ideas are listed below.

It could be interesting to compare the results of digital content marketing practices of other field of business to the results of this research. It can be assumed that the results would be very different because marketing communications agencies have adapted digital content marketing quite well while it could be more challenging to the other industries. It would be beneficial to study whether some companies have tried to utilize digital content marketing but have not been content with the results.

As the case companies in this study can be considered to be experts in the field of digital content marketing, one additional research idea would be to study one of the case companies very intensively and observe even more how they are conducting digital content marketing.

Another research idea is to conduct more in-depth research for each digital content marketing channel. It could be enough for one scientific study to research best practices for example only for Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, or blogs.

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that branding is one of the most common goals when conducting digital content marketing. Lipiäinen and Karjaluoto (2015) linked digital content marketing to digital branding, or *i-branding*. It could be beneficial to study further, how digital content marketing can help digital branding of the company.

The previous ideas are more suitable for qualitative kind of research. However, it is possible to study digital content marketing by quantitative methods too. For instance, it would be interesting to know how many companies in a certain industry have adapted digital content marketing to their marketing processes or interview a large amount of companies about their digital content marketing by conducting a survey.

### 7.3 Managerial implications

According to the results of this research, conducting digital content marketing is recommended in the B2B context. However, quality is more important than quantity. As not all companies are marketing communications agencies, it can be more challenging for some other companies to start doing digital content marketing systematically. If that is the case, it is recommendable to consult content marketing professionals, such as the agencies that are being studied in this research.

However, if the company is confident with their content marketing skills, the following list is a set of guidelines that will help them to conduct digital content marketing successfully.

- In all digital content marketing, it is essential to set a goal for the action, measure the impact, and analyze the results.
- Focus on audience-centric thinking. Content planning process should start from figuring out which themes interest the target audience. Social media channel choices should be based on where the target audience can be reached.
- Think about your company blog as the content hub and social media's one purpose as distributing the content from the company blog. However, social media should never be used only for distributing your own blog content.
- If you get a chance to guest blog in a medium that is relevant to your audience, seize the opportunity to meet your potential customers in different digital platform than your own website. It also raises awareness of the company and can reach potential customers who did not even know your company before. For the marketing industry, these media include for example Digitalist Network, IAB, ProCom, and Markkinointi & Mainonta.

- When blogging, use a thought-provoking writing style, react to current topics and news, use the keywords that the audience is using, and do not forget to write from the viewpoint of the reader.
- A circulating responsibility for blogging might be a beneficial approach to blogging especially if the company is a knowledge-intensive service business and therefore the company is full of experts. This decreases the risk that blogging is the responsibility of only one person; he or she might find it challenging to figure out new topics to blog about or find time to blog.
- Different social media channels need different kinds of messages. Every social media channel has its own goal and purpose. For Facebook, it is optimal to post lighter content. For Twitter, the purpose is to engage in conversation. Also, the press follows Twitter so it presents a new angle for Twitter as a social media channel. For LinkedIn, it is recommended to share only professional content.
- Only a fragment of shared content on social media should be about the company who is sharing. Rather, most of the content should be something that interests or benefits the reader. Digitys presents a 10-4-1 rule: for example of 15 tweets on Twitter, 10 should be something related to your field of business, 4 should be about your own content, such as blog posts, and one should be a clear call to action.

By following the above guidelines for planning and managing digital content marketing successfully, company managers can accomplish various positive tangible and intangible outcomes for the company. These benefits include different kinds of advantages in branding, increased leads and sales, and increased visibility on search engines.

## **7.4 Limitations**

Although the reliability and validity of this study were sought to be the best possible, this research has significant limitations. As digital content marketing is a very under-researched topic academically, there was a significant amount of speculation involved during the study. For example, the researcher chose to study specifically marketing communications agencies because they can be expected to be advanced in digital content marketing. Additionally, because of the lack of academic research, the quality of some source material might not be the best possible.

In addition, the chosen research methods present other limitations to this study. As the data collection method was conducting interviews, there is a threat of interview bias. According to Marshall (1998), there are three types of interview bias. The interviewer



bias can take place when the interviewer is assuming something and may ask leading questions. The respondent bias is prevalent when the respondents want to represent themselves differently than they actually are, i.e. lying when answering the interview questions. Furthermore, the interview situation presents possible bias because of physical and social settings of the interview. All of these biases are possible in this study.

The selection of interviewees presents another limitation to this study. One important limitation is the possibility that selecting other interviewees would have led to different results and conclusions. Even though it can be considered that the saturation point was reached, the number of interviewees was relatively low, seven persons.

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## APPENDIX 1 OPERATIONALIZATION TABLE

Sub-questions of the research	Main components of the theoretical framework	Interview questions
What is digital content marketing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definitions</li> <li>• Channels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is digital content marketing in your company?</li> <li>• What digital channels you currently utilize in content marketing?</li> <li>• What role does digital content marketing have compared to your other marketing communications?</li> </ul>
Why do B2B companies use digital content marketing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The change in marketing communications</li> <li>• B2B branding</li> <li>• Buying behavior of B2B customers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why does your company do digital content marketing? What are you pursuing by digital content marketing?</li> <li>• What are the concrete results of digital content marketing in your company?</li> </ul>
How should digital content marketing be conducted through blogs and social media?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital content plan</li> <li>• Blogging strategies and best practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you think are the best practices with blogging?</li> <li>• What do you think are the best practices with social media?</li> <li>• Which channels work the best for your company? Why?</li> <li>• Do you measure the impact of digital content marketing? (e.g. Google Analytics, Facebook statistics)</li> <li>• Do you have an explicit content marketing plan?</li> <li>• What kind of problems you have experienced with digital content marketing?</li> <li>• Would you have done something differently in the past? Why?</li> <li>• How you are going to develop your digital content marketing in the future?</li> </ul>

## APPENDIX 2 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS IN FINNISH

Taustakysymykset:

- Saako käyttää omaa nimeä?
- Saako käyttää suoria lainauksia?
- Saako nauhoittaa haastattelun puhtaaksikirjoitusta varten?

1. Millaista sisältömarkkinointia teette tällä hetkellä?
2. Mitä sisältömarkkinoinnin kanavia käytätte tällä hetkellä?
3. Miksi yrityksenne tekee sisältömarkkinointia? Mitä sillä tavoitellaan?
4. Millainen rooli sillä on suhteessa muuhun markkinointiviestintäänne?
5. Millaisia konkreettisia tuloksia tai seurauksia teille on tullut sisältömarkkinoinnista?  
Onko se vaikuttanut esimerkiksi myyntiin tai asiakashankintaan?
6. Onko teillä erillinen sisältömarkkinointisuunnitelma?
7. Mitkä sisältömarkkinoinnin kanavat toimivat teidän mielestänne parhaiten? Miksi?
8. Miten sisältömarkkinointia teidän mielestänne pitäisi tehdä blogien kautta, mitkä ovat parhaat toimintatavat?
9. Mitkä ovat teidän mielestänne parhaat toimintatavat sisältömarkkinoinnin suhteen sosiaalisessa mediassa?
10. Mittaatteko sisältömarkkinoinnin tuloksia jotenkin? Esimerkiksi Google Analytics - työkalulla tai Facebookin statistiikoilla?
11. Minkälaisia haasteita olette kokeneet sisältömarkkinoinnin suhteen?
12. Kun katsotte taaksepäin, olisitteko tehneet sisältömarkkinoinnin suhteen jotakin erilailla? Miksi?
13. Mihin suuntaan aiotte kehittää sisältömarkkinointianne tulevaisuudessa?

### APPENDIX 3 INTERVIEW QUESTIONS IN ENGLISH

Background questions:

- Can I use your name in the final research report?
  - Can I use citations of your speech in the final research report?
  - Can I record this interview in order to transcribe it later?
1. What kind of digital content marketing you conduct at the moment?
  2. Which digital content marketing channels you utilize at the moment?
  3. Why does your company do digital content marketing? What are you pursuing by digital content marketing?
  4. What role does digital content marketing have compared to your other marketing communications?
  5. What kind of concrete results you have obtained through digital content marketing? For example, does it affect to your sales or acquiring new clients?
  6. Do you have an explicit content marketing plan?
  7. What digital marketing channels work the best in your opinion? Why?
  8. If you are doing digital content marketing with blogs, what are the best practices?
  9. If you are doing digital content marketing with social media, what are the best practices?
  10. Do you measure the effects of digital content marketing, for example with Google Analytics or Facebook analytics?
  11. What kind of challenges you have experienced with digital content marketing?
  12. When looking back, would you have done something differently with digital content marketing? Why?
  13. How you are going to develop your digital content marketing in the future?