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Social Customer Relationship Management - Maximizing Customer Relationships

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Bachelor of Business

International Business and Logistics

Thesis

06.05.2016

Author(s) Title	Jarkko Leino Social Customer Relationship Management – Maximizing Customer Relationship Management
Number of Pages Date	36 pages + 3 appendices 5 May 2016
Degree	Bachelor of Business Administration
Degree Programme	International Business and Logistics
Specialisation option	-
Instructor(s)	John Greene (Principal Lecturer)
<p>The Internet and digitalization have changed the buying behaviour of customers and challenged businesses to create new ways to bring value to their customers. Old ways of mass mailing, pushy advertisements and cold calls are vanishing from the scene as they are only disturbing the customers and adding bringing value. The modern customer is intelligent and demanding individual who is making the decisions using lots of information and seeking experiences to fulfil their expectations.</p> <p>Sales and marketing have been struggling with the change and the strategies of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) have been forced to improve the customer interactions in the business environment. As the CRM traditionally was mainly focused on analogical data, a new channel - Social Media has emerged into the eyes of the sales and marketing teams. The power of Social Media in terms CRM is that customer are openly sharing information about them allowing businesses to personalise and optimise their message accordingly. The Social Media has enabled intelligent sales people to approach the customers in this new platform creating valuable interactions with every engagement.</p> <p>The whole purpose of this thesis is to find out is it relevant to add Social Customer Relationship (Social CRM) to organisations' current strategies. The research will be conducted by first studying the literature and then by professional interviews.</p> <p>The research was able to highlight the benefits of using social channels but it did offer also varieties of different aspects to consider when evaluating the effectiveness of Social CRM. The terminology caused few questions during the research and the main substituent for the term Social CRM seemed to be Social Selling. The general attitude towards the social aspects and changed environment was relatively positive.</p>	
Keywords	Marketing, CRM, Social CRM, Sales

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1 Introduction

1.1 Theoretical background and research objective

The Internet has revolutionised businesses in many ways. The revolution has shaken the previously balanced and stable business environments and even caused several bankruptcies in the industries we could not even imagine. The Internet has changed the way people interact with each other and enabling more transparent dialogues between the communities. Before the actual purchase, the customers, both in business-to-business and business-to-customer environments are now being offered knowledge and valuable information about their upcoming purchase from the Internet. Customers seek information and alternative suppliers by themselves without engaging any supplier at the early parts of the purchase process. Usually the vendor of choice is the one who manages to provide most valuable information in the early phases of purchase process. Customers are more aware of the products, companies and services and they are prepared to change the supplier if their expectations are not met (Aminoff and Rubanovitsch, 2015).

A large part of modern buying behaviour is affected by the rise of Social Media. The modern way of communicating in the new platform has offered customers a chance to interact with each other directly in a new open environment. In the summer of 2015 it was reported that social media has over 2 billion users worldwide and the amount seems to be increasing every year. The Social Media has grown to be a new phenomenal marketplace where the businesses are constantly seeking new opportunities. Despite the significant changes and emergence of the new market place many business executives seems to have still problems developing profitable interactions in the Social Media. The amount of information people openly share and reflect over the different Social Media channels and applications is enormous but it is not being leveraged to meet its



full potential. This phenomenon is part of larger concept that is often referred as 'digitalization'.

This research is focused on how the organisations can exploit the customer interactions in Social Media in order to attract and retain profitable customer relations and how to develop strategies in converting Social Media interactions into sales opportunities. The research will also provide answers to the marketing teams, how they can exploit the data available in order to create valuable and personalized campaigns to their customers. According to consulting company McKinsey & Company's report on July 2015 the most important thing to understand in shifting to digitalization is to understand the different meanings of the concept to each organization. For some its just the new technology available, but for some it's whole new way of doing things.

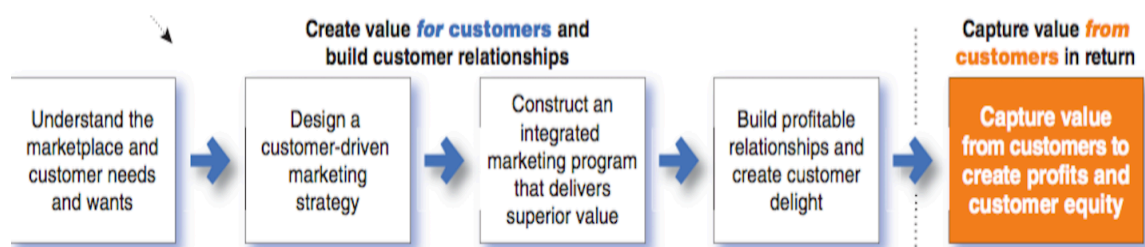
1.2 Literature review

In order to review the Social Customer Relationship Management as part of contemporary business environment we must first observe the origins of the customer relationship management how it evolved from marketing and sales processes in the past. In identifying these origins we must observe the changing environment where modern marketers and salespeople are trying to seek new ways of creating value and promoting their products and services. At first we must generate an overview of the different elements involved in the sales, marketing and customer relationship management. For the research one of the most important aspects of the literature review will be to identify the different drivers of the changed purchasing behaviour and how can the organizations stay competitive in the change.

2 Marketing



Kotler and Armstrong (2014) define marketing as a process by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture the value from customers in return. In order to survive in a competitive environment, an organization must provide its target customers more value than is provided to them by its competitors. Kotler and Armstrong (2014) presents the marketing process with five steps 1) understanding the marketplace and customer needs and wants 2) design a customer-driven marketing strategy 3) construct an integrated marketing program that delivers superior value 4) build profitable relationships and create customer delight 5) capture value from customers to create profits and customer equity. Customer value is the difference between all the benefits derived from a total product and all the costs of acquiring those benefits (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2009. p. 11).



(Figure 1. *Marketing Process*, Principles of Marketing, Kotler and Amrstrong, 2014)

Marketers market 10 main types of entities: goods, services, events, experiences, persons, places, properties, organizations, information and ideas (Kotler and Keller, 2012, p. 19) Well-known management professional Peter Drucker (1973) stated, “There will always, one can assume, be need for some selling. But the aim of marketing is to make selling superfluous. The aim of marketing is to know and understand the customer so well that the product or service fits him and sells itself.” Even though the thought leader like Drucker will make marketing sound as a straightforward process the marketing environment has changed drastically from the past century and keeps evolving all the time.

2.1 The Evolution of Marketing and the Increasing Power of Consumers



Only 10-20 years ago companies had completely different tools for the marketing such as, print media, street advertisements, television, radio, different events, fax machines and direct mail to the front doors of the customers (Aminoff, Rubanovitsch, 2015). In 1960 a famous marketer, E. Jerome McCarthy defined marketing activities as four Ps calling the model as 'Marketing Mix'. The four Ps of marketing were product, price, promotion and place. In the 90s Robert F. Lauterborn argued that the era of the four P's is over and the new model is four C's. Four C's meaning Consumer, Cost, Communication and Convenience.

In the midway of 2010's the amount of marketing channels increased explosively because of the digitalisation and current development in technology (Aminoff and Rubanovitsch, 2015). The digital era and the rapid growth of the Internet along with other technologies changed fundamentally the way people live. The communication, sharing information and shopping habits have all changed and the companies have been forced to develop new ways of delivering value to their customers (Kotler and Armstrong 2013). The Internet and digitalization has developed an electronic market space that has seamlessly grown across the borders into an online world inhabited already by over a billion customers (Chaffey and Smith 2008). The new market place offered marketers also new approaches when creating value to their customers.

2.2 Digital Marketing

The rise of the Internet and information technology created new exiting opportunities for marketers. The development saw the movement of consumers to the Internet, which meant that the marketing activities had to follow them. The digital media created new marketing channels for the marketers to better analyze and understand the consumer needs. As the changed buying behaviour shifted the power from the seller to the buyer, in marketing the same power of balance shifted from marketer to the consumer (Pride, 2016).



Digital marketing uses all digital media, including the Internet and mobile and interactive channels, to develop communication and exchanges with customers (Pride 2016) Digital marketing is applying digital technologies such as web, e-mail, databases, blogs, feeds, podcast and social networks, which form online channels to market. Digital marketing is contributing to marketing activities aimed at achieving profitable acquisition and retention of customers through recognizing the importance of digital technologies (Chaffey, Smith 2008) Digital and social media have become the space in which to engage B-to-B customers and strengthen customer relationships. Compared with traditional media and sales approaches the digital and social media has created greater level of customer interaction (Kotler and Armstrong, 2013).

The most common digital marketing tactics are search engine optimization, search engine marketing and building links through different online platforms. The most important tools to build digital marketing strategy is to establish well functioning website for your organization as well as social media platforms, but different blogs, online shops and webinars belong to the digital marketing channels as well. The advantage of digital marketing is that it is very cost efficient. (Aminoff and Rubanovitsch, 2015). Producing and targeting digital marketing is more cost efficient and if the campaign or ad is successful there is a high potential for exponential growth in the number of shares and views in the social media. The evolution and the digitalization of marketing have not only changed the marketing channels used but the contents and messages that marketers are now using are different as well.

2.3 Content marketing

At first the marketers established new platforms such as websites, mobile apps and social media channels and simply penetrated the “old” ways of marketing used in previous channels (newspaper ads etc.) into the new platforms. The



problem with the “old” marketing actions was that those were very company company-centric, interruptive and one-way communicative actions. Simply explained, content marketing means that in order to capture the customer’s attention and interest the marketers are offering different useful content to the prospects such as blogs, instructions, references or market researches. (Rubanovitsch and Aminoff, 2015).

The latest researches of Content Marketing Institute show that over two-thirds of the people rather learn about the company via article, rather than via advertisement or another clearly promotional source. The chaos caused by all these new fascinating opportunities led to a situation where the behaviour of customers was completely forgotten (Tanni and Keronen, 2011). Eventually the companies understood the importance of the relevant content and now over 90% of the companies (Content Marketing Institute) are sharing relevant information, ideas and entertainment in their channels in order to bring value to their customers and raising their own brand awareness. The content marketing has developed a need for companies to establish content strategies where the company is building an online content producing continuum, attracting potential customers to engage and react to the given content (Tanni and Keronen, 2011). The company that is able to produce the most relevant content is definitely gaining competitive advantage by differentiating from its competitors. The right content for the consumer is part of looking at what consumers desire and behaviour when viewing online material. In order to understand this we must take a step back to review consumer behaviour, origins and how it evolved to have such an influence.

3 Buying Behaviour

The traditional consumer behaviour has studied individuals, groups, or organizations and their processes of selecting, securing, using and disposing pro-



ducts, services and experiences to satisfy the impact that these processes have on the consumer and society (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010). The recent development in the consumer behaviour occurred during the mid-1900s. At that time the orientation focused on selling the goods that manufacturers produced and the aim was to seek answers how to sell the goods. After the selling orientated behaviour started the era of marketing, that was focused what the consumers likely to buy. At this point the power of influencing the consumer behaviour was in the hands of the organizations but since then it has all changed towards consumer orientation (Blackwell, Miniard and Engel, 2006). In order to illustrate the consumer buying process Kotler and Keller (2012) divided process into five-stage model; 1) problem recognition 2) information Search 3) evaluation of alternatives 4) purchase decision 5) post purchase behaviour. This kind of buying process seems very normal for all of us but it has not always been so straightforward.

3.1 The Changing Buying Behaviour

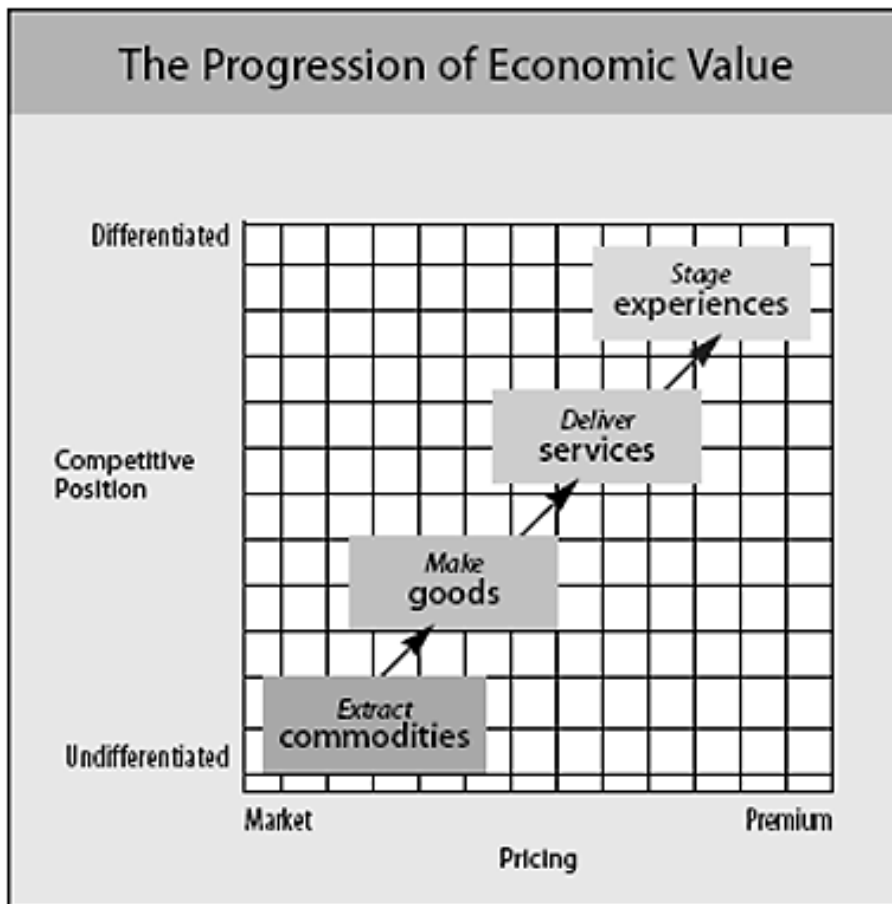
Traditional consumer behaviour has been affected rapidly because of the Internet and technology. Because of technology consumers are now able to seek and evaluate supplier options having all the power and knowledge in their hands. As in Kotler's and Keller's five-stage model now the three first stages; recognizing problem, searching information and evaluating the alternatives are all easily conducted by individual consumers. If in the past the sales representatives had most of the information about their products and services now the consumers can easily research by themselves and compare their options i.e. price and features. Also the marketers had the most of the control in the communications process influencing the consumer behaviour; now the consumers are in an ongoing dialogue with possible suppliers driven by the consumers themselves. A common place to share and ask for potential suppliers is social media. Consumers generally trust more the opinions of people (such as family, friends and acquaintances than marketing communications because these per-



sonal sources have no reason not to express their true feelings and opinions (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010). The changes in the consumer behaviour will demand the companies to identify the consumer behaviour of their potential customers and change all of their processes to lead and support the buying process of their customers. The competitiveness of the sales organizations will be heavily relying on understanding the buying process and behaviour (Aminoff and Rubanovitsch, 2015).

3.2 Customer Experience

The changed buying behaviour and increased from competitors have affected the way companies are viewing their customers. The term customer experience started to become a popular term in the business language in the early 2000's. In 1998 B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore published an article called *The Experience Economy* where they argued that in our "service economy" the companies must offer memorable events to their customers in order that the experience itself becomes the "product." By using cake as an example they described the *progression of economic value* where the progression starts from undifferentiated commodities and reaching differentiated experiences in the end.



(Figure 2. The progression of economic value. Photo: Harvard Business Review, July-August 1998)

After the pioneers (Pine and Gilmore) established the initial idea it became very popular term and topic in the United States and Europe. In Finland the term was not as discussed at the time but two Finnish business writers concluded it very well: Customer experience is a sum of those interactions, images and feelings that the customer creates based on the actions of organization (Löytänä and Korteso, 2011.) The important aspect to highlight is that the customer experience is formed based on the individual experiences of the customer. Therefore the customer experience is not a rational decision, but an experience that is influenced by sub consciousness and feelings.

Another important point to remember in Customer Experience is that delivering the experience is a process from end to end. This means that the customer ex-



perience is formed based on the first initial contact to the buyer lasting beyond the warranty period. This means that the good customer service for instance is not enough to comprise the whole experience; it is just a small part of it (Goodman, 2015). Managing customer experience is a comprehensive strategy consisting all parts of the organization from IT departments well-functioning systems to the sales people and their understanding of the customer.

4 Sales Funnel and Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

4.1 Sales Funnel

The Sales funnel has traditionally been divided into few separate processes. McKinsey's consultants Stanley and Plutkin (2015) categorizes the sales funnel into five steps; lead generation, lead qualification, deal proposal, deal negotiation and closing (see the figure 3.) More specifically at first you need to generate a lead, sales opportunity, either inbound lead produced by marketing activities or then an outbound lead produced by the sales representatives sales activities. After the lead is received it is being qualified, whether there is opportunity to sell or not. The qualified lead is usually discovered by sales representative in discovery phone call or meeting where the aim is to seek as much relevant information as possible as well as the budget, timeline and decision-making authority (who is the person who actually is in charge of the purchase). After the qualification the sales representative will propose a deal based on the discovery call or a meeting. After the customer has received the proposed deal then it is usually negotiated. The last part of the sales funnel is called closing where the customer accepts the proposed and negotiated deal.

1. Lead Generation	2. Lead Qualification	3. Deal Proposal	4. Deal Negotiation	5. Closing
→	→	→	→	



(Figure 3. The Sales Funnel)

Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy discuss the sales funnel in their Harvard Business Review article (July-August 2006) define sales funnel as a sequence of activities and events that leads customers toward purchases. Their definition includes marketing as usually responsible for the first steps of the funnel by generating leads through marketing activities, such as brand awareness, for the sales to execute the follow up and later steps. They also state that the same funnel can be shown as a “buying funnel” when looking at the funnel from buyers perspective.

The changes caused by digitalization have affected sales process and sales management drastically. Rubanovitsch and Aminoff (2015) described the traditional sales process that it started from the point where sales representative has somehow manages to contact (phone call, email or at the trade show) the professional buyer. The sales representative then asks questions from the professional buyer’s needs which serves as an agenda for their meeting. In the meeting the seller is presenting the benefits of their products or services and the buyer explains their business goals and targets. This sales process then leads to deal negotiation and possible future meetings to discuss the features and terms in more detail. In today’s world this kind of sales process is not effective nor do the buyers usually waste their time for these processes.

4.2 Customer Relationship Management

The idea of managing customer relations became a generally discussed topic in the beginning of the 90’s and since then the term has been influencing the contemporary sales management. From the 1950’s to 1970’s marketers used mass marketing practices to build their brands, but the usage of the Internet allowed the marketers to abandon this approach and apply new more personalised marketing messages. The idea behind moving to more personalised message was



to make sure that the marketers message is as relevant as possible for the customers. The basic idea of *customer relationship management* (CRM) is to systematically collect and analyse customer data in order to increase the value of the customer relations and therefore increase the company's revenue. Baran, Galka (2013) define CRM as a "strategic approach that is concerned with creating improved shareholder value through the development of appropriate relationships with key customers and customer segments." The development of analysing and collecting the data involved information systems as a vital part of the process and later on the term and the meaning CRM has transformed more towards IT-systems. Well functioning and well-used CRM is a powerful tool or even the strongest weapons to ensure your customer become and remain loyal (McGraw, Hill 2002). The importance of CRM is easy to understand when revisiting the sales funnel and the five steps described in the figure 3. The actual figure might give the reader a far too simple way of viewing the sales funnel as the buying decisions are always not as straight forward – the customer might be asking for offers from different vendors. Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy (2006) state that sometimes when marketing makes the handoff of a qualified lead the marketers lose their touch with the customer. Therefore Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy suggest that CRM systems should be used as a backbone for the sales management in order to avoid losing sales opportunities.

John A. Goodman argued in his book *Customer Experience 3.0* (2015) that the CRM must be the Customer Experience hub and in order to be the hub it has to:

- 1) Manage and guide the response content and process of all customer interactions.
- 2) Anticipate and take action on customer needs by drawing internal information about each stage of the customer's lifecycle as well as stated pre-



ferences, and on all operations information and external data sources, such as social media aggregators.

- 3) Obtain (ideally automatically) information from all customer touch points to support response, emotional connection, education and input into VOC (voice of the customers).
- 4) Obtain information from the Knowledge Management System (KMS) and operations data for use in response and proactive communication.

(Page 145, Customer Experience 3.0, John A. Goodman)

There are multiple different ways of defining the CRM. CRM tools are used as storage for data and information about your customers. Traditionally the data is produced by sales calls, emails, purchases, meetings and other engagement with the customer. This data allows companies to treat different customers in a different way according to the previous interactions or other data stored in the CRM (Baran, Galka 2013), Amazon became famous for their early adaptation of CRM tools by adding features and reinforcing their relationships with “the customers who bought this also bought” feature As the McKinsey’s report from July 2015 states, “the relevance is the new currency of the digital age”. The data about your customer’s preferences for instance allows you to deliver more personalised and optimised content and service with a proactive manner. As the CRM has evolved from mass mailing to providing more targeted data about your customers, the most recent sources of information have raised from different social networks online.

4.3 Social CRM

Paul Greenberg, the author of *CRM at the speed of light* defines the Social CRM (SCRM) as a “philosophy and a business strategy, supported by a tech-



nology platform, business rules, processes, and social characteristics, designed to engage the customer in a collaborative conversation in order to provide mutually beneficial value in a trusted and transparent business environment. It's the company's response to the customer's ownership of the conversation." The digital and social media provides an opportunity to interact with the customers in more personal manner in the platform the customer has chosen. The traditional CRM is does not involve the data form digital and social channels and it is a significant weakness if the aim is to provide an omni-channel (including websites, social media and email etc.) high-value service to the customer. Social CRM is very important strategy in order to increase customer experience and solve the issues of contemporary buying behaviour.

An important element of the Social CRM is concerned with the development of the technology and different tools for facing the customer in digital and social media. Despite the technical aspects, Social CRM is focused on the partnerships and value exchanged between the brand and the customer (Greenberg, 2009). As we covered all ready, the modern buying behaviour has shortened the sales processes because of the amount of information the customer all ready has (Aminoff and Rubanovitsch, 2015). The problem here is that if the customer chooses to look for the information online or from social media and the sales organization has not the tools for servicing or reacting to the first steps of the buying process. The modern elements added to the existing CRM-systems now involve tools to support the sales teams, by offering them data and analytics about the potential prospect customers. When the sales team has enough data and background information from the customer then they can more easily be involved in the same steps of the sales process as the prospect customer. By having the information before confronting the customer the sales team is able to reduce non-relevant steps of the sales process (Aminoff and Rubanovitsch, 2015).



4.4 The differences between Social CRM and traditional CRM

The main difference between the two concepts is in their approaches to the customer. Paul Greenberg (2009) differentiates the two concepts by arguing that their aims are different: CRM is aiming to manage the customer and the Social CRM is to engage the customer. The traditional CRM is more focused on internal operations to manage the customer relationships whereas Social CRM is focusing on meeting the personal agendas of the customers while simultaneously meeting their own business plan.

The modern buying behaviour is requiring engaging the customer in the sales process in order to create value, but the traditional CRM is focusing only on operational aspects to support sales, marketing and customer service. In the traditional CRM the customers are separated from the company when the Social CRM is trying to pursue collaboration and high level of customer interaction. The Social CRM is utilizing both the internal and external approaches to interact with the customer establishing

4.5 Social CRM strategy and integration

Building a Social CRM strategy might be seen as a huge challenge for some of the business executives and some of them might feel it is not that relevant to their industry. Paul Greenberg (2009) argues that the Social CRM should be seen as strategy and not just as tools. He also states that in the past the customer strategies were largely based around internal factors, whereas Social CRM aims to provide and engage the external factors. Greenberg underlines the shift in the strategies from transactional to interactional, increasing customer involvement and therefore improving their commitment, acquisition as well as retention. In the book *The Art of Social Selling* it is mentioned that when building your social strategy the only thing that is constant in social media is that it is constantly changing and new social media platforms while others evolve. The



writer Shannon Belew mentions that even writing a book about social media is very challenging when you are trying to keep up with the pace of the development.

Despite the fact that the social shift in the strategy has to be the initiator for the Social CRM and its integration, certain tools are still relevant or even vital in order to maximise the power of social channels. Belew (2014) distinguishes wide range of tools from social monitoring tools to CRM solutions. Belew also argues that the social monitoring and tracking tools are important in order to effectively gather and analyze the data. According to Belew the best social tools should increase efficiency, identify and find social influencers, help you to engage with customers online, improve rate of response, deliver content and manage your company brand and image online.

4.6 Modern Sales Representative: Social Selling

The changes in the sales environments have challenged the existing sales processes and increased the pressure for the sales teams to find new ways of reaching their potential customers (prospects). A big part of the sales management is focused on how you can build and manage profitable relationships and therefore increase the company's sales profit. The differentiator from the past is that in today's world the relationships are more and more built virtually in social networking sites, blogs and other online communities. Aminoff and Rubanovitsch (2015) argue that the era of old sales pitches is over because the buyers are more aware of the artificial sales drama, which irritates more the customer than increases trust.

In the book *Art of Social Selling* written by Shannon Belew, she defines the social selling as "the identification, targeting, and reaching out to prospective and existing customers through social media channels and social communities in an effort to engage them in conversations that result in a potentially mutually



beneficial relationships.” The concept social selling is another tool for the sales teams to extend their traditional sales process, not replacing any of the existing ones. As a sales tactic social selling is not trying to be aggressive or a sell-out in the amount of advertisements. Instead the idea of social selling is to have a two-way communication between the seller and the customer, where the seller is establishing trust and creating value. The early engagement of the customers is one of the most crucial aspects of the social selling.

4.7 Marketing automation

In the previous subheading the content marketing was introduced as a new way of attracting relevant traffic to the online-channels of the organization, creating valuable data. The solution is marketing automation. Oracle’s (Large US-based IT-service provider) definition for marketing automation is: “cross-channel marketing system where you can manage and automate the targeting, timing and content of outbound marketing messages in concert with prospect actions and behaviours.” The marketing automation is using technology to maximise the ROI (Return On Investment) of contemporary marketing actions. According to Google Trends (Google’s applications that measures search terms used) there has been a significant increase in the amount of searches with ‘marketing automation’ and the interest towards marketing technology is growing exponentially.

Marketing automation is linked with all the aspects of the modern sales and marketing. The modern buying behaviour involves customer’s ability to explore and evaluate suppliers independently and by marketing automation technologies companies are able to track the *digital body language* or the *digital footprint* of prospective buyers and engage them before their initial approach. Whenever we are surfing on the Internet, spending time in social media, paying with credit cards or using our loyalty cards on the shops, we are constantly leaving our digital footprints everywhere. The marketing automation technologies help com-



panies to track these digital footprints and start customizing websites for more personalized customer experience. All the data is restored in the organization's CRM systems integrated with Social CRM.

5 Research

5.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this research is to understand the concept of Social CRM by interviewing professionals (selected due to their background and expertise) about their views and opinions concerning the topic. The research can be divided into two main subcategories by their purposes. The first part of the research focuses on examining the level of correlation between the literature review and the discoveries in the actual research. The second part on the other hand focuses on more operational level observation, examining the impacts of the Social CRM to the businesses. Combined these two focus will provide us a better understanding of the phenomena.

As the research question states, the aim is to find out opinions and experiences of different business professional, whether the companies are able to increase their trading profit utilizing the Social CRM or not. The research is set to provide different views on how relevant it is to involve Social CRM as part of businesses strategy. Another aim for the research is also to get better understanding of what is the current level of Social CRM strategies used in the Finnish business management and what kinds of issues are the organizations generally facing.

In the literature view it was discovered that the nature of the topic is relatively broad and therefore we must involve different types of approaches in illustrating the different areas (i.e. marketing, sales perspectives and general business strategy) of this research in order to get a wider perspective from the different



organizational units. The research topic is relatively new and the development around in the digitalized environment is constant, we must also address professionals the beliefs and thoughts about the future of the topic. The interpretive research is set to have critical questions regarding the buzz caused by the quick development of the phenomena.

5.2 Research Question

How the companies can benefit from SCRM in order to maximize their customer relationships?

5.3 Research Design

According to Jerome Glenn (2010) the goal of the research process is to procedure new knowledge, which takes three main forms: exploratory research, constructive research and empirical research. Glenn continues to differentiate the three forms of research by identifying the fundamental aims of the researches; exploratory research aims to identify new problems, constructive research on the hand seeks solutions to a problem and empirical research tests the feasibility of a solution using empirical evidence. In different forms of research we must identify also the two types of research, quantitative and qualitative researches. C.R. Kothari (2004) distinguishes the difference between quantitative and qualitative research by saying that the quantitative research is based on measurement of quantity or amount and therefore the phenomena has to be expressed in terms of quantity where as the qualitative research is concerned with qualitative phenomena such as human behaviour. The differences between quantitative and qualitative research methods can also be distinguished in how the data is collected. In the qualitative research the interviewees are selected beforehand instead of random sample (Metsämuuronen, 2002).



Due to the empirical nature of the study, the study will be conducted using qualitative research methods. The reason for this is that the research involves human behaviour in order to understand the motivation and thoughts around the research topic itself. Especially qualitative research is important when the aim is to gain knowledge on how people feel or think about a specific subject or institution. By using qualitative research methods we are able to analyze the different factors, which motivate people to act in a particular manner (Kothari, 2004).

5.4 Data Collection

The data will be collected using in depth interviews, as it is often the primary-data collection method in qualitative studies (Merriam, 2009). C.R. Kothari (2004) also summarizes that “this type of research [qualitative] aims at discovering the underlying motives and desires, using in depth interviews for the purpose.” The interviews will be conducted as a phone discussion where the interviewees are told specifically the order and the purpose of the interview still avoiding shackling the answers into precognitive form. The interviewees will represent themselves as individuals despite that fact that some of them might have professional interests in the research topic. The Characteristics and competencies of the interviewees consists of experience in sales, marketing and business strategy with a contact angle to the contemporary sales and marketing management.

In this research the data will be collected using semi-structured interview structure, which means that all questions are used flexibly, but the largest part of the interview is guided by the list of questions. In order to collect good data the interviews must have well-chosen open-ended questions that are allowing follow up questions to request more detailed answers and probes.

5.5 Research Interviews



The research interviews will provide the most important input for the whole research. The interviewees were selected by using Social Media but the aim was to find three people with totally different backgrounds and experiences.

Interview profile A. Customer Experience Evangelist, Consultant at Finnish IT-company with over 100 employees. This interviewee has wide knowledge of different technologies used to manage customer relations and customer experience. The interviewee is working daily with corporations of different sizes and therefore there should be lots of experiences from the field.

Interview profile B. Entrepreneur and consultant with over 15 years of experience in different leadership positions and consulting upper management. The interviewee profile B is representing the generation that has experience from business consulting to business management over three decades. Interviewee B will provide depth to our research

Interview profile C. Marketing Advisor & Co-Founder of Finnish consulting company focusing on marketing and business strategies in digital era. The interview profile C has wide knowledge about marketing and value creation to organizations different sizes. C has long experience as a head of marketing in organization that employed over 150 employees. After 5-6 years of managerial roles the interviewee is now focusing on consulting small companies with high growth.

The interview questions can be found at the appendix 1.

6 Findings

At this part of the research we will go through the findings of the empirical interviews. In order to maintain structure and clarity the interview questions (see the



appendix 1.) were divided into three sub-categories and we are going to use the same structure when analysing the results.

6.1 Background

In the first part of the research findings the interviewees were given questions that consists of questions on higher level of companies' strategies and changed landscape of the markets. At first is necessary to understand the underlying principles of how the interviewees perceive the value creation and overall marketing strategies. From this part of the research questions there was already lots of references and relevant material available which allows us reflecting into what has been studied before. In the interviews we were able to witness relatively different approaches and attitudes towards the companies main marketing goals and strategies.

The interviewee A. described the main goal for a company & marketing strategy as: *"To transform your customers into your fans"*. The interviewee A. highlighted the customer journey across all the channels and processes within the company to support the journey and all the touch points of the customers. The interview also highlighted that the marketing strategy should be designed supporting the overall business strategy without marketing pursuing any own strategy. Interviewee B highlighted that *"marketing is the most important factor that increases the competitive advantage"* and *"the most important this is to produce products and services that are interesting despite the premium pricing."* The interviewee B is argues that especially in Finland the emotions are not involved in the marketing strategies and we are focusing too much on the production and efficiency rather than creating valuable brands. Interviewee C continues the brand discussion by saying that *"company's brand is the roof of the whole company"* and highlighting that every company should have *"mission and a meaningful way of changing the society"*. The interviewee C sees the value creation and mission



beyond earning money and sees the organization as valuable player in the society.

When asked about the changes in the marketers' value are creating value to the customers the interviewee A highlighted that the modern customers have very high expectations and *"It is all about exceeding their expectations each time."* The interviewee A then continued by explaining that it is important to offer *"valuable content"* to the customers and engage them by inspiring or enlightening them. After engaging the customer interviewee highlighted that value creation does not stop there and the customer journey is the key *"creating value at every touch point from purchase to post-sale activities."* The interviewee B mentioned that the marketers' value creation should be focused on *"leaving a mark to the customers heart"* and some industries (such as manufacturing) in Finland are struggling with this. Interviewee B said the changes are most visible in the attitudes that in the past it was all about costs and efficiency and now the customers are expecting more. Interviewee C argues that *"marketing has transformed into helping customers and marketing has become more comprehensive part of the businesses, not just a support role for the sales department."* The interviewee C also states that *"marketing consist of every action that the company is involved, from hr to r&d."*

The third question that was given to the interviewees described the change in the advertisements and digital marketing. All the three interviewees agreed that the digitalization has changed the way people reach to marketing and advertisement. The interviewee A mentioned that *"the crucial part of the advertisement and digital marketing is to understand where the customers are"* and later on continued that companies need to adapt all the data they have about customers in order to offer valuable content to them. The content might be blogs or webinars and their aims to offer call-to-actions for the customers, meaning that if they get interested in the content it is easy to purchase or contact the seller. Interviewee B on the other hand started questioning the digitalization in market-



ing by saying that *“the concrete results are not that clearly visible in the digital marketing and these modern apps and strategies have costs more than what they have generated revenue”*. The interviewee B also mentioned, *“the digitalization has polarized the relationships”* but agreed that the visibility in online channels such as social media is important for the companies. The interviewee C saw that the biggest change is that now *“the customers are online and there is more web-based purchasing processes.”* Interviewee C then added that the shift towards *“online has increased the need for more personalized marketing and customers are waiting to receive that as well.”*

When talking about the changes in the buying process there were some different opinions between the interviewees but all of the interviewees agreed on the importance of having visibility in different channels and especially online. Interviewee A pointed out the changes in the way people are searching information from the website for instance. According to the interviewee A *“the customers are more aware of the products and services and therefore it has become more difficult to have control over the process.”* Interviewee B answered the question about the changing buying process looking at it from little bit different perspective and adding the sales dimension to it: *“it is very important to have visibility publicly but it has not affected that much on the basic sales process”*. The interviewee C agreed with interviewee A with the fact that *“the buying process is more customer-driven and the customer are evaluating the opportunities themselves. Especially those buying processes that don’t require any specific requirements will eventually be fully online. More complex sales won’t disappear but they have to evolve with the changes as well.”*

6.2 Definition and positioning

In the second part of the research findings we focus on defining the key terminology and concepts of the research. The reason why the definitions are in such a crucial role of the research is that customer relationship management is very



broad term and in different organizations and individuals it might change its nature as well. The social customer relationship management on the other hand can divide opinions and provide even wider sets of definitions since it is such a new term.

The positioning on the other in this research means that how does CRM and Social CRM fit as part of organizations strategic management. This part questions for instance the relevance of the existence of CRM as in the question 5. The question 6. “Why most of the customer relationship management approaches are only focusing on calls, emails and meetings even though the same companies are talking about omni-channel strategies in engaging their customers?” aims to reveal the channel positioning from the management.

At first the interviewees were given a question to define the role of customer relationship management today and how relevant it is to organizations. Interviewee A says that *“data about the customers is very crucial”* in today’s sales process. The A continued then by underlining that in order to serve the customer better engage that customer *“you must use all the available data provided and different CRM-systems are important because all the people involved in the process, from sales to for instance hotel reception should have the access to see what have a said and done before when staying at their hotel.”* The interviewee A then revisited the customer journey and that *“all information must be there in order to guarantee the best possible customer experience.”* Interviewee B said that *“there are no profitable and unprofitable customers, there are only profitable and unprofitable customer relations management”* and continued to highlight that the salespeople has to focus more on the customer rather than showing their power point-slides. The B also mentioned *“that these days the amount of sales meetings where both parties only get to know each other is declining because of the information online and this why only those who are aware of their customers win the deals.”* Interviewee C divided the need for customer relationship management *“when it is more account based sales and mar-*



keting customer relationship management it is definitely important to keep all the necessary data stored from the previous discussions in order to capitalize them later on. For the bulk, all around sales roles where the sales rep is only running around and aiming to catch some percentage of the deals and cold calling constantly, I don't see it that relevant."

The sixth question, "Why most of the customer relationship management approaches are only focusing on calls, emails and meetings even though the same companies are talking about omni-channel strategies in engaging their customers?" received couple of different thoughts from the interviewees. The interviewee A said the fact that *"customers with high expectations require more meaningful interactions and social media is a good example of that."* The interviewee A said that the *"development is going towards omni-channel but companies struggle to keep up with the pace of the development"*. Interviewee B on the other hand believes that the management causes this because *"they are not the most active group in the digital environment and for instance email marketing is still rather effective."* The interviewee C believes that the activity approaches when leading sales is focused on calls, emails and sales because *"These are easy to measure, more qualitative approaches would be demanding and one reason is probably that it has always been this way."* Interviewee C still believes that *"Sales approaches are changing and more engagement will be in the future. It's pretty new still."*

In the next question where interviewees were given a chance to put social customer relationship management in to their own words. The interviewee B concluded his viewpoint accordingly: *"through social media channels the salesperson is able to approach possible customers, existing customers and other stakeholders. In this era salesperson is more problem-solver who listens, guides and shares the information to the customers in all the social channels the target audience decides to use. Cold calling is dying slowly."* The interviewee B involves the marketing into the definition by saying that: *"social cus-*



tomer relationship management provides customer insight, possibility for discussion and effective ways to get recognized. The main reason for using social media is still marketing.” Interviewee C admitted that Social Customer Relationship Management is not familiar term but in their company they use term called *“Social selling for the similar activities.”* The interviewee C then continued that *“listening the web and following social media”* would be the best way to describe the activities of Social Customer Relationship Management.

The eighth question was designed to ask interviewees to share their thoughts on how they feel that social media has changed the way companies sell and promote their products. According to interviewee A *“the social selling consist of building new networks, active communication and listening to customers in social media”* and then interviewee A added that *“people knowingly and unknowingly leave traces of their digital footprint in the web and it is all about listening that and being able to react when the time is right.”* Interviewee B turns the scenario into customers point of view saying that *“people know more about your company based on social media.”* The interviewee B mentions that he is using social media to promote his own consulting services as well on different social media channels. The interviewee C was also positive about the selling and promoting own services in social media. The interviewee C concluded the opinion as *“Yes, you can create inbound leads from social media. Blogs are very good source for instance. The social selling is still relatively rare that even the closing percentages of the sales opportunities are quite high.”*

6.3 Business Effects

In the final part of the research the interviewees were asked to describe the business effects they have experienced in using Social Customer Relationship Management. In this case the business effects are more or less described as qualitative measures and we are not expecting any growth rates or other numerical contribution from the interviewees. The aim of this part is simply to seek



answers whether or not Social Customer Relationship Management should be considered as part of organization's sales, service and marketing strategies. Another point that we will be considered is in this part of the research that what kind resources you need in order to pursue profitable interactions in social channels.

The first question of the business effects part dives straight into the topic and research issue of the thesis: "Can you maximize your Customer Relationship Management efficiency by utilizing interactions and data from the social media? If yes, can you provide an example?" Interviewee A states that *"using customers digital footprint that they are consciously or unconsciously leaving behind you can get information about them and what are their interests."* The interviewee also highlights that *"especially in business-to-business sales it is good to know your customers. Search the key people on Social Media and follow them because the better you know the customer the easier it is to approach them."* The interviewee B continued to support the use of Social Media from the network point of view *"I publish quite often on LinkedIn for example where I get information who has been following it or liking it. I also get to know these people and they get to know me."* Interviewees B and C were both supportive for the usage of networks and the C mentioned that their own company (established around 6 months ago) has not even had to sell themselves since all the projects have been inbound from the existing networks.

After receiving good opinions about the relevance of the Social Customer Relationship Management it was time to discuss the return on investment compared to the resources invested in it. The interviewee A mentioned that *"80% of the investment is your content and effort in social media, the 20% is the required technology to capture these interactions and turn them into leads."* After a short while the interviewee A continued that: *"the technology investments are simple but the content technology is worthless."* The interviewee B said almost the same thing by arguing: *"if you are good at content production, then it works. It is*



not a speed lane to success since social media creates relationships slowly.” Interviewee C mentioned that: “Companies should just more train people and support them (to sell socially). Currently there are only some people doing it and not all get started if they aren’t active already in Social Media.”

Despite the fact that Interviewee A already revealed his views on there are some technology requirements; the eleventh question was designed to ask even more detailed what type of requirements are for the contemporary customer relationship management. As the interviewee A said previously there is mysterious 20% requirement for technology and what that is: *“its intelligent CRM and marketing automation. CRM has all the information and about the customer and marketing automation is the key when following your customer’s digital footprint. But as I said none of this is relevant if the company does not have something valuable to offer.”* Interviewee B didn’t see the technology as valuable and he underlined the decisions between the social platforms used, *“I don’t need anything else than LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. If you are bigger company you definitely need something else too.”* The interviewee C had similar thoughts with Interviewee A as *“the technology itself doesn’t solve anything but when all the marketing functions, landing pages and materials etc. are well-functioning then the technology is very important to capture the data gained from these activities. Marketing automation is a good example.”* The interviewee C also mentioned that *“listening the web and social media is very important and there are couple of good tools for that. This gives you insight on what’s being discussed around your topic or industry allowing you to take action if necessary.”*

The final question of the research consisted of discovering is social media for everyone and are you missing out on opportunities if you choose not to use it. The question was also designed to narrow the possible industries from the picture that are not relevant to Social Customer Relationship. All the interviewees agreed that social media is for every one. The interviewee C for instance said: *“I*



can't recall an industry where it could be exploited? And even if there was one that was not actively using Social Selling or Social Customer Relationship Management then that would be a perfect differentiator." The interviewee B continued that *"Social Media is for everyone and you just have to find your own area in the social media."* The interviewee A saw the possibilities also for everyone by replying only "yes, of course [social customer relationship management is for everyone]."

7 Discussion

As the final part of the research we have to analyse the results of the interviews. We will also revisit the literature review to compare the research results to the existing literature.

7.1 Background

In the first part of the research the aim was to see what kind of general opinions the interviewees share from the marketing and what was changed from the past. All the three interviewees mutually agreed that marketing is very important in the modern business and all of them added had an idea of marketing and value creation being something more than just promotion. The interviewee A talked about fans, B appealed to emotions and C referred talked about mission or more meaningful purpose to exist. It seems that they all shared an idea that real value perceived by customer has to do with things larger than just normal business process. If we examine the literature Kotler and Armstrong (2014) defines marketing as a value creation process where the aim is to build strong customer relationships in order to capture the value from customer in return. This reflects especially with the fan-theory of Interviewee A where the value captured from the customers is turned into fanatic followers.



After the overall covering the basic strategy it was time to ask what has changed in the value creation and marketing. Again we got unanimous answers that definitely something has changed but all of the interviewees had their own angle to look at it. Interviewee A mentioned expectations and valuable content and their importance through the whole customer journey. The interviewee B emphasises the importance of leaving a mark in modern customers heart and Interviewee C talks about comprehensive role of marketing consisting all the activities of the company. All the responses reflect that the value creation is more complex than before and the value has to be delivered in personalised manner across all the operations within the organization.

As the marketing and value creation has clearly changed then are the tools. Interviewees A and C said both that the customer is know online and the marketers have to find these customers and offer them more personalised content and messages. This is relatively expected development when examining the previous answers where it was underlined that customers are expecting more. Interviewee C had little bit hesitation towards digitalization by arguing that digitalization has polarized the relationships. Later on C also mentioned that the businesses have spent more money on digital marketing and modern apps than what they have gain from doing it. The interviewees were little bit divided by the answers but C might have had a point when questioning the actual business impacts versus the resources invested, since the digital channels are still relatively new to many organizations. In the literature Rubanovitsch and Aminoff (2015) said that in digital marketing is cost efficient but they did not mention anything about numeric revenue growths with evidence behind them.

As a final question the research had question about changed buying behaviour. The answers divided the group again but there was more mutual agreement as well. All interviewees A, B and C agreed that people know more about and they are more aware your products and services. The differences appeared when the interviewee B mentioned that the sales process has not changed that much



where as A and C said that the process has changed and the customer has now more power and influence. Interviewee C even mentioned that some sales jobs that don't require anything-specific skill would vanish totally.

7.2 Definition and Positioning

In defining Customer Relationship Management the interviewees had lots of similar ideas and they all seemed to show value to the issues. Both A and B had the opinion that all the data from the customers are relevant and as B said there are not bad customers just bad customer relationship management. Interviewee A had the hotel example where the receptionist was able to add value to the customer by knowing the previous purchase history for instance. In this question only interviewee C had a different opinion where she argued that when it is account based (most B2B) customer relationship management then the customer data is very important when it comes to "bulk" or high volume sales it is not as relevant. In the literature Baran, Galka (2013) talk about customer relationship management between "key-customers" which supports the C's. This matter is probably too long to discuss here but maybe C's background in B2B side is now showing more and some other professional from B2C side would disagree especially when C as well pointed out the more personalised messaging earlier.

The sixth questions about CRM approaches on this new era of different channels received different types of answers from the interviewees. Interviewee A mentioned that development is going towards omni-channel but companies have not picked up the pace yet. The interviewee B's and C's answers are similar since the both have effectiveness from the management perspective as B mentions that the management might not be so active in all the channels. It feels, as the all the interviewees know that the movement to omni-channel CRM is approaching but they acknowledges the fact that management is not fully par-



ticipating in it. There reason might also be that majority of the management teams are older than the sales representatives and therefore they are not seeing the same potential yet.

As we had now covered most of the background questions and answers, it was time move into the actual topic Social Customer Relationship Management. We received good definitions although interviewee C not completely aware of the term Social Customer Relationship Management, as the interviewee was more familiar with the term Social Selling. Interviewee A's definition of Social CRM was another channel for the salesperson to engage and approach both existing and prospect customers as well as other stakeholders. A's definition correlates with Paul Greenberg's (2009) way of defining the meaning of Social CRM as he states that it is especially for engaging customers. Interviewees B and C are both agreeing that Social CRM is effective way to gain insights by "listening Social Media". In general all of the definitions where more or less what the literature review covered and the general impression was fairly positive in regards to the Social CRM.

After Social CRM the questions was that is Social Media really affective place to sell or promote your company. All the interviewees agreed that it definitely is. B and C both reflected to their own consulting services that one of their primary channels to "promote" or as C said to receive inbound inquiries, is Social Media. Interviewee A's more technical background probably reflected when his answer was more focused on digital footprint and tracking this with different tools but A also mentioned the networks that were B's and C's emphasis was. The relationships and networks are found also in the literature when Shannon Belew (2014) discusses Social Selling as "[efforts] creating potentially mutually beneficial relationships".

7.3 Business Effects



When businesses are evaluating different strategies it eventually culminates to the financial benefits of choosing one or another strategy. As this last part of the discussion we will see what the interviewees thought about Social CRM as an investment.

The most important question of the thesis was to ask the interviewees if you could really maximize your customer relationship management by using social media. The interviewees were relatively unanimous and all of them agreed that it definitely helps. A and B both pointed out the importance of gathering information for your customers and this will help you approaching them if needed. C also had the network approach when their new company had received lots of inbound queries through social networks, as many of their employees are active in social media. The responses correlate accurately with Shannon Belew's (2014) original definition of social selling used in the literature: "the identification, targeting, and reaching out to prospective and existing customers through social media channels and social communities in an effort to engage them in conversations that result in a potentially mutually beneficial relationships."

In the interviews it was discovered that Social CRM has definitely positive impacts on maximizing your results but what did the interviewees think about the effectiveness versus result ratio? Interviewees A and B had both the same problem that without good content there is nothing. Their objection was that only relevant and good content can be useful and this is definitely something that companies tend to struggle. Interviewee C on the other hand argued that there is not enough training and support for this, which is needed to succeed. In the literature Tanni and Keronen (2011) explained the role of content marketing as it has developed a need for companies to establish content strategies were the company is building an online content producing continuum, attracting potential customers to engage and reflect to the given content. The training part mentioned by C will be probably solved in the future but the content creation will be



probably the largest challenge and investment. It is never easy (or cheap) to produce good quality as often as Social Media requires you to do it.

The second investment-related issue was the technology requirements that organizations need in order to sustain profitable Social CRM. Both A and C agreed that technology itself does not solve anything but they did not say it was totally irrelevant either. The interviewee B separated the need for technology between large and small organizations where as A and C did not mention that. A's focus was more on producing valuable content and C emphasised listening the web. From these interview answers it is very hard to combine one conclusive conclusion other than technology itself is not enough.

When talking about Social Media you cannot avoid feeling the hype around it. Everyone is talking about but is for everyone? All the interviewees agreed that the Social Media is for everyone and you should definitely used as part of your business activities. Interviewee C couldn't recall any industries that wouldn't use it or that shouldn't. B mentioned that there is Social Media for everyone and A had overall positive approach. This last question really summarizes the whole research results in many ways. The it's very positive new extension to the existing channels and there is always ways to benefit from it and if there is not yet – why not be the first?



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Appendix 1.

Terminology

CRM = Customer Relationship Management

Social CRM = Social Customer Relationship Management

Optimization = Optimizing in this context means adjusting the words used in the search engine marketing to maximise the profitability

Lead = Lead can have different definitions but generally it's a sales opportunity where customer has shown interest towards your product or service

Google Trends = Google's extension to analyze the search terms used in different time periods – works as a measure of popularity

Appendix 2.



The Questionnaire:

Background

1. What is the company's main goal & marketing strategy?
2. How would you describe the changes (during the last decades) in a way marketers are creating value to their customers?
3. Have you noticed a change in marketing and customer relations with the advent of digital marketing? How has it changed?
4. Do you see any changes in the buying behaviour of customers (during the last decades)? Can you identify modern buying process or is there one?

Definitions

5. What is the role of customer relationship management today? How relevant it is to organizations – isn't the latest studies showing that customers are more or less doing the decisions without salespeople?
6. Why most of the customer relationship management approaches are only focusing on calls, emails and meetings even though the same companies are talking about omni-channel strategies in engaging their customers?
7. Can you explain Social Customer Relationship Management in your own words?



8. Do you think that Social Media has changed the way we sell and promote our products and services?

Business Effects

9. Can you maximize your Customer Relationship Management efficiency by utilizing interactions and data from the social media? If yes, can you provide an example?
10. Is social customer relationship management worth of investing your time – how time consuming in terms of ROI?
11. Are there any requirements for technology in the contemporary customer relationship management?
12. Most likely some sales people might have better capabilities in Social Media than others, so is this really for everyone? Are you missing out if you choose not to use this approach when engaging your customer?

