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THE ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL CONTENT MARKETING – CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF ICT COMPANIES

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of educational content marketing, within a digital marketing strategy, applied by software and application development companies for their business-to-business communication. Qualitative research for collecting primary data was conducted through in-depth interviews on a non-probability sample of experts. Considering the complexity of the products and business models of the companies from the sample, the purpose of the research was to determine how those companies establish a business relationship, how they use educational content marketing and what is its role in communication with other companies. The results indicate that the role of educational content marketing, for the companies in the sample, is crucial in expanding the market, creating new business opportunities, as well as in the sales process, especially in operations of high financial value.

Keywords: digital technologies, digital marketing, content marketing, educational content marketing, software and application development companies

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of new communication methods has changed the way companies approach products, brands, partnerships, and relationship management. Marković et al. (2021) state that due to the increasing availability of data and computational power, information and communication technologies (ICT) have become a crucial part of people's lives. Many companies have placed a greater focus on developing digital capabilities, skills, and practices to remain relevant and competitive in the market (Ferreira et al., 2022). Empowering digital capabilities in the B2B context is increasingly moving toward digital content marketing (Holliman & Rowley, 2014) because the B2B sales cycle is often long, complex, and multifaceted, involving many stakeholders. This process requires significant information availability, co-creation of value, and building long-term relationships with customers. Content marketing can provide significant support in all of these aspects. Although the undeniable importance of content marketing and digital marketing in the B2B environment, it is evident that B2B lags behind B2C practices in this area (Habibi et al., 2015). Content marketing in the B2B environment can play a crucial role because B2B places a higher value on educational formats. Furthermore, a greater number of decision-makers in B2B entails different media and different messages for each involved person. The slower decision-making cycle in B2B purchasing necessitates a greater need for information. The B2B environment involves high-value exchange, leading to a higher perceived risk. B2B products are more complex, B2B buyers are more informed, and they often rely more on personal selling than advertising as a source of product information (Habibi et al., 2015).

One of the most important determinants of quality digital marketing is content (Davidavičius & Limba, 2022). According to the purpose of usage, the content can be divided into: educational, informational and entertaining (de Aguilera-Moyano et al., 2015). But no matter what is its purpose, content should attract the attention of the target audience, make them think, educate them, and ultimately encourage them to some form of conversion and if possible, help establish long-term relationships with companies. Consequently, content marketing has become one of the leading marketing technique in digital marketing communication and it uses the point of view of consumers to build relationships by creating and sharing content (Du Plessis, 2017). One of the first definitions sets content marketing as “the creation and distribution of educational and/or compelling content in multiple formats to attract and/or retain customers” (Barrett & Pulizzi, 2008). Razzaq et al. (2023) state that digital content marketing utilizes various types of content to inform customers, provide entertainment, and build mutual relationships. Types of digital content marketing (such as blogs, vlogs, whitepapers, e-newsletters, ebooks, podcasts, etc.) are focused on offering highly original content aimed at engaging customers.

According to Hollebeek & Macky (2019) digital content marketing is the creation and distribution of relevant, valuable, brand-related content to existing or future customers on digital platforms to develop their favorable brand

engagement, trust, and communication. Dropulić et al. (2022) emphasize that one of the key changes affecting brands stems from technological advancements and their impact on consumer interactions with product brands. Usually digital content marketing is considered as a digital marketing strategy that educates consumers by providing valuable information to them (Davidavičius & Limba, 2022). According to Ho et al. (2020), customers are increasingly focused on digital communication with the brand, brands are taking responsibility for creating quality digital content that aims to achieve one or more of the brand's set goals. Fundamental changes in business-to-business buying behavior are making digital content marketing a strategic priority for suppliers as companies struggle to realize their full potential using a customer-centric marketing approach. Customer centricity, as a marketing strategy, seeks to understand and meet the needs of individual customers, rather than mass markets or broad market segments, in order to create superior value (Terho et al., 2022). Based on this contribution of creating superior value, educational content marketing arises as a specific and distinguishing type of content marketing. The purpose of educational marketing is to provide educational information that is relevant to a target audience, or to educate a specific niche on topics they are interested in, rather than to sell them products or services and to help customers increase their experience (Knihová, 2021). If educational content is taken into consideration as a leading point of selling, then it is more often offered to business users, and especially in one of the more complex industries where technology companies provide products and services in the field of information-communication technology. The educational content is even more specific for companies that develop software or applications for specific market niches, considering that this type of software or application needs to be personalized and integrated into the company's systems, and users must be previously trained for their usage. Because "an educated customer is a better customer" (Knihová, 2021). Therefore, to achieve the marketing goal, marketers undertake efforts to achieve them by creating educational content for their users. The most used content formats are blogs, vlogs, guides, e-mails, newsletters, infographics, downloadable white papers, e-books, videos and other visual content, webinars, podcasts, seminars, as well as social media communication through different channels (de Aguilera-Moyano et al., 2015) (Mansour & Barandas, 2017) (Knihová, 2021).

Conducted desk research indicates that the topic of educational content marketing is insufficiently researched, especially when considering technology companies. Desk research was the first step in collecting secondary data necessary for creating a theoretical framework and research instrument for collecting primary data. In second step, qualitative research through in-depth interviews was conducted on a non-probability sample, sample of five experts that represent the companies operating on a global level and that are leaders in the field of information and communication technologies that are specialized in the developing, i.e. sale/rental of software and applications to other companies.

The aim of the empirical research was to determine how technology companies create educational marketing content. The specific questions we would like to address are as follows: To which target audience is educational marketing content directed? How is the content distributed? Does educational content marketing provide added value in the business environment? How is the success of educational marketing content efforts measured?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Content marketing in B2B environment

Historically, building a business relationship between companies has traditionally been done through face-to-face meetings, because such a way of doing business was considered imperative for the long-term trust and survival of companies that operate on the business market. In the current business environment, within the framework of digital transformation, there are countless ways to establish and build relationships between companies. Although there are arguments that building a business relationship between two companies cannot be built through digital channels, it is undoubtable that through them relationship can certainly be strengthened (Sundström et al., 2020).

Šlogar & Bezić (2020) argue that with the onset of globalization, a new value system emerges in which innovation, knowledge, information, quality, and business flexibility become important factors for survival in the market. In order for companies to remain competitive in the market, they need to have appropriate organizational competencies, must be innovative, accumulate and develop existing knowledge, and also adopt new knowledge (Martinčević & Kozina, 2020). Technological innovations available in the market that a company can recognize, adopt, and implement in its business are necessary for achieving success. The assimilation and acquisition of new knowledge at the company level cannot exist without existing knowledge about the organization. In such an environment, companies must acquire new knowledge to develop new products and meet customer needs, as well as enter new markets. In a business context, many marketing decision-makers still perceive social media sites as less important because there is a common perception that social media is more relevant to “business to customer” markets and that social media cannot support the marketing objectives of the business relationship between companies (Shaltoni, 2017). According to Andersson, Wikström (2017) business to business (B2B) marketing, is defined as the “marketing of products and services that are bought and sold between organizations”. Holliman and Rowley (2014) state that digital content marketing has several audience-oriented functions.

Digital content marketing aimed at companies is an inbound marketing technique, which is carried out through a website, social media and value-added content, and is considered a useful tool for achieving and maintaining the status of a trusted brand (Davidavičius & Limba, 2022). Today, due to digital media,

business users have access to information about various products and services, which was traditionally not easily available to customers, and such information helps companies make informed decisions. Companies should maintain a credible online presence, whether through websites, blogs in online business communities or through social media platforms (Pandey et al., 2020). Companies use the opportunity to attract more customers and create added value for customers. Also, digital tools have turned content marketing into one of the most popular concepts today, and digital content has become the most popular concept in the marketing world today. Seyyedamiri & Tajrobehkar (2019) state that the digital dimension has led to the use of new terminology including terms like digital social content marketing, which focuses on changes in innovation technology in the creation, delivery and management of content. Creating content that is valuable to B2B audience requires brands to take a “publishing” approach that involves developing an understanding of the audience's information needs and purchase consideration cycle. Valuable content is described as useful, relevant, persuasive and timely (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Content marketing requires a culture shift from “selling” to “assisting” which in turn requires different marketing goals, tactics, metrics, and skills than those associated with more traditional marketing approaches (Holliman & Rowley, 2014). Digital media reach many different stakeholders and are crucial for companies because they improve the understanding of how they influence mutual relationships (Andersson & Wikström, 2017).

In terms of processes and activities, education includes teaching, schooling, training, guidance, and in terms of outcomes, it includes proximal outcomes such as learning, increased knowledge and insight, and change in beliefs, as well as long-term outcomes such as accumulation of knowledge, change in behavior, employment and income (Grewal et al., 2022). Educational content marketing is based on the marketing principle of education instead of aggressive and direct sales and starts from the conviction that potential customers should primarily be provided with education about the product or service offered (Knihová, 2021).

2.2. Shared value creation

According to Grewal et al. (2022), traditional value creation is perceived as companies creating value for their B2B customers, and customers then examine and evaluate the offer. Value creation is at the epicenter of marketing and the purpose of business-to-business marketing is embedded in the idea that suppliers and customers work together to create superior value that suppliers cannot provide alone (Hofacker et al., 2020). Although value creation is necessary but not sufficient for marketing success, the value must be effectively and efficiently communicated and delivered (Lewnes & Keller, 2019).

The use of digital technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain technologies can improve shared value creation activities and eliminate human involvement in mechanical processes leading to greater value.

At the same time, technologies are likely to cause new challenges that would reinforce soft behavioral aspects in business relations between companies (Hofacker et al., 2020). When selling technology-enhanced products, it is important to find ways to simplify explanations of the product functionality and performance, and the benefits obtained, or even cost savings, to help customers better understand the product and improve the customer experience (Lewnes & Keller, 2019).

2.3. Digital customer educational experience

The highly competitive marketing environment of the 21st century presents marketers with numerous challenges and requires them to adopt new approaches to attract and retain customers. The reason for this can be found in the fact that customer behavior is developing and changing at an unprecedented speed. Digital technologies are also continuously evolving, and that has enabled the development of new business relationship types between brands and their customers. With the support of digital technologies a large amount of data on customer behavior can be collected, which enables marketing experts to evaluate customer behavior in real-time more efficient and also allows detailed, predictable, customer profiling to create a fully personalized customer experience (Knihová, 2021). Therefore, development of digital technologies has fundamentally changed the way technology companies promote their brands (Knihová, 2021). In the digital environment, brands have a much more practical way to reach their customers and achieve relationship with them, and at the end to benefit from that relationship (Ertemel et al., 2021).

With the increased amount of complexity of technology-enhanced products and services, at the center of communication towards customers are educational contents that must be specially created to help customers overcome difficulties that would prevent a smooth transition of knowledge and skills while mastering the complexity of technological products (Dornberger, 2021). Therefore, closer and more frequent relationships with clients facilitate this transition and offer more opportunities to upgrade the products themselves, by offering them added value based on educational content (Knihová, 2021). For that reason, there is a need to upgrade marketing activities with educational content marketing campaigns with the idea in mind that content marketing and customer education should not be in contradiction, but rather to enhance each other (Avramescu, 2019).

2.4. Customer education

Customer education refers to companies' efforts to systematically provide users with critical knowledge, skills, and abilities to maximize their experience with a particular product/service offering and derive the most value from it (Sun et al., 2021). Companies that provide business technology introduction services must educate customers about the benefits - otherwise,

customers rely only on their general technology beliefs when deciding to use the technology (Blut & Wang, 2020).

Marketing strategies based on content marketing with a focus on customer education have proven to be beneficial for many software brands. With the goal of building a strong and high-quality relationship with customers, many software suppliers organize free seminars and webinars for potential customers long before their customers seriously consider purchasing their “software-as-a-service” solutions (SaaS) (Knihová, 2021). Technology provides tools that enable marketing experts to use creativity to build new types of customer relationships (Lewnes & Keller, 2019).

2.5. “Software-as-a-service” concept of technology companies

“Software-as-a-service” can be defined as a software licensing and delivery model where an application or service is deployed from a centralized data center over a network, providing access and usage, often on a recurring fee basis (Venkatachalam et al., 2014).

The market is constantly changing, which requires software companies to design and implement fundamentally different business models and different product management practices, as well as new development processes (Saltan & Smolander, 2021). The cloud-based business has not only changed the way software is used, but it has also changed the way customers are educated. Instead of training in classrooms, customers can experience their education through single sign-on (SSO) platforms offering a wide range of educational content (Avramescu, 2019). Consequently, technology companies do not sell their “software-as-a-service”, instead they sell an extended product. Marketing departments of technology companies complement the usual content marketing portfolio such as e-books, blogs, vlogs and webinars with educational content that becomes the basis for design, strategy and educational marketing campaigns.

3. RESEARCH

3.1. Research methodology

The subject of this research was the role of educational content marketing as part of the digital marketing strategy applied by companies that develop software and applications and use educational content marketing in communication with other companies. The aim of the research was to determine how technology companies create educational marketing content, towards which target audience of this content is directed, how it is distributed, as well as to determine whether educational content marketing provides added value in the business environment, and how the success of marketing efforts is measured. The goal of the research was also to investigate to what extent building relationships

and loyalty is important and whether educational content affects the speed of a company's sales cycle.

Qualitative research was conducted through in-depth interviews using an interview guide adapted from the research conducted by Knihová (2021) as a research instrument. The structure of the research instrument was derived from this guide, and most of the questions were adapted from it. Adjustments were made to align and shape the questions according to the objectives of the study. The research was conducted on a non-probability sample of five experts from the information technology industry. Given that the purpose of the research was to collect data relevant to this topic, the respondents were chosen deliberately according to precisely defined qualifications and industry. The experts represent the companies that operate on a global level and that are leaders in their field, the field of information and communication technologies that are specialized in developing, i.e. sale/rental of softwares and applications. The companies are located in Ireland and Croatia and have more than 800 employees. Respondents were respectively marketing experts and experts from the technical pre-sale of software and application to business users. Respondents were contacted through a LinkedIn, as well as through personal and business contacts.

The key prerequisites were that respondents had experience with educational content marketing and were employed in leading IT/ICT companies.

Table 1

Structure of respondents by gender, industry, and number of employees

Respondents	Gender	Industry	Number of employees
Respondent 1	M	IT	> 800
Respondent 2	M	IT	> 800
Respondent 3	M	IT	> 800
Respondent 4	F	ICT	> 5000
Respondent 5	F	ICT	> 5000

Source: Author's

Table 2

Structure of respondents based on geographic location and job position

Respondents	Location	Job position
Respondent 1	Northern Ireland	Director of Software Technical Pre-sales
Respondent 2	Ireland	Vice President of Marketing
Respondent 3	Ireland	Vice President of B2B Sales
Respondent 4	Croatia	Brand Manager
Respondent 5	Croatia	Digital Marketing Specialist

Source: Author's

Since the sample consists of experts who are often reluctant to participate in research, and given that these experts come from leading companies in the market, the sample size is considered adequate, taking all of these factors into account.

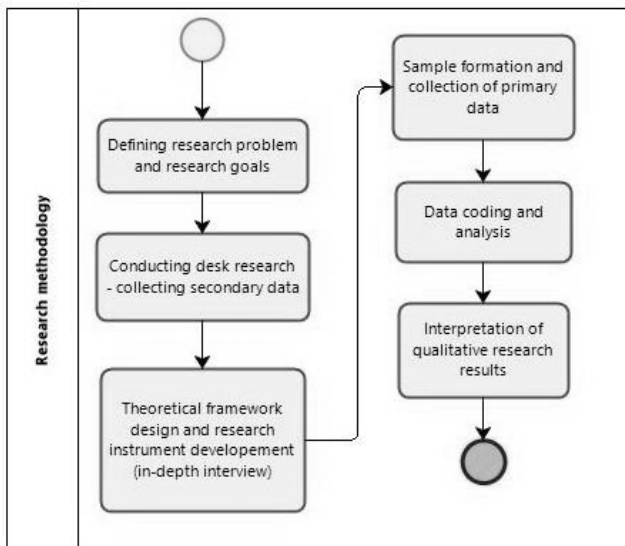


Figure 1 Research Methodology Model

Source: Author's work using Bisagi tool

The interviews with all respondents were conducted through the Teams platform, and the transcript function enabled by the Teams application was used as a tool. Respondents were informed that the recording of the transcript is anonymous and that they can be completely honest because the data will be deleted after the analysis was made. The duration of the interviews varied from a minimum of 45 minutes to 1 hour depending on the respondent's ability to provide focused input. Before the interview, interviewer gave a brief introduction to the experts, and explaining what the research topic was, and later at the very beginning of the interview, the purpose of the research itself was further explained. Respondents were asked the questions created according to the research conducted by Knihová (2021). Some of the questions were: How are clients found in the business environment in a specific information technology industry? Which platforms does the company use to attract the target audience? How important are digital media in a B2B relationship and is it possible to build a relationship with a client exclusively through digital communication? What types and formats of content marketing are used? What is the role of educational content marketing? How is the success of educational content marketing

measured? What will educational content marketing look like in the future? After collecting the data, data were coded by the authors and analyzed. The analysis of the data is presented below. For easier understanding of research methodology, the model is shown in Figure 1.

3.2. Research results

3.2.1. Establishing contact in the business environment in technology companies

Building business relationships between companies that operate in the market by offering software services to other companies requires a complex and comprehensive marketing strategy that involves several departments within the company working together towards established goals. One of the questions posed during the research specifically addressed the identification of clients and relationship establishment.

Respondents were asked how customers are found in the business environment of the information and communication industry. Considering that the research includes a sample of companies that have an established brand and are very actively present on digital platforms, their response was that given the specificity of the software, where it is sold to a particular type of large enterprises within a niche market, some respondents may have only four or five customers or four or five potential customers in any given country worldwide. And the main platform they use for business purposes and communication with business customers is LinkedIn. To discover and find their target audience, companies also research via the Internet which companies would be potentially interesting for business cooperation. Respondents state that one of the advantages is the fact that future customers are technically focused companies that usually sell products or services to customers and other companies. Given that it is a generic software/application, there is a need for additional personalization and integration of the software into the customer system to add a certain value to the customer and provide a customer experience. If taken into consideration, that the niche is specific, the focus of the respondents' companies is not the creation of potential customers. Instead, they are focused on a better customer experience, building loyalty, and working to maintain good relations and retain customers. Respondants stated that this is supported by educational content, which is why it is so important when creating and implementing a digital strategy.

3.2.2. Platforms for publishing content marketing in a business environment

Respondents were asked which platforms they use to publish digital content and most respondents listed LinkedIn as a preference platform for building business relationships and branding of a company in general. Respondents mentioned that the most commonly used digital platforms for

communication with the target audience besides LinkedIn, are YouTube and Twitter. All respondents agreed that LinkedIn is the best digital platform for business communication between companies because business clients are the easiest to find on LinkedIn. Still, there are different opinions regarding the use of Twitter. Respondents outside the territory of Croatia prefer Twitter as a platform they use to publish news or novelties from the industry, while respondents from Croatia do not consider Twitter as a relevant platform for communication with their target audience.

3.2.3. Application of digital media and building relationships in a business environment

The next question was related to the importance of digital media in a business relationship and whether it is possible to build a business relationship exclusively through digital communication. Different opinions were obtained from the respondents. Some believe that it depends on the type of product or service offered and how much physical contact with the company is really needed. Some experts state that to a certain extent, it is difficult to build a relationship through digital channels only, because applying only digital marketing tools do not build that face-to-face relationship, but also without face-to-face marketing efforts, a company cannot appear on the market as a credible brand or a strong partner, or even be seen as a potential player in the market. One of the respondents mentioned that in the last few years, the emphasis on building personal relationships has changed a lot due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Dealing with customers has changed earlier, in the sense that people are doing more research and information seeking before buying. If they are interested in it, they will find it in the digital environment and that is why digital marketing is useful and finds its application. One of the respondents mentioned that it is important to build the relationship digitally and face-to-face because no one will buy software just because they discovered it on the web, and further action and interaction with the company is required. Furthermore, while younger respondents consider it completely legitimate to build a business relationship purely through digital means, older respondents believe that establishing and building relationships through physical presence is a key factor in fostering business cooperation between companies.

Respondents said that demo versions of the software are available online, but they cannot offer all the features that the company expects without additional personalization and integration with the system. To provide proper personalization and integration physical interaction with each customer is important for acquiring feedback. Respondents also mentioned the importance of online communication, especially during the pandemic when they were unable or limited to travel and visit their business partners. Digital communication made it possible to connect without physical contact, but also to provide alternatives to physical visits to a branch or store. According to respondents, the speed of

transaction, the quality of service, and the expectations that match the customer's expectations are crucial. Finally, digital marketing perspective can help establish a good starting point from which a personal relationship can be further developed.

3.2.4. Types and formats of educational digital content

Good content marketing leads to greater customer engagement, which leads to more potential customers, which leads to more potential sales (Rani, 2022). When respondents were asked about the types and formats of content, they said that LinkedIn is the most important digital platform for them. It serves as a professional channel for the publication of blog posts, official news, and announcements, and companies regularly distribute various reports and data, press releases, case studies, infographics as well as the latest news from the technology world, related to the activity of the company itself. Some of the respondents said that their company uses Facebook as a sales channel, and Instagram for building brand awareness, where companies try to attract new employees, so the content is adapted to that topic more. Some use Twitter for business communication and news information in a shorter form of posting links, while YouTube is used for the announcement and publication of new products through video clips from conference events. Other types of content respondents mentioned include e-mail marketing and sending educational messages in the form of newsletters to companies.

3.2.5. The role of company-focused educational content

Respondents were asked why they use educational content marketing, what is the role of it. They stated that they use educational content marketing in communication with companies because their primary activity is to drive the implementation of innovative digital technologies. That is the reason for designing and delivering content which supports aiming to inform and educate business users. At this point it is useful to keep in mind that companies that are included in the sample are market leaders in implementing new digital technologies and that they need to teach their target audience about a particular topic. In that sense companies publish blog posts on LinkedIn and update the website quite regularly to provide continuous educational content delivery. These two channels are an important source of information and the primary point of contact for business users, but also serve as an entry point for potential customers. According to their answers, experts believe that their goal is to educate their business users, and that this goal achieves its purpose if the offered opportunities are used.

Respondents think that the term "education" is also used in communication with companies because then the business opportunity itself gains importance and adds value to business cooperation. In the technology market, there are many regulatory bodies, and many challenges regarding security in

terms of the way information is managed, as well as the volume of information and data managed. For this reason, education about the security of managed data is also important, especially when managing the data of millions of end users according to respondents. Special attention is paid to educational content regarding this aspect.

Based on the research, a digital marketing strategy is created with the purpose of education aimed at companies. In the case of content that has an exclusively educational character, the YouTube platform is more often mentioned, alongside LinkedIn. Experts believe that digital communication must answer five questions: who will consume the content, what can the company offer, and when, where, and how companies can deliver the content. According to experts, the user needs to be educated, and the company should provide additional content and have all the information necessary for the first contact with the company. Too much content is not recommended, and the infographic format is cited as the best example of the right information-to-format ratio. In addition to the education of business users with infographics, respondents also mentioned webinars that are used at a later stage, while blog posts are a standard part of everyday communication because they contain important information of educational content and enable presence on digital channels.

3.2.6. Performance indicators

The next questions in the interview were related to the success of educational content marketing and how can it be measured. It is impossible to develop a comprehensive marketing strategy without setting goals that are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound). If it is taken into consideration that key performance indicators (KPIs) serve to evaluate goals that are set and the results of it, respondents think that it is necessary to set KPIs. The most common KPIs are conversion rate, the number of visits to the website, the number of inquiries made through the contact form, the abandonment rate, as well as retention and interaction with the website and the sources that led to the page (LinkedIn, YouTube). Some respondents stated that they use external agencies to monitor company performance metrics, while others do it independently, in-house. They claim that they base their marketing strategies on the analysis of KPIs.

3.2.7. Trends in educational content marketing

According to experts, educational content marketing has good grounds for further development, but it cannot be used generically because it is very specific. The content they create must be very attractive, especially the video content, and must be available at the user's request. It is considered that the education of business users will not go in the direction of additional elaboration of the content, instead, the time required for the consumption of educational

content will only be shortened so that the content is consumed in parts or episodes. Respondents state that a sufficient budget for promotion must be invested in designing, creating and delivering educational marketing material.

Experts claim that marketing as a scientific discipline changes rapidly over the years and that predicting future trends is difficult. Most respondents believe that educational content marketing has potential for further development, but certain aspects of specificity, coverage and formats must be addressed. The content needs to be very attractive and available at the user's request, due to the decreasing concentration span of users in the digital environment. It is also important to have a sufficient budget available for the creation of educational marketing material as well as for advertising campaigns. Respondents mention that it is important to highlight the exceptional role of educational content marketing in businesses of great financial value, which, in addition to a personal stamp, educational content marketing has incredible importance in relation to providing full, timely and relevant content to potential customers.

3.3. Discussion

Educational customer experience is a newer concept in content marketing and refers to an innovative approach to customers that aims to shorten the customer's journey through the sales process. According to Knihová (2021), new ways of implementing an educational marketing strategy have been carried out only sporadically in previous research, the topic of education is still poorly researched, while the educational strategy of content marketing is poorly understood or not implemented as part of a company's complete digital strategy. This can also be seen from research conducted for the purpose of writing this paper, where respondents understand the importance of education and use educational formats when performing on digital platforms, but do not have a fully developed digital marketing strategy, as well as a plan for implementation and evaluation of the obtained results.

When choosing educational content, it is important to first determine the topic to be covered, then interest in the topic and familiarity with the topic. Other important aspects of the successful implementation of educational content marketing are timely management of decisions on choosing an effective mix of digital platforms and formats such as e-books, educational blogs or vlogs, educational e-mails, social media channels, live video on Facebook or other platforms, as well as educational videos on YouTube, webinars, podcasts, seminars, and many others (Knihová, 2021). Knihová (2021) in her research does not mention LinkedIn as a platform for educational content marketing, while this research confirmed that LinkedIn is the first choice of technology companies when publishing educational content. Although the branch of industry in the research conducted by Knihová (2021), is not the same as in this research, it can be clearly read that companies, consciously or unconsciously, educate their users, which confirms the research conducted.

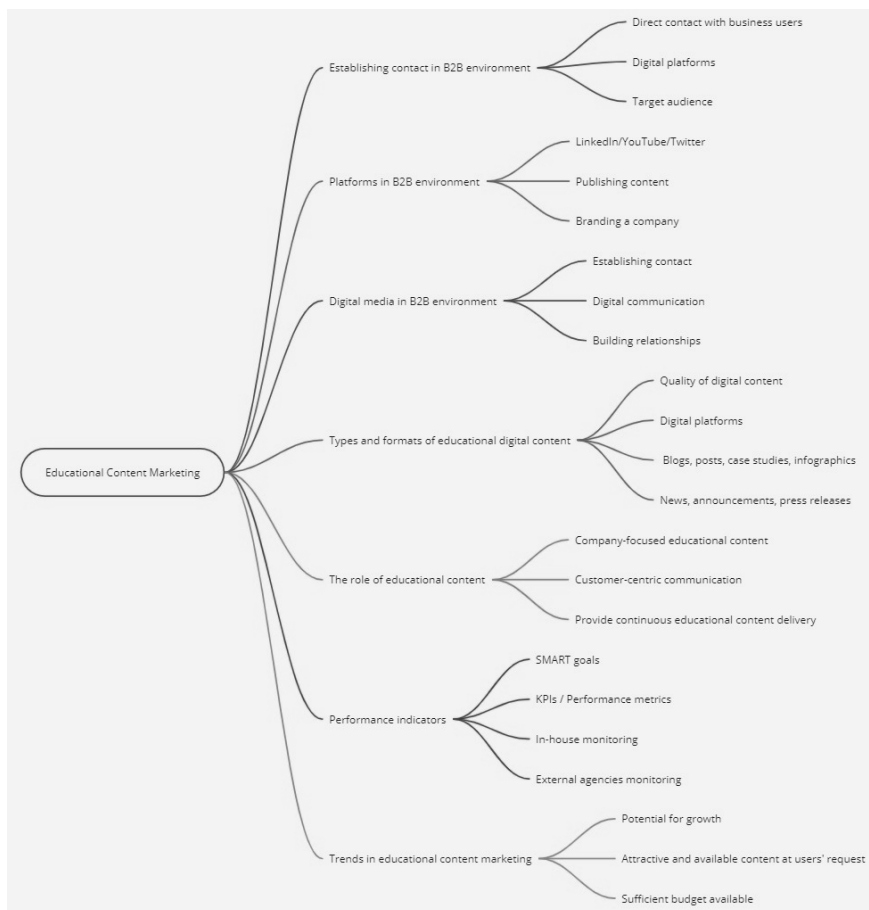


Figure 2 Mind Map of keywords and keyconcept of in-depth interviews

Source: author's work using Miro Mind Mapping tool

The challenge is manifested in the quantification of results, where it is not clear whether KPIs are used and how companies measure performance when appearing on digital media. Research by Retana et al. (2016), claims that the education of proactive customers can have significant economic benefits for the service provider. More precisely, pre-educated users significantly increase the use of the service towards the service provider compared to users who were not educated in the process. According to the experts from this research, this statement is also true because they mentioned that it is extremely important for experts to take the first step in the sales process, which is the education of business users. It is this initial education that spills over into the further sales process, which moves from the digital environment to the traditional environment

of physical presence in the negotiation phase, to further build relationships, both digitally and traditionally, depending on the requirements of the business environment. Bell et al. (2017) claim that the understanding of the paradox of customer education lies in the specificity and expertise of customers that is built as a result of customer education initiatives by companies. Their results show that educating customers about a very specific type of product or service results in an increase in customer loyalty, which is not the case with general purpose products and services. This is also confirmed by research results presented in this paper, according to which building relationships, loyalty, and customer retention is extremely important in a specific market, especially in the case when the market size is very limited due to a specific branch and/or a small number of companies for business cooperation. For easier understanding of collected data from in-depth interviews Mind Map was presented (Figure 2) to visualize most important keywords and keyconcepts of all seven research categories.

3.4. Research limitations

Research limitations are reflected in the impossibility of finding experts responsible exclusively for creating content marketing with an emphasis on educational content marketing, which is still in its infancy. There is a noticeable difference in opinions, especially when it comes to building relationships in the digital environment. While younger respondents consider it completely legit to build a business relationship entirely digitally, older respondents believe that establishing and building relationships through physical presence is a key factor in building business cooperation between companies. But considering the small sample size, a single conclusion cannot be reached.

Furthermore, comprehensive qualitative research should be conducted on a larger sample in the technological branch of the industry, on the side of the provider of educational content and on the side of the recipient of the educational content service. Limitations are also reflected in the impossibility of gaining insights into the analytics of company's digital platforms, to get a clearer picture of the effectiveness of the currently applied content marketing plan and for deeper insights and analysis into the research topic.

Future research could explore both qualitative and quantitative avenues. Qualitative research could be conducted to further analyze the obtained results with experts from practice, as well as involving experts from marketing agencies that assist the company in content creation. Quantitative research could encompass a larger and more representative sample of respondents, including professionals from various industries.

4. CONCLUSION

Educational content marketing is becoming increasingly recognized as an important concept of digital marketing strategy for companies that recognize the opportunities offered by it. Technology companies have recognized the importance of providing educational content and are developing their marketing efforts in the direction of user education as a starting point in establishing and building relationships. Due to the very nature of the services they create and deliver to other companies, the educational digital content created by technology companies is smaller in volume than the digital content created by end-user companies, and therefore it is important to adopt a unique approach when creating this type of content. It is very important to systematically and strategically plan, create and deliver educational content, keeping in mind the target audience, the complexity of the service, delivery of information at the right time, timely interaction with users, and evaluation of the achieved results.

In future operations, it is expected that companies will be forced to allocate additional marketing budget and ensure the education of marketing experts who will be able to successfully plan, set goals, implement, and evaluate the results of educational campaigns. Content marketing and educational content marketing are difficult to quantify, and appropriate steps must be taken to assess its effectiveness. Information and communication technologies are developing at a high speed and companies cannot afford not to apply digital marketing strategies. Companies that offer specific software solutions on the global market and address a niche group of potential business users, to some extent understand the importance of quality and relevant content and have accordingly shifted their attention to educational content marketing. Those companies are focusing on user education in a business environment, on using their own digital channels such as a website and LinkedIn to provide channels for delivering content and establishing first contact with business users through those channels as a base for transferring the communication to the physical world, building quality and long-term partner relationships.

However, the conducted research showed that the technology companies whose experts participated in the research do not have, have only partially created a comprehensive digital marketing strategy, or have a formal strategy. In cases when a strategy exists, it is mostly not sufficiently well integrated with the traditional marketing performance on the market or is not consistently implemented. Another insight from this research is the case that educational content marketing also plays an exceptional role in businesses of great financial value, which could be a valuable area of further research. Based on information gathered in this research, it could be concluded that educational content allows companies to create their own success and enables users to participate and co-create future products and services, to improve existing products or businesses, and this is exactly where technology companies can have an advantage when using an education-oriented marketing strategy.

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ULOGA MARKETINGA EDUKATIVNOG SADRŽAJA – ANALIZA STUDIJE SLUČAJA ICT TVRTKI

Sažetak

Ovaj rad istražuje ulogu marketinga edukativnog sadržaja, kao dijela strategije digitalnog marketinga koji primjenjuju poduzeća koja razvijaju softvere i aplikacije te se njime koriste u komunikaciji s drugim poduzećima. Za potrebe prikupljanja primarnih podataka provedeno je kvalitativno istraživanje s pomoću dubinskih intervjua na namjernom uzorku, uzorku stručnjaka. S obzirom na složenost proizvoda i poslovnih modela poduzeća iz uzorka, svrha istraživanja bila je utvrditi kako ona uspostavljaju poslovne odnose, kako se koriste marketing edukativnim sadržajem te koja je njegova uloga u komunikaciji s drugim poduzećima. Rezultati provedenog istraživanja ukazuju na to da je uloga marketinga edukativnog sadržaja, za poduzeća iz uzorka, iznimno važna u nastojanju širenja tržišta, otvaranja novih poslovnih prilika, kao i u procesu prodaje, posebice u poslovima visoke financijske vrijednosti.

Ključne riječi: digitalne tehnologije, digitalni marketing, marketing sadržaja, marketing edukativnog sadržaja, poduzeća za razvoj softvera i aplikacija.

JEL klasifikacija: M31, L86.