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B2B Digital Marketing Plan for Attracting New International Customers and Building Brand Awareness Globally

Case: AMA Co., Ltd

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Author(s) Ponomarenko, Anastasiia	Type of publication Bachelor's thesis	Date May 2018
		Language of publication: English
	Number of pages 108	Permission for web publication: x

Title of publication **B2B Digital Marketing Plan for Attracting New International Customers and Building Brand Awareness Globally**
Degree programme Degree programme in International Business
Supervisor(s) Kujala, Irene
Assigned by AMA Co., Ltd

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to find out how the assignor company can improve the effectiveness of its digital marketing in the B2B context in order to reach potential clients abroad, establish the company's brand globally and promote a positive image of the company. The objective of this research was to determine which digital marketing channels would be the most efficient for building brand awareness and attracting new customers in B2B business. Another objective of this thesis was to identify the successful tactics for managing each of those channels. The final goal of this research was to develop a B2B digital marketing plan for the case company with recommendations for a digital marketing strategy.

The literature review consists of theory on the concepts of a digital marketing strategy and digital marketing tools for B2B. The theoretical part focused particularly on content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing and search engine marketing. A situation analysis of the case company's current digital initiatives was conducted to determine how efficient the company currently was in terms of digital marketing and to highlight the areas for improvements. The primary data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews. The list of questions was designed by adapting the existing theory and the results of a situation analysis. The purposive sampling method was used to form the sample.

According to the results, content marketing plays an integral role in B2B digital marketing nowadays. Moreover, search engine optimization (SEO) is vital for promoting a B2B brand online. Social media marketing provides unique opportunities for improving brand image, but this channel is only beginning to develop in the B2B context. Based on the results, recommendations were made about the specific tactics of digital marketing that the company could employ to enhance the brand's presence globally.

Keywords/tags (subjects) Digital marketing, B2B marketing, digital marketing planning, digital strategy, content marketing, social media marketing, email marketing, SEO
Miscellaneous

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1   Introduction

1.1   Background

We are now living in the era of digitalization: computers, laptops, smartphones and tablets have become our loyal companions in everyday life. More and more content that people are consuming on a daily basis is presented in the digital form. It was estimated that in 2016 there were 3.49 billion people in the world using the Internet (Key ICT indicators for developed and developing countries and the world (totals and penetration rates) 2016). The Internet has become not only an unlimited source of information and entertainment, but also a powerful platform for doing and enhancing business. In 2016 in the EU, a great majority (92 %) of enterprises with at least 10 persons employed made use of a fixed broadband connection to access the internet (Digital economy and society statistics – enterprises, 2017).

Nowadays, it is almost impossible to think of a successful company which is not trying to capture the expanding opportunities that digital marketing provides for developing the business. Since consumers now spend more and more hours online, it is absolutely logical that marketers should use internet platforms for promoting products and services (Jackson & Ahuja 2016, 177). With the help of the Internet, companies execute their basic business operations (buy and sell), attract new clients, maintain profitable relationships with their existing clients and engage them as well as create a positive image of the company in society. In contrast, traditional ways of selling are now becoming extinct. For instance, 90% of C-level executives claimed that they "never" answered cold calls or e-mail blasts (Giamanco & Gregoire 2012). Technology gives businesses a unique opportunity to reach their potential clients from all over the world and establish their brands internationally with minimum expenses. Indeed, digital marketing has become one of the most important parts of a firm's marketing strategy and its significance is constantly increasing. Chris Anderson, the editor of the "Wired" magazine, said once that "Your brand isn't what you say it is, it's what Google says it is", and nowadays this statement seems to be completely justified (Mescher 2011).

Digital marketing includes a whole range of activities: websites and content, blogs, social media marketing, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), email marketing, internet advertisements, mobile marketing and much more. It is evident that in order to implement the numerous digital marketing activities effectively and keep all of them integrated a company should undertake a strategic approach and integrate a digital marketing strategy into the overall marketing strategy of the company. Identifying the Internet as a primary engine of the business, firms have to compile such a digital marketing plan that would enhance its overall digital performance and meet the needs of a customer from a digital era. As Frick (2010, 10) notes, an effective digital strategy ensures that a company has an infrastructure that maintains and facilitates digital efforts. A strategic plan for online marketing will provide marketers' actions with strategic direction, focus, goals, prioritization and resource allocation, and all these elements need to be specified for any business activity in a company, digital marketing included. Strange as it may sound, although almost every company nowadays is engaged in digital marketing activities, only 49% of them have a clearly defined digital marketing strategy (Chaffey & Jones 2017).

The assignor of this thesis project was a company called Association of Medicine & Analytics (St.-Petersburg, Russia), hereafter referred to as 'AMA'. AMA is a developer, producer and seller of medical equipment for gastroenterology and it distributes its products both domestically and to more than 30 countries abroad. AMA has already established a rather strong presence in the domestic market, and now the company is seeking for opportunities to expand internationally. Therefore, AMA's representatives are concerned with effective methods to promote their products to foreign customers. The aim of this thesis was to analyse the current state and effectiveness of the digital marketing activities of the case company and develop a comprehensive digital marketing plan for it in order to help it to establish their brand worldwide, reach potential clients abroad, increase international sales and maintain a positive image of the company.

Since AMA operates in a B2B (business-to-business) environment, the thesis particularly focused on the marketing activities of B2B companies taking into

consideration the specificity of this business environment. Kotler and Armstrong (2016, 198) define B2B companies as firms that purchase products or services which are then used to produce other goods or services for further sale to other companies. Moreover, B2B relationships involve selling goods to retailers or wholesalers who purchase them with an intent to resell to other firms and gain a profit. In B2B, buyers do not consume the purchased goods or services themselves, and this fact explains why B2B marketing techniques and methods vary greatly from those of B2C marketing (Fill & Fill 2005, 5). According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 624), business buyers tend to make buying decisions based on technical and economic considerations, and therefore, marketing activities aimed at the emotional and impulsive side of consumer behavior are not as effective here as in the B2C environment. The author of the thesis focused, thus, on researching the special features of B2B digital marketing and on giving recommendations for an online strategy and certain activities that would be efficient particularly for the B2B market where the case company operates.

This research was designed to collect and investigate primary and secondary data that would provide the author with a realistic view on the state of B2B digital marketing in the modern business world and that would also serve as the basis for compiling the strategic B2B digital marketing plan for the case company. As agreed with the assignor, the final product of the thesis was a B2B digital marketing plan for the case company, which included the recommendations on digital marketing tools and activities. The decision on the actual implementation of the plan will be made by the company's representatives.

1.2 Motivation for the research

From AMA's perspective, the choice of the topic was motivated by the fact that although the company was active on the Internet in several ways, the management felt that their digital initiatives were not as effective as they should have been in today's rapidly changing business environment. AMA's marketing department had been continuously following the patterns in digital activity that were established by

the firm a long time ago. These outdated patterns did not bring the results that they were designed to bring, and thus, they appeared to be ineffective. The company wanted to review the existing online practices, evaluate which of them no longer resulted in the desired return, which should be modified or expanded and which new initiatives would be beneficial for the firm to undertake. Moreover, AMA's marketing employees have been constantly reflecting on which digital activities, if undertaken, would be the most beneficial for the B2B sector where the company operates. For instance, they would like to learn which social media platforms would be the most efficient for promoting products to B2B clients and how to create suitable social media content that would increase brand awareness and attract new clients.

Furthermore, the management has realized the need to integrate the firm's digital marketing activities into one comprehensive and effective system that would become an efficient tool for accomplishing the company's business goals. AMA has never followed a clearly outlined digital marketing strategy, but since the firm currently aims to expand globally, the decision makers have realized that if they want to stay competitive in today's business arena and succeed in achieving the aforementioned goal, they will need to undertake a strategic approach towards the company's digital presence.

For the author herself, the topic of digital marketing represents significant professional interest. Each day marketing itself is shifting more and more towards digitalization and this change dictates that every marketing specialist has to acquire the corresponding knowledge and skills. The author chose to research this topic because she was eager to study the substantial change occurring in the marketing field nowadays and how companies, and marketers in particular, should adapt to it in order to continue achieving business goals in the rapidly transforming business world. Furthermore, promoting B2C goods and services online is a widely discussed and well-researched topic nowadays. While working in AMA, a B2B company that sells complex products, the author became interested whether the same techniques and approaches as in B2C digital marketing could be applicable to promoting goods in the B2B markets and to what extent those techniques could be equally efficient.

As McLaren (2012) notes, the challenge of B2B marketing lies in the promoted goods' complexity that can weaken the brand's main value proposition. Creative communication can help to overcome this obstacle by encouraging word of mouth and referrals, essential marketing engines of B2B. The author was motivated to go deeper into researching the ways how B2B companies could utilize the opportunities that digitalization provides nowadays for enhancing their businesses.

1.3 Research objectives, research questions

Research problem

The case company would like to improve the effectiveness of its digital marketing so that the executed digital initiatives could contribute to the achievement of the company's main business goal at the moment: to expand globally by attracting new international customers. However, the managers of the company are not certain which digital marketing tools they should apply as a part of their marketing strategy and how to manage them in the most efficient way.

Objective

The overall objective of this study was to develop a B2B digital marketing plan for the case company. The plan would include proposals on how to effectively apply the selected digital marketing tools in order to reach potential clients abroad, increase international sales, enhance the company's brand globally and promote a positive image of the company.

Research Questions

The general research question is the following:

- What digital marketing strategy should the case company implement in order to attract new customers abroad, establish the company's brand internationally and gain a competitive advantage?

Two sub-questions were formulated in order to specify the main question:

- What are the suitable digital marketing channels for building brand awareness and increasing sales in B2B business?

- How can the company effectively manage each digital marketing channel?

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis commences with an Introduction chapter which provides the background information about the topic of the study and outlines the motivation for the research and its main objectives. The following chapter is a literature review which builds a theoretical framework for the empirical study. The literature review introduces the main concepts of a digital marketing strategy and the specific digital marketing channels that are the most relevant to the B2B business and thus, more applicable to AMA's case. The case company situation analysis is presented in the following chapter. The aim of the situation analysis is to assess how efficient the company is nowadays in terms of digital marketing and highlight the areas for improvements. This part of the thesis describes the case company in more detail, gives an overview on the current digital marketing initiatives, provides a digital-specific SWOT analysis of the company and analyses the competitive environment.

The methodology chapter sets the study into the research context and gives a justification why a certain research approach, methods and techniques were utilized during the study. The chapter describes the structured process of conducting research, including the topics of research approach, data collection and data analysis. The author also included the qualitative research results in the methodology chapter. The results subchapter reports the main findings from the interviews and provides the data for answering the research questions.

The last chapter of the thesis is Conclusions, which gives an overview of the main research results, outlines the recommendations for the case company, deals with the issues of reliability and validity, assesses the results in the light of existing literature and gives recommendations for the future research.

2 Literature review

2.1 The concept of digital marketing

The key phenomenon of this thesis is digital marketing, a term used to describe such form of marketing of products and services that uses modern digital technologies for attaining customers, transforming them into leads and retaining those leads. It is important to note that terms, such as "digital marketing", "Internet marketing" and "e-marketing" are used interchangeably by researchers and practitioners (Shaltoni 2017, 1010). The main goal of digital marketing is to promote brands, form customers' preferences and encourage sales through different digital marketing tools. (Todor 2016, 52.) These digital tools include web sites, social media, e-mails, blogs, mobile applications and advertisements, and other digital platforms whose aim is to ensure the customers' uninterrupted engagement via various electronic devices, including PCs, smartphones, tablets and other devices (Kotler & Armstrong 2016, 49). According to Song (2001, 1), promoting products and services online is a powerful tool for increasing brand awareness and achieving business goals. In today's world companies are obliged to blend traditional marketing tools with the emerging digital initiatives to meet the expectations of the contemporary consumers (Parsons, Zeisser, & Waitman 1996, 192). Moreover, as communications technology and interactive media progress, interactivity and efficiency are considered to be new objectives of marketing communications and of digital marketing in particular (Karjaluoto, Mustonen, & Ulkuniemi 2015, 704). According to Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015, 635), it is essential to comprehend the specific characteristics and dynamics of digital marketing in order to build efficient on-line marketing strategies and tactics.

A framework created by Kierzkowski, McQuade, Waitman, and Zeisser (1996) represents digital marketing as a cyclical process, which can be illustrated as a circular pattern (see Figure 1). According to this framework, the digital marketing cycle consists of five activities: (1) attracting visitors; (2) engaging them; (3) retaining them; (4) learning from them; and (5) relating to them. The relationship of each

component is facilitated by marketing activities and is aimed at acquiring and retaining customers. The authors of this framework consider that the application of technology to achieve CRM is a key component of digital marketing. (Kierzkowski et al. 1996.) Since creating long-lasting relationships with customers is significant to any business, this marketing cycle is tightly connected with CRM in terms of generating profit and obtaining and keeping knowledge about the customers, such as their behavior, added value and loyalty drivers. Consumers define the success of a business by estimating the value of a product or service, thus marketers depend greatly on their capacity to create value. (Woon, Shafaghi, Woollaston, & Lui 2010, 314.)
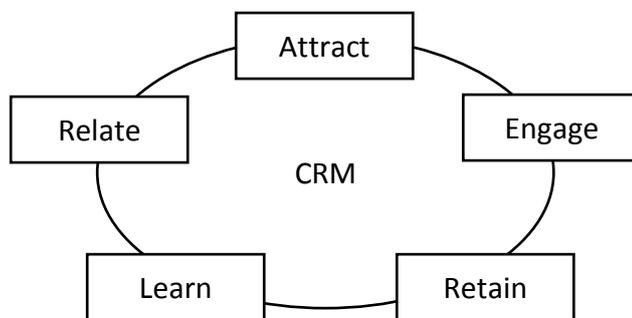
Figure 1. Digital marketing cycle (Kierzkowski et al. 1996)

Digital marketing provides companies with more powerful and unique tools for promoting products and services than traditional marketing (advertising through TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, direct mail) is capable of. First of all, digital marketing allows to target a specific narrow audience based on gender, age, location, interest, and even past purchases, which increases the effectiveness of the campaign. In addition, with the help of the internet it is possible to reach global audiences all around the world quickly and with small expenses. It is necessary to note one distinctive feature of digital marketing which is very important to businesses nowadays: users themselves can easily spread an online message among a wide audience thanks to the share function available on websites, social media and e-mails. (Cave 2016.) Traditional methods of advertising can be rather expensive, especially for small companies. On the other hand, the lower costs of digital

marketing allow any firm to engage in efficient promoting activities and compete with bigger companies. Digital marketing is considered to be very cost-effective in terms of the ratio of costs to the reach of the target audience (Jackson & Ahuja 2016, 182). Moreover, the interactive nature of digital communications allows companies and brands to establish personal connections with their audience. Businesses encourage their customers to interact with them online: they can leave feedback about a product, rate a product, visit websites and follow them on social media, download official applications, participate in contests and surveys online, chat with the company's representatives and much more. What is more, unlike traditional marketing campaigns, digital initiatives can be easily evaluated by using various analytical tools available online. Companies can track in real time what is working efficiently and what is not, and thus promptly make adjustments to improve the results (Cave 2016).

B2B digital marketing

B2B digital marketing, which basically implies digital marketing in the B2B sector, is a concept that has been actively developing during the last years. One of the possible reasons for such phenomenon is that the B2B buying environment is nowadays evidently affected by the digital buying habits of consumers in general (Goodall 2014). According to a study conducted by CEB Marketing Leadership Council (The Digital evolution in B2B Marketing 2012, 2), B2B companies that fail to "show up strong" in the context of effectively utilizing digital and social media channels do not meet customers' expectations and risk to miss sales opportunities.

Kingsnorth (2016) claims that, although B2B and B2C clients are all individuals with the same human psychology, B2B customers pursue specific business objectives, engaging in a fundamentally different relationship than in the B2C environment. Since traditional marketing techniques may appear to be less efficient in the B2B business, Kingsnorth suggests that marketers should focus more on managing customer relationships, creating efficient content for online platforms and engaging clients in direct value-added discussions. However, it is still crucial to ensure that customers can find all the necessary information about a company online. (33.)

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 627) emphasize that the most effective digital communications tools for B2B customer acquisition and retention include SEM (search engine marketing), content marketing, display advertising, e-mail marketing and social media marketing.

Figure 2 summarizes the application of digital marketing communications in the B2B marketing context. The customer relationships in a B2B environment are usually built for a long-time perspective, and they rely significantly on personal communication. Moreover, managing various types of customer interactions is influenced by the organizational complexity of the B2B seller and buyer companies. All these special features of the B2B sector determine the main elements of digital marketing communications that B2B customers are seeking nowadays while choosing a vendor: strong brand, active customer interaction and outstanding content. The main goals that B2B marketers are trying to achieve by digital marketing are communication in customer relationships, providing sales support and establishing brand awareness. (Karjaluoto et al. 2015, 704-706.)
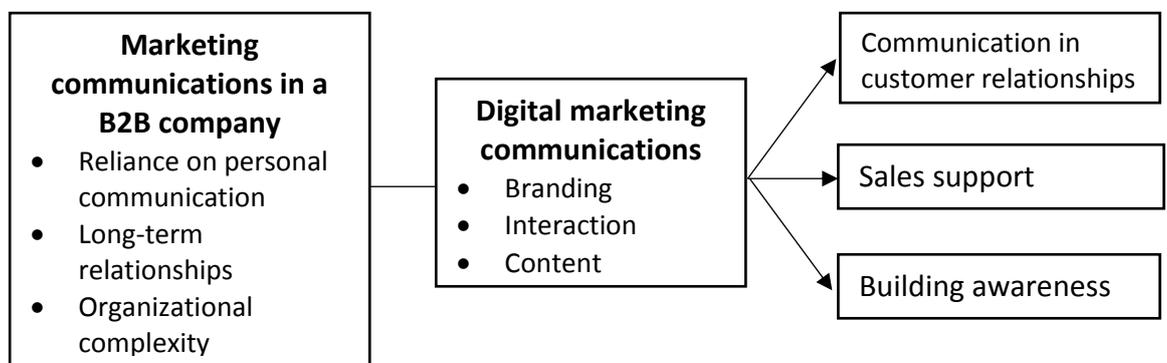
Figure 2. Use of digital marketing communications in the B2B marketing conext (adapted from Karjaluoto et al. 2015, 706)

Digital marketing as a part of integrated marketing communications

In today's business world, it is essential to consider digital marketing as a part of integrated marketing communications (IMC). The concept of IMC, as illustrated in Figure 3, implies that a company's all communication channels have to be integrated

and coordinated in order to deliver a clearly defined and consecutive message about the organization and its products. IMC ascertain that many of a company's communication channels are consistent with each other, communicate the same brand message and eliminate vague brand perceptions by consumers. (Kotler & Armstrong 2016, 449-451.) Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 467) highlight that organizations should apply IMC in order to support customers during the entire buying process, via all types of media: television, print advertisements, e-mails, PR materials, website contents, social media and other things.
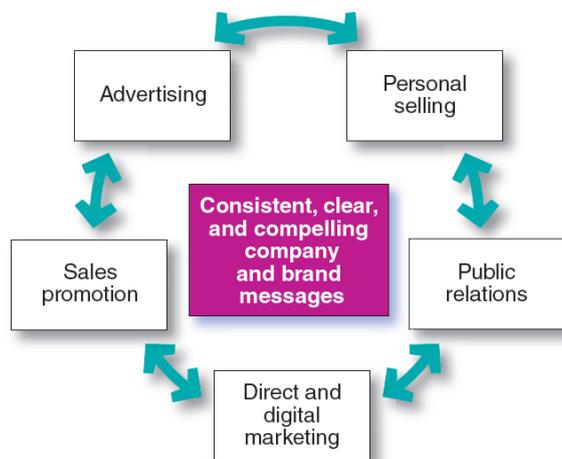
Figure 3. Integrated marketing communications (Kotler 2016, 451)

De Pelsmacker, Geuens and Van den Bergh (2013) emphasize that creating synergies through integrated communications will help marketers to achieve contemporary marketing goals. While traditional communications strategies are aimed at delivering common transaction-oriented messages through mass media, integrated communications have a much more customer-centric, personalized, interactive and relationship-based nature. Their goal is not only to alter awareness and attitude, but also to directly affect behavior. (10.)

Pickton and Broderick (2005, 28-29) have outlined the main characteristics of IMC, which are known as 4Cs:

1. Coherence: various communications should be connected logically.

2. Consistency: messages on different platforms should support and strengthen each other, without any contradictions

3. Continuity: communications should support the principles of connectivity and consistency through time

4. Complementary: messages should be synergistic, meaning that combined together they create an efficient system

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 466-467) suggest ways to further apply the guidelines on IMC from Pickton and Broderick to digital marketing. Firstly, integrated communications planning should be based on clearly outlined marketing communications objectives. Internet marketing should ensure the regulation of both outbound (e.g. direct e-mails, posts on social media) and inbound (e.g. customer's feedback) communications. In addition, digital marketing should use various digital media channels to communicate consistent messages, which would encourage customer interaction with a brand online. In order to stimulate customers' activities and create traffic for a company's online presence, marketers need to review which online and offline communications tools would constitute the most effective mix. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 467.)

2.2 Digital marketing strategy and planning

As any other communication channel, digital marketing has to follow a clearly outlined strategy which has to be integrated with other marketing channels strategies as a part of IMC. Formulating a defined digital marketing strategy helps companies to concentrate on internet marketing activities most beneficial to specific business, make sure that these activities contribute to the overall business goals and, not less importantly, target and reach the right audience (Ryan & Jones 2009, 19-20). Digital marketing strategy can be defined as the description of the approach that is used to support marketing and business goals through the use of digital technology tools and techniques. Furthermore, digital marketing strategy defines how to use digital channels to contribute to the established marketing strategies, how to benefit from these channels and avoid their weaknesses, and how to coordinate digital

channels with other channels to maintain the principles of IMC. Formulation of digital marketing strategy, which follows the main steps of traditional strategic marketing planning approach, includes setting the objectives, situation analysis, strategy formulation, and resource allocation and monitoring. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 190-191, 251.)

Identifying digital marketing strategy to be very similar to traditional marketing strategies, Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) have outlined its main functions. To begin with, digital marketing strategy creates a prospective direction to digital marketing activities and outlines digital marketing objectives which would support the overall marketing objectives. Furthermore, a strategy provides a comprehensive analysis of the company's external environment, internal resources and capabilities, and that is essential for making strategic decisions. Digital marketing strategy includes selecting strategic options that would help businesses to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and reach marketing goals. It also involves making traditional strategic decisions, such as choosing target markets and positioning, and formulating the marketing mix. It is necessary to note that marketers should not only decide what to include in the strategy, but also figure out which strategies and marketing tactics a company should not undertake. Finally, digital marketing strategy defines how an organization should be structured to successfully follow a formulated strategy and it also indicates how the available resources are going to be utilized. (190.)

Figure 4 illustrates the environment in which digital marketing strategy is developed. The external influences comprise market structure and demand, competitor strategies and the existing and emerging opportunities and threats, associated with evolving digital technologies, for instance SEO and mobile marketing, and marketing techniques, for example, extensive use of social media. In terms of internal influences, corporate objectives and strategy influence company's marketing strategy, which subsequently forms digital marketing strategy. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 190)
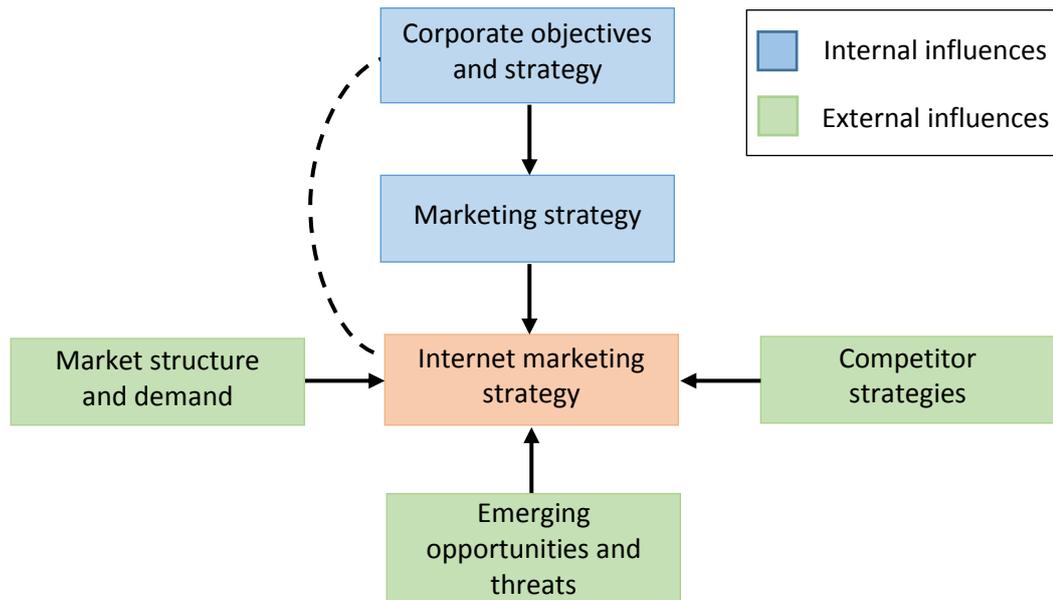
Figure 4. Internal and external influences on digital marketing strategy (adapted from Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 191)

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) suggest that digital marketing strategy should be viewed as a channel marketing strategy which determines how an organization should establish specific objectives for each channel, such as Internet, and come up with a special proposition and communications, specific for that channel. Digital marketing strategy should explain how the Internet is strategically significant to other communications channels that a company uses to keep in touch with customers. Thus, the aim of this strategy is to clarify how the particular digital channels support the established marketing strategies, how to benefit from their strengths and minimize the effects of their weaknesses, and how to integrate them with other channels, creating an efficient multichannel marketing strategy. The concept of multichannel marketing strategy implies that all of the company's marketing channels are integrated into an effective system, with the channels supporting each other in terms of value proposition and communications to the customer. (190 – 191.)

The development of digital marketing strategy and implementation of corresponding activities are coordinated through a digital marketing plan. In marketing context,

planning is defined as a set of activities implemented in a logical order resulting in the definition of marketing goals and tactics to accomplish them (McDonald & Wilson 2016, 40). Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick suggest (2012) that digital marketing plan should stress on three main goals. Firstly, it should determine the changes occurring to competitive forces both on micro- and macro-level which will impact consumer demand for online products and experiences. Then, digital marketing plan should create value proposition for customers who use online services during their purchasing process. Finally, it should describe how this value proposition will be delivered to customers through various technological tools and presentation of information. (198.) Chaffey and Smith (2013, 536) emphasize that digital marketing plan should be a part of marketing communications plan and also a part of an overall marketing plan of a company.

The main goal of the purposed thesis is to develop a comprehensive and viable digital marketing plan for the case company. The development of a marketing plan should follow a logical sequence of steps that covers all essential activities of strategy development and implementation. Thus, it is crucial for companies to choose a strategy process model which they will follow when formulating their digital marketing plan. The author of the thesis has chosen to implement the SOSTAC® planning technique, which has been advised by Chaffey and Smith (2013, 538) particularly for strategic Internet marketing plan development. The SOSTAC® framework, which has been developed by Paul Smith in 1998, combines all necessary components that every plan must have:

S – Situation analysis (where are we now?)

O – Objectives (where do we want to be?)

S – Strategy (how do we get there?)

T – Tactics (how exactly do we get there?)

A – Action (what is our plan?)

C – Control (did we get there?) (Smith & Zook 2011, 226.)

Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) explain how these planning stages are applicable to digital marketing strategy. Situation analysis consists of carrying out a digital-specific SWOT analysis and analysing the environment where the company operates, including customers, competitors, and intermediaries. Situation analysis is a concept used in classic marketing and it implies revising the existing marketing initiatives in terms of their effectiveness, providing the basis for strategy formulation. Generally, situation analysis is comprised of three parts. Firstly, company's internal capabilities, resources and processes are reviewed and its activity in the marketplace is evaluated. Then, an immediate competitive environment, which is called micro-environment, is assessed in terms of marketplace structure, consumer demand and behavior, competitors' performance and relationships with suppliers and partners. The last step of situation analysis involves examining the company's macro-environment factors, which include economic development, social and ethical issues, government regulations, legal issues and taxation, and other things. (199, 202).

Setting up objectives is crucial since they will provide the vision for the specific strategies and tactics and also become a tool for communicating the strategic business goals to stakeholders (Chaffey 2015, 344). Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 209) suggest that digital marketing objectives could be derived from the benefits that a particular digital channel represents. For instance, one advantage of using social media is the opportunity to enhance the brand. The specific objective formulated from this benefit could be the following: "to ensure brand awareness among 50 per cent of our target market through online initiatives within 2 years". Chaffey and Smith (2013, 547) have introduced five general benefits of digital marketing, also known as 5 Ss, which could be the basis for formulating the specific objectives.

1. Sell – increased sales due to wider reach to customers whom it would be impossible to serve offline, or perhaps due to a broader product range or lower prices.
2. Serve – enhanced value by providing customers with more benefits online, or receiving their feedback via digital platforms

3. Speak – more profound knowledge about customers achieved by communicating with them online and studying their online behavior

4. Save – advantages derived from savings on costs of sales transactions, administration, service, print and post.

5. Sizzle – a stronger brand due to the online opportunities for increasing brand awareness, recognition and participation.

During the "Strategy" step managers describe how to achieve the outlined objectives. The traditional marketing decisions such as segmentation, targeting, differentiation and positioning are defined on this stage. The main purpose here is to determine your target customer groups, formulate the online value proposition and decide how these groups of customers are going to receive value through digital channels. The process of formulating a strategy begins with listing alternative strategies a company can follow. Then, the advantages of the possible options are examined and managers choose a strategy that is most suitable in terms of company's internal and external environment, resources and capabilities. It is essential that organizations build their strategies on a profound analysis and assume realistically what these strategies can achieve. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 199, 218.) Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) emphasize that strategies appear to be most efficient when they are aligned with particular business objectives, such as increasing brand awareness through online marketing activities. Rather than making fundamental changes to a general marketing strategy, the formulation of digital marketing strategy is focused on making adjustments to an overall strategy by employing the advantages of online channels. (218.)

A common approach to digital marketing strategy involves applying the established offline segmentation, targeting, differentiation and positioning to the online activities. While this method is definitely easier to undertake, a company risks to miss opportunities to grow sales, unlike the farsighted competitors who modify their strategic decisions for online customers. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) argue that in digital marketing strategy companies should employ the selective targeting of customers groups and various forms of delivering value for particular online

channels. The authors stress that the strategy should rely on the specific business objectives of particular digital channels and correspond with the types of customers who are active on a channel and can be successfully reached through it. Digital strategy should contain a specific, distinctive proposition for the channel and outline the ways by which the proposition is going to be delivered to customers to engage them in online activities in addition to other marketing initiatives. (220.)

Then, it is essential to define the exact tactics of implementing the strategy and objectives. Being the details of the strategy, tactics in marketing communications plan describe the exact activities carried out by the company using their communications tools such as advertising, direct mail, PR and other things. (Smith & Zook 2011, 237). Tactics are concerned with the elements of digital marketing mix and ways of customer engagement during customers' journey through company's digital media channels (Chaffey 2015, 363). The traditional marketing mix, also known as the 4 Ps of Product, Price, Place and Promotion, is a widely used concept for marketing strategy development, including digital marketing strategy. The marketing mix represents a simple strategic framework for managing various components of the product offering in order to shape the demand for product among target audience. The Internet provides many potential implications on the marketing mix, and these new opportunities are applied in the company's online tactics. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 258.) The execution of tactics is specified through action plans that include specific activities carried out by managers. In order to develop action plans, it is necessary to resolve a number of issues, such as the amount of investment needed for specific digital channel, the required employee training, the allocation of emerging responsibilities and other things. (Chaffey 2015, 381.)

Finally, digital marketing plan should introduce the system for monitoring, measuring and controlling the extent to which the planned strategic and tactical goals have been achieved. Since it is easier to measure performance against clearly identified objectives, it is advisable to set up precise general objectives which could be divided into more detailed objectives targeting shorter periods of time (Smith & Zook 2011,

240). Businesses often use sales, leads, awareness, attitude and ROI as indicators showing the efficiency of certain initiatives (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 570). In digital marketing web analytics provide a helpful tool for assessing digital marketing performance and highlighting the areas for imporivement. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 199.)

One of the most significant steps in digital marketing planning is choosing the right digital marketing channels among the many available. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 429) define digital media channel as an online communication tool that companies use to increase brand awareness, familiarity and favorability and to engage consumers with a brand or product through digital platforms, ultimately encouraging them to make a purchase of company's products or services. It is crucial for the company's management to decide which marketing channels would be most useful in attaining and engaging customers taking into consideration the specificity of particular business. Taiminen and Karjaluoto (2015, 635) suggest to classify digital channels based on the degree of company control over the channel and whether communications is one-way or two-way (Table 1).

Table 1. Classification of digital marketing channels (Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015, 635)

	High company control	**Low company control**
One-way	Website E-mail newsletters Online directories Banner adverting	SEO (Search engine optimization) SEA (Search engine advertising)
Two-way	Company generated blogs Company's own communities	Social media

As it was mentioned earlier, the most effective digital communications tools for B2B nowadays include content marketing, social media marketing, search engine marketing and e-mail marketing (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 627). The following

subchapters will provide a literature review of these concepts and present the specificity of their application in B2B environment.

2.3 Content marketing

Nowadays, the traditional means of communicating marketing messages where companies initiate the contact with customers through intensive advertising, large-scale email campaigns and cold calling have become outdated. Instead, now it is the customer who actively searches for brand information and experiences through channels like search engines, social media, and blogs. This emerging phenomenon is called inbound marketing and it focuses on attracting customers to company's digital channels through creating useful and relevant online content (websites, blogs, social media posts) that is optimized for search on the web and social media. According to Holliman and Rowley (2014, 272), Odden (2012) claims that nowadays companies are expected to invest into relationships with customers before establishing a purchase scenario. Thus, creating efficient content of high quality that would address customers' needs and expectations has become an integral part of contemporary marketing. (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 34; What is Inbound Marketing? N.d.)

Successful inbound marketing involves creating convincing and creative content to attract, engage customers and compel them to action through digital channels. By the term "content" marketers nowadays refer to not only static content that forms web pages, but also interactive media encouraging engagement: videos, podcasts, polls and surveys, user-generated content and much more. Content marketing involves managing all types of digital content (text, rich media, audio, video content) for engaging existing and prospective customers through different forms of web presence (sites, blogs, social media, email), in a long term aiming to reach marketing and business goals. (Chaffey 2015, 331.) Content Marketing Institute (What Is Content Marketing? n.d.) emphasizes the importance of content quality, stating that the created content should be valuable and relevant, and it should be aiming at driving profitable customer action within a clearly defined audience. According to Holliman and Rowley (2014, 273), Davis (2012) states that the content does not

necessarily need to contain the detailed product information, what is more important, it should fulfil the expectations and needs of the customers that a company wishes to attract.

The increasing importance and wide-spread application of content marketing can be explained by its outstanding effectiveness combined with relatively low costs. According to Demand Metric (Content Marketing Infographic, n.d.), content marketing costs 62% less than traditional marketing, nevertheless, it generates approximately three times more as many sales leads as traditional marketing methods.

Surveys show that content distributed through various digital channels plays an important role not only in B2C market, but also among B2B customers, gaining more significance with each year. According to Demand Gen Report's latest findings, 75% of B2B buyers admitted that their buying decision towards a certain seller was significantly influenced by the content provided by that selling company. Moreover, 89% of participants claimed that winning vendors' content was successful in "showing ROI and building business case for the purchase". (Halchak 2017, 3.) This finding once again proves that the created content should align with target audience's expectations and needs. B2B marketing professionals determine three main objectives of content marketing: lead generation, brand awareness and thought leadership (Content Marketing: Ready for Prime Time 2012, 3). Holliman and Rowley (2014, 289) note that digital content lies "at the heart of brand-building processes". Efficient digital content provides a significant support in achieving sales objectives since various multimedia, such as videos, animations, digital presentation materials can noticeably contribute to the completion of sales tasks by visually demonstrating and simplifying complex B2B products (Karjaluoto et al. 2015, 706-707).

Website

The main channel for communicating digital content is a company website. Nowadays, it is almost impossible to imagine a successful company that does not

have at least a one-page corporate website. Usually, a company website contains exhaustive information and useful materials on products or services offered, information about company, its story and contact details, latest news regarding firm's business and achievements, relevant official documents and investor information, links to other company's resources and other things. A website is a digital tool that provides an opportunity to reach a wide range of markets quickly and with minimal expenses (Eid & El-Gohary 2013, 35). Christodoulides (2009, 143) describes a website as the home of the company's brand in the digital context. A brand site is designed to communicate marketing messages to target audience, efficiently enhance and maintain customer loyalty, as well as to facilitate interaction with company's customers and gather individual customer data, for example through subscription to corporate newsletters (De Pelsmacker et al. 2013, 488). According to Shaltoni (2017, 1010-1011), Strauss and Frost (2014) argue that in years to come, websites will remain crucial for all businesses since they provide opportunities for better search engine marketing, company's control over published content and, hence, better branding. Therefore, although digital marketing tools have been improving far beyond websites, companies should still pay special attention to the development of their webpages, making sure that they are regularly reviewed and updated, aligned with various organizational goals and are a part of company's integrated marketing mix (Chaffey & Smith 2013, 284).

In terms of B2B environment, making a first impression to a potential customer through a website is critical, since studies show that an overwhelming majority of B2B buyers start their search of suitable vendor by browsing the web. Moreover, the survey demonstrates that B2B buyers value those companies that provide website content relevant to the buyers' and their industry's needs. Additionally, when exploring B2B sellers' websites, potential clients prefer those companies who can demonstrate profound experience and knowledge within their field. (Halchak 2017, 5.) However, it is not advisable to solely stress on broadcasting company- and product-related blocks of information. What internet users value nowadays is a "story" approah, where companies engage in story-telling about their brands. The

main emphasis here is to create an inspiring online content in the form of a story, differentiating the brand from competitor's. (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 272.)

On the whole, the content presented on a website should be relevant, engaging and it should introduce new and valuable information to the visitor. Since complicated B2B purchasing cycle involves several participants on different levels, B2B seller's website should contain all useful information which any participant of the sales process may need (Holliman & Rowley 2014, 270). The emerging multimedia facilities of websites (combining sound, music, graphics, text, video) not only help a consumer to concentrate on the relevant parts of the online experience, but they also improve the website's interactivity and attractiveness, creating a favorable B2B brand image. (Fill & Fill 2005, 325.) According to Fill and Fill (2005, 325), Karayanni (2000) states that B2B website should stress on the company's identity and reputation as well as communicate customer-related information.

Blogging

Blogging has proved to be a very effective digital marketing tool for businesses nowadays. Not only it helps to encourage customers' interest and engagement, but it is also increases traffic to a website, thus creating more leads that could be converted into sales (Nikunen, Saarela, Oikarinen, Muhos & Isohella 2017, 176; Burnes 2017). A study by HubSpot has shown that companies that regularly create content in a form of blog posts receive 55% more website visitors, who represent potential customers. Moreover, blogging helps to produce many indexed pages on company's website as well as it increases chances of getting linked on other websites. Both these features positively impact on company's chances to be found in search engines. (Burnes 2017). Bodnar and Cohen (2012, 33) argue that blogging is probably the most efficient tool for B2B companies to become more visible on search engines.

Blogging as a B2B marketing tool can help companies to establish themselves as experts in their fields by creating informative, authoritative and valuable content (Devaney & Stein 2013). According to Ryan and Jones (2009, 165), the overall consumers' experience of communicating with a company can be positively affected

by providing blog visitors with engaging personal insights into a brand and an industry. Content created for a B2B blog could include opinions about industry news and events, interviews with thought leaders, creative "how-to's" that demonstrate the usage of products and much more. (Devaney & Stein 2013; Ryan & Jones 2009, 165). It is crucial to include keywords and phrases to the blog posts so that the webpages appear in the search results. A blog is designed to encourage engagement and discussion, that is why it is important to include prompts or questions to facilitate an online conversation with blog visitors. (Frick 2010, 146.) Chaffey and Smith (2013) suggests that every blog post should contain a call-to-action element relevant to the content of the post. It could be, for instance, an invitation to participate in an event to build brand engagement, like a webinar, or action elements that would ensure that visitors are informed on how to purchase products or encourage them to take next steps. (257.)

2.4 Social media marketing

The phenomenon of social media has altered the way organizations build their communication strategies, since now it is the customer who creates and controls the flow of information (Mangold & Faulds 2009, 359). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 61) define social media as a group of Internet based applications that are designed for the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011, 1153) claim that social media currently represents a prevailing online source of information. Among various social media platforms researchers distinguish social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, applications for sharing media, like Instagram and YouTube, commerce communities, as Amazon, and also blogs and discussion forums (Agarwal & Yiliyasi 2010).

According to Habibi, Hamilton, Valos, and Callaghan (2015, 642), the opportunities and potential benefits that social media marketing provides make this digital tool an indispensable part of a firm's overall marketing strategy. The advantages of social media include providing support to marketing strategy, cost-efficiency, consumer

and market information collection, service delivery, and opportunities to reach remote markets. The mentioned advantages are attributable to the specific characteristics of social media. First of all, social media provides opportunities to share the created content between different elements of organizational environment: inside the organization (employee-to-employee), outside (consumer-to-consumer or other external stakeholder) and between the organization and consumers. Secondly, social media provides facilities to link company's various digital channels together and make customer's movements between them more convenient. The immediacy nature of social media allows to instantly learn about the emerging consumer trends and to analyse the effectiveness of marketing activities being undertaken, thus helping to build more effective marketing strategies. In addition, consumer opinions and insights are distributed across the social media channels in no time. Moreover, due to social media channels, companies have an opportunity to collect valuable organic customers' insights, which are very helpful during new product development and service improvement. (Habibi et al. 2015, 642-643.)

As in the case with company generated blogs, social media channels foster two-way communication with customers. However, the main distinction with blog is that in social media a company has lower degree of control over the generated content. The aforementioned digital marketing trend of story-telling is also applicable to social media communications since customers expect to hear real conversations around the brand and creative stories rather than product-centered sales messages. (Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015, 636.) Rowley (2008, 534) highlights that companies nowadays have to undertake a "soft-selling" approach, which makes an emphasis on co-creating value with customers and managing customer relationships while avoiding communicating direct calls to purchase.

Only recently B2B marketing professionals have begun to realize the value that social media marketing can contribute to their B2B businesses (Shaltoni 2017, 1011). Many practitioners in the field still share a common misconception that social media can only be efficient in B2C context and that it is not suitable for pursuing B2B marketing

objectives (Michaelidou et al. 2011, 1153). According to Shaltoni (2017, 1011), researchers explain this situation by marketers' lack of knowledge and skills on how to use social media platforms for B2B marketing purposes (Järvinen 2012) as well as their concerns that company's social media presence may provoke confidential information disclosure (Simula 2013). Moreover, many B2B companies still mistakenly perceive social media as an entertaining promotional initiative rather than a part of strategic marketing approach (Marx 2013).

Researchers have identified the practical benefits of social media implementation specific to B2B marketing context. Social media is a useful tool for attracting new B2B customers, maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with existing ones, and facilitating collaboration with customers for further innovation (Shaltoni 2017, 1010). In connection to B2B brand, literature shows that the efficient application of social media initiatives helps to improve brand image among all decision-makers and to enhance brand loyalty (Habibi et al. 2015, 638; Shaltoni 2017, 1010). However, Shaltoni (2017, 1010) notes that social media marketing will lead to profitable results only when companies undertake a strategic approach towards it.

According to Schulze (2013, 13), the main applications of social media in B2B context include creating content for a company blog, establishing relationships with social media bloggers, influencers, and community moderators, as well as allocating company-generated content to social sharing sites, for instance, YouTube, Flickr and SlideShare.

As stated by Habibi et al. (2015), the specific features of B2B relationships influence the way that social media marketing should be implemented in B2B companies. First of all, since B2B purchasing process is very complex and involves a number of decision-makers, B2B marketers should consider what social media channel and what message would be appropriate for each influencer in the process. Secondly, B2B products are usually of a greater value than B2C products, therefore, B2B buyers tend to pay more attention at possible risks associated with a purchase. Marketers should concentrate on creating relevant and informative content for social media

platforms, thus reassuring customers about their purchase decision. This content can be presented, for example, in the form of video recommendations from satisfied customers or educational content from internal product experts. Moreover, social media can contribute to implementing the function which is usually carried out by B2B sales people – providing pre-purchase exhaustive information and comprehensive customer support. (640-641.)

B2C customers usually seek entertainment in social media content. In contrast, B2B buyers value messages that communicate competence and reliability. That is why B2B marketers should concentrate on creating content that would, on the one hand, engage customers and, on the other hand, sustain a professional and authoritative image on social media. The complexity of B2B products explains why B2B buyers usually need to review as much product information as possible. Social media channels provide companies with an opportunity to communicate this information to customers, however, marketers should first determine which content would be valuable to each decision-maker and which platform it would be reasonable to post it on. Due to the complex nature of products, higher levels of commitment and closer relationships, B2B marketing communications require a more personalized approach. (Habibi et al. 2015, 641-642.) With regard to specific social media tactics, Habibi et al. (2015, 642) suggest that B2B marketers should apply the concept of content marketing with the help of webinars, blogs and platforms such as LinkedIn, instead of Instagram and Pinterest.

2.5   Email marketing

Although digital marketing nowadays offers a broad variety of modern and innovative channels, email remains a widely used marketing tool for quick and efficient communication with company's target market (Fill & Fill 2005, 325; Swann 2016). Even though email is originally a two-way communication channel, businesses often employ it as a one-way channel to deliver newsletters and promotional messages (Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015, 635). According to Simmons (2007, 550), emails are used for different marketing purposes including delivering information

about products and services, promoting them, enhancing brand loyalty, maintaining customer relationships and encouraging customers to visit a company website. With the help of emails, companies can easily receive customer feedback (Dehkordi, Rezvani, Rahman, Nahid, & Jouya 2012, 118), achieve more brand touchpoints and strengthen the relationships with loyal customers, aiming for additional sales (Simmons 2007, 551). The appropriate form of email-based communication in business context is based on opt-in e-mail marketing where users give a permission to a company to contact them (Ginty, Vaccarello, & Leake 2012, 198); emailing to prospects and customers without their opt-in is considered unethical and intrusive (Fill & Fill 2005, 325).

Efficient email marketing campaigns require a thorough strategic planning which would determine the frequency and content of email communications (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 529). Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) distinguish several types of email letters that companies can send to their opt-in lists. Conversion emails are delivered when website visitors express their interest by providing their email address. These follow-up emails are intended to encourage prospects to take the next step in the purchase journey, for instance, to trial the service. Regular email newsletters are sent with a determined frequency and are usually designed to inform customers about a newly developed product, current promotions, or in case of B2B it could be an update on latest trends within an industry. House-list campaigns are carried out periodically and can support different objectives, for example, promoting trial of a new product or service, encouraging a repeat purchase, or bringing back to action those clients who have not bought for a long time. Event-triggered emails are prepared for special occasions, for instance, when a company announces the launch of a new product or promotes an exceptional offer. (529.)

There are several advantages of email marketing that prove its effectiveness in communicating a controlled push message that encourages a response. First of all, the costs for this type of communication are relatively low and email marketing campaigns can provide a substantial return on investment. Secondly, email is a great way to encourage customers to visit a company website by click-throughs in the text.

This increases the chances of an immediate and impulsive reaction to the email proposition. Moreover, email marketing provides opportunities to personalize delivered messages in a greater extent than it is possible in the context of a website, for instance. Additionally, email campaigns can be tested relatively easier and incurring less costs compared to other types of marketing messages. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 530-531.)

However, there are some disadvantages of email marketing that marketing professionals should consider in order to achieve the desirable results for their email campaigns. To begin with, the delivery of emails in some occasions might be impeded due to different Internet service providers, corporate firewalls and web mail systems. The multimedia elements in an email message (pictures, animations, click-throughs) might not be displayed properly because of different email reading systems. Furthermore, subscriber's engagement tends to decrease with time, therefore, marketers should plan in advance how to keep the recipients interested and responsive. In addition, marketers will have to manage customers' varying communications preferences regarding the content and frequency of emails. Finally, companies will need to attract more talent and technology resources in order to efficiently make use of email marketing opportunities: targeting, personalization and more frequent communication. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 531.)

Literature reveals a lot of useful advice and success factors of email marketing that marketing professionals should consider for maximizing the effectiveness of their email communications. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012) have formulated general guidelines for an efficient marketing campaign. The authors highlight that company's emails should have a well-thought layout, structure and style, as well as the creative use of color and images. With the help of targeting and selecting suitable lists, marketers should ensure that an email meets the needs of the recipients. Targeting in email marketing involves tailoring more personalized messages with varying incentives to different segments on the customer list. An email letter should clearly communicate the benefits that customers will receive when they click on the hyperlinks in the email. On a general level, email marketing should be consistent with

other means of brand communications, reinforcing the messages sent through various channels. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 532-533.)

Ginty et al. (2012) claim that email marketing can be a very efficient tactic for B2B companies and outline the general recommendations for B2B marketing emails. First of all, it is necessary to determine the frequency and the schedule for email campaigns since the recipients should be aware of when to expect company's email newsletters and lead nurturing messages. Marketers should take into consideration that the majority of customers will not tolerate an overuse in email communications and might consider it as spam. Concerning the time of the day suitable for launching email campaigns, literature suggests that it is better to avoid weekends and Fridays. (198.) Ginty et al. (2012, 198) suggest that testing is an effective way to determine the timing when the highest open rates are achieved.

The design of an email should be simple and avoid the usage of different fonts and font sizes; it should contain some branding elements, such as a company logo or a customer email header. Open rate of an email campaign depends largely on the characteristics of a chosen subject line. Some suggestions for improving the attractiveness of a subject line include communicating a sense of urgency in the subject line, personalizing the subject line, indicating the main information contained in an email, intriguing the recipients by a tempting offer. An email should contain a clear and visible call-to-action proposing next steps and encouraging customers to move on along the purchase journey. (Ginty et al. 2012, 199-200)

Swann (2016) states that the key objective in B2B marketing is to "create a strategy that delivers appropriate content during each phase of the customer journey". Unlike B2C context, the effectiveness of B2B email campaigns does not necessarily rely on the visual and emotional component of an email. What is more important, the content of emails should provide effective solutions for customers' problems and aim at strengthening relationships. (Swann 2016.) Swann (2016) further emphasizes that email personalization is also a winning strategy since it enhances customer engagement. Emails can be personalized by identifying the recipients by their name

and company, role within a company, their stage in the purchase journey or relevance to decision making. After the personalization, marketers have to create targeted content that customers will find informative and valuable. (Swann 2016.)

2.6 Search engine marketing

Search engines, such as Google, Bing, YouTube, have now become an integral part of consumer life. Internet users turn to search engines whenever they need to find some specific information, including information on products, brands, services, and entertainment. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 490.) Search engines are designed to provide users with high-quality, relevant and timely search results (Charlesworth 2014, 189). Taking into consideration how important it is for brands nowadays to be found online, search engine marketing (SEM) has become an extremely beneficial tool in a digital marketing strategy of any company (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 490; Teo 2005, 205).

Search engine marketing is comprised of two distinctive approaches: search engine optimization (SEO) and search engine advertising (SEA). SEO implies improving the position of a website in the search engine's organic search results when a user searches for specific keywords. SEA includes posting paid advertisements based on specific keywords on search engine's results page. The goal of both these approaches is to inform consumers about the available products and services, and implementing these techniques is a key factor in improving company's visibility online. (Taiminen & Karjaluoto 2015, 635.) SEO and SEA vary in terms of marketing activities needed to manage them, yet companies should use a combination of both SEO and SEA, undertaking an integrated approach towards search engine marketing (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 490).

Search engine optimization (SEO)

Search engines use more than 200 factors that determine whether a specific search result will appear on an upper or lower position in the ranking, or these factors might even consider it as a spam and eliminate it from the list. According to Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 494), the two most significant factors influencing the ranking

position are on-page optimization and inbound links. On-page optimization includes specific technical steps aiming to highlight relevant keywords and phrases on the website so that it could be found on search engines. The more high-quality links to company's website are there on other websites with good reputation and relevant content (inbound links), the higher search engines will rank a company's website. (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 494).

Odden (2012) identifies several essential approaches to improve the natural search visibility that would contribute to the achievement of marketing goals. First of all, it is necessary to conduct a keyword research in order to identify which combinations of words customers use to search for information relevant to company's business. When relevant keyword phrases have been determined, marketers should assess current webpages in order to identify areas for optimization and suggest ideas for creation of efficient and relevant website content. (59.) Puetz (2014) suggests that engaging, compelling and informative content is nowadays a powerful tool to expand brand's visibility online, since Internet users tend to share blog posts and interesting materials with others, and this process increases the credibility of the source, thus lifting the company's website in the search engine ranking. In the context of B2B, Odden (2012)

As it was stated before, links to a webpage shared on other websites and social media increase the chances to be listed higher in the ranking. Marketers, therefore, should analyse the quantity and quality of links present online that are associated with company's website. Brand's presence on social media sites nowadays plays an increasingly important role in search engine visibility. Thus, it is essential to audit brand's activity and distribution within social media channels and ensure that there is a proper amount of relevant and effective content delivered through social media. (Odden 2012 59-60.)

Search engine advertising (SEA)

Search engine advertising, or paid search marketing, is a paid service on search engines where a relevant text advertisement is displayed on the result page when a

user searches for a particular keyword phrase. The most common scheme of paid search marketing is pay-per-click, where a fee is charged every time a user clicks on a paid ad. Generally, the bid price per click is higher when the ad is placed higher in the search results, however, some pay-per-click systems form the bid price based on the popularity of the advertisement and the perceived quality of webpage that is associated with a paid link. (Ryan & Jones 2009, 90.)

According to a study conducted by Content Marketing Institute (Linn 2014), search engine advertising is the most popular tool of paid media among B2B companies; it is also perceived by B2B professionals as the most efficient among paid options. As Linn (2014) states, paid search marketing provides opportunities for targeting consumers effectively, enhancing B2B brand awareness and increasing lead generation. Lappe (2013) provides a practical advice on improving the effectiveness of search engine advertising in B2B context. First of all, the text of the advertisement should clearly address the problem that target customers are seeking to resolve. The ad text and the advertisement itself should make an appealing and credible impression, with longer-tail keyword phrases to avoid irrelevant clicks. Furthermore, marketers need to make sure that a link redirects users to a well-designed webpage that relates very closely to the context of the advertisement and further addresses the problem of a customer, encouraging potential leads to make a next step in the buying process. (Lappe 2013.)

3 Case company situation analysis

This chapter provides an overview of the case company, describes the existing digital marketing initiatives, analyses the company's presence in the online environment by using the SWOT technique, as well as reviews the competitors' digital marketing activities. The aim of the situation analysis was to evaluate the company's performance in terms of digital marketing and determine the main areas for improvements.

3.1 Company overview, objectives

To begin with, it is necessary to demonstrate that the case company has been selected appropriately in relation to the context of the research. The determining factor here is the B2B nature of the company's operations. AMA sells the produced devices to distributors who subsequently resell them to other firms. The case company is striving to improve its digital marketing practices in order to attract new international customers and establish the brand on the overseas markets. Therefore, the suitability of the case company for the context of this study seems justified.

The case company AMA was established in Saint-Petersburg, Russia, in 1997, and since then it has been developing, producing and selling medical devices for the diagnostics of gastroenterological diseases. AMA is a medium-sized enterprise with 90 employees working in the R&D, Manufacturing, Sales, Customer Support, Finance, Logistics, HR and Marketing departments. The company is present both in the Russian market and abroad, selling its medical devices in more than 30 countries in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. The domestic customers include public and private hospitals and clinics, as well as companies that distribute medical equipment in Russia. As for international sales, AMA establishes distributors in every country of its presence and sells its products to these companies which in turn distribute them to the country's hospitals and clinics. The end users of AMA's products are doctors: gastroenterologists, GPs and pediatricians. AMA highlights that its diagnostic devices are innovative, user-friendly and efficient. The company's mission is to provide every clinic with an access to reliable diagnostics of high quality.

Innovation is at the core of AMA's operations. As an example, AMA's researchers have developed a new method for diagnosing a wide-spread bacteria Helicobacter pylori, introducing several diagnostic devices that are based on this method. The innovativeness of this method is that, unlike the alternative approaches, it is absolutely painless to the patient. Innovation is an ongoing process at AMA, and now the company's developers are working on new diagnostic devices that would allow AMA to expand to other areas of medicine, beyond gastroenterology.

Currently AMA's main marketing channels include international and domestic trade fairs and conferences, networking, publications in scientific journals and referrals of thought leaders. An international trade show is a very important tool for a business like AMA's because it is possible to make personal contact and negotiate with distributors from several different countries within a short period of time. As AMA's representatives state, the prevailing majority of AMA's present international distributors were contacted for the first time during major medical trade shows, such as MEDICA in Düsseldorf and Arab Health in Dubai. In the medical devices market, decision-makers tend to rely to a great extent on authoritative opinions of specialists with a substantial medical background. That is why thought leadership and scientific publications mentioning the company's devices are also crucial for the successful promotion of AMA's products.

Regarding digital marketing activities, the company has a corporate international website, and it is also actively involved in e-mail marketing through sending its existing and potential customers updates about current special offers, upcoming events and corporate achievements. However, AMA realizes that the unique opportunities that the Internet offers to businesses nowadays are not utilized efficiently by the company. The management would like to revise the effectiveness of the currently employed digital marketing tools as well as introduce new digital operations that would contribute to achieving the company's overall goals.

The assignor has outlined the main business objectives of engaging in digital marketing. Firstly, AMA would like to attract potential customers both in the countries of its presence and in the new markets. Secondly, the company's aim is to convert as many leads into buying customers as possible. Furthermore, AMA would like to establish their brand globally through digital marketing channels and make the company stand out among competitors. Finally, the company also wants that digital marketing activities would communicate a positive image of the company.

The specificity of AMA's business lies in the fact that the decision-makers who purchase the company's products have significantly different profiles from the end

users: the decision to buy medical devices from AMA is made by the purchasing managers of healthcare institutions or by distribution companies, while the actual users of the devices are physicians. However, AMA's practice shows that due to their authoritative opinion, doctors often have a considerable influence on the purchase decisions of medical devices. That is why it is crucial to address the end users of the devices in the company's marketing campaigns, highlighting the value that the product provides to physicians. Therefore, the digital marketing initiatives should be targeted at both the decision-makers and the practitioners who utilize the products. The figure below summarizes AMA's target audience online (Figure 5).
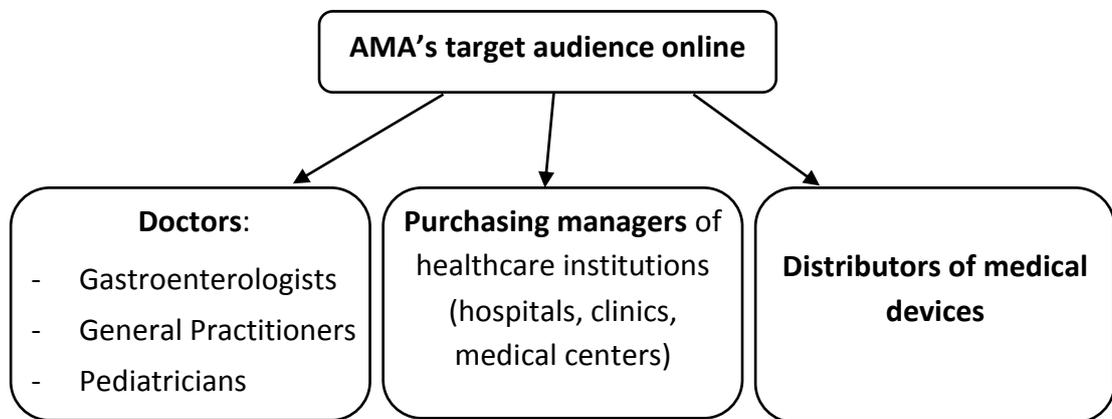
Figure 5. AMA's target audience online

AMA's core brand value lies in providing customers with innovative, cost-effective and user-friendly devices for easy diagnostics. Moreover, the customers enjoy excellent after-sales service and expert customer support. AMA highlights the company's value proposition through their products and services offering as well as during promotional activities and marketing campaigns. However, since the company has not previously undertaken a strategic approach towards its digital marketing, a specific brand value communicated through digital channels has not been formulated. Chaffey and Ellis-Chadwick (2012, 232) claim that developing and communicating an online value proposition (OVP) is essential for emphasizing the competitive advantage and positioning. OVP is a set of clear statements communicated online that reinforce the core brand value and highlight the

advantages of an online brand over the offline offerings as well as those of competitors (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 232).

Taking into consideration the complexity and the narrow focus of AMA's products, the company should concentrate on creating a clear view of its product offering as well as on establishing an image of industry experts. Therefore, the OVP of AMA could focus on providing comprehensive specifications of the products and professional insights into the industry. These messages could be delivered, for instance, through educational content, such as technical whitepapers or blog posts with overviews on latest industry trends. AMA's OVP should reassure the decision-makers and encourage them to share the online content with professionals within an industry, thus creating lead opportunities for the company.

3.2 Current digital marketing activities

As it was stated in the literature review chapter, revising the existing marketing initiatives is an important part of situation analysis. During the internal audit of digital marketing, the existing digital channels are reviewed to analyse the contribution they are currently providing to the business (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 203). Since the main emphasis of this research is made on finding approaches to enhance the brand's international presence, the author considered that it would be appropriate to review only those existing marketing initiatives that are aimed at attracting customers from foreign markets.

First of all, AMA runs a corporate website designed specifically for promoting the brand internationally. Figure 6 presents the appearance of the website's main page. The website's appearance and design seem to be rather appealing and user-friendly, with clear structure and navigation. The site is very compact, with only several webpages and short blocks of content. On their website, AMA included sections about the company, the offered products, upcoming product launches, contact information and countries of presence, as well as news section and order request form. The encouraging elements of contact phone number and an order request form stand out distinctly in the website header. The company's introduction is

limited to AMA's history and their achievements in the field of certifications and patents while the product webpages give a general overview on the offered devices. The news section is utilized for announcing the company's participation in the upcoming international trade shows.

Figure 6. The main page of AMA's corporate website (AMA Co., Ltd. 2017)

What AMA's website clearly seems to lack is the brand-building and customer engagement functions. To begin with, a website visitor might get a wrong perception of AMA's sphere of business since the main page does not clearly communicate the company's area of specialization. The information on the webpages is presented in a rather standardized and common manner, decreasing the chances for a website to stand out among competitor's. The communicated content focuses mainly on the company, their achievements and offered products, lacking the customer focus. AMA's website does not embrace the opportunities of content marketing which is an indispensible tool in B2B environment nowadays. The company does not provide engaging or educational content relevant to B2B buyers and their industry needs, such as blog posts, whitepapers, scientific publications mentioning the company's medical devices or case studies from satisfied customers. Moreover, the product descriptions are limited to the main characteristics, while customers would certainly want to study the detailed product specifications before moving forward in the purchase process. What is more, AMA's website clearly lacks call-to-action elements

that would encourage visitors' further interaction with a company, such as email subscription form or links to company's social media.

In order to assess the website's visibility on the Internet, the keyword phrases were tested in the most popular search engine – Google. The main kyeword phrases were identified together with company's representatives as the following: "gastroenterology diagnostics test", "quick tests for gastroenterology", "devices for diagnosing helicobacter pylori", "helicobacter pylori quick test", "buy helicobacter pylori tests", "helicobacter pylori breath test", "buy rapid urease test". The search engine test using the keywords showed that the company website is unlikely to be found by users, since there was not a single link to AMA's webpages in at least 3 result pages for every keyword phrase. This result reveals that the company should conduct an on-site optimization as well as engage in the creation of efficient content that would contain the relevant keyword phrases.

AMA's marketing team is rather active in terms of email marketing. Email marketing campaigns are carried out in order to notify customers and prospects about the ongoing promotions and special offers, to invite to an upcoming trade show, to introduce a newly developped product and encourage to learn about it, as well as to congratulate the receipients on public holidays. The email lists include the email addresses of customers and prospects which are usually collected during the first contact at trade fairs or when an interested purchaser contacts AMA independently. Emails are designed by marketing managers using a well-known email marketing service MailChimp. Figure 7 shares a part of an invitation email whose aim was to encourage the receipients to visit AMA's booth at an international trade show. The reviewed email campaigns of AMA include well-designed, branded emails with call-to-action elements and clickable items that redirect to a corresponding webpage.

Figure 7. An example of AMA's email campaign

Although marketing professionals at AMA have not undertaken a thorough strategic planning towards email marketing, their email marketing campaigns show good results in terms of open rates and click rates. The statistics collected through MailChimp service (Figure 8) reveal that the open rates of AMA's latest email campaigns are noticeably higher than the average open rate of Medical, Dental, and Healthcare industry. Moreover, the click rates for AMA's emails with clickable items always exceed the industry average click rate of 1.5%. Although the visible performance results of AMA's email marketing campaigns seem to be optimistic, the company does not analyse the conversion rate of their emails, which basically shows how many recipients actually accomplish the action promoted in an email, such as purchasing the product. Therefore, it is difficult to tell whether AMA's email marketing contributes to achieving company's business goals.
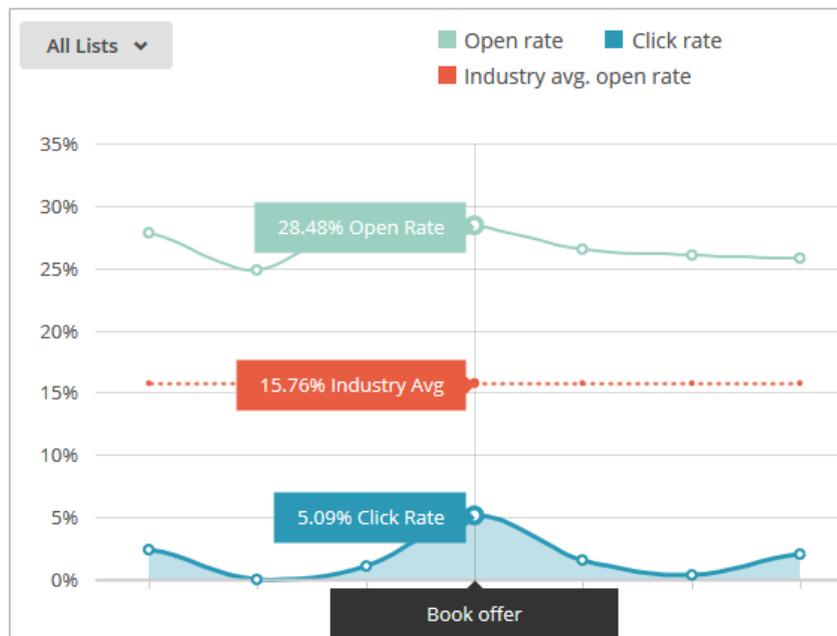
Figure 8. Open rates and click rates of AMA's email marketing campaigns

The types of emails that AMA delivers to their recipients seem to be rather straightforward and common, thus missing opportunities for engaging customers and strengthening relationships with them. AMA could consider diversifying their types of email campaigns, for instance, by communicating in emails valuable content that would fulfil the expectations and needs of the B2B customers that the company wishes to attract.

In terms of social media marketing, AMA is not currently present in any social media channel. Marketing specialists in the company are not sure whether engaging in social media activities would contribute to accomplishing business goals, taking into consideration the specificity of the business. Moreover, social media marketing requires continuous creation of relevant and engaging content, and the company previously did not have spare professional resources for maintaining this task. However, at the time being the company's management acknowledges the potential benefits that social media presence could bring to the business and is eager to participate in social media activities relevant to B2B sector and their industry in particular.

3.3 Overview of competitors' digital marketing

As it was stated in the literature review, an indispensable part of situation analysis is reviewing the competitors' performance in context of digital marketing. Comparing the approaches that competitors employ for online promotion allows to identify threats caused by competitors' online offerings as well as to determine the opportunities to stand out in digital environment (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 94). For this particular case the author has chosen to review the marketing activities of AMA's two direct competitors – Biohit Oyj and Kibion. Both these companies are comparable with AMA's business since they develop and produce devices for diagnostics of gastroenterological diseases as well as operate internationally by establishing distributors in different countries. Due to limited access, the author could study the competitors' marketing activities only by conducting the secondary research of reviewing the companies' visible digital channels, such as corporate websites and social media.

Biohit is a Finnish biotechnology company operating globally, with subsidiaries in Italy and the UK. The company's product range includes medical tests for diagnosing gastrointestinal diseases and related laboratory instruments. Biohit has established a well-designed and user-friendly website; Figure 9 presents the website's homepage. What is evident from the first sight is that the homepage clearly communicates the company's area of specialization and Biohit's value proposition: *"Biohit's products and services are safe, ethical and cost-efficient innovations for diagnosing and preventing gastrointestinal diseases and the associated risks"* (Biohit Oyj 2018). The section "About us" provides not only a brief introduction of the company and their main achievements, but it also describes Biohit's strategy and objectives, management structure, operating environment, as well as gives an overview on the company's activities in the fields of R&D and quality. Providing various organizational insights helps to build credibility and establish a professional image of the company. An interesting element of Biohit's website is "Glossary" where different scientific and medical terms are explained. It might be useful when websites visitors without medical or scientific background try to learn about company's product offerings.

Biohit provides a profound scientific base about their devices and the developed methods of diagnostics: visitors can review scientific studies, presentations materials, study protocols and relevant literature. The company creates an image of professionals in the field and builds a strong reputation by sharing relevant educational content. Biohit shares extensive information about their products on company's webpages, including the detailed specifications and instructions on different languages. The website also encourages visitors to download additional informational materials, thus increasing customers' engagement. There is also a search function on the website which can make visitors' navigation through the site easier and quicker.
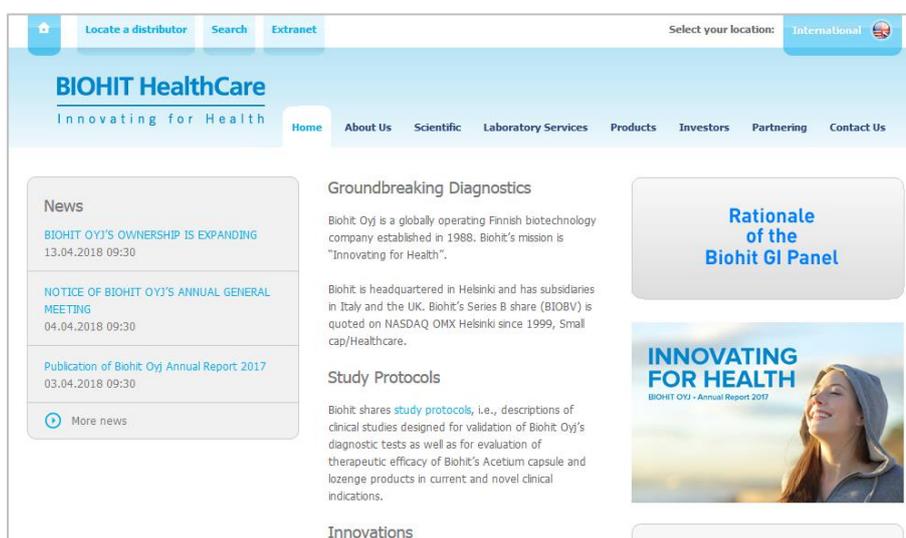
Figure 9. Homepage of Biohit's website (Biohit Oyj 2018)

In terms of social media presence, Biohit has established corporate accounts on several social media platforms. Biohit's Facebook page is well developed and is updated regularly; 657 users are subscribed to company's updates. However, all posts are written in Finnish language, which means that the page is aimed solely at Finnish customers. Due to language constraints, the content of the page could not be analysed. It is evident that there is almost no audience involvement on the page because the posts do not get any comments. Biohit's Twitter account has 453 followers and is updated regularly, with up to 10 publications a month. The content is published both in Finnish and English languages. With the help of Twitter, Biohit

delivers company, product and industry related news, shares useful articles about diagnostics and health promotion as well as media content from trade fairs. Compared to company's Facebook page, its Twitter account gets more audience involvement which can be seen from the bigger number of likes and retweets. Biohit's Pinterest account contains company-generated photos of products and trade fair stands. The page seems to be inactive with only several posts shared and the last action taken a year ago. On the whole, it can be concluded that Biohit has established the brand's presence on social media, but the audience's involvement remains on a low level.

The second company chosen for competitor analysis is Kibion – a Sweden-based developer and producer of breath tests for gastroenterology. This frim is AMA's main competitor on the market of breath tests. Kibion is a part of the French company Laboratory Mayoly Spindler and it operates globally with subsidiaries in Germany. The product range includes three medical devices aimed at the diagnosis of Helicobacter pylori infection. Kibion has established a sophisticated and modern-looking website with easy navigation and clear structure (Figure 10). The user experience is enhanced by interactive elements on the main page.
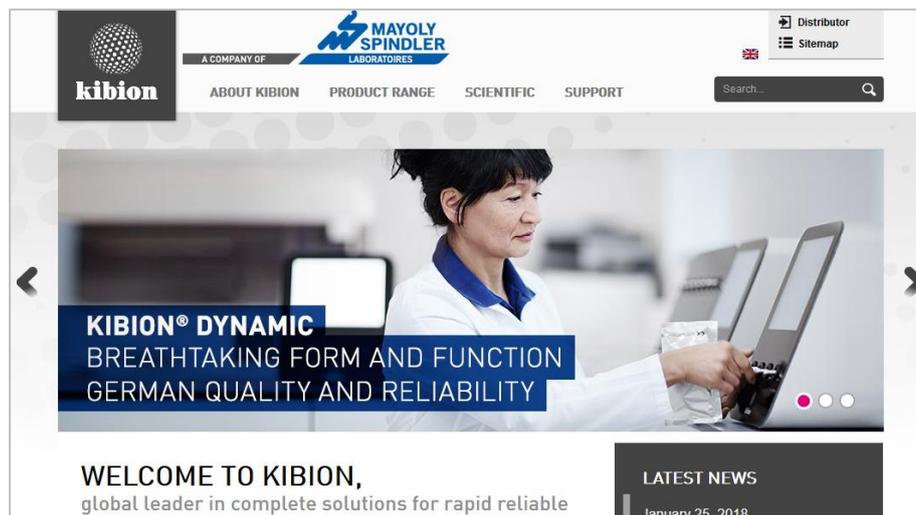

Figure 10. Homepage of Kibion's website (Kibion AB 2018)

Kibion's main value proposition is delivered explicitly on the main page and it claims that the company is a *"global leader in complete solutions for rapid reliable urea*

breath tests to diagnose the stomach ulcer bacterium Helicobacter pylori" (Kibion AB 2018)*.* The key feature of Kibion's website is the extensive information provided for each product in the catalogue. The webpages describe comprehensively the method that the devices utilize, give video instructions for medical procedures, include FAQs sections that address the common questions from customers. The website visitors are also encouraged to download a wide range of product-related documents. This approach of presenting information in a customer-friendly way and including many customer touchpoints increases engagement with a brand. Moreover, the company makes sure that all necessary and relevant information about product offerings is available at customer's disposal. As in the case of Biohit, Kibion also provides a lot of useful educational content, such as scientific publications mentioning Kibion's products and information sheets about diagnostic methods. Kibion is not present in any social media, thus the activity in this context cannot be reviewed.

The conducted competitor analysis in the field of digital marketing showed that AMA's main competitors have established well-designed and customer-centric websites. In order to meet customer expectations, AMA will need to concentrate more on customer needs in its digital strategy and communicate clearly the value that customers are going to receive from interactions with the company. The competitor analysis showed that competing companies are active in terms of providing detailed product information and related content. This insight highlights that AMA should publish more content that would educate customers and give them valuable industry insights. It is also essential to ensure that website visitors comprehend the complex nature of AMA's products, thus the descriptions and specifications should be delivered in a comprehensible manner, for instance, with the help of media elements. The competitors' research showed that both Kibion and Biohit are not actively involved in either blogging or social media, although the literature review revealed that the significance of these digital marketing initiatives in B2B context is rising nowadays. Therefore, AMA could stand out among the competitors and build its brand by efficiently seizing the opportunities that these channels provide.

3.4 Digital specific SWOT analysis

Conducting a digital specific SWOT analysis of company's online activity is an integral part of situation analysis. Not only it allows to assess company's strengths and weaknesses in the online marketing environment, but it also helps to review the main external opportunities and threats that are associated with company's digital marketing. After performing a digital specific SWOT analysis, companies can create a plan on how to counter the threats and benefit from the opportunities using digital marketing channels. Thus, the appropriate strategies can be developed with the help of this tool (Chaffey & Ellis-Chadwick 2012, 208-209.) A digital specific SWOT analysis was performed for AMA's brand and the results are presented below in Table 2.

Table 2. Digital specific SWOT analysis for AMA's brand compared with Biohit Oyj and Kibion

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
• An acknowledged brand • Established distributors in more than 30 countries • Innovativeness and high quality of products • Strong technical and scientific knowledge • Continuous innovation: new product launches • Expert customer support and after-sales service • A new and modern corporate website	• Never applied a strategic approach towards digital marketing • Marketing managers have limited skills in digital marketing • Personal contact with customers still plays an important role • No interaction with customers and prospects online • Website: no clear value proposition, no engaging content • No presence on social media; no visibility on search engines
OPPORTUNITIES	THREATS
• New markets opportunities • Growing demand for cost-efficient medical devices of high quality • Digitalization is constantly increasing • Increasing use of digital marketing in B2B context • Growing demand in relevant, engaging and educational content • User-friendly online marketing tools and platforms; no need in special trainings for marketing managers	• Limited marketing budget • Competitors' established active presence online • New competing products • Risk of misalignment between various marketing channels • Certain digital marketing initiatives might not be appropriate in context of AMA's complex products • Target customers might not use particular digital channels during vendor search

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

A process undertaken in a systematic way with an intent to increase someone's knowledge is known as research (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill 2016, 5). Gray (2004, 2) defines organizational research as a methodical and organized process of examining a particular problem and finding solutions for it.

A research design is a framework for a study that defines the details of implementing the research approach. It describes the strategies for collecting information that is essential for solving the research problem. (Malhotra 2010, 70.) A research design outlines the main steps that a researcher will need to undertake to answer the research questions (Saunders et al. 2016, 162). According to Malhotra (2010, 70), developing a well-grounded research design is crucial for ensuring the efficiency and effectiveness of the conducted research. Research designs are generally classified as exploratory, descriptive and explanatory, although it is also possible to employ some combination of them (Saunders et al. 2016, 174).

The research design chosen for this study is exploratory research. The aim of exploratory research is to examine a problem or situation to establish insights and understanding. Since formal research procedures are not utilized in exploratory research, this type of research design is flexible and versatile in terms of employed methods. Moreover, as new ideas and insights emerge during the study, the focus of the research might change. Exploratory research involves getting maximum valuable insights from a small, non-representative sample. The collected primary data and its analysis are both qualitative in nature. Exploratory research is an appropriate design for this study, because the aim of the project is to collect valuable insights and develop a course of action to approach the business problem. (Malhotra 2010, 70-73.) The author collected qualitative data from several industry experts to study their perceptions and professional knowledge of digital marketing in B2B context. The

gained insights were subsequently used in creating an action plan for case company's digital marketing.

During the research planning stage, the appropriate research methodology and data collection methods are chosen. A qualitative approach was chosen for this research project. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) define qualitative research as an interpretive research approach that is based on different kinds of subjective data and examines people in certain contexts in their natural environment. Qualitative research makes stress on words in the data collection and analysis rather than on quantification (Bryman & Bell 2011, 386). Qualitative research is based on subjective evaluation of attitudes, opinions and behavior of people (Kothari 2004, 5). The goal of qualitative approach to research lies in investigating a certain phenomenon through understanding the data from the subjective perspectives of participants. The main task of qualitative research is to gain an understanding of the insiders' views. The advantage of qualitative research is that it generates data for the development of theoretical understanding of the studied phenomenon. (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner 2015, 68-69.)

The reason why qualitative approach was chosen for this study, is that the phenomenon of B2B digital marketing is relatively new and was not extensively studied before. Furthermore, the aim of this thesis is to come up with a detailed action plan for a case company, therefore, studying the subjective opinions of company's marketing experts about the issue being examined seems justified. Qualitative data collected during the research provided a comprehensive understanding of the current situation of case company's digital marketing. In addition, the collected subjective information is intended to discover and explore in detail the possible solutions for the research problem in order to come up with a profound action plan. To conclude, answering the research questions requires a detailed description of the solution suggested, thus, a choice of qualitative approach seems to be appropriate.

Case study methodology was implemented during this research project. During a case study, a researcher carries out an intensive investigation of a contemporary phenomenon in real-life settings (Malhotra 2010, 42; Yin 2013, 8). Case study is an efficient strategy for increasing understanding and enhancing experience associated with the studied subject (Gray 2004, 123); it aims to reveal the complex nature of the phenomenon (Bryman & Bell 2011, 59). According to Malhotra (2010), a wide range of units can become a case in research context: markets, organizations, customers, stores, Websites and other things. In a case study data is collected from multiple sources: the company, external secondary sources, and through interviewing people who could contribute valuable insights into the studied phenomenon. (42.) However, as Gray (2004) states, the data collection in case studies should still has a clear focus which should be provided by laying out a theoretical foundation at the beginning of the research. Compared to other research strategies, a case study does not simply describe an existing situation, but it aims to identify relationships between a phenomenon and a context where it takes place. (123-124.) The implemented case study methodology helped the author of the thesis to scrutinize the complex phenomenon of B2B digital marketing within the context of a specific case company and provide a detailed answer to research questions.

4.2   Qualitative data collection

The outline of the research design guides the researcher in choosing an appropriate data collection technique and data analysis procedures. There are two types of data that researchers collect in order to answer research questions: primary and secondary data. According to Saunders and others (2016, 724), primary data is a kind of information that is collected particularly for the specific research being conducted. The researcher gathers primary data directly from its original source. This type of data is beneficial in the terms that it provides insights that precisely suit the researcher's needs. However, primary data collection can be expensive and time-consuming. (Krishnaswami & Satyaprasad 2010, 90.) On the other hand, secondary data is data that was previously gathered by other researchers for some other purpose. (724, 727.) In contrast with primary data, secondary data can be gathered

quickly, easily and at a relatively low cost. Secondary data can help a researcher to answer specific research questions and test some hypothesis as well as gain more insights for interpreting primary data. It is crucial to review available secondary sources before commencing the primary data collection because secondary data forms foundation for conducting primary data analysis. However, researchers should take into consideration that secondary data may lack relevance and accuracy in the context of conducted research, since it was initially gathered for other purposes. (Malhotra 2010, 100-101.) Wilson (2010, 170) states that research usually commence with reviewing secondary data and, as a rule, the result of this analysis shows whether it is essential to collect primary data additionally. The author of the thesis came to a conclusion that it will be necessary to collect both primary and secondary data in order to answer the research questions.

Conducting a situation analysis of case company's digital marketing required reviewing document secondary data. Document secondary data represents data that has a physical or digital form, can be relocated between time and space and can be analysed with another aim than it was initially created. This type of data includes both text materials (emails, letters, blogs, tweets, reports, etc.) and non-text materials (non-text content of web pages, images, video recordings, etc.) Document secondary data is regularly utilized in research that also includes primary data collection. Nowadays, the web-based content generated by organization and online communities is increasingly utilized as document secondary data by researchers. (Saunders et al. 2016, 319-320.) To analyse the current state of case company's digital marketing, the author reviewed the company's digital content created so far: the content of the corporate website as well as email marketing campaigns and their reports. Furthermore, in order to analyse the digital activities in the competing environment, the author reviewed the websites and social media presence of AMA's main competitors in the international market.

The author assumed that reviewing solely secondary data will not be enough for answering all research questions. Therefore, in order to deepen the understanding

and gain valuable insights of the studied topic, the primary data was collected through conducting semi-structured interviews.

Interview

Interview as a data collection technique involves asking questions in oral-verbal form and getting a reply also in oral-verbal form (Kothari 2004, 97). With the help of interviews, a researcher can collect valid and reliable data that will contribute to answering research question(s) and completing research objectives (Saunders et al. 2016, 388). Interviewing allows to obtain participants' subjective perspectives, attitudes and ways of thinking concerning a topic being investigated (Wilson 2010, 138). One of the advantages of this data collection method is that a researcher can gain the exact information needed for the research and this information will be in-depth (Christensen et al. 2015, 73). Using interviewing as a technique for collecting primary data, the author aimed to attain opinions from company's representatives, customers, end users, and digital marketing experts about the desired state of case company's digital marketing.

According to Saunders and others (2016), there are several types of research interviews. The chosen type of interview should correspond with the overall purpose of the research and its strategy as well as it should be suitable for the formulated research questions and objectives. (391.) Since the nature of the research was determined to be qualitative, the author decided to conduct semi-structured interviews, which is the type of qualitative research interviews. Saunders and others (2016, 392) state that semi-structured interviews can be applied in exploratory research, which was found appropriate for this study, and the collected data most often requires qualitative analysis.

In semi-structured interviews the researcher has a list of questions or themes to be discussed, although other topics may be included in the conversation as the interviewer reacts to the ideas expressed by the interviewee. In addition, the order of the questions asked may differ from the one listed in the interview protocol. (Bryman & Bell 2011, 467.) The questions in semi-structured interviews are put in

the open-ended form, which encourages the participants to express their thoughts in a flexible manner, as they are (Yin 2011, 135). This type of research interview implies that the data being collected will be captured either by audio-recording the conversion or by taking notes (Saunders et al. 2016, 391). During the interview, participants may lead the conversation to the topics that the researcher had not considered before but which can increase the understanding and be helpful in answering the research questions. (Saunders et al. 2016, 394) This type of interview was considered beneficial for the research project because the author needed to collect valuable and detailed insights about the studied topic.

According to Saunders and others (2016, 401), researcher's preparation for an interview determines its future success. First of all, it is necessary to acquire solid knowledge about the studied topic and get to know the organizational or situational environment where interviewees operate. This allows a researcher to prove his or her credibility, evaluate the accuracy of responses and engage participants into a more detailed discussion. Providing interviewees with a list of questions or themes in advance helps to increase validity and reliability, since in such way participants are aware of the researcher's field of interest and thus they can prepare better for the interview. A researcher can come up with interview questions on the basis of literature review, considered theories, own experience of a specific field, common sense, and discussions with colleagues, academic advisors and research participants.

Sample

The objectives and research questions of this study are narrowly focused on one specific phenomenon of B2B digital marketing in the context of a case organization. Thus, it would be impracticable to survey the entire population. Because of this, a sample for the research should be selected using an appropriate sampling technique. A sample is a group of elements inside the population selected to participate in a research. Sampling techniques allow to decrease the amount of data to be collected by examining only data from a subgroup instead of all elements of the population. (Saunders et al. 2016, 272-274.) In this research a non-probability sampling method of purposive sampling was applied in order to determine the particular participants

for interviewing who could contribute valuable insights into the topic, helping to answer the research questions. According to Bryman and Bell (2011, 442), in purposive sampling participants are not selected randomly, but rather in a strategic way that ensures that the choice of sample members will be most beneficial in meeting the objectives of the research and answering the posed questions. The researcher uses his or her own judgement to select those participants who could provide the most relevant and comprehensive data in the particular research field (Yin 2011, 88).

In this research the sample consisted of four distinct groups of interviewees that were formed based on participants' profiles. The choice of each participant in the sample was made based on the expected valuable insights that each of them could contribute into the contemporary state of B2B digital marketing in the context of the case company AMA.

The first group of interviewees consisted of company's representatives who shared their views on AMA's existing digital marketing and its desired state. The second group included two companies successfully operating in B2B market in the same industry as AMA's, also internationally, but selling a different range of diagnostic devices. The author asked these interviewees to discuss how they manage their digital marketing activities and which of them they consider most efficient and why. The next group of interviewees consisted of AMA's two established distributors whose product catalogues include a wide range of medical devices. Their insights created an understanding of how purchasing companies nowadays utilize internet tools when searching for a vendor and what are the prevailing factors when choosing a B2B seller online. Finally, the author interviewed two digital marketing professionals who provide consulting services in the field of digital marketing to both B2B and B2C companies. The interview revealed their opinions on efficient digital marketing practices in B2B context.

The distinction of interviewees into four groups by their profile was made to ensure that different points of view on the same general topic are expressed and considered

by the researcher. Every interviewee is considered to have a certain knowledge of and experience in B2B digital marketing. Since the case company is aiming to expand globally using digital marketing services, the author considered that it would be useful to learn opinions and practices from professionals operating in countries other than Russia. Therefore, three participants from other countries were included into the sample. Table 3 provides a short profile for each interviewee who participated in the research. Since one of the interviewees expressed the desire to stay unidentified, all participants and their answers will be presented anonymously in order to maintain the reliability of the research.

Table 3. List of interviewees

	Interviewee	Job title	Company industry	Location
AMA (case company)	A	Head of Marketing department	Medical devices	St.-Petersburg, Russia
	B	Marketing manager		
B2B vendors	C	Sales & marketing manager	Medical equipment	Helsinki, Finland
	D	Marketing manager	Medical equipment	St.-Petersburg, Russia
B2B buyers	E	Purchasing manager	Distributor of medical devices	São Paulo, Brazil
	F	Purchasing manager	Distributor of medical devices	Moscow, Russia
Digital marketing professionals	G	Social media consultant	Marketing agency	Vienna, Austria
	H	Digital marketing manager	Marketing agency	St.-Petersburg, Russia

Data collection implementation

The participants were initially reached using the resources of the case company's and author's own professional networks. The author of the thesis made sure that the chosen interviewees were genuinely interested in the topic to be discussed. The preliminary list of themes to be covered during an interview was provided to the participants, however, the interviewer notified them that new relevant topics may arise during the discussion. It was agreed beforehand that the interviews will not involve sharing or discussing confidential information of the companies where the participants are employed.

The interview questions were prepared in advance and they were guided by the research objectives and questions. Moreover, the author made use of the reviewed literature and discussions with AMA's representatives for narrowing down the questions. A preliminary set of questions for facilitating the discussion was developed for every group of interviewees based on their profile and expected insights. The list of questions can be found in Appendix 1. In order to demonstrate competence and thus increase the interviewees' confidence, the author decided to learn about the organizational context where the interviews will take place by reviewing the available information about companies where participants are employed and their main business activities.

All interviews were individual and they were held face-to-face if the interviewee is based in St.-Petersburg, or in other cases via Skype. For Russian participants the interviews were conducted in Russian language, the participants from other countries were interviewed in English. The face-to-face interviews took place at the participants' offices since it was the most convenient location for interviewees. The author made sure in advance that the interview process would not be disturbed at the chosen location. All interviews were audio recorded for further analysis, and the researcher gained permission from every participant to audio record the discussions.

4.3 Data analysis

After the raw data has been gathered, it should be processed and analysed. According to Saunders et al. (2016, 710), analysis of data is the process of decomposing the collected data in order to explain the nature of its elements and relationships between them. During the analysis stage, the data is summarized and organized in such way that the research questions can be answered (Kothari 2004, 122). Analysis of qualitative data involves providing new meanings to data after dissolving it into smaller parts and searching for new concepts (Gray 2004, 319).

In order to analyse the qualitative data collected during semi-structured interviews, the researcher has chosen to apply the method of thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 79), thematic analysis organizes and describes data by recognizing, analysing and reporting patterns, which are called themes, within data set. The process of thematic analysis commences with familiarizing yourself with the collected data through reading it and looking for meanings and repeated patterns (ibid., 87). Since the data in this research was collected in an interactive form of an interview, the researcher had already had a substantial knowledge of the data. However, the author studied the data set more profoundly and started generating ideas of possible patterns during the transcription of data, which is considered to be an efficient way to familiarize with data (ibid., 87).

As reported by Braun and Clarke (2006), the next stage in thematic analysis includes organizing the data set into meaningful groups which are called codes. A code represents a basic element within data that a researcher considers interesting in terms of perceived content and that can be analysed in a meaningful way. During this phase, the researcher performed coding by identifying curious aspects within the transcribed data that could become the basis for recurring themes. After all data has been coded, the generated codes are allocated into potential themes. (88-89.) In the context of theme analysis, a theme reflects a recurring response or meaning in the data set and identifies important aspects of the data that could be helpful for answering research questions (ibid., 82). According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 88),

Boyatzis (1998) states that themes are those elements in relation to which judgements about the phenomenon being studied are made. Searching for themes sets the analysis into a broader context since the coded data extracts are combined within separate themes. At the end of this stage, the researcher has connected all separate coded elements of data with identified themes. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 89-90.)

During the following phase of theme analysis, a researcher should ensure that all the data extracts combined under each separate theme cohere together meaningfully. Moreover, it is necessary to examine the validity of identified themes in relation to the whole set of data and determine whether there is a comprehensible and identifiable distinction between themes. The next step involves conducting a detailed analysis of each theme where a researcher explains how the specific theme scrutinizes a particular aspect within data set and what insights this theme contributes in relation to research questions. At this stage, themes are given their refined names which should be concise and should be clearly communicating to the reader the sense being discussed under this theme. The final phase of theme analysis consists of reporting the results of the analysis. The main goal of the final report is to summarize the main findings in a manner that would assure the reader about the quality and the validity of the analysis. It is crucial to not only report the essence of the collected data, but also to provide an argument in relation to research question. (Braun & Clarke 2006, 91-93.) The author of the thesis will present the main results of the study in the following section.

4.4   Research results

The current role of digital marketing in B2B

To begin with, the researcher discussed the overall state of B2B digital marketing in the light of the specificity of B2B relationships and the existing practice of traditional marketing in this sphere. All respondents acknowledged that offline marketing activities still play an important role in B2B marketing due to the complex nature of business relationships. AMA's representatives stated that international trade fairs

remain the main channel for attracting and establishing distributors abroad. The company annually takes part in at least four global trade shows in the field of medical devices. Additionally, the trade show's environment provides a platform for discussing and negotiating, which is still very important in B2B context. As one of the B2B buyers put it: *"It doesn't matter how I found a vendor initially, I still prefer to discuss things in a personal meeting before committing to purchase".* One of the B2B vendors expressed a strong belief that due to the complexity of purchased products and high contract prices, face-to-face meetings, phone calls and email communications play an integral part in business relationships and they are "*rather unlikely to be completely replaced with digital interaction*".

However, all respondents agreed that marketing using digital platforms in B2B business is a necessity nowadays, and its significance and influence is constantly increasing. The main concern here, mentioned by many interviewees, is that most of B2B buyers nowadays initiate their vendor search online, often starting from a broad search rather than a specific company. One of the purchasing managers provided a valuable insight that illustrated the importance of digital marketing for B2B companies in capturing new opportunities:

> *When we are looking for new opportunities, I mean, new devices or equipment to distribute… I like to learn about a vendor through their website… or any other material that they have published online. Usually, when I see a lot of… a lot of exhaustive information about products and their specifications, I am more convinced… Convinced about their credibility as experts, and thus I continue to explore the proposition.*

According to the interviewed marketing professionals, competition in digital marketing between companies is constantly growing, and therefore, an organization should try to establish an effective online presence in order to gain competitive advantage. This is particularly crucial in AMA's case since the company is aiming to attract new overseas customers, and the only offline initiative to attract foreign clients nowadays is promoting the brand at trade fairs. Moreover, as the situation analysis has revealed, AMA's competitors have a more developed digital marketing strategy. As digital specialists stated, this situation further highlights that the company should introduce a "*confident online presence*".

Reflecting on their experience, digital marketing professionals noted that the level of adoption and development of digital marketing is generally lower among B2B companies compared to B2C. Among the underlying reasons, they mentioned a wide-spread misconception of many organizations that online marketing activities can only be efficient in B2C context. In addition, as cited by the digital expert, marketers oftentimes "*simply don't know how to make digital marketing work for their business…, including what channels to use and what content to create*". Moreover, an interviewee emphasized the lack of relevant skills among B2B marketing managers:

> *…the management in companies often underestimates the potential that digital marketing has for their B2B businesses and …thus, marketing personnel do not receive sufficient training and often act intuitively when using digital tools.*

Only one respondent among B2B sellers stated that their company is currently following an established digital marketing plan, which specifies how the chosen digital marketing channels are managed. The other seller and the case company admitted that they have not earlier undertaken a strategic approach towards digital marketing, describing their online initiatives as "*little bit of this and that*", "*the projects that management considered we should do*". At the same time, the interviewed digital experts insisted that a strategic focus is crucial for efficient digital marketing, first and foremost, because it determines a clear direction towards specific goals that the company is aiming to achieve: "*It's pointless to do something unless you have a clear vision of what you are trying to receive at the end".* Moreover, the marketing professionals noted that conducting a prior research and developing a digital strategy helps to make grounded decisions about the appropriate digital channels, formulate a solid value proposition and develop efficient approaches to reach target audience.

The research revealed that the main objectives B2B companies are seeking to achieve through digital marketing are sales-oriented: the participants mentioned lead generation and increasing sales on the first place. The other cited objectives include increasing brand awareness, establishing an image of the industry's experts and improving customer relationships. According to AMA's representatives, the

company would like to achieve the following goals with the help of digital marketing: increasing international sales, attracting new customers in foreign markets, enhancing brand awareness globally and promoting an image of trusted brand. Digital marketing professionals added that AMA could also use digital marketing for improving the existing products according to the valuable customer insights gained through digital media channels as well as decrease marketing spending by transferring some of the offline marketing activities to the digital environment.

The application of specific digital channels in B2B context

The findings from the literature review revealed that the most efficient digital marketing tools for supporting B2B business are content marketing, social media marketing, search engine marketing and e-mail marketing. The author intended to verify those findings with the help of the insights collected during semi-structured interview.

All of the interviewees agreed that a website is the most important channel in B2B digital marketing and marketers should put maximum efforts into its development. A website is described as "*the first instance where a potential customer lands*" and "*the home of the brand*". The respondents describe the role of the website as providing the thorough description of product offering, creating an image of the company, communicating the value to the customer and building trust and credibility. The interviewed B2B sellers stated that a website is also a platform that they use for communicating company-generated content. Respondents affirmed that content has become the most powerful tool in B2B digital marketing. As one of the marketing experts noted:

> *Buyers nowadays come a long way in the decision process by themselves before actually contacting a vendor… And content is the thing that encourages them to progress during this process.*

Content has been referred to as "*the king of digital marketing*". Company-generated content is created to build up consumers' knowledge of the brand and the offered products. One of the respondents has expressed an opinion that content marketing

has surpassed the traditional advertising in the sense that content provides value that consumers are searching for.

The study revealed that the interviewed B2B sellers are active in content marketing and use a range of content formats that are created to build customers' trust. The types of content include blogs, videos, webinars, case studies, whitepapers and E-books. The main goals of all these content formats are providing extensive information about products in comprehensible and illustrative manner and establishing an image of industry professionals. The digital experts emphasized that company-generated blogs and video marketing have established themselves as very efficient tools in B2B marketing since they provide opportunities for communicating the complex nature of B2B products in a comprehensible way to a wide audience. As one of the marketing professionals noted: *"…the interactive types of content are more appealing to consumers and they help to achieve better engagement"*. Moreover, both B2B buyers confirmed that when a vendor provides a wide range of downloadable and informative materials, they consider this as a sign of professionalism.

When asked about social media marketing, B2B sellers admitted that although they are present on social media sites, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram and Twitter, their initiatives lack clear goal and understanding what is the value to be delivered to customers. Marketing managers stated that their social media activity is limited to posting company-related news, such as product launches, participation in trade fairs, expanding to a new market, all expressed in a rather informal manner. Thus, these companies use social media as a one-way communications method, while the main feature of social media sites is encouraging users' interaction with a company. Digital experts expressed an opinion that B2B marketing specialists should try to exploit this feature and enhance customers' communication with company, establishing a two-way dialogue. Another benefit of social media adoption within B2B context, as cited by a social media professional, includes better opportunities for online visibility. Social media presence generates more links to the company's websites, thus creating

more traffic and increasing the number of leads. Moreover, creating social media content is helpful in terms of SEO. As social media expert explained:

Nowadays, social media presence affects the rank that your company will get in Google search: the more active you are in terms of effectively utilizing social media channels – the higher you'll be in the rank.

The author also captured the attitudes of B2B buyers towards the usage of social media sites for professional purposes. The distributors reflected that they do not purposefully search for social media accounts of specific companies they are interested in, although they might visit the accounts when exploring a vendor's website. As one of them explained: *"Me personally… If I see links to some social media on the website, I might click and explore what's in there… In fact, I may scroll a long way down the timeline, if I'm interested".* Talking about social media content generated by B2B companies nowadays, B2B buyers used the following phrases: *"usually nothing special"*, *"quite boring"*, *"dry facts"*. However, one of the respondents told that he is subscribed to several manufacturers whose posts he finds *"interesting and creative"*.

Unlike social media marketing, email marketing practice is more developed among the interviewed companies. The respondents use email marketing to communicate special offers, company's achievements, new product launches, and invitation to events. One of the B2B vendors called email marketing *"the main tool we use to facilitate a conversation with customers"*. Another seller identified email communications as a tool that *"drove the most revenue among other digital initiatives"*. One of the digital marketing specialists speculated that the wide adoption and the perceived efficiency of email marketing may be caused by the nature of interaction which resembles personal communication. She continued with mentioning a specific feature of email marketing:

Emails might seem easy in terms that you already have a ready list of recipients, but the tough part is to initially make them subscribe and to keep them subscribed afterwards.

As it was already mentioned, B2B buyers often start looking for a vendor from a broad search using search engines. According to the surveyed distributors, they

rarely go beyond the third page in the results list. Therefore, being visible on search engines is highly important for B2B companies. As one of the digital experts put it:

> *Just imagine how much revenue a company could generate if it was a number one in search results for relevant search phrases… That's why all companies should strive to improve their position.*

B2B sellers participating in the research noted that SEO is probably the most difficult digital activity in terms of technical implementation. One of the marketing managers shared that their company had to outsource the optimization of the webpages since in-house employees do not have necessary technical knowledge and skills. Another B2B seller revealed that their marketing team is involved solely in non-technical part of SEO which includes managing keyword phrases use in the generated content and improving inbound links.

Efficient digital practices for B2B companies

After studying the adoption of various digital marketing channels in B2B context, the author decided to gather insights from the interviewees about the general principles and valuable advices for managing these channels.

The discussion about a good B2B website confirmed that the main page should contain a clear value proposition stating "*what exactly a company can offer to customers*" and the proposition should be communicated explicitly. The participants agreed that a section containing information about a company should not be limited to a short description of activities and company's history. Customers usually like to learn the principles of operations inside an organization, main strategic focus, how a company ensures sustainability and quality control. As one of the B2B buyers explained: "… *when there's plenty of information about the company and their expertise, that basically shows that it's not just a producer or seller, but it's unique in some sense and it can be trusted".* Both digital marketing specialists have proposed an opinion that B2B companies oftentimes use complicated terms in the products' description on their websites. However, the specialists recommend that the language on webpages should not be too scientific or industrial, it should rather aim to explain the complicated matters in a comprehensible way to a broad audience.

A FAQs section was described as "*beneficial*" for a B2B website since it helps to address the complicated products' features and customers' frequent problems. A company can devise the questions and answers to them based on their experience of "*customers' common pain spots*". Digital experts noted that due to the dialogue form of FAQs section, visitors feel involved in a conversation with a brand and that increases customer engagement. Speaking of enhancing customer engagement, one of the marketing specialists advised that the essential news section should include not only company-related announcements, but also significant industry updates that website visitors might find useful to learn. It was discovered that both B2B sellers aim for better integration of their digital channels by providing on their webpages explicit calls to subscribe to corporate newsletter and visit company's social media profiles. Moreover, they ensured that their website design is adopted for mobile devices since visitors often use smartphones or tablets for web browsing even for professional purposes.

The study revealed that the overall approach to content creation should be based on customer-centric attitude. As reported by digital marketing professionals and confirmed by B2B buyers' experience, the proposed content should have a clearly identified target audience and it should aim to resolve the audience's problems or provide valuable hints for their businesses. When B2B customers talked about the qualities of content that they would like to see at a vendor's website, they used the words "*useful", "relevant", "educational", "insightful", "valuable", "solving a problem", "interesting*". Marketing experts note that created content should be presented in a form that could be easily shared, thus ensuring better SEO opportunities. As cited by one of the experts: "*Usually the content that discusses a trending topic in the market or industry is highly likely to be shared".* One of the B2B buyers stated an opinion that when a vendor uses selling language in the communicated content, the value of the content perceived by the customer is decreased:

When I see that the only concern of the vendor is to sell something to me, it immediately puts me off… If the only thing that they [vendors] provide is intrusive ads, that will undoubtedly put their professionalism into question, for me personally.

The interviews showed that providing a wide range of downloadable materials on a website is an efficient practice in B2B content marketing. Both B2B buyers confirmed that they appreciate when all relevant product instructions and specifications are available on the website so that they can study them before contacting a vendor. The B2B sellers told that they are involved in developing educational e-books and whitepapers and these forms of content have received a positive feedback from the customers. When asked about what types of content could be created in the forms of e-book and whitepaper, a digital marketing specialist explained:

Both e-books and whitepapers could, for instance, provide a research on industry statistics or trends, describe customer product experience in the form of a story, introduce thought leaders' insights into the market and their opinions about the products, and other things.

He continued by noting that both e-books and whitepapers are designed to provide thorough and informative content, however, a whitepaper is more profound, detailed and academic, and it is great for describing technical aspects in an exhaustive manner. The interview revealed that since AMA produces diagnostic devices for medical practice, the most significant papers to be provided to customers are probably scientific studies mentioning AMA's devices or the methods that they utilize. The case company's representatives noted that their potential clients often request *"the scientific justification of the device's accuracy"*.

According to the interviewees, blogging is also aimed at providing valuable information to the website visitors, but in a more informal and conversational manner. B2B marketers should aim to facilitate conversation under the blog posts. As mentioned by digital marketing experts, it is crucial to include the keyword phrases to the blog posts to ensure better search engine visibility. The content of the blog benefits from the usage of photos, videos and infographics since media elements engage customers. It is essential to update the corporate blog regularly to maintain visitors' involvement and improve SEO. One digital expert added that topics for the

blog could be generated by reviewing customers' activity on social media and benchmarking the competitors' initiatives. Another suggested introducing guest posts that would provide insights of thought leaders. When discussing the efficient blogging practices, the participants mentioned the following elements: *"appealing and intriguing heading", "trending topics", "easy and interesting to read", "friendly tone", "informal language"*.

As the study revealed, efficient social media marketing in B2B relies largely on the right choice of social media platforms. According to the interviewed digital specialists, marketers need to make sure that their target audience is present in the specific social media before entering it. They agreed that the most utilized social media sites in B2B nowadays are Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, noting that Facebook has the largest active audience of B2B buyers. AMA's representatives stated that they have never been present on social media before, and they would like to start their social media marketing activities from the most appropriate site to test whether social media presence potentially could contribute to achieving AMA's goals. Therefore, Facebook was considered to be the suitable site to establish AMA's social media presence.

The author asked the interviewees to share their opinions on the efficient Facebook practices for B2B companies. First of all, it was mentioned that a company should try to engage customers to interact online with a brand. In order to create involvement on Facebook, companies should share interesting facts about their activities: new product launches, company news, insider stories, participations in the events and other things. Every post should be supported by media materials, such as pictures, photos, videos. Facebook was also cited to be an appropriate platform for sharing company-generated videos. Marketers can increase subscribers' engagement by sharing and commenting on the latest industry trends, new market regulations, relevant statistics or studies, interesting articles and other things. Social media expert noted that asking questions inside a post can help to facilitate commenting and start conversation with customers. Marketers can announce new blog posts or new content releases via Facebook and thus create connections with corporate

website and blog. The author surveyed the B2B buyers about their perceptions of a vendor's Facebook profile, and the insights were the following:

"Social media is genuinely designed to entertain visitors, that's why I expect vendors' posts to be entertaining, …but at the same time they shouldn't question the company's professionalism".

"I'm subscribed to our several vendors but I'm rarely impressed with what they publish there, usually it's something straightforward like promotion announcement… I would like to see more engaging content, like videos or infographics".

The interviews with digital experts revealed that efficient email marketing nowadays involves targeting, which means that customers on different buying stages should receive different emails. In such way companies ensure that an email is relevant to the recipient's needs and wants and this approach allows to nurture leads during the purchase cycle. As companies succeed in content creation, emails can be used for inviting the recipients to download a newly released e-book or white paper. During the discussion of an effective email campaign the following elements were mentioned: *"clear call-to-action", "links to social media", "link to home page", "mobile-friendly", "appealing design", "easy to navigate", "intriguing subject line", "clear and compelling offer", "relevant and informative content".*

Email marketing provides excellent opportunities for analyzing the efficiency of campaigns since all performance metrics are available, however, the interviewed digital expert noted that marketers often disregard this feature. As a result, the corrective actions are not made and a company risks to lose subscribers. The researcher discussed with B2B buyers the possible reasons why email recipients might unsubscribe:

I might push the "Unsubscribe" button if there are too many emails coming from one company and they are all intrusive and always trying to sell something.

I don't like it when, for instance, we've just signed the contract to buy some medical equipment from a vendor, and in a couple of days I receive an email encouraging me to buy the same equipment we've just purchased… It's just… sort of unprofessional.

In terms of SEO, the interview with the case company revealed that at the moment AMA is eager to undertake only the non-technical part of SEO due to limited skills of marketing personnel and limited financial resources. Therefore, only this part of SEO in B2B context was discussed during the interviews. According to the digital specialists, nowadays good results in the search ranks are determined predominantly by the great content of high quality, meaning that the company-generated content should be unique, valuable, relevant and it should provide great user experience. Obviously, content should include the relevant and popular keyword phrases relevant to the topic. The relevant keyword phrases can be chosen with the help of specific tools, such as Google AdWords Keyword Planner. The interviewed digital specialists advised to choose the keyword phrases that include familiar terms to wider target audience. The most effective places to include keywords are headers, sub headers, first and last paragraphs of the text.

SEO nowadays involves not only the optimization of company's website, but also the activities aimed at the creation of inbound links. There are many techniques to increase the number and quality of inbound links, the interviews with digital marketing specialists revealed the following ones which the case company could apply:

- Creating and distributing valuable content that visitors would share on other websites (e-books, whitepapers, videos, infographics, blog posts, presentations, studies, etc.)
- Adding sharing options for all generated content
- Asking customers and partners to share company's links on their websites
- Encouraging customers to leave product reviews
- Writing guest blog posts for relevant websites
- Preparing press releases about company's achievements
- Monitoring the competitors' inbound links
- Providing cross-channel links on company's all digital marketing channels (e.g. from social media to website)

5   Conclusions

5.1   Summary of the main results

The main goal of the current study was to determine how a B2B company should manage its digital marketing activities to establish new international clients and enhance brand awareness globally. In particular, the study examined which digital channels the case company AMA should utilize and what tactics the managers of the company should employ towards each channel to improve the efficiency of digital marketing. The final goal of the research project was to develop a B2B digital marketing plan for the case company which would include suggestions on the choice of digital marketing mix as well as practical guidelines to manage digital channels. In order to answer the research questions, the author conducted a literature review of the current state of digital marketing in B2B context, carried out the situation analysis of AMA's existing digital activities and competitive environment, and also administered semi-structured interviews to gather valuable insights into the efficient digital practices for B2B companies.

The results of this study show that nowadays establishing a digital marketing strategy and thorough planning of the online activities is essential for succeeding in digital environment because every initiative should have a clear direction and explicitly stated goals. The process of designing a digital strategy is complex and involves many stages, including situation analysis, setting up digital-specific objectives, identifying target audience online, formulating an online value proposition, defining exact tactics for achieving the objectives, and introducing a system for measuring the results. The results of this study indicated that the main objectives that companies are trying to achieve with the help of digital marketing are lead generation, increasing sales, brand awareness, establishing a positive image and improving customer relationships.

This study has shown that having a good visibility online and establishing an effective website are the main concerns of B2B marketers nowadays since buyers

predominantly start their vendor search online from a broad search. Despite the significant improvements in the field of digital marketing communications, a website remains the most important tool for B2B marketers in terms of providing the comprehensive information about product offering, communicating the value to the customer, establishing company's professional image and building credibility. For a website to be found online, companies should improve their search engine rankings by undertaking SEO techniques, which require profound technical skills. This study revealed that oftentimes B2B marketers do not possess the necessary knowledge or resources to conduct the technical part of SEO, thus limiting the initiatives to improving the natural search visibility and optimizing inbound links.

The natural search visibility is ensured by creating a unique and relevant content of high quality that would include the appropriate keyword phrases. Content marketing is crucial in B2B context not only for SEO, but also as a tool for attracting, engaging and compelling the potential customers to action. The research findings showed that B2B customers tend to form their perceptions of the brand based on the content the company delivers through its digital channels. It was established that company-generated content that fulfills the expectation and needs of customers helps to establish a professional image of industry experts. The main types of the content that B2B marketers can make use of include e-books, whitepapers, studies, videos, and blog posts. Blogging was identified as an efficient technique for explaining the complex nature of B2B products in a comprehensible and informal manner.

This study has shown that social media marketing is not yet widely adopted among B2B marketers, although the literature and marketing experts state that presence on the appropriate social media platform can provide B2B marketers with better opportunities for building brand awareness, improving customer relationships and enhancing online visibility. It was established that Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter are the most widely-used social media platforms in B2B context. However, the case company expressed their intention to start their online activities from Facebook in order to test whether their target audience is present in social media and thus evaluate the potential benefits of social media marketing in the company's context.

Another major finding was that email marketing is the most adopted tool among the interviewed B2B companies. B2B sellers develop email campaigns for lead generation, increasing sales and strengthening the brand. However, the study has found that some companies neglect to measure the effectiveness of their email marketing and thus do not undertake the corrective actions for increasing the efficiency of email campaigns.

The author presents the answer to the second research question regarding the specific tactics for chosen digital channels in a form of a B2B Digital Marketing Plan developed specifically for the case company. The plan is presented in Appendix 5 and it provides a set of guidelines for AMA's digital initiatives. The suggested initiatives and practices are based on the findings from research literature, case company situation analysis and the qualitative results from semi-structured interviews. The author also involved her own knowledge and experience for suggesting implementation ideas. Due to the specific scope of this study, the proposed digital plan can be considered limited in terms of measuring results and analytics strategies, however, the goal of providing practical approaches for managing company's digital channels is accomplished.

5.2   Recommendations

Recommendations for the case company

The final product of this thesis suggests the specific guidelines for efficient digital marketing initiatives, however, to ensure the success of overall digital marketing, AMA should employ these guidelines in the context of an established digital marketing strategy involving monitoring, control and evaluation system. Executing the listed initiatives in an ad-hoc manner may result in misalignment between various digital channels and ineffective budget spending.

The ever-changing marketing environment dictates that marketers should be constantly prepared to employ new techniques and tools and thus sticking to the established practices may lead to losing the competitive race. Both literature and digital experts noted that testing is an effective method in digital marketing since it

helps to evaluate the effectiveness of specific approaches among many available. For instance, marketers can determine which type of social media content evokes better audience involvement by simply posting various things and analyzing the consumers' reaction to each of them. The method of testing can be applied in the same way for all digital channels. Moreover, it is necessary to note that due to constant changes in the digital marketing practices, newly developed approaches might yield better results than those proposed in the current digital marketing plan. Therefore, the case company should monitor the state of B2B digital marketing and take into consideration the emerging trends.

Managerial implications

The conducted study highlighted several important implications and areas for improvement in the current digital marketing practices. First of all, it became clear that contemporary B2B digital marketing is shifting from making an accent on selling and encouraging customers to buy to a more customer-centric approach where companies are offering solutions to customers' problems and needs. Moreover, customers are no longer passive recipients of promotional messages, but they are actively involved in companies' digital marketing activities. Therefore, in their digital practice B2B marketers should adopt the stance of helping customers and addressing their pain points, predominantly by providing the appropriate content. The study has emphasized that practitioners should constantly research customers' needs and expectations at different points in time and at different stages of their purchase journey. In such a way, marketers can create an understanding of what type of content it would be beneficial to deliver to B2B customers at specific points.

The results of this study show that the strategic approach towards digital marketing should be undertaken mainly because it helps to build customer relationships around the brand in the long-term rather than for short-term results. During the implementation of digital marketing strategy, B2B practitioners should gradually gather insights into how different types of content (e.g. company-generated content, social media content, website) can deliver value to various target audiences and what is their effectiveness for these target groups. Another practical implication

concerns the various types of resources that companies should be ready to invest into digital marketing initiatives. First of all, the study highlighted that oftentimes marketing personnel lacks essential training and skills for efficiently utilizing digital marketing instruments. Therefore, companies should consider investing time and financial resources before undertaking an active digital strategy. It is crucial that organizations gain a thorough understanding of contemporary digital environment for utilizing the full potential and wide range of opportunities that digital marketing tools provide.

5.3 Verification of findings

In order to ensure the quality of the research, the author of the thesis has taken into consideration the issues of validity, reliability and objectivity. According to Bryman and Bell (2011, 42), validity questions whether the conclusions derived from a research possess integrity. Internal validity is concerned with the extent to which the research findings can be accounted for the actual research implementation process rather than drawbacks in the research design (Saunders et al. 2016, 181). The researcher has ensured internal validity by applying the methodology in a scrupulous manner and, as a result, answering the research questions accurately. The theoretical framework was built by reviewing the literature on digital marketing strategy and tactics. The questions for the semi-structured interviews were formulated based on the literature review and research questions. The interview questions were reviewed and approved by the case company. The detailed research design has established a link between the theoretical framework and the choice of data collection technique.

External validity determines the extent to which the research findings can be generalized and can be equally applicable to other relevant settings, such as other companies (Gray 2004, 91; Saunders et al. 2016, 204). In the context of this research, the small number of interviewed professionals restricts generalizations for the research findings. Moreover, most interviewees come from the similar background, which is medical devices industry, and some findings may be case-specific and

context-specific. Thus, the findings of the research are limited and cannot be generalized to other organizational settings. However, the author made an effort to improve the validity by gathering the viewpoints of professional with different roles in the context of the study (B2B sellers, B2B buyers, digital marketing specialists).

Reliability is concerned with consistency and stability of research findings, measuring whether the similar findings will be drawn if the research design is replicated (Saunders et al. 2016, 202). The data collection technique implemented during this study is semi-structured interviews. According to Saunders and others (2016, 399), the findings received from in-depth and semi-structured interviews do not necessarily need to be repeatable because they reflect a situation when they were collected which can change with time. In the context of this research project, it was crucial to study complex topics and thus the usage of semi-structured interviews was justified. The researcher defined the research design rigorously, ensuring that the choice of strategy and methods is well-explained.

Objectivity is concerned with minimizing the influence of researcher's opinions and attitudes on the research implementation and its outcomes (Christensen, Johnson, & Turner 2015, 37). In the context of this study the research questions and objectives were formulated based on the business problem that the case company aimed to resolve. The researcher eliminated bias during the qualitative data collection by following a unified procedure while conducting the interviews. The author of the thesis based her conclusions and recommendations for the case company on the theoretical framework and collected data. The mentioned considerations ensured the objectivity of the research.

5.4 Discussion

The data generated from this study shows that although B2B companies nowadays realize the acknowledged potential of actively utilizing digital marketing to achieve business goals, they have not yet discovered the comprehensive set of approaches to effectively apply it as a part of their overall integrated marketing communications strategy. It has been revealed that current digital marketing activities of B2B brands

are oftentimes limited to traditional marketing techniques applied in an online environment. Offline marketing activities and personal communication still play a crucial role in B2B settings due to the complex nature of business relationships in B2B. This represents a possible reason for lower adoption of digital marketing in B2B compared to B2C environment. Moreover, the efficient implementation of digital initiatives requires adopting a creative, innovative, and open-minded stance, which may be unusual for people working in industrial settings.

One of the main challenges associated with adoption of digital marketing in B2B context is concerned with the unclear practicability of using social media platforms for B2B purposes. The literature argues that companies should utilize social media for lead generation and building brand awareness. However, the research results have shown that B2B sellers question the efficiency of social media presence in achieving those goals. The main concern here is that brand's target audience might not be present on social media or they might not utilize it for professional purposes. As a result, the company's resources are spent and the goals are not achieved. This situation highlights the importance of prior research of a specific channel before establishing presence there. It would be valuable to examine the cases of B2B companies from different industries that have obtained successful results in using social media for enhancing their businesses.

While reviewing the relevant literature, the author of the thesis noted that there is not much prior research conducted on the topic of B2B digital marketing. Thus, there are many topics to cover in the future research. The author believes that it would be beneficial to gather insights into why some B2B companies utilize more digital marketing than others as well as examine how the type of the product, customer profile, and specific region of operations explain the different levels of digital marketing adoption. In addition, the B2B sector would benefit from studies reviewing the usage of different types of digital content in various industries and the challenges associated with utilizing the generated content to achieve marketing objectives.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Interview questions for case company's representatives

1. What are the main directions of current marketing activities in the company?
2. What are the established methods of attracting new customers?
3. Have you previously been involved in digital marketing planning? If so, how would you evaluate the achieved results?
4. What kinds of digital marketing activities are currently applied? How do you evaluate their effectiveness?
5. How would you describe your digital customer? Are there any specific customer characteristics that, in your opinion, should be taken into consideration when developing a digital strategy?
6. What business goals have you achieved so far using digital marketing?
7. How much time and budget is allocated for managing digital initiatives nowadays?
8. What are the main goals AMA would like to achieve with the help of digital marketing?
9. Do you think you could formulate the specific digital marketing objectives that the company aims to achieve in 2-3 years' time?
10. How do you see the image of the company and its brand values that should be communicated through digital marketing channels?
11. Have you considered the amount of professional and financial resources that the company is willing to invest into the development of digital marketing?

Appendix 2. Interview questions for B2B vendors

1. What are the main offline marketing activities in your business?

2. Is your company involved in digital marketing planning? Have you established a digital strategy for your business? If so, how would you evaluate the importance of undertaking a strategic approach towards digital marketing?

3. How long has your company been involved in digital marketing activities?

4. What are the main goals your company is trying to achieve with the help of digital marketing?

5. What are your current digital marketing activities aimed at international markets?

6. What types of digital platforms do you use and what is the purpose of each of them in the context of your business?

7. What types of content do you create for your digital platforms? Which types of content do you consider the most efficient in terms of customer engagement?

8. How does your digital marketing support the promotion of products to foreign markets? What digital tools do you consider to be the most efficient in terms of attracting new customers and establishing the brand internationally?

9. How do you usually attract new B2B clients from abroad and retain the existing ones?

10. How do you align your offline and online digital marketing activities?

11. Do you measure the effectiveness of your digital marketing? If so, what techniques for measuring performance do you use?

Appendix 3. Interview questions for B2B buyers

1. How do you usually look for a vendor to purchase a specific medical device?

2. How do you utilize Internet resources when looking for a vendor?

3. What are the essential features and content that you expect to find at a B2B seller's website?

4. Are you subscribed to AMA's newsletter? If so, do you read the company-generated emails? Have you ever acted upon receiving a marketing email from AMA?

5. When considering a vendor, do you review their social media profiles?

6. In your opinion, how the vendor's social media content could create a more favorable image of the B2B seller?

7. How would you evaluate the extent to which the B2B seller's online performance could influence your buying decision?

8. As AMA's established distributor, how would you rate AMA's existing digital marketing initiatives? What suggestions for improvements could you offer?

Appendix 4. Interview questions for digital marketing professionals

1. From your point of view, should every company wishing to promote their products online develop a digital marketing strategy? What are the benefits of following a digital strategy?

2. What are the main trends in B2B digital marketing nowadays?

3. How does the complexity of promoted products influence the approaches for marketing those products online?

4. From your professional experience, what are the most efficient channels for promoting B2B products to foreign markets using digital marketing tools?

5. What would be your general advice on managing those channels?

6. What is the role of company-generated content in B2B digital marketing context? What types of content are efficient in terms of establishing a brand image and increasing customer engagement?

7. What are the best blogging practices in B2B context?

8. How should B2B email marketing be managed to increase the conversion rate?

9. What role does social media play nowadays in the context of B2B digital marketing?

10. What would be your advice on using social media channels for B2B marketing (choice of platforms, generated content, frequency of updates, ways of increasing customer engagement)?

11. What would be your advice for improving AMA's search engine visibility, taking into consideration the limited technical skills of marketing specialists?

12. How should the effectiveness of digital marketing be measured?

Appendix 5. B2B Digital Marketing Plan for AMA Co., Ltd.

B2B Digital Marketing Plan

AMA Co., Ltd.

Proposed by Anastasiia Ponomarenko

April 2018

Table of Contents

Digital Marketing Objectives

1.   Increasing international sales

2.   Attracting new customers in foreign markets

3.   Enhancing brand awareness globally

4.   Promoting an image of trusted brand

Company Mission and Online Value Proposition

Mission Statement:

AMA's mission is to provide every clinic with an access to reliable diagnostics of high quality.

Online Value Proposition:

AMA provides innovative and cost-effective solutions for safe and reliable diagnosis of the stomach infection Helicobacter Pylori

Digital Marketing Mix

Corporate website

Company-generated content

Email marketing

Social media marketing

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

Target Audience Online

AMA's target audience online

Doctors:

Gastroenterologists
General Practitioners
Pediatricians

Purchasing managers of healthcare institutions (hospitals, clinics, medical centers)

Distributors of medical devices
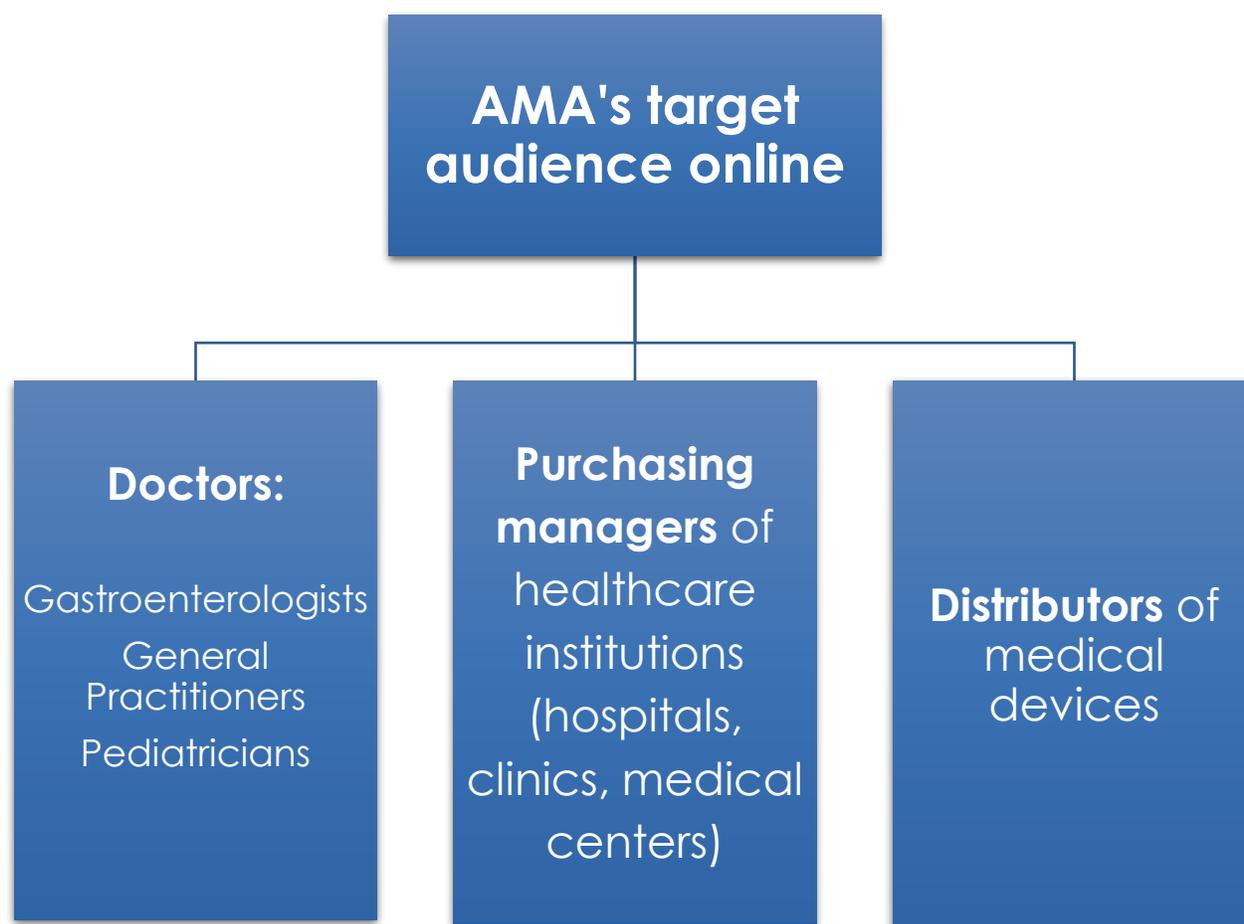
Corporate website

Tips for improving the existing website:

- Include an explicit online value proposition on the home page

- Provide a detailed information about the company and its principles of operations
    - strategic focus and objectives
    - management structure
    - sustainable operations
    - quality control

- Provide profound product descriptions and specifications

- Use comprehensive language aimed at wide audience

- Include a FAQs sections addressing customers' frequent product-related questions

- Post industry updates in the news section alongside with company-related news

- Ensure the website's compatibility with mobile devices

- Add clear icons for visiting company's social media

- Add an option for subscribing to corporate newsletter

- Update the website regularly

Company-generated content

Efficient digital content

- Applies customer-centric attitude
- Has an identified target audience
- Aimed at solving customer's problem
- Can be easily shared
- Useful, relevant, educational, valuable
- Does not use selling langauge
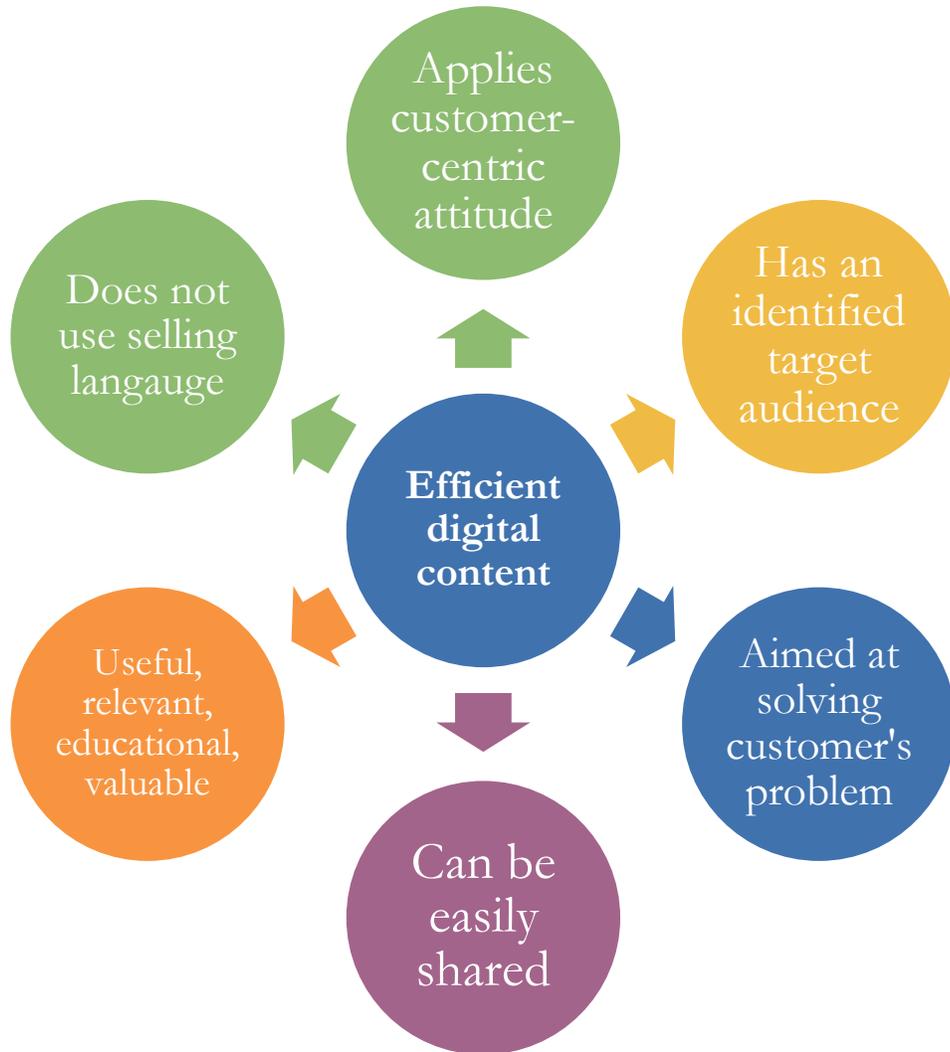
Company-generated content

Types of generated content

Type of content	Short description	Implementation ideas
E-books & whitepapers	Downloadable documents posted on website that provide thorough and informative content on specific relevant topic	• Studies on industry statistics, trends • Customers' stories of product experience • Thought leaders' insights into the diagnostic methods • Though leaders' opinions about the product • A study describing differences between diagnostic methods
Scientific research & studies	Academic articles providing the scientific justification of the devices' accuracy	• Invite the researchers to conduct a study that would utilize AMA's diagnostic devices
Blog posts	A blog section on corporate website that provides valuable information to visitors	Topics to discuss: • Prevention of gastroenterological diseases • Guidelines on healthy lifestyle • Patient's guide to prepare for the test conducted with AMA's devices • Insights from production department • Distributors' stories • Guest posts written by thought leaders
Videos	Can be shared on social media or website; utilize story-telling approach	• Video instructions for using the devices • Story of the development of diagnostic method • Company's story • Interview with experts who use the devices • How the quality of products is ensured?

Company-generated content

Efficient blogging techniques

Nature of communication	• Informal and conversational langauge, friendly tone • Aiming to facilitate conversation with customers
SEO opportunities	• Include keyword phrases for better online visibility
Content of the blog	• Appealing and intriguing headings • Usage of photos, videos and infographics • Posts should be introduced regularly • Easy and interesting to read
Topics for the blog	• Monitoring what is discussed on social media • Discussing trending industry topics • Inviting industry thought leaders for guest posts

Company-generated content

Monthly content planning schedule

Week	Type of content	Time	Topic	Content detail	Link	Notes
			January			
	Blog posts					
	Video posts					
	E-books, white papers, studies					

Social media marketing

Activity on Facebook page

Company-related updates:

- New product launches
- Company news and announcements
- Insider stories from R&D, manufacturing, experts, etc.
- Participation in the events
- Announcements of new content releases

Share and comment:

- Latest industry trends
- New market regulations
- Relevant statistics and studies
- Educational articles
- Partners' Facebook content

Media support:

- Every post should be supported by:
  - Company generated videos
  - Photos
  - Pictures
  - Infographics

Facilitating interaction with customers:

- Addressing customers by asking questions in posts
- Introducing posts that ask for users' opinion
- Answering to all comments
- Responding to all incoming messages and enquiries

Social media marketing

Components of an efficient Facebook account:

- Posts are introduced 2-3 times per week
- Photos and videos prevail over text material
- Detailed company information provided in "About" section
- Recognizable profile picture and engaging cover photo
- Call-to-action elements
- Measuring the audience involvement (likes, shares, comments)

Weekly content planning schedule

Week	Time	Content type	Topic	Content detail	Link	Multimedia used
Week 38						
Facebook posts						

@ Email marketing

The process of developing an email campaign

Establish the goals for the campaign:

- Lead generation, driving sales, brand awareness, customer engagement, etc.

- Goals have to align with overall marketing objectives

Choose the appropriate list of the recepients:

- Email campaign should use targeting for customers at different stages of buying cycle

- The target recipients are selected according to the main goal of the campaign

Choose the appropriate type of campaign:

- Conversion, follow-up, regular newsletter, house-list, event-triggered campaigns, etc.

Create your campaign:

- Personalized messages for different segments

- The content should be relevant and provide solutions for customers' problems

Measure the results:

- The key metrics to be analyzed include open rate, clickthrough rate, leads generated, unsubscribe rate

@ Email marketing

Checklist: Elements of an effective email

☐ Email content provides effective solutions for customers' problems

☐ Clear and compelling offer

☐ Clear and visible call-to-action

☐ Email communicates the benefits that customers will receive after clicking on the included links

☐ Email is consistent with other means of brand communications

☐ Attractive and engaging subject line

☐ Elements of personalization (identifying the recipients by their name and company, role within a company, etc.)

☐ Branded elements (company logo, email header, etc.)

☐ Well-thought layout, structure and style

☐ Creative use of color and images

☐ Email is optimized for mobile devices

@ Email marketing

Email planning and measuring template

	Week 38	
	(Email sent date)	**(Email sent date)**
Email topic		
Campaign		
Subject line		
Target audience		
Email list		
Personalization		
Media used		
Links included		
Email draft link		
Goal		
Total sent		
Emails Delivered		
Emails Opened		
Total Click-throughs		
Open rate		
Click-through rate		
Leads generated		

Search Engine Optimization

Steps for improving the natural search visibility

Conduct a keyword research

- ☐ Use specific tools, such as Google AdWords Keyword Planner, and your experience
- ☐ Survey customers to learn which words they use
- ☐ Use terms that are familiar to wider target audience

Assess current webpages

- ☐ Include the identified keyword phrases to the content of webpages
- ☐ The most effective places to include keywords are headers, sub headers, first and last paragraphs

Create efficient content

- ☐ For better SEO results, generated content should be of high quality, unique, valuable, and providing great user experience
- ☐ Ensure that the created content contains the keyword phrases

Ensure the presence on social media

- ☐ Relevant and unique content communicated through social media sites substantially increases the search result rankings

Search Engine Optimization

**Suggested keyword phrases identified via
Google AdWords Keyword Planner**

Helicobacter pylori test	H pylori breath test	Rapid urease test
Gastrointestinal diagnostic test	Best test for H pylori	Diagnosis of gastrointestinal infections

Optimizing inbound links

Creating and distributing valuable content that visitors would share on other websites

Adding sharing options for all generated content

Asking customers to share company's links on their websites

Encouraging customers to leave product reviews

Writing guest blog posts for relevant websites

Preparing press releases about company's achievements

Monitoring the competitors' inbound links

Providing cross-channel links on company's all digital marketing channels (e.g. from social media to website)