



Bachelor's Thesis

The International Marketing Programme 180 credits

Digital Branding for B2B: Building Trust and Differentiation

Thesis in Business Administration 15 credits

Halmstad 2025-05-20

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Glossary

B2B (Business-to-business): Refers to transactions or marketing strategies between two companies, rather than between a company and individual consumers.

B2C (Business-to-consumer): Describes business transactions or marketing strategies where companies sell products or services directly to individual consumers.

Digital Branding: The process of building a brand's presence and identity through digital channels such as websites, social media, and content platforms.

Trust Building: The intentional actions taken by a company to earn and maintain the confidence of customers or partners, often through transparency, consistency, and credibility.

Storytelling: A marketing approach that uses narrative techniques to communicate brand values, engage audiences emotionally, and differentiate the company.

Social Proof: The psychological phenomenon where people rely on the actions or opinions of others (e.g. reviews or testimonials) to make decisions, often used to build credibility.

Artificial Intelligence (AI): The simulation of human intelligence by machines, often used in marketing to automate tasks, analyze data, and personalize communication.

B2B Brand Differentiation: Strategies used by companies to stand out from competitors in the business-to-business market by highlighting unique capabilities, values, or services.

Content Marketing: The strategic creation and sharing of valuable, relevant content to attract and engage a target audience, often without direct promotion.

Account-Based Marketing (ABM): A targeted marketing strategy where efforts are tailored to specific high-value business accounts rather than broader segments.

CRM System (Customer Relationship Management): A digital system used by businesses to manage interactions with current and potential customers, helping to organize data, communication, and sales efforts.

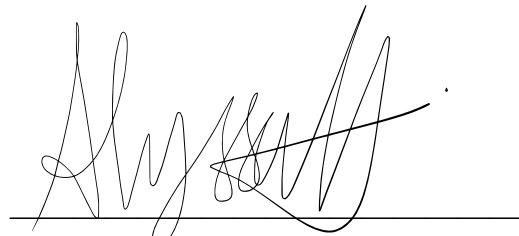
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, we would like to express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor, Svante Andersson, for his valuable feedback and guidance throughout the entire thesis process.

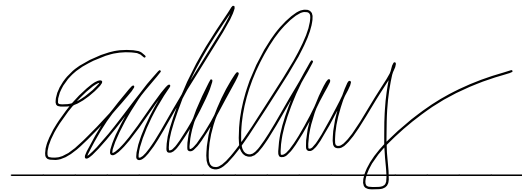
Furthermore, we would like to express our appreciation to all the respondents for participating in our interviews, which made this thesis possible. Thank you for taking the time and for your engagement.

Halmstad University

2025-05-20

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alyssa Howe', written over a horizontal line.

Alyssa Howe

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Emilia Ouseley', written over a horizontal line.

Emilia Ouseley

Abstract

Title	Digital Branding for B2B: Building Trust and Differentiation
Level	Bachelor's Thesis, 15 credits
Author	Alyssa Howe & Emilia Ouseley
School	Halmstad University
Supervisor	Svante Andersson
Examiner	Olga Rauhut Kompaniets
Period	Spring 2025

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how B2B companies use digital channels to build trust and demonstrate expertise in their marketing communication.

Methodology: The study follows a qualitative approach based on six semi-structured interviews with marketing professionals from different B2B industries. The data was analyzed thematically.

Theoretical Frameworks: The analysis is guided by four key theories: Source Credibility Theory, Trust Transfer Theory, Relationship Marketing Theory, and Signaling Theory, which together provide a lens for understanding trust building in digital B2B environments. Concepts like Digital Branding, Digital Marketing and Channels, Thought Leadership and Brand Differentiation in B2B are also central in this study.

Empirical Data: Findings show that companies combine educational content, transparency, and community engagement to build trust. The use of digital platforms supports, but does not replace, personal relationships. Technical proof and social validation are key signals of expertise.

Discussion and Conclusion: The study contributes to existing theory by highlighting the importance of perceived credibility over actual expertise, and the contextual nature of signaling strategies. It also suggests that hybrid digital-human models are essential in modern B2B branding.

Keywords: Trust, expertise, B2B marketing, brand differentiation, digital channels, digital branding, thought leadership, source credibility, social proof, artificial intelligence (AI).

Sammanfattning

Titel	Digitalt varumärkesbyggande för B2B: Skapa förtroende och differentiering
Nivå	Kandidatuppsats, 15 hp
Författare	Alyssa Howe & Emilia Ouseley
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Termin	VT 2025

Syfte: Syftet med denna studie är att undersöka hur B2B-företag använder digitala kanaler för att bygga förtroende och visa sin expertis i marknadskommunikation.

Metod: Studien har en kvalitativ ansats och baseras på sex semistrukturerade intervjuer med marknadsansvariga från olika B2B-branscher. Den insamlade datan har analyserats tematiskt.

Teoretiska ramar: Analysen vägleds av fyra centrala teorier: Source Credibility Theory, Trust Transfer Theory, Relationship Marketing Theory och Signaling Theory. Dessa används för att förstå hur förtroende byggs i digitala B2B-miljöer. Begrepp som digitalt varumärkesbyggande, digital marknadsföring och kanaler, thought leadership och varumärkesdifferentiering är även centrala i studien.

Empiri: Resultaten visar att företag kombinerar utbildande innehåll, transperens och engagemang i sina nätverk för att skapa förtroende. Digitala plattformar fungerar som stöd, men ersätter inte personliga relationer. Teknisk bevisning och social proof är viktiga signaler för expertis.

Diskussion och slutsats: Studien bidrar till existerande teori genom att belysa vikten av upplevd trovärdighet snarare än faktisk expertis, samt att signalstrategier är kontextberoende. Studien visar att även hybrida modeller, där det digitala kombineras med mänsklig kontakt, är avgörande för B2B-varumärkesbyggande idag.

Nyckelord: Förtroende, expertis, B2B-marknadsföring, varumärkesdifferentiering, digitala kanaler, digitalt varumärkesbyggande, thought leadership, source credibility, social proof, artificiell intelligens (AI).

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

While digital marketing is now widely embraced in B2B, this was not always the case. Historically, many B2B firms believed digital channels were better suited to B2C contexts, questioning their effectiveness in high-value, relationship-driven sales (Lacka & Chong, 2016). This hesitation may be attributed to the norm of confidentiality in business relationships, as well as concerns that excessive openness could undermine a firm's competitive advantage (Karjaluo et al., 2015). Nevertheless, successful implementations of digital marketing by B2B companies such as Cisco and IBM have contributed to a shift in perspective, demonstrating that digital strategies can effectively support complex decision-making processes and relationship-focused sales environments (Venkatesh et al., 2019). As a result, more organizations are acknowledging the role of digital tools in improving the flow of information and building trust in customer relationships (Krishna & Singh, 2018).

B2B companies are increasingly expected to present a trustworthy and knowledgeable presence online. Unlike B2C markets, where emotional appeal and impulse purchases can drive decisions, B2B transactions are typically longer, more rational and involve multiple stakeholders. As part of this extended process, more than 70% of B2B buyers begin their research online, evaluating potential partners before initiating contact with sales representatives (Schwartz & Kim, 2012, as cited in Marvasti et al., 2021). As a result, a company's digital presence often serves as both the first impression and an ongoing point of reference throughout the buying journey. A strong digital presence not only signals credibility and operational stability but also supports lead generation, enables the self-directed research that buyers prefer, and sets expectations for professionalism, expertise, and reliability (Edelman & LinkedIn, 2021).

Building a strong B2B brand presents a unique set of challenges compared to consumer markets. Purchases are typically high-value, long-term, and involve several stakeholders with varying priorities. Consequently, B2B buyers are often cautious and rely on clear, consistent signals of trust and expertise throughout the decision-making process. Unlike emotional appeals common in B2C marketing, B2B branding must demonstrate rational value and credibility. This makes trust and perceived competence critical brand assets. Within a digital context, companies must use content strategically to build authority, demonstrate expertise, and reassure potential clients of their ability to deliver (Leek & Christodoulides, 2011).

In this regard, digital channels play a role in how B2B companies build and communicate their brand. These platforms have evolved beyond simple promotion and are now used to educate, engage and build long-term relationships with potential clients. A company's website often serves as the main hub for detailed product information, case studies, and brand messaging. LinkedIn, on the other hand, is recognized as a platform for thought leadership,

where firms can showcase their expertise through articles, industry insights and direct engagement with professionals (Edelmann & LinkedIn, 2021). Email marketing and newsletters support ongoing communication and trust-building, while content formats like whitepapers and blogs allow companies to provide value, and position themselves as reliable experts in their field.

1.2 Problem Discussion

While digital marketing is widely recognized in B2B-buyers purchase process and companies are expected to have a strong digital presence, challenges remain to strategically use digital channels for brand building (Hofacker et al., 2020). B2B transactions are complex, involve multiple stakeholders and rely heavily on rational considerations, trust, credibility and expertise. This places special demands on digital communication (Schwartz & Kim, 2012, as cited in Marvasti et al., 2021). As a result, traditional branding approaches do not always translate effectively into digital formats. Companies struggle to develop clear and coherent digital brand strategies.

Given that most research on digital marketing and branding has focused on B2C markets, there is limited understanding and research on how B2B companies specifically leverage digitalization to achieve product-related goals such as building trust, demonstrating expertise and creating differentiation in a B2B context (e.g., Järvinen et al., 2015).

Digitalization is not static, the landscape is rapidly changing with new technologies. The emergence and fast development of tools based on Artificial Intelligence (AI) add another layer of complexity. AI has the potential to influence everything from content creation and personalization to search behavior and digital marketing effectiveness. At the same time, it raises new questions and challenges regarding how to build trust with chatbots and ensure transparency in AI-generated content. It also raises concerns on how to maintain brand differentiation in a landscape saturated with similar AI-generated content, and how to navigate risks with emerging, immature technologies (Alshurideh et al., 2023).

Understanding how B2B companies navigate this complex and rapidly changing digital landscape, especially in light of emerging technologies like AI, is becoming increasingly relevant. Lack of research and frameworks increases difficulty for marketers within B2B to identify effective strategies and best practices for digital branding in this specific context (Pandey et al., 2020).

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze how B2B companies use digital channels to build strong, differentiated brands that foster trust and demonstrate expertise. By gathering insights from marketing professionals across different industries and regions. The study aims to identify patterns, strategies, and challenges in digital branding within a B2B context.

1.4 Research Questions

This thesis explores following questions:

- How do B2B companies use digital channels to build trust and demonstrate expertise in their marketing communications?
- What strategies do B2B companies use to differentiate their brand through digital marketing?
- What internal and external factors influence the strategic use of digital channels in B2B branding?

1.5 Delimitations

This study is based on qualitative interviews with six respondents working in B2B marketing, including five in-house professionals and one consultant. The study focuses on how digital channels and digital content are used to build trust, demonstrate expertise, and create brand differentiation within a B2B context. The research does not include technical evaluations of digital tools or detailed analysis of geographical differences. While aspects of the B2B customer journey are discussed, the study does not map each specific step in the journey or the decision-making process. The analysis explores common themes across industries rather than industry-specific strategies.

2. Theoretical Perspectives

2.1 Concepts

2.1.1 Digital Marketing and Branding in B2B

Prior research highlights that branding in B2B contexts differs significantly from B2C. While B2C branding often appeals to emotions and lifestyle, B2B branding centers around demonstrating expertise, credibility, and long-term value (Denga et al., 2023). In digital environments, B2B companies use branding to reduce risk, signal professionalism, and strengthen trust in complex decision-making processes (Edelman & LinkedIn, 2021). Digital marketing serves as a key driver in this branding process by enabling companies to communicate consistently across platforms such as websites, newsletters, social media, webinars, and blogs. Content marketing is especially prominent in B2B, where the focus is on offering educational and problem-solving content rather than direct promotion (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2015). This approach positions the company as a helpful and knowledgeable partner rather than a seller, which supports relationship building and credibility.

Moreover, digital tools like SEO, email marketing, and marketing automation enhance brand communication by allowing for personalization based on user behavior and data insights (Saura et al., 2021). However, research suggests that merely adopting digital channels does not guarantee increased customer loyalty. Instead, successful B2B marketing depends on the ability to create meaningful, insight-driven content rooted in customer needs and challenges (Bakhtieva & Oeconomia, 2017). Entertainment-driven content, while common in B2C, may be seen as irrelevant or distracting in B2B settings. Overall, digital marketing and branding are interconnected in the B2B sector. Together, they contribute to building a coherent and differentiated brand identity that signals reliability, competence, and long-term value to potential buyers.

2.1.2 Thought Leadership and Trust-Building

In B2B markets, where purchasing decisions are often complex, high-stakes, and relationship-driven, trust plays a critical role in influencing buyer behavior. One strategy that has gained prominence for building trust in digital environments is thought leadership. Thought leadership involves sharing expertise-driven, insightful content to position a company, or individual, as an authority within a specific field (Barry & Gironda, 2019). Prior research suggests that thought leadership is not only about showcasing knowledge but also about demonstrating relevance and foresight. Effective thought leadership content addresses customer pain points, aligns with their strategic goals, and offers actionable insight, which helps foster credibility and long-term engagement (Neuhaus et al., 2022). This makes it particularly powerful in the B2B context, where buyers often seek partners who understand their industry and can offer tailored expertise.

Thought leadership also contributes to brand credibility and differentiation by enabling firms to define their unique perspective and voice in the market (Magno & Cassia, 2020). When consistently communicated through digital channels such as blogs, whitepapers, LinkedIn, and webinars, this form of content can influence key decision-makers early in the buying journey. In doing so, it supports both relationship marketing and brand-building efforts. Ultimately, thought leadership functions as both a trust-building mechanism and a brand positioning strategy in B2B digital marketing. Its success depends not only on the quality of insights provided but also on the company's ability to deliver them in a way that resonates with the target audience's needs and challenges.

2.1.3 Brand Building and Differentiation in B2B

Brand building in B2B markets goes beyond creating recognition, it plays a strategic role in establishing credibility, trust, and perceived value among professional buyers. Unlike B2C, where emotional connection often drives brand loyalty, B2B branding focuses on rational attributes such as expertise, problem-solving ability, and long-term reliability (Denga et al., 2023). Differentiation is a central objective of B2B branding. It involves clearly communicating a company's value proposition in ways that resonate with the target audiences (Bailetti et al., 2020). Prior research indicates that differentiation in B2B is often achieved through demonstrating technical excellence, industry-specific knowledge, or superior service offerings rather than through aesthetic or emotional appeal (Sharp & Dawes, 2001). Digital platforms provide an effective arena for expressing these unique qualities through tailored content, customer case studies, and performance data.

Trust is also linked to successful differentiation. Brands that are perceived as credible and knowledgeable are more likely to be considered as preferred partners in B2B transactions. Digital branding activities, such as consistent messaging across touchpoints, publishing expert content, and engaging in transparent communication, help reinforce these perceptions (Edelman & LinkedIn). Furthermore, the combination of thought leadership and customer-focused digital marketing enhances brand differentiation by reinforcing the brand's authority in a specific niche. Rather than competing solely on product features or price, companies that invest in digital branding are better positioned

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

2.2.1 Source of Credibility Theory

The source of credibility theory is about why we choose to trust certain people, companies or messages more than others. The theory was originally developed by Carl I. Hovland and Walter Weiss at Yale University in the 1950s. Their research showed that the credibility of a communicator is strongly influenced by how the recipient interprets and accepts a message. The theory is about the fact that if a source is perceived as reliable and knowledgeable, it has a better opportunity to influence the recipients attitudes and behaviors than a less credible source. The study highlights trustworthiness as important factors, and that trustworthiness was

categorized as high credibility and low credibility based on perceived trustworthiness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

Wilson & Baack, (2023), explored how credibility affects B2B communication and found that companies that are perceived as knowledgeable and trustworthy can build stronger relationships with business partners. The study states that credibility is not only a theoretical construct, but also a concrete factor in business contexts. In B2B contexts, the study mentions two dimensions, expertise and trustworthiness, where expertise is the perceived level of competency and capability, and trustworthiness is the source's ability to be honest and trusted. Through an online experiment with executives, they found that source credibility had a stronger effect on message persuasiveness than both argument quality and involvement in tested scenarios. Credibility was also found to have a big impact on attitudes towards promoted products, in this case country, and there was intention to find additional information, which indicates that both expertise and trustworthiness play an important role in forming attitudes and behavioral responses. In a B2B context, this suggests that credibility can affect how messages are interpreted.

2.2.2 Trust Transfer Theory

Trust transfer theory explains how trust can be transferred from a trusted source to a new target, provided there is a clear association between the two. This transfer of trust takes place through two processes. One is a cognitive process, which is based on the individual's knowledge of the relationships between the source and the target, for example a hyperlink from a trusted website. Another one is the communicative process, where trust is influenced by social interaction and communication, such as word-of-mouth recommendations. Lie et al. (2018) applies trust transfer theory in the context of social media brand communities (SMBCs), brand communities created by companies using social media platforms. The study explores how trust in a brand can be developed through trust transferred from other parties within the community.

A key factor identified in the study is consumer engagement, defined as a psychological state involving cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors. It shows the extent and quality of an individual's interactions within the brand community, it could be with peers, company representatives or other relevant stakeholders. High engagement encourages stronger connections to trusted actors, which increases the exposure to brand related communications and strengthens trust in a brand (Liu et al., 2018). Although the study is based in a B2C context, trust transfers are just as relevant in B2B settings, where trust comes through expertise, interactions and community engagement.

2.2.3 Relationship Marketing Theory

Relationship marketing theory is a strategy that focuses on creating and strengthening long-term relationships and to deliver value to customers, which will improve the relationship and increase the customer retention, instead of striving for single sales alone. The theory is based on key factors such as customer loyalty, trust and commitment. By understanding the

customer's needs, communicating consistently and offering specific solutions, customers' needs are met promptly, significantly boosting satisfaction and deepening customer relationships. This strengthens the relationship between companies and customers, which in turn leads to increased loyalty, repeated purchases and positive word-of-mouth. Within global B2B branding, relationship marketing is a focus area of knowledge. The study also highlights how relationships develop in different phases, which requires adopted strategies from companies. Digital platforms like social media have been given a key role in enabling dialogue, exchange and deepening business relationships (Marvi et al., 2024). Hofacker et al. (2020) highlights the potential of digital communication within innovation networks. The study indicates that the low cost of digital communication is expected to increase interactions between various sources of knowledge, which in turn supports faster innovation within these networks.

Ha (2020) examines how trust affects company performance depending on the closeness of the relationship. The study conveys that trust has a strong positive impact at the beginning of a relationship but that the effect decreases over time. However, previous experiences of trust and performance can continue to influence future relationships, so-called temporal and carryover effects. This highlights that strong B2B relationships, with the connection of trust and performance, are dynamic rather than static and require constant care and adaptation.

2.2.4 Signaling Theory

Signaling theory explains how individuals and organizations send signals to communicate qualities and competencies that are not directly observable. The theory was developed by Michael Spence in 1973 and it focuses on how actors use signals to reduce information asymmetry (Spence, 1973). In business contexts, particularly in B2B markets, signaling is used to build credibility and demonstrate competence and reliability. Companies send signals in different ways, such as through customers preferences that show as proof of their capabilities and experience. Customer references are important in marketing strategies as existing customers share their experiences with potential buyers (Boyd et al., 2023).

There are different design decisions that influence signaling, especially regarding reference depth (richness of information) and reference breadth (number of customers). Reference depth can be conveyed through formats like written case studies, video content or face-to-face presentations. Customer references also act as credible quality signals. To further strengthen trust, companies can demonstrate authenticity by showcasing their customer's name and customer testimonials that are relevant (signal fit) to the target group. Signal fit is about how well the signal corresponds with the wanted quality, which is especially important in B2B due to being able to adapt. B2B companies are encouraged to create engaging and shareable content in appropriate formats. Quality and relevance are more important when it comes to firm value and purchase intentions since it has a positive effect, meanwhile quantity has a negative effect (Boyd et al, 2023).

2.3 Integration of Theories and Research Focus

The study is based on four theories, which provide a foundation for understanding how digital branding, trust building and demonstrating expertise function in a B2B context. Source of Credibility Theory provides the foundation by emphasizing that customers are more likely to be influenced by sources they perceive as both trustworthy and competent (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Wilson & Baack, 2023). However, credibility is rarely established alone. Trust Transfer Theory complements this by showing how credibility can be strengthened when it is associated with already trusted entities. For instance, through partnerships, customer testimonials, or respected platforms (Lie et al., 2018). In digital branding, where direct interactions are limited, this transfer of trust becomes particularly important. Once credibility and trust have been initiated, Relationship Marketing Theory explains how these elements are deepened and sustained over time. Rather than one-off interactions, B2B branding often relies on building long-term relationships with stakeholders through consistent, value-driven communication. In digital contexts, this includes email marketing, social media engagement, and educational content that supports ongoing connection (Marvi et al., 2024; Hofacker et al., 2020; Ha, 2020).

Signaling Theory then brings all of these components into action by explaining how companies can reduce uncertainty and reinforce their positioning through intentional signals. Such as thought leadership content, client logos, or certifications, which serve to confirm both expertise and reliability (Spence, 1973; Boyd et al., 2023). These signals work together with credibility, trust transfer, and relationship-building to make the brand visible, persuasive and differentiated. Together, these theories illustrate that trust and differentiation in B2B are not the result of a single action or channel, but rather of an integrated process shaped by how companies are perceived, how they connect with credible sources, how they build and maintain relationships, and how they communicate strategic signals to their audience.

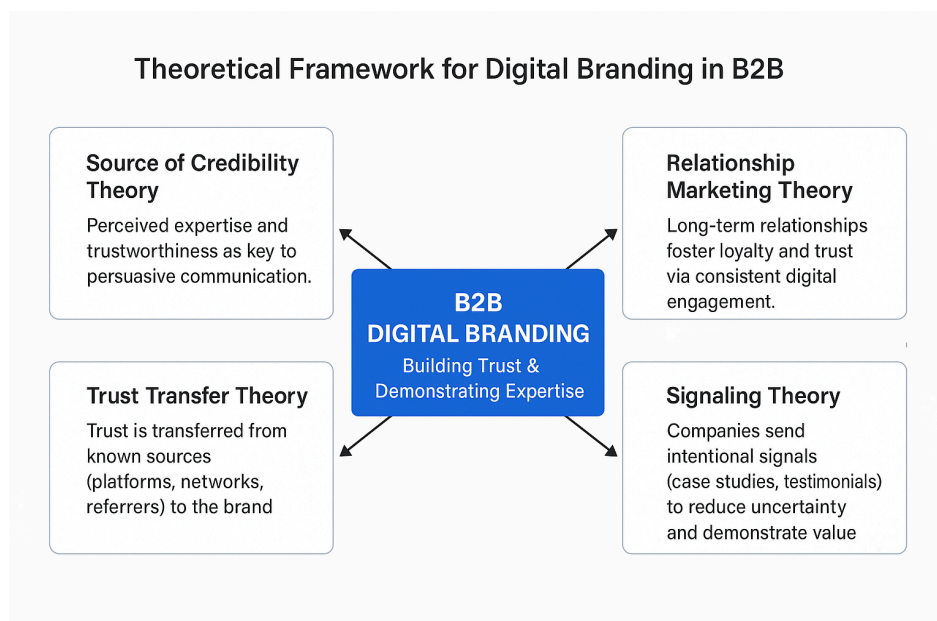


Figure 1: *The model illustrates how the theories are connected to the research focus and support the interpretation of the empirical finding.*

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative and exploratory research design to explore how B2B companies use digital channels to build trust and demonstrate expertise. An exploratory design is suitable when there is limited existing research, and the goal is to gain new insights and identify patterns in professional experiences (Stebbins, 2001). A qualitative approach was chosen as it enables deeper understanding of perceptions, strategies and real-world practices, rather than measuring variables statistically (Adams, 2015).

The research process began with a literature review to identify relevant theories and concepts. Based on this, a semi-structured interview guide was created to allow flexibility during interviews while ensuring that core topics were covered. This format makes it possible to compare responses while still capturing the respondents' unique perspectives. The design was considered appropriate because of the complexity of the topic and the need to understand how communication strategies are applied in different B2B settings.

3.2 Literature Approach

The theoretical foundation of this study is based on peer-reviewed academic articles and industry reports, focused on digital marketing and B2B communication. Articles were found using Google Scholar, Google, Halmstad University's database OneSearch, Emerald, JSTOR and Scencedirect. Articles were reviewed and selected based on their relevance to the research questions and their contribution to the topic.

Keywords: Digital branding B2B, digital marketing B2B, digital marketing, B2B industry digital branding, digital channels, trust, expertise, differentiation, digital tools, B2B, marketing theory, credibility.

3.3 Selection of Respondents

Six participants were selected based on their professional experience with B2B marketing and digital branding. The respondents are based in Sweden, Singapore, and the Netherlands. The selection aimed to capture a variety of perspectives, including five in-house marketing professionals, and one consultant with experience from large B2B firms across multiple industries. The same semi-structured guide (Appendix A) was used for all interviews, with follow-up questions adapted to the respondent's industry context. The questions were based on theoretical perspectives and relevant peer-reviewed literature discussed in this thesis. Two participants reported working closely with AI-driven content production, which was considered valuable given the increasing relevance of AI in marketing planning and content creation (Mikalef et al., 2023). This thematic difference is intentionally included and reflected upon in the analysis.

3.4 Data Collection

The empirical part of this study consists of six qualitative interviews with professionals working within the B2B sector. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via online video calls on Teams. A semi-structured interview method was used because it offers flexibility, allowing the interviewer to ask follow-up questions based on the respondent's answers while ensuring that key topics are covered (Adams, 2015). Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the respondents' consent and subsequently transcribed via Teams to ensure an accurate representation of their responses.

The interview guide was constructed based on the literature review, the theoretical frameworks, and key concepts identified in previous research. The questions were designed to reflect the study's focus areas, such as digital channels, trust building, brand differentiation and digital tools. This structure allowed for consistency across interviews, while still allowing room for elaboration and clarification when needed (Ruslin et al., 2022).

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. First, the material was read carefully to gain an overall understanding. Then, key themes related to the research questions, such as the role of digital channels, trust-building strategies, use of content marketing, and challenges, were identified and coded. Patterns across interviews were compared and organized into broader categories that formed the basis for the analysis. Thematic analysis was considered appropriate as it provides a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns in qualitative data, while also allowing the researcher to stay close to the participants own words and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.6 Credibility

To ensure the credibility of the study, several steps were taken during the data collection and analysis process. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to freely express their views while still focusing on the study's main themes. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed to ensure an accurate and detailed representation of their responses. The data was analyzed using a thematic approach, which made it possible to identify recurring patterns and perspectives grounded in the empirical material. By staying close to the respondent's wording and examples, the analysis aimed to reflect their experiences faithfully. These strategies are in line with Lincoln & Guba's (1985) criteria for credibility in qualitative research, which highlights the importance of researcher transparency, contextual depth, and staying close to participants' perspectives to ensure trustworthiness.

However, the study is based on a small sample size of six respondents, all of whom have professional experience in B2B marketing, including five in-house marketers and one consultant. While the insights are rich and varied, the limited number of participants and diversity of industry context mean that the results should be interpreted with caution. The

findings are not intended to be representative of the entire B2B sector, rather to provide exploratory insights into how digital branding, trust and differentiation are approached in some cases.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study before the interviews and gave their verbal consent to participate. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were made aware that they had the right to withdraw at any time without providing reason. The interviews were recorded with the participants permission and transcribed for analysis. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, no names, company names, or directly identifying information are included in the thesis. The collected data was securely stored and only accessible to the authors. The ethical considerations in this study follow established ethical guidelines for business research, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the responsible handling of data (Saunders et al., 2023).

4. Empirical Data

Respondent	Role	Company	Years within the marketing industry	Country/Region of practice
A	Brand Manager	Distributor of professional haircare products	4	Sweden
B	Marketing Director	Nanotechnology solutions provider specializing in advanced materials and nano-engineering	10	Singapore
C	Consultant marketer	Consultant supporting large companies across various sectors	16	Sweden & UK
D	Strategic Marketing Director	Industrial metal 3D printing systems provider	3	Netherlands
E	CEO & Part-owner in other marketing firms	AI-based copywriting company	14	Sweden
F	General Manager & Founder	General Manager at a large creative agency in Asia, specializing in AI-driven content creation	18	Asia

Table 1: *Short description of the study's respondents.*

4.1 Respondent A

4.1.1 Organisation and Target Group

Respondent A works as a Brand Manager at the largest distributor of professional haircare in Northern Europe. They have roughly 1500 active customers in Sweden, mainly hairdressers. The company works towards resellers that then sell to the final consumer, they have no direct relationship to consumers. The professional haircare distributor has a large portfolio that

targets hairdressers of all ages. They represent 15 haircare brands, including Olaplex, Moroccan Oil, Björk and Lanza. Traditionally, the company has worked with in-person sales where salespeople visit salons, however in the last few years it has become more digitalized. Their goal is to encourage more hairdressers to shop online.

4.1.2 Digital Channels and Strategy

The haircare company primarily uses their webstore and instagram for digital communication. The online store is an ongoing project and a large digital investment. The purpose of the online store is to make hairdressers shop themselves. The company has invested more into digital marketing in the past three years and works with both paid and organic marketing. According to Respondent A, they use instagram to build a sense of community with their customers. They also use newsletters as an effective way of communicating. The digitalization has come with a challenge to get hairdressers to shop online. Many of their customers are used to the physical contact with the salespeople and feel a sense of security from purchasing from a human being to make sure their order is correct. The haircare company has to assure their customers that they have the opportunity to shop themselves, with guidance from sellers or knowledgeable staff. Respondent A shared that getting their customers into the digital world and discovering online shopping in a B2B context has been a challenge.

4.1.3 Building Trust Digitally

According to Respondent A, the haircare company works with instilling trust by combining digital and in-person meetings. On instagram the company creates value for the hairdressers by having competitions, to ensure that their customers feel as though they are getting something in return for purchasing haircare from them. They use educating language in their communication towards hairdressers and resellers, and attempt to act as their customers' friend.

“We’re a company that likes to include a personal touch, so it’s a lot about us being a friend to them.”

The company believes in the digital presence when building trust, where they share the hairdressers results on instagram to enhance their competence and build a community. In-person events are combined with digital marketing, where participants are encouraged to tag the company to spread what they’re doing. The goal is to show that the distributor is more than just products. They measure the outcomes of their initiatives in different ways. Some examples are checking analytics on social media, new leads from digital campaigns or new customers in their online store. For the newsletter they analyze which newsletters the recipients interacted with most and how many who opened them. Maintained customers are also seen as a measurement of trust. Respondent A spoke of potentially adding a blog to the website.

4.1.4 Differentiation and Expertise

Respondent A states that in order to differentiate themselves in the competitive B2B environment, they have to create value for their customers. The hair care company offers gifts and discounts to their customers. Another value proposition is quick customer service and availability, having personnel on site that customers can contact directly. The respondent means that their established presence, large events and strong brands contribute to their differentiation compared to other haircare distributors. The respondent shares that the company educates their salespeople about the portfolio of many brands and products, and their properties. Before campaigns and launches the sales people receive specific information that they pass on to the salons. The salespeople are the company's ambassadors, meeting customers in person to educate them on their product portfolio and how to use their online store. This exchange of knowledge is key to ensure that customers feel that they need to buy certain products. They also offer digital courses and workshops.

4.1.5 Internal Collaboration

Respondent A emphasizes that collaboration between marketing, sales and customer service is very close. The hair care company's marketing team brings forth campaigns approximately once a month in close collaboration with sales managers to ensure that the offers are in demand and will be appreciated. They also work closely with customer service for everyone to be informed on questions that can come up. Communications are synchronized between all departments according to the respondent.

4.1.6 Customer Journey and Purchasing Process

Respondent A shares that once a customer is familiar with the company brand, it can quickly lead to an initial purchase to test a product. Much of the focus then shifts to retaining the customer. Larger investments in haircolour brands require more educating and imply a longer decision-making process. Following up is important in these cases. Company A's sales people are key in the customer journey, as they build personal relationships with customers.

4.1.7 Future Digital Trends

Respondent A believes that AI is a digital trend that will affect B2B-branding the most going forward. Company A has a chatbot on their webstore for customers that would like answers to their questions. The respondent sees AI as a tool that can be used to produce large amounts of material. She also shared that viral products and micro trends shift quickly, and shared an example of Redken via Sabrina Carpenter. A part of the company's strategy is to pick up on these trends and act fast, if they carry products that suit the trend.

4.2 Respondent B

4.2.1 Organisation and Target Group

Respondent B is a marketing director at a Singapore based nanotechnology solutions provider specializing in advanced materials and nano-engineering. The company's main customers are

large B2B companies, including those in electronics and automotive industries, seeking deep tech solutions. The respondent describes the role as strategy development and the integration of marketing management activities. This includes responsibilities such as marketing analytics, content production, digital marketing, and demand generation, referred to as a full spectrum, end-to-end in-market management. The marketing team consists of four people, including the respondent, and the company has over 500 customers globally.

4.2.2 Digital Channels and Strategy

Respondent B shared that the main purpose of implementing digital marketing automation and related tools is to support the company's scale-up efforts in a sustainable manner. In this context, sustainability refers to generating demand organically without relying on large marketing budgets. The aim is to generate demand, and to attract high-quality leads that are well-matched to the company's offerings and manageable for the sales team. Respondent B lists the company's key digital channels and strategic methods as including the website, Electronic Direct Mail (EDM), backlinks, and emerging tools based on generative AI.

The website is described as a central channel, though currently considered basic, with noted potential for improvement. It is primarily used to build long-term SEO traction. EDM, in contrast, serves as a cost-efficient tool for more immediate lead generation. Through this method, emails are proactively sent to contacts within specific target groups. Content is adapted based on the recipient's background or industry, with the goal of making the subject line and topic relevant enough to encourage engagement. The strategy is to convert cold leads into warm leads and eventually into qualified leads.

Backlinks are described by Respondent B as a tactical tool for increasing visibility through external platforms. This is not always visible to end customers but contributes to organic reach. The respondent notes that backlinks from reputable external sources, such as event organizers or industry associations, can increase exposure by reaching audiences who might not otherwise discover the company. This, in turn, can contribute to more followers, increased traffic, and greater overall traction.

Finally, the respondent notes that the greatest limitation when choosing digital channels strategically is the available budget. This is described as a key factor influencing both the scope and timing of digital initiatives.

4.2.3 Building Trust Digitally

Due to confidentiality agreements with customers, the company faces limitations in using traditional trust-building tools such as customer cases or testimonials. This presents a challenge in using storytelling and social proof, which are otherwise common in B2B branding strategies.

When discussing how trust is built through digital channels, Respondent B emphasizes the importance of understanding the customer, including their profile. Content is adapted based

on the recipient's industry and specific needs. Respondent B describes how trends are continuously analyzed to ensure that the material produced is relevant and timely. In email marketing, the respondent highlights that the subject line plays a role in whether the email is opened, and that the content must be concise and targeted. Respondent B also points out that the different personas, ranging from C-level executives to engineers, require different approaches as their motivations and KPIs differ. According to the respondent, C-level executives are generally focused on profitability and business expansion, while technical engineers are primarily concerned with solving specific technical problems. The tone and structure of the messaging must be adjusted accordingly. The respondent stresses that personalization goes beyond simply using the recipient's name, it involves clearly presenting the value and relevance of the proposed solution.

To assess whether digital efforts contribute to building trust, Respondent B refers to specific performance indicators. In email marketing, the team monitors opened emails over time and tracks the number of new opens or first-time recipients. On the company's website, metrics such as new unique visitors and engagement time via Google Analytics, are used to evaluate whether the content captures or maintains interest. According to the respondent, these indicators provide insight into whether the content is relevant and engaging. Respondent B also notes the use of tools that can identify which companies have visited the website, which is considered a positive outcome when such companies fall within the target audience.

4.2.4 Differentiation and Expertise

Respondent B describes brand differentiation in a B2B context as particularly challenging, especially compared to B2C environments. According to the respondent, B2C brands often operate in broader markets where creativity and emotional appeal play a larger role. In contrast, B2B differentiation is more complex, as it depends heavily on the nature of the offering and its relevance to specific business needs. In the case of the nanotechnology solutions provider, which operates within deep-tech and advanced nanotechnology solutions, the respondent explains that differentiation efforts are focused on communicating the value of highly specialized solutions to technical stakeholders such as engineers. Due to the tailored and account-specific nature of the company's offerings, the respondent emphasizes the use of a hybrid strategy that includes account-based marketing (ABM). This approach is used to focus efforts on specific market segments or individual accounts, rather than broad-based campaigns.

Respondent B explains that the company relies on its technological credentials, such as scientific validation, patents, and proven R&D capabilities, to communicate expertise and build brand credibility.

“The difficulty is that we can't name any of the customers which blocks one of our avenues to promote. Then it all boils down to like how how much credentials your solution has.”

4.2.5 Internal Collaboration

Respondent B describes internal collaboration between the marketing department and other departments based on experiences within the organization. According to the respondent, most internal stakeholders at the company likely have a limited understanding of digital marketing, typically restricted to basic elements such as the website, social media, and perhaps familiarity with SEO or advertising on platforms like Google and LinkedIn. Respondent B emphasizes that digital marketing extends far beyond these basics, describing it as a field that involves both science and strategy.

The respondent sees the marketing team's role as one of informing and enabling other departments to leverage digital tools and channels. Several examples are provided to illustrate how digital capabilities are used to support internal collaboration. For instance, the marketing team assists the sales department in reaching a wider audience more effectively.

4.2.6 Customer Journey and Purchasing Process

Respondent B describes the customer journey at the nanotechnology solutions provider as long and complex, primarily due to the technical nature of the business and the qualification requirements involved. According to the respondent, the process from initial customer contact to the issuance of a purchase order typically takes more than a year. This extended timeline is attributed to the need for extensive testing and validation on both the company's side and the client's side before the customer can integrate the solution into a final product and bring it to market. Respondent B characterizes this as a long life cycle, which reflects the current customer journey within the company's business environment.

4.2.7 Future Digital Trends

Respondent B identifies changes in user search behavior as a digital trend going forward. While traditional methods such as word-of-mouth and Google searches still play a central role, the respondent observes a shift toward the use of generative AI tools for quicker and more seamless access to solutions. He describes this behavior as driven by users' desire for immediate answers, stating that a trend to adapt to will be how quick your solution can surface them. Generative AI is described as a central force shaping the future of digital marketing. Respondent B notes that tools such as Lexity, ChatGPT, and Gemini are building their own databases, which may change the foundation of search engine optimization. In this evolving landscape, a key challenge will be how company-specific information can be fed into these AI-driven platforms in a reliable and accurate way. This development is linked to the concept of programmatic SEO, where AI is used as a driving engine to replicate or scale content and visibility. Although the respondent considers this area to be immature, he believes that those who succeed in navigating it early will gain a competitive advantage.

The respondent also reflects on how AI is already being integrated into major platforms, such as Google's use of Gemini within its search engine. This raises questions about the future relevance of Google Ads, especially if AI-generated content begins to dominate top-ranking results. Another effect of generative AI, according to Respondent B, is its widespread use

among marketers who rely on tools like ChatGPT to generate content under time pressure. This could lead to a situation where many marketers produce similar, undifferentiated material. The respondent suggests that a key differentiating factor in the future will be the ability to write effective prompts, as prompt engineering becomes a core marketing skill.

Finally, despite the increasing importance of digital channels, Respondent B underlines that purchasing decisions are ultimately made by people. While digital marketing may give companies an initial advantage during early-stage selection, the respondent stresses that trust, human connection, and relationship-building remain critical. A central consideration going forward, according to the respondent, will be how to humanize digital marketing by creating content that feels personal and relatable.

4.3 Respondent C

4.3.1 Organisation and Target Group

Respondent C is a marketing consultant with experience from multiple B2B sectors. The consultant's role has often involved strategic marketing and understanding complex product portfolios and sectors. The respondent presented cases from the HVAC and engineering consultancy industries. For the HVAC company, the respondent describes two distinct sub-brands, each targeting a specific segment within the commercial property sector. The overall target group comprises commercial building owners and property management firms. One sub-brand offers high-end radiators, aimed at architects and interior designers who influence demand and require visually appealing, emotionally resonant marketing. The other sub-brand focuses on standard radiators, targeting installers and property managers who value technical specifications and cost-efficiency. For the engineering consultancy company, the target group is project managers in large industrial firms, decision makers in utilities, nuclear and processes industries and sometimes non-technical buyers.

4.3.2 Digital Channels and Strategy

Respondent C describes the usage of digital channels in B2B as complex. The main purposes identified are communication, customer service and experience, monitoring and branding. Monitoring was highlighted as a function that is often overlooked. Platforms such as Twitter (now X) were mentioned as tools to observe discussions within different industries, including conversations about brands or customers. In relation to branding, respondent C brought up the concept of user generated content, UGC, using Lego as an example of a company that engaged customers through design competitions, where winning contributions became real products.

The respondent emphasized that the choice of digital channels depend on the company and its customers. In one case involving an HVAC company, respondent C described two different sub-brands with distinct target audiences. One brand targeted interior architects and required a design-focused communication strategy. The other targeted installers and property managers, with messaging centered on technical specifications and pricing. In another

example focusing on an engineering consultancy, the company traditionally used technical case studies and white papers without adapting the content to different recipients. This approach was adjusted by sharing publications and advertorials in industry-specific journals, such as those within the water and engineering sectors, to reach relevant professional audiences more effectively. The website content traditionally included information about what the internal departments did, this was adjusted to focus more on customer problems and the engineering consultancy's solutions.

Respondent C further pointed to the importance of CRM systems in B2B, as they allow a company to move from generic outreach to targeted communication. For the engineering consultancy company, the lack of segmentation meant that their recipients were receiving technical content and case studies, regardless of their background or role. The respondent had discovered that while some recipients had deep technical expertise, others did not.

“You cannot just go and send the cases to him and hope he understands and calls you. It's not going to work that way.”

4.3.3 Building Trust Digitally

Respondent C emphasizes that building trust digitally varies depending on the specific industry and customer type. The respondent illustrates an example from the engineering consultancy company. In a niche technical consultancy company, trust is primarily built through understanding. This means simplifying complex information, in order for relevant target audiences, like project leaders that aren't technical specialists, to understand what the company does and how they can solve specific issues. The respondent compares this to a doctor's visit, you trust the doctor if they listen, ask relevant questions, understands your problem and provides an understandable explanation. Trust is built in the same way within B2B, through listening, asking relevant questions, offering solutions and showing that you have solved similar problems in the past.

“That's trust. Trust comes from understanding, and that understanding of what you do.”

Digital channels, like an unstructured website that focuses on customer problems and the company's solutions, or advertorials in industry specific journals that simply communicate the company's solutions, are tools to express this trustbuilding message. They are not a replacement for personal relationships or demonstrated expertise.

Respondent C also mentions that customer cases can be used to build trust, but that they are problematic in certain industries, i.e. because of secrecy. The respondent points out that traditional case studies often are too academic and need to be simplified and adjusted to become effective for the broader target audience.

4.3.4 Differentiation and Expertise

“What problems do you have? What sector do you work in? If you are working in this sector and you have this problem, I can offer you this solution.”

Respondent C again emphasizes that differentiation strategies are highly industry specific. The consultant describes the B2B sector as “know-how” and knowledge based, where having expertise is not sufficient on its own. The expertise must be communicated effectively in order to build trust and stand out. According to the respondent, case studies and white papers need to be simplified to make the message accessible to a broader target audience. Further stating that digital channels can be used to communicate this simplified message and demonstrate the company’s expertise and solutions. In the example from the HVAC sector, Respondent C highlights how two sub-brands required entirely different communication strategies to achieve differentiation. The high-end radiator brand focused on design and luxury to appeal to interior architects, while the standard radiator brand emphasized technical specifications and pricing, targeting installers and property managers. These distinct strategies were designed to reflect the specific priorities and mindsets of each audience segment.

Respondent C describes expertise as a cornerstone of B2B positioning, but underlines that differentiation is achieved through adapted and effective communication of this expertise. The respondent sees digital tools as essential channels for conveying such messages, and stresses that any strategy for differentiation must be based on a deep understanding of customer needs and the specific dynamics of an industry.

4.3.5 Internal Collaboration

Respondent C underlines the importance of collaboration between marketing and sales, to increase understanding in a B2B context, customers worries, needs and buying behavior. A marketer's job in B2B is to communicate with the sales team to get to know the customers.

The sales teams the respondent has worked with, gather valuable information from customer meetings, however this data often gets lost because it isn’t fully registered in a digital system that everyone can share, like a CRM. This highlights a failure in internal collaboration, where data that is collected by a department isn’t available or used by other departments, like marketing or management. Digitalization, like incorporating a CRM, is a technical solution that facilitates this necessary internal collaboration surrounding customer data.

“This data is collected, it’s wasted because we don’t have a CRM system? We don’t have a digitalization, basically, in the company.”

4.3.6 Customer Journey and Purchasing Process

Respondent C does not present the customer journey as a formal step-by-step model, but highlights factors that influence how B2B customers interact with a company throughout the purchasing experience. When asked, the respondent referred back to earlier examples,

emphasizing the importance of understanding the customer and their specific needs is essential throughout the process. In previous examples, illustrated this through the HVAC and engineering companies, where tailored communication and content were needed to support decision-making. Trust was described as central throughout the journey, with different meanings across industries.

Lastly, digital tools, such as CRM systems and websites, were mentioned as enablers along the journey. Respondent C noted, as previously discussed, that websites should be structured around solving customer problems rather than internal categories. He also pointed out that traditional internal structures can hinder a customer-centric digital experience.

4.3.7 Future Digital Trends

Respondent C identifies AI as the prominent digital trend that will affect brand building looking forward. The respondent describes AI as a buzzword at the moment, but emphasizes that it will revolutionize everything, and is already transforming digital marketing at a rapid pace. AI is described as having many different applications and affecting various areas within marketing communication. The respondent specifically mentions its impact on customer service and customer relationships, providing AI Chatbots as an example. At the same time, both positive and negative aspects are noted, with the responding stating that experiences with chatbots are still not satisfactory.

The respondent also points out that managing the use of AI, from strategy to implementation, will be a big challenge looking forward. It is considered important to proceed with caution, even though the technology is seen as revolutionary.

“AI is the calculator, you are the mathematician. Which one do you want to be?”

4.4 Respondent D

4.4.1 Organisation and Target Group

Respondent D is the Strategic Marketing Director at an Industrial metal 3D printing systems provider in the Netherlands. With a background in material science and metallurgy, Respondent D transitioned into marketing and now focuses on product management, business development, and strategic marketing. The company has between 30 to 40 customers and are mainly within the automotive, aerospace and high-tech manufacturing sectors.

4.4.2 Digital Channels and Strategy

The company has attempted demand generation strategies to increase its customer base but found limited success. Instead, account based marketing proved to be more effective, given the high prices of the products, approximately 1.5 million euros per product. The company uses internal and external systems to market their products. Internal systems like HubSpot, which is also used to host the company's website. This integration enables customer data

collection and analysis. By tracking the websites returning customers, the company can identify potential business opportunities and categorize leads as Marketing Qualified Leads (MQLs) or Sales Qualified Leads (SQLs). This helps to estimate how warm a lead or a contact is, how close customers are to a purchase decision. This enables them to tailor communication based on the customer's placement within the buying journey.

Additional tools like Semrush and Google Analytics support further customer insights. Among external channels, the company uses LinkedIn, which is the primary platform for outreach due to the company's target group, approximately 50% in Europe and 50% in the U.S. Platforms like WeChat are not prioritized, as they are not relevant to the company's regions. Paid advertising through LinkedIn and Google is used to increase website traffic and direct customers to the company's landing page. The company also utilizes YouTube to showcase its 3D printing systems and demonstrate their application through instructional content. Initially, the company experimented with platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook and Instagram, but low engagement led to their discontinuation. LinkedIn was found to be the most consistent platform their customers visited for educational insights and information. While some U.S. competitors have started using Instagram, it remains a low priority for the company.

4.4.3 Building Trust Digitally

Trust comes in several ways. The most common method for the company to build trust digitally is social proof. They are using a combination of press releases and customer case studies to show that their customers are using their systems and having a good experience. According to Respondent D, it's the most valuable way the company can build trust. The respondent points out that audiences often doubt corporate claims as they tend to come across as promotional, since it's only natural for a company to portray itself as superior. The only tool the company uses is customer success stories since it's a proof point. Even if a press release about a customer buying another machine would help. It's even better if it's possible to show application based case studies to demonstrate how people are using the products and their internal value, like X% cost reduction or Y% market share increase.

“We want to be able to demonstrate that value because that's like the mechanism of proving trust.”

The company also uses nano-influencers, specialists with 3,000 to 5,000 followers in the B2B sector, who operate under a pay-to-play model. These influencers amplify the company's LinkedIn content, increasing reach and engagement. Additionally, the company posts regular educational non-promotional content to build credibility within their industry.

4.4.4 Differentiation and Expertise

“We rely heavily on a value proposition of automation. That's what makes us stand out. That's our promise that we are the most automated printer on the market.”

The company's key differentiator is its focus on automation, and position itself as offering the most automated printer on the market. Beyond this, the company differentiates itself through customized, non-commodity solutions tailored to each customer's specific needs. Both in B2B and consumer contexts, personalizations is highly valued. The company applies this by using automation to deliver tailored tools for unique applications. Due to the company's small team, customer interactions are very personalized. The company's consultative sales process further strengthens the differentiation. Given that a typical sales cycle can exceed up to two years and involve investments of over 1.5 million euros, the company emphasizes long-term relationship building through consistent face-to-face engagement.

4.4.5 Internal Collaboration

The relationship between the marketing and sales department are both essential and often challenging. Respondent D states that marketing and sales have a love-hate relationship, but at the same time a symbiotic relationship.

"Wherever you go, marketing and sales will always be somehow twins, but also enemies."

It's a relationship that is KPI-driven, where marketing is expected to generate leads and sales to convert them. When one of the departments underperforms it will go back and forth between them. Respondent D means that sales often tend to focus on short term outcomes while marketing needs to focus more on long term outcomes and have a strategic view. If marketing were to become reactive to sales demands, they would end up doing things like trade shows or seasonal campaigns. This might provide a short term uplift in sales but won't contribute to sustainable growth. Therefore marketing needs to collaborate with other departments other than sales, such as technology, supply chain or a corporate strategy department. These relationships would help with the long term view. Respondent D also refers to the framework in book *The Long and The Short of It* by Binet and Field, which explores balancing short term activation with long term brand building can lead to more effective marketing over time.

4.4.6 Customer Journey and Purchasing Process

Respondent D refers to the customer journey using the classic marketing funnel, which is awareness, interest, consideration and purchase. The awareness stage is typically initiated when individuals encounter the company via social media, press coverage, or general name recognition. It can also be triggered when procurement teams discover the company through market reports and encourage desktop research to identify potential suppliers. Interest comes from technical or innovation teams within OEMs who reach out with specific inquiries if they could produce on the company's machines, which is more valuable than generic RFQs from procurement teams. At the consideration stage, the company provides detailed information about costs, production capability and both capital and operational expenditures over time to help build the company's business case. However, the purchase tends to be long, around a two year process. After a technical match the procurement teams often step in and insist on

comparing multiple vendors, turning it into a competitive bidding process which can extend the timeline up to a year.

4.4.7 Future Digital Trends

The future of the industry is moving toward automation, integration and digitalization. Respondent D believes people are going to change how they search. More people are using ChatGPT and the respondent thinks this will increase over the years, using ChatGPT over Google. This is because ChatGPT will give you a more detailed answer with different chapters etc. If the information is correct, it's easier and the people searching will get an answer on their exact question rather than have to find the correct article or website on Google. The respondent also says that the company isn't optimizing for this which makes the respondent uncomfortable.

“We are not optimizing for ChatGPT at all and that leaves me uncomfortable. I think that is the biggest blind spot, it is a discomfort factor that I have right now.”

The way content is being created and consumed is changing and it will have a big impact on how the company and the industry communicates. Traditional formats like blog posts or videos are becoming less engaging since people don't read them because it's too long or they don't have the attention span to watch the whole video. Respondent D states that the company will have to change their content, for instance on LinkedIn or blogs to be able to match with the modern attention span, shorter and more engaging formats.

Another challenge will be to sell into different territories. The respondent thinks the era of globalization is over, where increased consumer sensitivity to product origin. Another big trend according to Respondent D will be listening to B2B markets where the people will be more sensitive to tariffs which will affect the final cost. Marketing will play a key role and therefore it will be important to balance work with supply chain and to understand how the company is going to get the products to market.

4.5 Respondent E

4.5.1 Organisation and Target Group

Respondent E, CEO of an AI-driven copywriting firm has held the position for seven years in a role overseeing both strategic and operational aspects. Where the respondent is responsible for a part of marketing. The company focuses on content and translation and has been operating for 15 years, but has gone through several change and renewal processes over the years. The company offers comprehensive content solutions with a strong focus on the customers needs and understanding their real problems before presenting a solution. It also offers integration, linguistic content, localization strategy and digital adaptation. The company's target group is mainly medium to large e-commerce companies and retailers, typically generating between 30-40 million SEK and several hundred million in annual revenue. These customers often require multilingual, customized content for international

expansion or region-specific SEO. While the company has both short- and long-term customers, the strategic focus remains on building enduring partnerships.

4.5.2 Digital Channels and Strategy

The company's digital strategy is built on the principle "live like they learn", meaning that their content should support the entire customer journey. Rather than spreading resources, the company focuses on a select number of digital channels that generate the most engagement, specifically LinkedIn. This platform has proven to be the most effective for reaching their B2B target group. While the company does maintain a website, Respondent E explains that it's currently not prioritized, as it doesn't fully align with the company's value proposition. A redesign is planned in the near future. Due to the high cost of paid advertising, the company focuses more on long-term visibility through organic marketing and relationship building.

Another part of the strategy is maintaining an authentic voice. Respondent E demonstrates this through direct communication with customers and their audience on LinkedIn, which has led to increased visibility and an increase in business inquiries. The company is also working towards ranking high on Google to increase visibility but is actively preparing for a shift toward AI-driven search platforms. Respondent E believes that as long as the company delivers relevant and valuable content, the specific search engine is of less consequence.

"We are not first movers but second movers. Being first is extremely costly and risky, and we don't have the resources for it. We let others try first, learn from their failures and then implement with higher precision and lower risk."

4.5.3 Building Trust Digitally

Respondent E states that the company actively works to build digital trust by emphasizing transparency, relevance, and social proof. They share customer cases and experiences through digital channels such as LinkedIn, highlighting both successes and failures. Honesty is viewed as a strategic strength, especially in relation to AI-driven services, where customers value insights into common pitfalls and lessons learned. By openly addressing past challenges and their resolutions, the company positions itself as both knowledgeable and trustworthy, thereby strengthening its credibility.

"It's about creating trust and needs, and building relationships rather than just making a quick sale."

The company also seeks approval from new customers to establish a visible trust footprint, which may involve joint initiatives such as press releases, featuring the customer's logo, or sharing selected testimonials. Although this is not always feasible, it's considered an effective method for building trust. A significant part of the company's leads originates from referrals by previous customers, which Respondent E views as a strong indicator of customer satisfaction. The company's long-term objective is for every satisfied customer to act as an ambassador, by contributing to sustained, organic growth.

4.5.4 Differentiation and Expertise

The company distinguishes itself digitally through its niche expertise in e-commerce, SEO optimization, and tailored content. A core focus is understanding commercial language and the tone of voice, ensuring that content is not only linguistically correct but also fit for its intended purpose. Rather than relying on open crowdsourcing, the company has built a quality-assured community of translators. Each member must pass difficult and strict tests to demonstrate both linguistic competence and the ability to produce commercially viable content.

In addition, the company offers technical integration solutions that allow customers to connect directly to its platform, streamlining content production and reducing administrative work. Respondent E shared an example from the car parts industry, one customer reduced their market entry timeline from 6-8 months and over 1 million SEK in cost to under a week and around 10,000 SEK. This dramatic improvement was achieved through a hybrid solution that combined AI-generated translations with human validation and terminology checks. Over time, the process became so efficient that translation requests were fulfilled in as little as 10 seconds, went from needing 6-8 months and over one million SEK to enter a new market, to doing the same in under a week for about 10,000 SEK.

4.5.5 Internal Collaboration

Respondent E emphasizes that internal collaboration is one of the company's key strengths, supported by their tight-knit team. Close collaboration exists between marketing, sales and customer service. The use of digital tools such as Slack enables both synchronous and asynchronous communication, fostering open dialogue, knowledge sharing and trust building.

Decision making is guided by real customer cases and carefully considered priorities. According to Respondent E, choosing what not to do is equally important as deciding what to pursue. Strategic decisions are based on business benefits, customer value and alignment with the overall vision. That vision includes not only growth but also minimizing unnecessary administrative tasks and freeing up human creativity by automating repetitive work. Respondent E states that forward momentum depends on the company's willingness to take risks.

4.5.6 Customer Journey and Purchasing Process

Respondent E describes the customer journey as circular rather than linear. The goal isn't just to go through with a deal but to create long-term relationships where the customer in the end becomes one of the company's ambassadors who helps to promote and encourage selling. The customer journey varies in duration based on project complexity and customer needs, ranging from a single day to as long as three years. On average, the process is 70 days from initial contact to completed service. The company handles approximately 50 customers per month and around 200 annually. The journey typically begins with an introductory meeting and an analysis of the customer needs, which takes between one- to two-week. Thereafter, service delivery is continuous, reflecting an ongoing partnership rather than a one-time

service. The company's business model is based on relationship selling rather than transactional exchanges, with a focus on building trust, understanding customer needs, and delivering long-term value. The copywriting firm aims to not only solve a single task but to be a natural part of the customer's content work.

4.5.7 Future Digital Trends

The respondent highlights several digital trends expected to influence B2B branding.

“We don't know exactly what will happen with AI, but we know it will have an impact, so we are going to make sure we learn as much as we can.”

Respondent E believes AI will play a major role in the form of AI agents and content generation. Another important trend is blockchain, which offers potential for enhancing transparency, traceability and data security in supply chains. Cybersecurity and compliance are also mentioned as important future focus areas since data volumes and automation increases. Additionally, retail media is a mentioned trend, where companies monetize their digital platforms by allowing other brands to advertise, for example, Lyko lets partner brands promote themselves on its site. The respondent also believes integration will continue to grow, while SEO won't disappear, it's likely to evolve, possibly merging it with AI-driven search.

The company plans to meet these trends through continuous learning, experimentation, and a strategy that allows for fast but yet selective adaptation. While they acknowledge uncertainty surrounding the implication of AI, their proactive approach is grounded in preparedness and flexibility.

4.6 Respondent F

4.6.1 Organisation and Target Group

Respondent F works as a General Manager at a creative agency in Asia specializing in advertising and marketing, and focusing on AI-generated content creation. The respondent mainly works with creative and strategic marketing for big customers, including those in the banking and beauty industries such as Visa and L'Oréal. The company operates across multiple markets, adapting campaigns to local segments. The creative agency uses AI to identify interests and customer needs more efficiently, enabling more personalized and targeted communication.

4.6.2 Digital Channels and Strategy

AI has made it possible to change the process of campaign planning. Respondent F provides an example from the banking sector, where campaign timelines were reduced from 3 to 4 months to just 2 to 3 weeks through AI tools. Cost dropped from approximately 500,000 euros to 100,000 euros, while generating over 800 unique campaign versions.

“Now we did everything AI... we created about 800 versions within two weeks. So the campaign cost went down to 100K, including agency and production fees.”

AI has also shortened the campaign strategy process. What previously required 2 to 3 weeks of manual research now takes two days using automated data collection. Tools like ChatGPT for text and Adobe Firefly for visuals, are prompted by market data and customer insights to generate hundreds of content variations. Respondent F also mentioned Adobe’s Project Panorama as a demonstration of advanced technology. While it’s not used daily by the company, the tool illustrates how user behavior in apps can be mapped out in real time, it showed how to map how users navigate in an app in real time and being able to place messages where they are most relevant. This example reflects the potential of linking behavioral data to personalized communication.

4.6.3 Building Trust Digitally

The respondent says that building trust digitally has different meaning depending on the industry. In the bank and finance industry it’s about ensuring that the right information is correctly communicated without faults. In this market the regulations are strict and it’s important that all of the content before going out to customers is legally approved. The company produced over 600 AI-generated banner variations for a banking customer, all of which were reviewed and approved by the customer’s legal team, a process that previously didn’t involve legal oversight.

Trust is also achieved through a hybrid model that combines AI and human service. For example, AI allows customers to open a bank account in three minutes, while the manual process approximately takes up to a week. Physical markets remain essential as 45% of people still prefer in-person service, especially in the banking and finance industry. Trust is also built with personalization. By using the correct data, for instance, customer preferences and spending habits, brands can create relevant content whether the communication comes from AI or a human advisor.

Respondent F mentions that there are some risks when working with AI generated content, since many of the tools are still in the beta version. In one case, Adobe Firefly was updated shortly after a campaign was launched, which affects consistency since it always will be an updated version. In another, markets reported content issues, but quick adjustments were possible. According to the respondent, it’s about weighing the risks against the benefits.

“You just launch and test the market. You do it for a fifth of the cost, knowing there might be a 20% risk of the visuals being a bit off.”

Instead of waiting three months and investing large sums, the customer could get an AI generated campaign for a fifth of the cost and launch quickly, with risks of minor errors. Most of the company’s customers accept this since they prefer fast and cost effective solutions, provided adjustments can be made.

4.6.4 Differentiation and Expertise

Respondent F didn't discuss differentiation in its entirety, but emphasizes the agency's use of AI to create personalized and relevant content that still feels human. The respondent mentioned that a point of differentiation wasn't being early adopters of AI in marketing by using beta versions. Rather that the firm can deliver content faster and for a smaller cost. The respondent does point out that whoever can master the use of AI will be able to deliver the same.

The respondent gave an example of a campaign for a chocolate malt beverage (milk in focus) in Vietnam, targeting mothers and children with diverse nutritional needs and a focus on sports, using AI to tailor content to individual passion points. After testing on 100 people, the campaign scaled to millions of users. AI identified similar audiences and adjusted content in real time based on feedback and making the process more efficient and precise than manual methods.

4.6.5 Internal Collaboration

From what the respondent describes, AI has changed the way they work. AI is now used throughout the whole process, from strategy to production, which has replaced manual work. For instance, strategy planning that took weeks before, now only takes a few days through automated data collection and analysis. A new organizational change is the integration of legal teams into the content review process for AI-generated material, a step that wasn't required in previous work. No further internal collaborations mechanisms were mentioned.

4.6.6 Customer Journey and Purchasing Process

The customer journey is described as non-linear due to new consumer behaviors and purchasing patterns. AI and martech (software) are used throughout the funnel to tailor messaging based on audience preferences and usage contexts. Campaigns follow four main phases: awareness through mass media, consideration with personalized content, purchase via an omnichannel approach, and post-purchase-loyalty which is often overlooked despite its role in customer retention.

The respondent gave an example from the banking industry. Previously, opening a bank account required a week, which now takes just three minutes via an app with the help of AI. The general manager described a similar effect with AI content production orders, earlier content production would take 3 to 4 months, it now takes 2 to 3 weeks.

4.6.7 Future Digital Trends

Respondent F notes that AI is currently in an intensive testing phase, with companies testing its applicability across different business functions. The respondent highlights the importance to distinguish where AI is truly effective, since it's not universally applicable. One issue being highlighted comes from the banking industry, where customers expressed a strong desire to speak with real people.

“Everyone gets excited about AI... but there’s also this trend where people start to say that they’re kind of yearning for some sort of human connection... they are not going to be replaced completely”

The respondent therefore sees a possible change in the future finding a more balanced interplay between AI and human interaction, especially in trust sensitive industries like banking. In the B2B sector, AI is a hybrid model where AI is used as a background tool to support the internal processes, meanwhile the customer relationship remains human.

“B2B comes with a very large scale of contract and negotiation. So there will always be a customer relationship manager that goes out and meets customers, that relationship is irreplaceable.”

AI in a B2B context is mainly used to enhance internal functions such as supply chain management, cost analysis, product traceability, and inventory forecasting. CRM systems store customer data, but as Respondent F points out, they are tools and not replacements for relationships. In the future, AI is expected to evolve as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for human interaction in B2B communications.

5. Analysis

5.1 Building Trust and Demonstrating Expertise Through Digital Channels

5.1.1 Trust through Expertise and Communication

A communicator's effectiveness depends on how the audience perceives their expertise and trustworthiness (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Wilson & Baack, 2023). This was evident across the interviews, though the expression of expertise varied. Respondents B and D, who represent firms in deep-tech and industrial sectors, rely on technical credentials such as patents, scientific validation, and R&D as proof of expertise. These signals are important in technical environments where buyers are often engineers or procurement specialists who expect data-driven proof (Bailetti et. al., 2020). Their audience requires verifiable competence. In contrast, Respondents A, C, and E operate in industries where relational and communicative credibility carries more weight.

For instance, Respondent A (haircare) builds trust by equipping staff with in-depth product knowledge and providing digital education, emphasizing accessibility and guidance over hard metrics. Respondent C (consultant) underlines the importance of adapting complex technical language, and compares trust to a doctor who listens and offers clear, understandable diagnosis. This analogy illustrates that even deep expertise must be translated into the audience's language to be perceived as credible. Similarly, Respondent E (AI copywriting), associates credibility not only with technical ability but with transparency. Across these cases, a common thread is that expertise, trust and credibility must be perceived, not just claimed. It must be communicated in a way that aligns with the audience's expectations. Tailoring the tone, format, and depth of communication is critical. This aligns with Source Credibility Theory's claim, that perception, not just reality, determines how persuasive a message will be (Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

“What problems do you have? What sector do you work in? If you are working in this sector and you have this problem, I can offer you this solution.”

5.1.2 Building Trust via Social Proof and Community

The process of transferring trust can occur through both cognitive mechanisms, such as a hyperlink from a credible website, and communicative mechanisms like word-of-mouth of influencer engagement (Liu et. al., 2018). Several respondents reflected how digital tools facilitate trust transfer. Respondent A, for example, actively encourages community tagging on Instagram, allowing trust shared between professional hairdressers to extend to the distributor's brand. By showcasing real users and authentic results, the brand taps into a professional network where credibility is often peer-driven. This is a form of social proof, where users' demonstrated trust in a product becomes persuasive to others in the same community (Hofacker et. al., 2020). Respondent D employs nano-influencers on LinkedIn, whose smaller but engaged audiences often perceive them as relatable and authentic. In this

sector, establishing trust and authority depends on perceived neutrality and thought leadership rather than overt brand promotion (Neuhaus et. al., 2022).

Respondent E highlights word-of-mouth referrals from satisfied customers as a key trust-building mechanism. This reflects the communicative route of trust transfer, where interpersonal trust is extended to the company through relational ties. Respondent C also uses simplified white papers and case studies, which can function as indirect endorsements when confidentiality limits more direct testimonial use. While this limits the visibility of the referring source, these materials still aim to transfer credibility from past success to potential clients. These mechanisms are not universally applicable among the Respondents. Respondents B, C, and E note that confidentiality agreements and technical complexity often constrain the ability to fully leverage trust transfer strategies. In deep-tech or consultancy contexts, where clients may not permit public use of their name or results, brands must find alternative ways to imply third-party validation.

5.1.3 Building Long-Term Trust

Central to relationship marketing are elements such as understanding customer needs, offering personalized solutions, and maintaining consistent communication (Marvi et al., 2024; Ha, 2020). In the digital age, these efforts are increasingly supported by digital platforms, yet findings in this study suggest that digital channels serve to complement, not substitute, personal relationships in B2B contexts (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2015). Several respondents described relationship building as a deliberate and strategic priority. Respondents A, D, and E all emphasized the importance of combining digital tools with in-person interactions to build and maintain loyalty. For example, Respondent A, operating in the professional beauty industry, blends online ordering and Instagram-based engagement with personal visits from knowledgeable sales staff. Similarly, Respondent D, in the industrial manufacturing sector, noted that their two-year sales cycle demands frequent, personalized interaction, facilitated by digital tools like CRM systems but rooted in human contact and trust.

Respondent E, leading an AI content firm, described their business model as relationship-centric, focusing on customer understanding and mutual growth. Rather than pushing single sales, the goal is to create ongoing partnerships where customers act as brand ambassadors. This model reflects what Ha (2020) describes as the temporal and carryover effects of trust: the quality of earlier relationships influences future performance and retention. At the same time, respondents pointed to organizational and technological enablers of relationship marketing, as well as barriers. Respondent C emphasized the importance of CRM systems and interdepartmental collaboration, particularly between sales and marketing. Without shared access to customer insights, even the best intentions around relationship building may fail (Karjaluo et al., 2015). The consultant illustrated how lack of data infrastructure often leads to missed opportunities to deliver personalized experiences, which are at the heart of effective relationship marketing.

“This data is collected, it’s wasted because we don’t have a CRM system? We don’t have a digitalization, basically, in the company.”

Interestingly, Respondent F, representing a highly digitalized creative agency, observed a growing demand for human contact. Especially in trust-sensitive industries such as banking, the Respondent underlined that human contact was essential due to the high volume of sensitive data it handles. Despite dramatic advances in AI and automation, many clients still prefer direct, interpersonal interaction, particularly in high-value or regulated sectors (Järvinen & Taiminen, 2015). This sentiment echoes concerns raised by Respondent C, who noted that over-reliance on digital tools can disconnect companies from the real needs of their customers.

5.1.4 Demonstrating Invisible Qualities Through Content and Cases

Markets characterized by information asymmetry, where one party knows more than the other, firms must actively signal qualities such as competence, reliability, and value through observable cues (Spence, 1973). This is particularly relevant in B2B contexts, where buyers face high stakes, complex products, and long decision-making processes. In such situations, direct evaluation of a provider’s quality is often not understood, making signals such as client testimonials, performance metrics, and third-party validations critically important (Boyd et. al., 2023). Respondent E reinforces this logic by employing a broader set of signals, including case studies, testimonials, measurable outcomes, and well known client logos. These elements function as reputation-based signals, a powerful norm of social proof in a relatively new and rapidly evolving field like AI-driven copywriting. Moreover, the company shares quantifiable impact metrics from their technical solutions, such as performance improvements, which serve as hard signals of competence (Bailetti et. al., 2020). This signal aligns with Spence’s (1973) original argument that strong signals are costly to fake, and therefore more credible.

However, not all firms can rely fully on transparent signaling. Respondents B and C acknowledged that confidentiality agreements limit the ability to share detailed client results. As a workaround, Respondent B uses technical credentials, patents and proven R&D capability, which aim to illustrate problem-solving without compromising client privacy. This introduces a concept of signal fit, that is the effectiveness of a signal is not only about its strength or visibility, but how well it aligns with the target audience’s expectations, needs and decision context (Boyd et. al., 2023). In these cases, content strategy functions as a key instrument for signaling. Firms produce educational material, industry insights, and value-focused storytelling not only to inform but to position themselves as credible and capable partners (Magno & Cassia, 2020). As Barry & Girona (2019) argue, thought leadership content can serve as an indirect signal of expertise, especially when direct performance data is unavailable or restricted.

5.2 Brand Differentiation Strategies

5.2.1 Forms of Differentiation

Technical companies, such as the 3D printing provider (Respondent D) and the nanotechnology company (Respondent B), focus on showing their technical strengths as a way to stand out. Respondent D described their product as “...*the most automated printer on the market*”, which is a way to demonstrate technical capability and stand out in their industry. They use tools like press releases, educational content, and customer cases to build trust and highlight their market position. Respondent B emphasized patents, research and development (R&D) and scientific validation as key ways to show competence, especially to technical buyers. These strategies reflect Signaling Theory, where companies aim to reduce uncertainty by using clear and credible signs of their skills, such as formal credentials and verifiable indicators (Spence, 1973; Boyd et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, companies in service- or communication-driven industries focus more on relevance, adaptability, and human based messaging. The AI copywriting agency (Respondent E), for example, tries to integrate fast into customers' workflows, maintaining high linguistic standards, and reducing time-to-market, such as shortening market entry from six months to one week. This demonstrates differentiation not just in what they offer, but in how efficiently it's delivered. By sharing customer results and being open about both successes and challenges, they build authenticity and trust. This can be linked to Signaling Theory and Source of Credibility Theory, which highlights the importance of perceived transparency, relevance and trustworthiness (Boyd et al., 2023; Hovland & Weiss, 1951).

The consultant (Respondent C), emphasized that technical expertise alone is not enough, it has to be communicated in a way that different audiences can understand. According to the respondent, many companies create overly complex content that is difficult for non-technical stakeholders to engage with, which limits how their expertise is perceived. This highlights the importance of adapting communication to the audience. White papers, case studies, and language style need to match the receiver's level of knowledge and expectations. Both Signaling Theory and Source of Credibility Theory suggest that effective differentiation depends on the credibility and relevance of the message, and also how easily it can be understood and how well it fits the target audience (Boyd et al., 2023; Wilson & Baack, 2023).

5.2.2 Emotional and Relational Differentiation

Beyond technical capabilities, some companies rely more on relational or emotional strategies to stand out. Ha (2020) emphasizes that trust in B2B relationships changes over time and requires ongoing attention and adaptation to be sustained. Respondent A positioned their brand as a “friend” to customers, emphasizing personal contact, community building on Instagram, and educational content. This fosters loyalty in a commoditized market like professional haircare distribution. Respondent F, working in a highly digitalized environment, observed there is a demand for human connection, particularly in trust-sensitive industries

such as banking and finance. Despite operating in a market driven by AI and automation, the respondent emphasized that personal interaction remains essential for building credibility and long-term trust in B2B relationships. Rather than viewing technology as a replacement for personal interaction, the respondent described digital tools as important, but that they should not replace personal relationships. In this context, maintaining a human connection becomes an important aspect of how the company sustains trust, even in a highly automated market.

“Everyone gets excited about AI... but there’s also this trend where people start to say that they’re kind of yearning for some sort of human connection... they are not going to be replaced completely”

The emotional tone and human based communication reflect strategies that may not fit traditional B2B norms. However, these approaches align with relationship marketing theory, where differentiation can be achieved through long-term trust, consistent engagement, and personalized relationships (Marvi et al., 2024). Likewise, Respondent E uses transparency and authenticity, making them stand out in an AI-driven and potentially impersonal field. Additionally, Respondent F highlighted a shift in customer expectations where they seek emotional interactions. This aligns with emotional closeness and human understanding, which can be competitive advantages, even in highly technical and automated industries (Ha, 2020).

5.2.3 Thought Leadership as Strategic Differentiation

Several respondents use thought leadership to position themselves as experts in their fields. Respondents A, D, and E publish educational, non-promotional content (primarily through LinkedIn) that positions them as authorities in their field by creating value beyond their offerings. This aligns with the concept thought leadership, which means that sharing valuable, relevant insights over time enhances brand credibility and leads to long-term differentiation (Barry & Girona, 2019; Neuhaus et al., 2022). These companies aim to influence the conversation in their industries. When this is done well, it not only demonstrates expertise but strengthens emotional trust by offering value over time.

5.2.4 Adapting Communication to Audience Needs

A key insight across all companies is that effective differentiation is not just about highlighting strengths, but about aligning the message with what the audience expects and understands. Respondent C’s emphasized the importance of adjusting complex content for different stakeholders. Respondent D combines technical communication with credibility-building efforts on LinkedIn. Respondent E uses customer testimonials and performance metrics to support their message. These examples reflect Signaling Theory, where the success of a signal depends on what's being communicated and how well it matches the receivers expectations and contexts. As Spence (1973) stated, the effectiveness of a signal is not always observable in the signal itself. It’s more about how well it matches the expectations and interpretive frameworks of the receiver.

“You cannot just go and send the cases to him and hope he understands and calls you. It’s not going to work that way.”

5.3 Factors Influencing Strategic Use of Digital Channels

5.3.1 Internal Alignment and Organizational Capabilities

One internal factor influencing channel strategy is how well teams within the company collaborate and share information. Respondent C mentioned that the absence of a CRM system limits the ability to coordinate communication across the customer journey and track customer interactions over time, which weakens the potential of relationship-building with the help of digital tools. The respondent also emphasized the need for better collaboration between marketing and sales to understand customers more effectively.

Similarly, Respondent A described how close relationships between their salespeople and customers are supported by combining digital communication with in-person contact, strengthening trust throughout the customer journey. The respondent also highlights their close collaboration between sales, marketing, and customer service supports clearer and more aligned communication with customers. These examples reflect ideas from Relationship Marketing Theory, which highlights that strong B2B relationships are built on long-term engagement, consistent communication, and internal collaboration that supports trust-building through channels (Marvi et al., 2024).

5.3.2 Resource Limitations and Strategic Prioritization

Budget and time limitations are also factors that influence channel strategy. Respondent B explained that their limited marketing budget makes them focus on low cost and high impact tactics such as SEO and email marketing, rather than resource-intensive formats like video or paid media. This connects to Signaling Theory, where the capability of a signal can be related to the cost or effort behind it. In this context, it’s more effective to focus on fewer but more strategically targeted actions that are likely to be seen as credible and valuable by the intended audience (Spence, 1973). With limited resources, the company has to focus on digital efforts that are most likely to be seen as credible and valuable by their target audience.

“We don’t know exactly what will happen with AI, but we know it will have an impact, so we are going to make sure we learn as much as we can.”

5.3.3 Customer Expectations and Industry Norms

External factors such as customer expectations and industry based communication norms influence which channels to use and how. Respondent D, who works with technical buyers, highlighted the importance of case studies and LinkedIn for communicating expertise. While the respondent didn’t mention alternative channels, their focus on technical and structured content suggests an approach aimed at building professional credibility. Meanwhile, Respondent F, who is based in a highly digitalized space, describes that digital tools are expected, but personal interaction remains essential in trust-sensitive industries like banking.

“B2B comes with a very large scale of contract and negotiation. So there will always be a customer relationship manager that goes out and meets customers, that relationship is irreplaceable.”

Respondent A described how their use of Instagram and customer events reflects their customers' preferences for visuals and community engagement. Respondent C highlighted that customer expectations require adaptation not only of channels, but the complexity and clarity of the content. The respondent stated that many companies communicate technical information without adjusting it to different levels of knowledge, which can reduce credibility. For example, case studies that are too complex may not succeed to engage stakeholders who are not technical specialists. These examples support Source Credibility Theory, which suggests that a message's impact depends on what's communicated and how the messenger is perceived, based on how well they align with customer expectations and professional norms (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Wilson & Baack, 2023).

5.3.4 AI and the Evolution of Channel Strategy

Some companies' adapt their channel strategies as a response to the fast evolving of technologies, such as AI. Respondent F explained that AI helps their company to produce marketing campaigns faster and tailor them to different customer needs.

“Now we did everything AI... we created about 800 versions within two weeks. So the campaign cost went down to 100K, including agency and production fees.”

Meanwhile Respondents B and D expressed uncertainty about how AI search tools, like ChatGPT, might affect how customers find information, potentially making traditional SEO less effective. This shows that as digital environments evolve, companies have to consider how their messages are understood, both by people and digital systems (Alshurideh et al., 2023).

“We are not optimizing for ChatGPT at all and that leaves me uncomfortable. I think that is the biggest blind spot, it is a discomfort factor that I have right now.”

5.3.5 Relational Trust in a Digital Landscape

Although digital tools are a central part of B2B communication and channel strategy, personal interaction continues to play a key role in building trust and long-term relationships. Respondent D described a long sales cycle that depends on repeated interactions and relationship-building over time. Respondent E described their customer journey as circular and focused on sustained trust and long-term relationship-building, rather than short-term transaction.

“It's about creating trust and needs, and building relationships rather than just making a quick sale.”

Similarly, Respondent F mentioned that even in an AI-driven environment, customers value emotional connection and authenticity. Respondent A positioned their brand as a “friend” to customers where they mix personal relationships with community-building on their social media. This relational focus helps them with trust-building. These examples highlight the relevance of Relationship Marketing Theory, as the respondents emphasized long-term trust, ongoing communications, and the continued importance of human interaction, even in highly digital or automated environments. Rather than replacing relationships, digital tools are used to support and strengthen them (Marvi et al., 2024).

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Discussion

To understand how B2B companies use digital channels in their branding efforts, three research questions were identified, which were answered by analyzing recurring patterns in the interviews with Respondents A-E.

The first research question concerned how B2B companies build trust and demonstrate their expertise digitally. It became clear that this is not something that happens through a single channel or method, but rather as a whole, where content, tone, accessibility and human presence interact. Several of the respondents described how they work to educate their target groups, communicate transparently and share real examples from customer collaborations. However, what really became clear during the interviews was that trust is not just about what you say, but also how and when you say it. Understanding the target group, their industry, roles and needs, becomes an important dimension in how expertise is communicated. Digital channels are perceived as powerful tools, but none of the respondents saw it as sufficient in itself. Instead, it is the interplay between digital presence and human relationships, described as a hybrid model, that builds real trust over time.

While examining how companies differentiate their brands through digital marketing, it emerged that differentiation is often less linked to spectacular campaigns and more to consistency and relevance. Companies do not necessarily try to stand out by being the biggest or most creative, but by being clear, credible and customer-oriented. In the conversations, it was evident that differentiation in B2B is often about showing that you understand the customer's problem and can offer a solution, and that you do so in a way that feels professional but also personal. Some companies focus on their technical edge, others on their speed or adaptability, but what they have in common is that it must be communicated in a way that the recipient can understand. Several respondents highlighted the importance of customized communication, where the right message meets the right person at the right time, something that requires both insights and skill.

The third question, which factors influence companies' strategic use of digital channels, was perhaps the most complex to answer. Precisely because the answers varied depending on the industry, organization and target group. Despite the variation, certain patterns were visible. Within the organization, the choice of channels and methods is often influenced by internal factors such as budget, technical expertise and how well different departments collaborate. It became clear that strong collaboration between marketing, sales and customer service facilitates more consistent and customer-oriented brand work. At the same time, there are external factors that companies need to relate to, such as industry practices, customers' digital habits and emerging technologies. Many companies are currently at a tipping point where they are experimenting with AI to streamline content, but where there is still uncertainty about how to retain the human and uniqueness in an increasingly automated communication.

It also became clear that the ability to adapt, quickly and with strategic thought, is becoming a key to success.

The participating B2B organizations, along with the consultant, contributed to answering the research questions within their contexts. Enabling this study to develop a nuanced understanding of how these responses are shaped in practice, by organizational structures, interpersonal relationships, and contextual factors.

6.2 Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how companies strategically use digital channels to build trust and differentiate their brands. By analyzing insights from marketing managers across industries, a clear picture emerges that digital branding requires more than a technical presence. It requires content, tone and structure that are perceived as credible, relevant, and value-creating. A central conclusion is that trust in digital environments cannot be separated from human relationships. On the contrary, the results suggest that the most effective B2B strategies are those that manage to combine digital precision with human warmth, whether through educational content, customer references or personal meetings. In addition, differentiation is strongly linked to how well companies understand and address the specific needs of their customers. Thought leadership, tailored communication and credibility through social proof thus become key components of the digital B2B strategy.

6.3 Theoretical Implications

The findings in this study imply that credibility relies on perceived expertise and trustworthiness, aligning with the core of Source Credibility theory (Hovland & Weiss, 1951). However, the analysis extends the theory by showing that in B2B, the way expertise is communicated (e.g., adaptation, tone, delivery) is as important as the expertise itself. Among the firms in complex or technical industries, trust is built through data, and through translation and contextualization of that data. This supports recent arguments by Wilson & Baack (2023) that source credibility is dynamic and situational in B2B settings.

The respondents in this study further confirmed that trust can be transferred via peers, influencers, and communities (Liu et. al., 2018), validating the theory in modern digital B2B environments. At the same time, the findings show that industry-specific constraints, such as confidentiality and regulation, limit the full application of trust transfer strategies. This implies that the effectiveness of trust transfer is not universal, and its success depends on both audience characteristics and content sensitivity.

Further, results strongly support Relationship Marketing Theory (Ha, 2020), especially the idea that trust and loyalty in B2B are built over time through a mix of personal and digital engagement. This contributes to the theory by emphasizing that digitalization does not transform or simplify relationship marketing. Instead, it creates a hybrid trust environment where digital and human elements must coexist strategically.

The findings support the foundational assumptions of Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973), which suggest that firms operating in information-asymmetric environments must communicate unobservable qualities. These qualities include competence, reliability and value. Examples such as case studies, customer testimonials, logos, and performance metrics serve as strategic tools to reduce uncertainty and convey trustworthiness. However, the analysis also contributes a theoretical refinement by emphasizing the concept of signal fit (Boyd et. al., 2023). A signal that is technical may still fail to build trust if it is perceived as overly complex, irrelevant, or misaligned with the recipient's context.

6.4 Practical Implications

The findings of this study highlight several practical considerations for B2B companies, who are aiming to strengthen their digital branding efforts. One key implication is the importance of communicating expertise in a way that aligns with the specific expectations of different target audiences. While technical competence is important, it has to be presented as a clear and relevant message that resonates with the intended recipient, whether it's a procurement officer, technical engineer, or business executive. This means that expertise alone is not enough, it has to be perceived as both credible and easy to understand. Digital channels should therefore be used strategically to demonstrate competence through educational content, case studies, and testimonials. Several respondents emphasized the value of thought leadership, where sharing industry insights and knowledge builds trust and helps brands stand out in saturated markets.

Another important factor is internal collaboration. For digital strategies to be successful, departments such as marketing, sales, customer service and technical teams need to work together. Respondents mentioned that when internal knowledge is shared and communication is consistent, companies can deliver more personalized messages across the customer journey. This suggests that investing in internal infrastructure and enabling collaboration across departments should be seen as a strategic priority, not just an operational one.

Artificial intelligence (AI) was a recurring theme. Some respondents described AI as a tool that helps companies to produce content more effectively, personalize communication, and reduce campaign timelines and costs. However, concerns about trust, credibility, and authenticity were raised. Companies may benefit from a hybrid approach, where AI is used as a supportive tool while maintaining human oversight, especially in trust sensitive industries. In addition, some respondents expressed uncertainty about how AI search tools like ChatGPT might affect traditional SEO practices, requiring companies to rethink how they have to structure and distribute content for digital visibility.

Companies with limited resources should be more selective in how they choose digital channels. Rather than using many different channels, it may be more effective to focus on fewer but more targeted and credible digital channels that fit the brand and audience

expectations. In this context, tools like thought leadership and customer testimonials can have an important role in building trust especially when time or budget is limited.

6.5 Societal Implications

The increasing integration of AI and automation in B2B marketing reflects a broader transformation of professional communication with societal implications. As companies use digital tools to streamline processes, reduce costs, and personalize content, there is a risk that human connection and trust building, which are key elements in B2B relationships, may be weakened. This shift places new demands on companies to balance efficiency and authenticity. Before trust was built through long-term relationships and face-to-face interaction, but now has to be built digitally which requires new forms of credibility, transparency, and ethical communication (Mikalef et al., 2023). Additionally, the move toward more automated communication can exclude users or customer groups who are less used to digital tools, which shows the need for more inclusive digital strategies and continued support for users.

The findings show that society is becoming more dependent on marketing strategies that are based on data and controlled by algorithms. This raises important questions about responsibility, creativity, and how the role of marketing professionals are changing. As more content is created with AI and decisions are based on numbers, there is a risk that human creativity and deeper understanding lose importance. This highlights the need for companies to think more carefully about how they use technology, not only for better business results, but also how it affects people's jobs, customer relationships, and the long-term brand image. These changes are not limited to one company, they affect how entire industries work, communicate and build trust.

6.6 Study Limitations

While this study is based on qualitative interviews with six respondents from different industries and regions. While the findings offer rich and contextual insights, they are not statistically generalizable. The limited sample size may also exclude alternative perspectives, especially from industries that are less digitalized or have different purchasing dynamics. In addition, digital technologies are evolving fast, specifically AI, which means that strategic practices and tools are continuously changing. Some of the trends identified in this study, such as the potential impact of ChatGPT on SEO content and the use of AI for personalization, are still emerging. As a result, their long-term implications remain uncertain.

6.7 Further Research

First, while this thesis included companies from multiple industries, an industry-specific study could present deeper insights. For instance, trust building strategies in deep-tech sectors may differ from those in creative or service oriented industries, and isolating such contexts could enhance theoretical precision. Second, future research could adopt a quantitative approach to validate and expand upon the themes identified in this study. Surveys or

experiments involving a larger sample of B2B marketers or decision-makers could examine the relative impact of different digital strategies on perceived trust, credibility, or customer loyalty. Another promising area for research is the role of AI and automation in trust building. As AI becomes more integrated into B2B marketing and content production, it is important to understand how automated communication affects trust and perceived authenticity, particularly in comparison to human generated interactions. These directions offer opportunities to expand the academic understanding of trust and expertise in B2B digital branding, while also providing practical insights for marketers operating in increasingly digital and globalized environments.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. Introduction
 - a. Introduction of the respondent
 - i. The purpose of our interview is to explore how B2B companies use digital channels to build strong, differentiated brands that foster trust and demonstrate expertise. We would like to hear about your experience and strategies.
 - b. Background Information
 - i. Can you briefly describe your role and the main business of your company within the B2B sector?
 - ii. Approximately how many customers do you have?
 - iii. What is the main goal/purpose of using digital channels?
 - iv. How would you describe your companys current digital presence?
2. Main Section - Digital Branding & Trust
 - a. Digital Strategies and Channels
 - i. Which digital channel do you primarily use to communicate your brand? Who is your target audience?
 - ii. How have you strategically selected these channels, and what were the key factors in your decision?
 - b. Building Trust Digitally
 - i. How do you work to create and maintain trust with your business customers through digital tools?
 - ii. What elements (e.g. transparency, customer cases, expert content) do you consider most important for building trust?
 - c. Differentiation and Expertise
 - i. What do you do to differentiate your brand in a competitive B2B environment via digital channels?
Can you provide examples of content or digital activities that highlight your expertise in your field?
 - d. Challenges and Lessons Learned
 - i. What major challenges have you encountered in trying to differentiate your brand digitally?
 - ii. How have you dealt with these challenges, and are there any lessons you can share?
 - e. Internal Integration
 - i. What does the collaboration look like between different departments (e.g. marketing, sales, customer service) when working on digital branding?

- ii. Can you describe a typical customer journey - from identifying a need to completing a purchase, and how you support the process through marketing and sales?
 - iii. How can you ensure consistent brand communication internally?
- 3. Closing Questions
 - a. Future and Trends
 - i. What digital trends do you think will most affect B2B branding going forward?
 - ii. How do you plan to adapt your strategy to meet these future challenges and opportunities?
 - b. Additional Insights
 - i. Is there anything else you think is important to include when discussing digital branding for B2B, something we haven't already touched upon?