



## Developing Insights on Branding in the B2B Context

Branding within B2B Sales

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## Chapter 7

# Branding within B2B Sales

*David Mullo, Liljeström Mats and Tomi Snäll*

### Abstract

This chapter offers insights into one of the most influential aspects of external branding, namely, branding within business-to-business (B2B) sales. In particular, the authors of this chapter claim that B2B sales are indispensable for the growth and existence of a brand. The special attention of this chapter is focused on sales personnel, as representatives of firms and carriers of branding. In other words, the impact of sales personnel on branding in a B2B context is presented theoretically and examined empirically. The chapter thereafter offers an interesting case study of Logomo, a cultural venue in Finland, specializing in selling customized space to companies, as well as organizing different kinds of public events. Through a combination of theory and practice, the authors demonstrate the importance of branding within B2B sales and conclude by providing specific implications for practitioners.

*Keywords:* Business-to-business; corporate branding; product branding; sales; salesperson

### 7.1. Introduction

The main focus of this chapter is on B2B sales and the importance sales have on the firm's corporate as well as product branding. The research

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investigates the impact that the sales personnel have when meeting the clients. It is therefore important to understand what influences the buyer decision making and relationship building process and what are the benefits of branding for the previously mentioned processes. The research is conducted from the perspective of the seller, by discussing what companies should focus on when thinking about sales and whether they should communicate either their corporate or product/service brand. The chapter includes a theoretical part and the findings of a case study in order to advance the knowledge on branding within B2B sales.

## **7.2. The Importance of Sales in a B2B Context**

To start with a simple statement: the reason companies generate sales is to make a profit and therefore the effectiveness of sales is an essential component for the survival of the company. The selling process can be described as a set of activities that connect two organizations together, with the purpose to sell a product, offer a service, or provide the solution for a customer's problem. In these situations, one of the main tasks of a seller is to help the customer in making the buying decision (Alanen, Mälkiä, & Sell, 2005). In B2B sales meetings, companies are represented through selected individuals, that is, a salesperson who represent the supplier's company, and a buyer, representing the other company (Jenster, Hayes, & Smith, 2005).

However, in many cases, there are more than two individuals participating in meetings, and negotiations often consist of groups of decision makers. As Schmidt, Adamson, and Bird (2015) argue that companies nowadays can have five or six individuals participating in decision making before a purchase is finalized. In addition, in a B2B market, the company is often connected with a fewer number of customers but has larger buying volumes (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Another essential characteristic of B2B sales, which correspond to its business nature, is the importance of building and maintaining close and long-term relationships. In these relationships, trust and commitment are built over time, and these factors make decision-making processes easier and sales more efficient. B2B sales are furthermore influenced by the rapid development of technology (see Chapter 9 on online branding), which provides the possibility for buyers to easily find all the necessary information about the products and services online, even before decision making occurs. In addition, if communicated correctly, the branding can improve the company performance and positively influence the

decision-making process (Claye, Crawford, Freundt, Lehmann, & Meyer, 2013). These are some of the main features that differentiate B2B from traditional B2C sales.

B2B sales are often accomplished in cooperation with professional buyers who have knowledge and experience in buying. This type of selling is also liable to be larger since companies usually buy more than just one product item (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006). Almost all manufacturers that sell consumer products must sell their products to intermediate businesses before they reach the end customer. A good example of business-to-business sales processes can be found in supermarkets. They buy their products from the producers and wholesalers and then add an extra percentage when re-selling to the end customers. Purchases made by consumers at the supermarket are made possible, in most cases, only through a network of business actors. In B2B sales, besides products, services are also offered and sold. For example, accountant firms sell their services to help other companies complete their taxes. In B2B selling, it is therefore important to have a wide knowledge of the products and services that the company sell, as well as knowledge of the customers' needs in the targeted market.

However, as Crawford (2016) argues, it is good to remember that in both the B2B and B2C context, human beings are the target of the sales. Ultimately, it is not a computer or a device that companies are selling to, thus, it has to be remembered that decisions are always made by people. With this in mind, it is necessary to rethink our understanding of the B2B sales processes. In reality, no matter what the size of the corporation may be, when the company is examined, it can be clearly seen that all positions are filled by individuals who represent their departments. As such, decision-making forces in the company will always be made up of individuals or groups of individuals. Therefore, in B2B sales, the sales representatives are the ones that have a major impact on buyers. Salespeople are critical players with regard to building and maintaining business relationships. Although Boaz, Murnane, and Nuffer (2010) argue, in their article about B2B sales, that customers focus on price and product dominant factors when evaluating a supplier and making purchasing decisions, it has been proved that other factors influence their decisions as well. A survey has been conducted with 1,200 purchasing decision makers from small to large organizations, throughout the USA and Western Europe; these decision makers are responsible for buying products and services. The findings show that in addition to the tangible aspects, it is also the whole sales experience and the company's overall performance that matters in decision-making

processes. Factors such as product and service features have a significant impact on the sales experience, but they are no longer dominant (Boaz et al., 2010). Instead, buyers insist that product and service features are combined with the overall sales experience. A more detailed discussion on the impact of the salesperson will be discussed later in the chapter.

### **7.2.1. The Changes in B2B Sales**

As Adamson, Dixon, and Toman (2012) argue in their article “The end of solutions sales” that customers’ needs have been changing and developing rapidly over the last decades. This has considerably influenced the B2B context, with the result that customers do not need sellers in the same way as before. A study of a Corporate Executive Board consisting of more than 1,400 B2B customers showed that customers do a great deal of research in advance, such as benchmarking, pricing, ranking options, and solutions, before contacting the seller (Adamson et al., 2012). As Kovac (2016) confirms, technological development has changed the behavior of customers, and customers are ahead of the sales efforts. In other words, customers have become more demanding (Davie, Stephenson, & Valdivieso de Uster, 2010). As an outcome, the overwhelming information, social media has become an important, if not already an essential factor in B2B sales. Focusing on the development of insightful online content is therefore becoming a crucial part of B2B sales (see Chapter 9 for further insights on online branding).

In addition to online branding, sales are shifting from product to service branding. For instance, around 20 years ago, IBM introduced an enormous change in its business model. It went from producing hardware to providing software solutions for its customers (Vax, 2015). It is important to understand the difference between hardware and software, hardware is something tangible (i.e. a product), while software is something intangible, as, for example, a service or a platform online. Further, Vax (2015) claims that the change IBM made and the impact it had on its business network was clear: the revenue stream became steadier, the profit increased, and maybe the most important aspect was that they improved their customer relationships.

The trend to provide a service instead of a product did not only occur within the computer industry but also went far beyond (Vax, 2015). Manufacturing companies are now offering complete solutions, which might be seen as hybrid solutions between products and services, as

Vax (2015) emphasizes. An example in another industry is provided by Penttinen (2007) and the findings of his study on KONE.<sup>1</sup> In 2005, 60% of KONE's turnover was accumulated from the services they provided, instead of from their sales of units of elevators, escalators, and other tangible products.

This type of change also contributes to the development of the long-lasting relationships, where companies aim to serve the customer over a longer period of time. In many cases, it is more expensive for companies to acquire new customers, thus, in comparison, selling to existing customers is more beneficial for both parties (Pepijn, 2017). Pepijn (2017) continues further by explaining that companies should try to improve customer loyalty, which is very hard to gain but even harder to retain. This will also have an impact on the firm's reputation on the market. According to Cretu and Brodie (2007), companies with a positive reputation are seen as more trustworthy and perceived to offer better products and services to their customers.

The fundamental of branding is that it is not the responsibility of only one person (e.g. brand management) in a company. It is the responsibility of every single employee (Juliano, 2010; Koporcic & Törnroos, 2015). Furthermore, this is important for the development of business relationships and ultimately for sales as well. Juliano (2010) also claims that it is the customers who will define the corporate brand based on their experiences with the company. When interacting with business partners, it is not only important how customers perceive the company but also how the company presents itself on the market (Koporcic & Törnroos, 2015).

### **7.2.2. *The Impact of the Salesperson in B2B Branding***

When a company is about to be launched online, its website should be up and running (von Herten, 2006). Therefore, it is possible to question whether a salesperson always needs to be a physical person. While the word does imply a person, it needs to be remembered that a field like marketing is constantly evolving and needs to meet new challenges and standards. Consequently, the concept of the salesperson may need to be re-examined. Interestingly enough, Graham and Mudambi (2016) discuss how the impact of the salesperson might have changed due to the

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<sup>1</sup>KONE is a global leader in the elevator and escalator industry.

Internet and e-commerce transactions. This is a very important point, as this phenomenon is probably not the one that will disappear in the near future. Nowadays, it seems to be quite common to do shopping on the Internet or at least browse the products before making a purchase decision. Since there is no actual person to communicate with, the importance of sales personnel is probably not as integral as before. However, it does need to be highlighted that the context is everything in this scenario, which means that some industries will not see this trend at all, whereas others might face challenges from an online presence.

However, [Zaefarian, Thiesbrummel, Henneberg, and Naude \(2017\)](#) are of the opinion that in order to stay competitive, companies should nurture and maintain their business relationships. Once more, it must be highlighted that long-term business relationship in a B2B context are preferred over short-term relationships. However, we need to keep in mind that the business relationships, as all other types of relationships, are always managed and negotiated by individuals. This is an element that needs to be raised when discussing the impact of a salesperson in the business world. As [Graham and Mudambi \(2016\)](#) point out, the salesperson is the face and voice of the company to the general public and therefore is quite important when trying to build and maintain the corporate brand. [Graham and Mudambi \(2016\)](#) also argue that the salesperson can serve as an extension of the firm's credibility and quality. In other words, this places a considerable amount of pressure on the salesperson.

Furthermore, [Bromley \(2001\)](#) talks about how we tend to believe that some personality traits go hand in hand. In other words, if a person is seen to be sociable, he or she is also believed to be trustworthy ([Bromley, 2001](#), p. 329). This is important for a salesperson to know, because as explained above, just by displaying some positive characteristics, the salesperson can lead the client to believe that he/she also possesses other favorable traits. This can be illustrated through the metaphor of a snowball rolling down a hill and increasing in size on the way. By displaying one good character trait, people can assume that the person has other good traits as well, even if the salesperson has not shown them yet.

### **7.2.3. *Personal Selling in a B2B Context***

As already argued, although there is an endless number of new technologies and software available for companies, the most common way of

communicating brand value in a B2B context is still through personal selling. The reason for this is that a salesperson can personalize and adapt the message in accordance with the immediate customer (Lynch & Chernatony, 2007). This is an important point to make, as it helps us understand how technologies and software, in many cases, cannot replace actual person-to-person interactions. This means that even if technology is improving rapidly, the responsibility of conveying the brand message to the customer still falls on the salesperson's shoulders. Furthermore, Lynch and Chernatony (2007, p. 126) state that salespeople should adapt their selling methods based on the following factors: the specifics of the buyer's decision-making process; the ways of communicating; the current stage in the relationship between the seller and buyer; the selling situation; the situational risk for the buyer; the buyer's capabilities; as well as the buyer's social style.

Business customers often expect a relationship to be developed after purchasing a B2B service. Customers expect the salesperson to follow up after the purchase and maintain the relationship (Kaski, Hautamäki, Bolman Pullins, & Kock, 2017). This might seem somewhat counterintuitive from a consumer's point of view, but it is good news from the perspective of the business marketer. When the customer is keen on retaining a relationship and having regular interactions with a buyer, there are so many opportunities for the salesperson to further enhance the corporate brand and improve its reputation on the market. It is also true, however, that at the same time, the salesperson acquires more opportunities to damage the brand; however, this is part of the risks of branding. Gammoh, Mallin, and Bolman Pullins (2014) are of the opinion that salespeople should strive toward development of long-term relationships and creation of plans that will enhance that relationship, instead of merely seeking short-term profit. Although short-term profit seemed to be the most popular way to look at the topic of sales, in the current fast-changing environment, it does not appear to be the most sustainable alternative. Once again, it is the salesperson's job to understand this and act upon it.

Von Herten (2006) also argues how important it is to remember any significant personal dates a client might have and act upon these dates by sending them some sort of a gift. Von Herten (2006) further points out that this gift cannot be an advert for the firm but instead something of personal value. In addition, it is important to remember that most of the actions that a company does for clients is aimed toward retaining the customers and making sure that they stay satisfied.



As many would argue, the impact of the salesperson on the corporate brand is often hard to measure. However, the salesforce is constantly enhancing the brand through all their business interactions and therefore influencing the firm's identity and its reputation on the market. Baumgarth and Binckebanck (2011) in their research discuss the importance of the salesperson's personality, behavior, as well as brand communication, for building a successful B2B brand. As a result of the nature of a salesperson's job, the work can sometimes become quite stressful. This can influence the performance of a salesperson and could possibly have implications for the quality of the customer service. Because of this, an important factor to consider is the salesperson's job satisfaction and commitment (Anisimova & Mavondo, 2010).

### 7.3. Empirical Example of Branding within B2B Sales

After presenting the theoretical background of branding and B2B sales, including the trend of moving from product to service brands and the impact of the salesforce on the whole process, we now move on to an empirical understanding of the phenomenon. The empirical study, using a qualitative case design, was conducted in order to examine and observe the theoretical inclinations in real-life settings. We interviewed a B2B sales professional, Maarit Hurme (Personal communications. Interview by David Mullo and Mats Liljeström, May 4, 2017) from Logomo. She was happy to share her personal experience and also to reflect on our questions from the perspective of Logomo.

Logomo is a party and event venue located in an area of Turku that historically has always been industrial. The aim of Logomo is to become "the center of a creative economy business park."<sup>2</sup> Logomo operates within the B2B market and specializes in selling space to companies, mainly start-ups and event organizers that is customizable for their purpose.

Ms Hurme has a solid background within sales, as she has worked in the field for 15 years. The interview was conducted as a semi-structured, face-to-face dialogue that allowed the informant to develop a storyline that best fitted her experiences. In this way, we obtained insights into a broader area of sales and branding. We had prepared some preliminary

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.turku.fi/en/news/2015-06-23\\_business-park-expanding-surroundings-logomo-prospect](https://www.turku.fi/en/news/2015-06-23_business-park-expanding-surroundings-logomo-prospect) (4.12.2017)

questions that we shared with the informant via email, before the interview date. The questions were developed based on the theoretical foundation of this chapter, with the main focus of the research being the seller's perspective. We were interested in discovering what kind of impact the sales representative has on the process, whether selling the product is most important aspect or if the corporate brand plays a crucial role. Another focal point was placed on the importance and influence of the seller's own activity and performance in business decision-making processes. The interview was voice recorded as no written notes were taken. This was in order for us to be able to focus on the discussion. The answers were then listened again and evaluated. Ms Hurme also promised to give us further details by telephone if anything was left unclear.

#### **7.4. Findings of the Study**

In the interview, Maarit Hurme defined B2B sales as a form of partnership where both parties, that is the seller and the buyer, convene to find the best possible solution — the solution that benefits everyone in the best possible way. In B2B sales, therefore, it is important to know the crucial qualities of a product or service and to be able to convey the message to its current and potential customers. However, the seller's mission is not to sell the product or service just for the sake of selling it and earning profit, but the mission is rather to find the right fit for the customer's needs. If the product or service does not suit the customers, Ms Hurme argued, the customer will definitely find another supplier, rather than asking for a product or service modification to their specific needs or a lower price. In other words, sales are not about short-term profit but rather about managing the long-term relationships with customers, where the mutual trust and commitment of both parties are of essential importance and are earned over time.

Ms Hurme furthermore highlighted that today, B2B sales are rapidly moving toward online platforms, where the content is within the reach of everyone. Ms Hurme said that “today everything starts from the online content.” The information flow must be fast in today's business world and regularly updated by the company in order to be credible. The online content is important and must support the rest of the company's activities in order to fully support the corporate brand.

Next, we discussed the role that price plays for customers and their decision-making processes. Ms Hurme argued that price might influence

the decision-making, but it is not always the main deciding factor. In some cases, price does not play a role at all. Ms Hurme gave us the example of a company that organizes events where everything must go as planned, and there is no room for errors. In this kind of case, price does not play the most significant role as the quality of the service is crucial. However, she continued that this cannot be generalized and applicable to all cases, since it is often industry specific. For instance, it is natural that customers calculate price and costs when products are bought and used further for re-sale to end customers. However, primarily, she emphasized that Logomo mainly concentrates on providing a service solution for its customers. In addition, it has developed many business relationships: some are focused on products, some on services, but they are all aimed to be long-term, according to Ms Hurme. Moreover, she also related that the company's most important revenue stream comes from renting space to other B2B actors, although it is possible for private individuals to rent some of their spaces for events such as weddings.

Logomo, therefore, rents out office space to companies, which provides it with a steady revenue stream. In addition, the company focuses and works very closely with event production, which occupies a considerable amount of its time. As an example, Ms Hurme mentioned about a well-known event that will be organized soon, and argued: "I cannot take it for granted that it will be arranged in Logomo. Therefore, we need to improve ourselves over and over again, while at the same time aiming towards building a stronger relationship with the organizers." When she compared the differences of renting office space to companies and event production, it is clear that renting office space requires long-term transactions, while handling arrangements for a concert at Logomo has to be seen as a single process every time.

Therefore, it is very important to build functioning relationships and to create and maintain a first-class brand — as these will all help when organizing similar events. Ms Hurme stated "You should always try to get the customer to brand you further. This can be achieved only by answering the customer's demands and taking it further from the customer's expectations. And it is always more beneficial if a potential customer hears good things about your company from another customer."

When we asked Ms Hurme about the company's preferences as regard focusing on promoting Logomo as a corporate brand or a product brand, she instantly told us that this was a key question from the beginning. However, it is decided that the corporate brand will be promoted, and over the years, the importance of the brand has

accumulated even further. Moreover, she emphasized that even though they have chosen to concentrate on the corporate brand, it is very important that the ingredients (i.e. products) are the right ones. Ms Hurme claims that a good brand must offer top of the line products and services to their customers. She further explained that the corporate brand must be aligned with the product brand. A company should never promise more than it can deliver, because that will instantly harm the corporate brand. One of the cornerstones of Logomo is its excellent service and professionalism. However, in order for it to provide the best service, it also needs to make certain that the partners they work with are also the best. It is a fact that the partners can boost Logomo's brand through good results, but at the same time, if they are not sufficiently professional, they can harm the reputation of the Logomo brand. Therefore, it is very important that everyone always handles his or her part with dignity and full professionalism. Needless to say, if the customer is not happy after organizing an event in Logomo's facilities, they will not arrange another one in the future and will probably convey negative recommendations to other potential customers.

Ms Hurme repeatedly highlighted that the core duty of Logomo is to help the customer by all means possible. When the discussion turned to the topic of business negotiations, she mentioned that she does not always aim for a sale. If the client has a need that Logomo cannot provide, she will honestly inform them about the current situation and give them suggestions for alternative solutions, such as which company might be able to help them further. Thus, it can be concluded that Logomo chooses to select long-term partnerships where both parties are likely to prosper, instead of many short transactions where the customers might not return. Similar findings are described by [Newtek \(2013\)](#) on building long-term relationships with customers.

A good point that Ms Hurme raised during the interview was how the corporate brand would suffer if the company was only profit oriented and had no concern for its customers. If the customer does not obtain the quality of a product or service that was expected from the company, the further activities of this customer on the market can destroy the company's reputation — especially if that customer is connected with a large network of companies. It seems that Ms Hurme is of the opinion that operating in this way seems irrational and stated that: "It is easier to sleep at night when you know that you have done your best."

An interesting observation that Ms Hurme described is how Logomo is structured from the perspective of an organization. Although the number of Logomo's permanent staff is small, all other business needs

are covered through B2B partnerships. Thus, it becomes clear that long-term business relations are vital for Logomo, and it could be stated that they are the pieces holding the puzzle together. She also mentioned that in order to establish a business relationship that bears fruit for both parties involved, the salesperson needs to be very insightful and knowledgeable on the subject. If they are not well-informed, Ms Hurme is of the opinion that no one will want to cooperate on a continuous basis. She also mentioned the competition for clients is fairly hard, and they are required to work long hours in order to ensure they retain long-term customers.

## 7.5. Conclusions

This chapter has familiarized the reader with sales in a B2B context and provided an understanding of its importance for corporate and product branding, that is B2B branding. We have discussed the technological developments that have changed B2B sales and buyers' decision-making, while focusing on the seller's perspective. The importance of price and products and how the sales experience impacts the decision making have also been discussed. Furthermore, an overview has been presented of the impact that the salesperson has on branding. An understanding has also been depicted of the importance of branding to the development of business relationships and most importantly that every single employee must understand his/her importance and role within the company and his/her possibility to positively influence corporate brand building. Every employee is always a representative of the company and should be aware of it, because one minor error can often lead to serious problems that can evolve further and at the end influence the turnover of the whole company.

As a result of our interview data, we can conclude that branding within B2B sales presents a multifaceted phenomenon. The seller's task in the sales situation is to help to find a solution for customers in the best possible way, so that both parties benefit. The same has been argued by [Alanen, Mälkiä, and Sell \(2005\)](#), highlighting that the purpose of selling is to find a solution for customers, whilst also providing help in the decision making. In most cases, the price is not the dominant factor but has a certain role in the decision making although it often depends on the product and industry in which the company operates. However, the questions still remain: what should a company focus its communications on, the corporate brand or the product/service brand?

In our empirical case, the company has decided to promote the corporate brand over the product and services and has chosen to focus on providing all its services under the same name. This is one of the main points that should be considered by the management. Obviously, a company will simply not survive without its customers; the customers pay the bills and bring in the revenue, and as indicated by the literature, it is more expensive to acquire new customers than it is to keep existing and loyal ones — thus, relationship building and maintenance should always be the priority. In addition, a company should always strive to provide exceptional personal service to the customers in order to earn and keep its trust and commitment.

As regard the question of long-term versus short-term business relationships, we can clearly state that long-term relationships, in most cases, are more successful than short-term relationships. When taking into account how much Logomo's whole business idea relies on partnerships and recurring business relationships, it seems obvious that maintaining relationships is the safest choice. It is important to keep in mind, however, that all of Logomo's relationships seem to start with the notion and basis that they will become long-term relationships. Nonetheless, it needs to be remembered that although in the case of Logomo, long-term relationships were the number one choice, it does not necessarily mean that this will be the case for companies in all industries. Our findings seem to be in line with what [Zaefarian et al. \(2017\)](#) argue regarding business relationships and how important they are for a business to prosper. From the interview data, we can also draw the conclusion that Ms Hurme's opinions and experiences are in line with what [Baumgarth and Binckebanck \(2011\)](#) mention in regard to the behavior of sales personnel and their influence on corporate brand success.

### **7.5.1. Managerial Implications**

Based on the literature and the empirical research conducted for this chapter, we are able to make some managerial implications regarding branding in B2B sales.

When building a brand, companies need to be aware of the importance of the individuals who represent the company and interact with other representatives. In most cases, sales representatives are the ones who are in direct contact with buyers. As we have learned from the theory and the research, in many cases companies are interested in

building long-term relationships. These relationships are often based on the trust and commitment developed between the salesperson and the customer. This can also be noticed in our case study regarding Logomo's B2B sales where they predominantly consider every new customer relationship as a long-term relationship. Therefore, companies must invest time and money in educating their employees to be aware of the role they play in interfirm interactions. Employees need to be familiar with their brand messages, as it is they who communicate with their current and potential customers.

In addition, it could be beneficial for the salesforce to have some kind of brand manual in readiness, and this could be a very good tool if developed with the aim of benefiting both interacting parties. Another improvement would be to develop a guideline online, as it could be maintained and updated regularly (Von Herten, 2006). It needs to be highlighted that, although von Herten wrote the book referenced in this article 11 years ago, which is a considerable amount of time, considering how rapidly technology advances, it is still useful and applicable today.

In today's sales situations, it is no longer simply the price and the product that are the keys to the decision making, as the seller now has to think more about additional services and overall sales experience. Companies should therefore focus on developing their corporate brand identities and reputations, which will influence how they are perceived on the market by their current and potential business partners (Koporcic & Törnroos, 2015). As we discovered, Logomo is able to maintain a very small salesforce, as long as it is connected with a network of other organizations that work in the same business area. In this way, the companies can spread information and arrange events or projects together, through their network connections and by interacting with the right partners. However, besides connecting with the right partners and using mutual knowledge gained, sales people also need to understand the customer's needs and preferences. All these factors will help in developing long-term business relationships and a strong brand value on a B2B market. On the basis of our research, we also suggest that B2B sales companies invest in the development of online features since it is where many customers initially start when searching for information.

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