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The practice of content marketing strategic planning
*- A multiple case study of external marketing consultants
in Swedish PR-companies*

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Tackord.

Vi vill inleda uppsatsen med att tacka vår handledare Benjamin Julien Hartman. Benjamin har med sin kunskap och sitt engagemang varit en stor inspiration och vägledning till denna uppsats. Vidare vill vi tacka våra handledningsgrupper för hjälpsam återkoppling.

Avslutningsvis vill vi tacka alla intervju respondenter som tagit sig tiden att bidra till vår forskning, det är er tid som ligger till grund för empirin i denna undersökning. Samtliga intervju respondenter har visat ett stort engagemang, utan er kunskapsförmedling hade denna uppsats aldrig ägt rum.

Abstract

Purpose: Content marketing is becoming increasingly important for businesses and practitioners. The field of content marketing strategy is now central for success, but there is relatively scarce empirical evidence of how content marketing strategic planning is conducted in practice. The goal of this paper is to fill this empirical gap. By exploring how external marketing consultants conduct the content marketing strategic planning, for their business clients. This will in turn be analyzed by taking a strategy as practice perspective.

Methodology: A multiple case study through interviews with six external marketing consultants from Swedish PR-companies identified how these practitioners plan the content marketing strategy in practice.

Findings: The findings pointed to a set of six activities that were commonly used in the content marketing strategic planning process. It also suggests two forms of content marketing strategic planning practices, one that is more formal and one that is more informal. Furthermore, the practitioner's perceived industry volatility of their business clients seems to regulate the amount of continual revision and scope of the planning process.

Contribution: This study has contributed to the relatively scarce research area of content marketing strategy by conducting empirical research to give further insight into the content marketing strategic planning practice. This study has also contributed to the strategy as practice field by providing insight into external practitioner's impact on strategy. Additionally, our findings add to the existing literature of strategic planning from a strategy as practice perspective and its new role in contemporary businesses, as a mechanism for coordination in perceived volatile industry contexts.

Key words: *Content Marketing, Content Marketing Strategy, Strategy as Practice, Strategic Planning, Consultants.*

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Abbreviations

For convenience, reoccurring abbreviations are listed down below.

CM = Content marketing

CS = Content strategy

CMS = Content marketing strategy

SAP = Strategy as practice

1 Introduction

In this section, we will start by presenting a background to content marketing, followed by a problem discussion. In the problem discussion, we will discuss content marketing strategy and previous research conducted in the area of content marketing strategy and strategy as practice, that in turn leads to the aim of this study.

1.1 Background

“Content is King” is a term that was first presented by Bill Gates in early 1996, which has shown to be increasingly evident in contemporary society (Barregren & Tegborg, 2013; Charmaine, 2015; Alagoz & Ekici, 2016). Content marketing (CM) is a rapidly emerging phenomenon that is taking the business world by storm. It has in recent years, received much attention by business practitioners and is becoming increasingly important in marketing because of the value it creates (Barregren & Tegberg, 2013; Clark, 2016).

The total investment on marketing activities continues to rise and has reached approximately 450 billion USD worldwide as of 2018 (Statista, 2018). The increasing amount of marketing expenditure has resulted in large amounts of advertising messages that marketers want to convey, which is affecting everyone, including you (Yankelovich, 2010). According to the Yankelovich study (2010), the average modern person is exposed to approximately 5000 ads every day. Advertisements are seen almost everywhere in today’s society - on the TV, radio and social media to name a few.

The loud noise from traditional marketing advertising, is continuing to expand with the emerging digitalization (Barregren & Tegborg, 2013). Additionally, people are beginning to get tired of the traditional advertisements (Charmaine, 2015). In the new landscape of marketing, consumers can decide by themselves which channels and advertisements that they want to take part of. Additionally, the increasing rise of ad-block usage has risen to 200 million people (PageFair, 2015). In a world where trust is scarce, social networks have higher credibility than traditional media and Google is the place we search for our answers, the increasing importance of valuable content is persistent (Jefferson & Tanton, 2015).

The number of messages that we are bombarded with every day means that marketers need to develop new ways and strategies to sort relevant information from the digital noise (Yankelovich, 2010; Barregren & Tegborg, 2013; Charmaine, 2015). This makes it even more important to invest in CM and develop content that consumers find useful (Charmaine, 2015).

CM is a different concept in comparison to the traditional marketing and sales approach (Wall & Spinuzzi, 2018). CM is selling without selling with the goal to provide relevant, engaging and credible content, in order to be perceived as an expert in the area (ibid.). Focus is put on being objective, helpful and informative to meet the current needs of the consumer,

instead of direct sales advertising (Barregren & Tegnberg, 2013; Charmaine, 2015). Through the use of CM, the marketer is able to create value, trust and long-term customer relationships through quality content. (Rowley, 2008; Harad, 2013; Charmaine, 2015; Alagoz & Ekici, 2016).

Additionally, instead of the commonly used push strategy, CM uses a pull strategy on owned media such as blog posts, website and newsletter. In contrast to traditional advertising, that would focus more on paid ads, such as Google ads, Facebook ads, TV and radio (Rowley, 2008; Berggren & Tegnberg, 2013; Charmaine, 2015). Therefore, the objective of CM is to act as a magnet to gain customers attention through valuable content that customers want to take part of and share further on their own initiative (Miller & Washington, 2013; Gattis, 2014; Charmaine, 2015; Wall & Spinuzzi, 2018).

1.2 Problem discussion

Even though “Content is King”, successful CM still needs a good strategic plan to be effective (Gates, 1996; Barregren & Tegnberg, 2013; Charmaine, 2015; Clark, 2016). The vast amount of increased content that is developed, requires the message to be aligned, structured and consistent for long-term value to be created, otherwise it is easy to produce and publish a variety of content that does not produce the desired output (Berggren & Tegnberg, 2013). A functioning CMS plan can assist during this process and is therefore needed to create quality content on a consistent basis and to facilitate the emergence of the objective (Barregren & Tegnberg, 2013; Datig, 2018; Naseri & Noruzi, 2018).

However, a majority of organizations seem to struggle with this part and do not have a formal CMS document (Content Marketing Institute, 2014). Instead, a recently conducted study from Content Marketing Institute (2014), identified that many companies are actually deploying some form of CMS, depending on how it is defined. But it tends to not be documented as a formal strategic document, and a majority of these companies do not seem to find success with their CM (Pulizzi, 2012; Content Marketing Institute, 2014). Pulizzi (2012) further argues, that the reason behind this could be explained by the lack of documented CMS. Having a formal CMS plan creates more structure and opportunities for alignment in the message conveyed, as well as deeper consistency (Pulizzi, 2012; Barregren & Tegnberg, 2013; Datig, 2018; Naseri & Noruzi, 2018).

CMS is an emerging area that is quickly maturing (Clark, 2016). But even though CMS is becoming increasingly popular among business practitioners, there is a distinct gap between business practitioners and academic research professionals (ibid.). The wide interest from business practitioners has not followed through in the academic world to conduct research in the area of CMS (ibid.). Overall, there is a lack of research, and especially when it comes to empirical research in the area of CMS, which is needed in order to validate the current understandings, and develop the research area of CMS (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016; Datig, 2018; Naseri & Noruzi, 2018). Additionally, Clark (2016) and Kissane (2011), highly stress the need to conduct empirical case studies, as there is rather scarce research previously

conducted.

CMS is a rapidly evolving area that is becoming increasingly important for society, businesses, marketers and consumers. But the area also has its challenges and there is a need for increased empirical studies by research scholars to facilitate the field and further understand this phenomenon. One could therefore argue that it would be interesting to investigate the development of a CMS from a practical perspective to understand the practice of content marketing strategic planning. Additionally, the strategic planning aspect is an important part of the development of a content marketing strategy and the development of a formal document.

Drawing on the above mentioned, an interesting and emerging field is the area of strategy as practice (SAP), that takes an approach to strategy from a more practical perspective mainly through empirical research (Whittington, 2006). SAP is involved with three dimensions, namely praxis, practices and practitioners (ibid.). In the area of practitioners, there have been studies conducted at internal multi-level organizational practitioners (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007), but the perspectives of external practitioners are less prominent, and Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) state that this area needs more research. In the area of practices and praxis, research has been conducted, but still needs more research to expand the knowledge of the area (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Especially when it comes to strategic planning practices (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). Grant (2003) and Nauheimer (2007) attempt to provide answers to these questions by conducting case study research, but both still argue of the need for further empirical studies in the area.

1.3 Purpose statement

The purpose of this study is to contribute to fill the empirical knowledge gap presented above by understanding through practical empirical research how external practitioner's conduct the content marketing strategic planning practice.

To achieve the purpose of this study we have formulated a main research question and a sub-question that will be presented below.

1.4 Research Question

Main research question:

- *How do marketing consultants conduct the content marketing strategic planning practice for their business clients?*

Sub-question:

- *How does the marketing consultants perceived industry volatility influence the content marketing strategic planning practice for their business clients?*

1.5 Delimitations

In this study, we will only take the initial planning phase of the CMS plan into consideration. This means, that we will not take into consideration the implementation, evaluation phase or tactical aspects such as editorial calendars of the CMS plan.

Additionally, this study will not take into consideration the marketing consultants own CMS planning. Instead, focus will solely be put on the CMS planning that these external marketing consultants conduct for their business clients.

We will also limit this study to understand the content marketing strategic planning practice using theories and previous research conducted from mainly the area of strategy as practice. The decision to take this perspective is based on the purpose of this study which is to understand the content marketing strategic planning practice through empirical research, and a strategy as practice perspective is therefore relevant to understand this strategic planning 'practice' more in-depth as the area takes a practical perspective on what happens in practice, aligned with the aim of this study.

2 Methodology

In this section, we will present the methodological approach that has been used to achieve the aim of this study. The approach that has been implemented to conduct the study will be explained thoroughly. We will also discuss the sources and the methodological approach used, followed by ethical aspects that have been taken into account in order to achieve good research ethics.

2.1 Research methodology

To investigate how marketing consultants plan the CMS in practice, we decided to adopt a descriptive methodology, using an inductive and interpretative approach (Patel & Davidsson, 2011; Bryman & Bell, 2013). The reason for this decision, was due to the fact that the research objective was to gather descriptive data from marketing consultants about CMS planning practices.

Furthermore, we decided to carry out a qualitative multi-case study. Through case study research, we can gain deeper knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009). With this qualitative case study, we have studied CMS in practice, because the research focuses on subjective words and explanations of people in a particular environment (Patel & Davidsson, 2011; Bryman & Bell, 2013). Bryman & Bell (2013) claim that quantitative research, through statistical results would not be suitable for this type of study. A qualitative approach is proposed when the research area is not well studied, which is correct for our study (Patel & Davidsson, 2011; Bryman & Bell, 2013), since there is quite limited research in the field of CMS from a practical perspective (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016).

One of the challenges with a qualitative approach is that it is difficult to make general conclusions, because it is not based on quantitative facts (Yin, 2009; Patel & Davidsson, 2011; Bryman & Bell, 2013). Instead, the qualitative approach gives opportunities to go more thoroughly and exploratively, to gain a deeper understanding of the selected phenomenon, which is in line with the purpose of this study (Patel & Davidsson, 2011; Bryman & Bell, 2013).

The most relevant methodological approach was to conduct a multiple case study for the purpose of the research in this study. Six case studies with six practitioners were conducted through interviews to obtain a more robust result compared to only conducting a single case study, as more respondents and empirical data make the empirical evidence more convincing (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Zainal, 2007; Yin, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2013). As there has not been much studies conducted in the research area, a case study can help to validate current understandings and develop the research area within CMS, (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016; Datig, 2018; Naseri & Noruzi, 2018).

We interviewed marketing consultant practitioners. The reason for this approach is because it allowed us to research external practitioners, which Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) argues has

scarce research in the area of SAP. Additionally, CMS is considered to be a relatively new phenomenon (Charmaine, 2015; Clark, 2016).

The sample selection criteria for each respondent, was that all the marketing consultant practitioners had to identify with the problem description of the study. Furthermore, the respondents had to be relevant candidates to answer the questions. The respondents were also required to have at least 5 years of industry experience, with senior roles in their respective company. Finally, the company had to offer services within the area of CMS. The reason behind this was to ensure that the marketing consultant was experienced and could contribute to the research study, and that they were conducting the practice of CMS planning. These criteria were met for all the respondents in this research study.

Company	Respondent	Position	Employees	(2017) Revenue	Services
<i>Solberg</i>	Cecilia Gravenfors	Business Manager	45	47 Mkr	Brand strategy, Communications strategy, Content marketing strategy, Tactical production
<i>Break A Story</i>	Håkan Linger	Editor	5	14 Mkr	Content marketing strategy, Content marketing, Tactical production
<i>Newsroom</i>	Mona Höynä-Carlsson & Göran Björklund	Account Director	10	11 Mkr	Content marketing strategy, Content marketing, Tactical production
<i>MorePR</i>	Åsa Frykberg	Senior PR Consultant	8	10 Mkr	Communications strategy, Content marketing strategy, Content marketing, Tactical production
<i>Wonder Brand</i>	Gitta Hertzman Pérez	CEO & Brand Strategist	10	17 Mkr	Brand strategy, Communications strategy, Content marketing strategy, Tactical production
<i>Fanclub</i>	Ulla-Karin Barret	Brand Strategist	8	12 Mkr	Brand strategy, Communications strategy, Content marketing, Tactical production

2.3 Data collection

The data collection in this study consists of primary data collected through interviews with six respondents. The reason why we decided to only collect empirical data through primary data was because of the practice perspective taken in this methodology and the scarce previous research in the CMS area. A focus on primary data collection could therefore contribute to further expand the field. Below we present the process and procedure for the data collection.

Through qualitative interviews, we were able to get an in-depth explanation of how the responding practitioners worked when planning the CMS from their perspective in practice.

We decided to base our primary data on semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were adaptable to reach answers that would benefit the study and the goal, with relevant follow-up questions. We therefore always kept the research questions in mind during the interviews, to ensure that the interview questions and answers from the respondents were relevant to the study. This technique also has the advantage that the respondents often feel more secure and the interview is perceived as a natural conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2013), which hopefully generates a more nuanced answer. One of the interviews was conducted via email conversation due to limited time and long geographical distance. This interview would also follow the semi-structured approach and allow for follow-up questions depending on the responses received.

We conducted six interviews in total. We sent out 42 interview requests, 16 replies were received, of which six interviewees were accepted. It was hard to get appointment for a time with relevant respondents. Another obstacle was the distance, therefore many of the respondents were located in the Gothenburg region. We also made sure that the respondents were working with CMS in the initial contact through email. In this email, we gave a brief background of our study, CMS, the objectives, and which respondents we were searching for, to conduct our interviews. The respondents that were available for interview and fit our criterias responded rather quickly and wanted to be a part and help of the research study.

All the interviews were held at the respondent's workplace, except for Fanclub where we exchanged emails. By holding the interview in the respondent's normal environment, it could enhance the respondent's comfortability, which could lead to more nuanced and accurate answers (Bryman & Bell, 2013; Creswell, 2013). The interviews were held individually, except for Newsroom, where two respondents were interviewed at the same time. We decided mainly on individual interviews for the study because it prevents the respondents from affecting each other's responses, and instead be more neutral and individual (Yin, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2013; Creswell, 2013). The length of the interviews were between 30-60 minutes. The interviews were recorded so that we could focus our attention on the interview and its nuances. Furthermore, an audio player captured information that was not expected, such as follow-up questions, specific breaks or other reflections in the interview guide.

We perceived the first interview with Solberg to be a bit more unstructured, as we did not know what to expect from the answers received from the first respondent. After the first interview was conducted, we gained a better understanding of the general problems perceived by the respondents. Many of the participants in the interviews also found the subject interesting, and some of them wanted a follow-up of the results.

2.4 Data analysis

After the data was collected and transcribed from the different interviews conducted, we compared the different interviews to each other. Focus was put on finding the main similarities and differences in the CMS planning practice conducted. Based on the research questions and purpose statement, we specifically focused on the following aspect:

- CMS planning processes and activities used to achieve CMS goals
- Impact of industry context on the CMS planning practice

Additionally, differences in the practice conducted attributed to industry context, activities, tools and the practice were analyzed. Relevant theories from the SAP area, mainly with a focus on strategic planning in practice and strategy creation in practice were used, to understand the phenomenon more in-depth.

2.5 Method for literature review

The data collected for the research question was from relevant books and articles in the area of CMS and SAP. The articles were acquired using Gothenburg University Search Library and Google Scholar. The books were collected at Gothenburg City Library, and Gothenburg University Library. Any other secondary sources and models came from respondents from the interviews.

Key definitions and terms that were used for searching were different variations of: *Content Marketing*, *Content Marketing Strategy*, *Content Strategy*, *Strategy as Practice*, *Strategic Planning*, *Content Marketing Strategic Planning*.

2.6 Source discussion

The sources used in this study are primarily based on interviews, articles and university books. There have been some old references used in this study, such as Weick and Mintzberg, and the reason behind this choice is because these researchers are prominent in the area of strategy and we believed them to be relevant to further understand the research study. Although, much has happened in the past few decades that have passed since their work, their critiques and findings are still insightful. To complement this, we have tried to supplement these older sources with newer ones, to give a more comprehensive view.

We have tried throughout the choice of sources to take a critical approach and question the

sources and theories found. This was done by trying to find other independent sources that would strengthen the argument of the other source. We also decided to incorporate a section that solely discusses some critiques and concerns raised towards the SAP field, as this perspective is primarily used throughout this study and we therefore wanted to be transparent with the difficulties in this evolving research field.

2.7 Method discussion

Case studies are in general problematic because the case is delimited and there are difficulties in gaining access to the case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009). Additionally, qualitative research is also hard to replicate because of many different factors that are influencing the research and the environment (Bryman & Bell, 2013). In order to increase the reliability, we have strived to neutralize the factors in the environment that we can control.

First, to increase the reliability of the research study, we have only interviewed respondents in our research that we did not know beforehand and have no personal connection towards, in order to limit the personal connection and subjectivity factor to affect the study results. Thus, aiming to stay objective in our research approach and limiting the personal connection factor between us and the respondents to affect the output (Bryman & Bell, 2013).

Secondly, we have conducted multiple interviews and case studies with six marketing consultants from different companies. This research design therefore allows for increased reliability as more empirical evidence is collected and tested repeatedly in different cases, in comparison to a single case study. However, one could argue that the sample is still considered to be small, which could be a flaw and should be taken into consideration. To tackle this, we have strived to increase the number of interviews conducted, but due to time limitation, geographical distance and accessibility to relevant participants that met the sample criteria to participate, has made this challenging. We have therefore been unsuccessful to interview more respondents.

Despite this, there are still limitations with the research method of qualitative case studies. One of these are the personal involvement of us as the researchers throughout the process, that could affect both the situation and the results (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2013). Our subjectivity, personal interests and interpretations during the interviews and choices of material are also a risk for the study and the reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2013). We have strived to stay neutral and take an objective stance in our approach to the research study to limit the effect of these factors.

We have also taken steps to increase the validity of the research study. First, all of the interviews were conducted with a similar approach by using an interview guide and semi-structured interviews. The usage of an interview guide could assist us during transcription and comparison of the different interviews, to enhance the validity of the study.

Secondly, all of the interviews that were held in person, were recorded. By recording the

interviews, it could lead to uneasiness for the respondents and the information could potentially be manipulated in order to make it appear better than reality, which needs to be taken into consideration. However, we did not experience any dishonesty or discomfort during the interviews from our personal subjective perspective. The respondents were open with their work and the challenges they faced. Furthermore, we also offered to send the transcribed material back to each respondent for review and to clear any misinterpretations and strengthen the validity of the research study.

Additionally, the interviews were held in Swedish, and later transcribed into Swedish, but the citations used were transcribed into English. The translation that has been made, could result in nuances being lost during translation and is something that should be taken into consideration. We did however try to be careful during the translation and also sent the citations that would be used back to the respondents for approval, in order to limit any misinterpretations.

2.8 Research ethics

We have strived towards following good research ethics in accordance with Bryman & Bell (2013). In our research we have aimed to be open and transparent with our research and the objectives. Much effort was also put into making clear how the interview would be used in order to limit confusion, misunderstandings and potential harm towards the respondents and their respective companies. We therefore decided to not disclose any material that was not approved by the respondents beforehand. Thus, material that has been published in this study has all received approval, but the transcriptions will not be published, in order to adhere by good research ethics.

Additionally, we asked all the respondents if they wanted to remain anonymous due to the publication of the study online. But were ensured that we could use the respondents as references with their names and their company in our research study. The transcription was also sent back to the respondents for review afterwards, to ensure that no misinterpretations occurred during the interview session. Furthermore, the research has been carried out truthfully, as a researcher we have conducted all communication fairly for the purpose of the study conducted.

Theoretical framework

In this section we will present the theoretical framework based on previous research in the area. First, we will present the planning of a content marketing strategy. We will then move on to define content marketing and content marketing strategy. Lastly, we will define and present theories in the strategy as practice field that is relevant to our research.

3.1 Planning a content marketing strategy

A framework for planning a CMS is presented by Naseri & Noruzi (2018). According to Naseri & Noruzi (2018), the CMS process model can be divided into four distinct key dimensions that would make up the CMS. Namely, ‘planning’, ‘production’, ‘distribution’ and ‘measurement’ (Naseri & Noruzi, 2018).

Naseri & Noruzi’s (2018) research is based on a meta-synthesis of the existing literature in the area, combined with a few interviews from experts in the field of CMS. The model presents a six-step framework that marketing practitioners in theory tend to follow when conducting a CMS during the initial planning phase, (ibid.).



The first step is involved in deciding objectives and essentially the purpose of the CMS (Barregren & Tegborg, 2013). Common objectives are for example brand awareness and visibility. It is important that the objectives are clearly set and defined as they will be a guideline for the rest of the strategy creation (ibid.).

After deciding on objectives, the next step in the planning phase would be to define the target audience (Naseri & Noruzi, 2018). In this section, marketers would identify and understand the targeted customer and create a user persona. More specifically the typical customers interests, desires and needs so that the content can be adapted accordingly (ibid.).

Figure 1. Planning a CMS model (Naseri & Noruzi, 2018:15)

A user persona is a generalization of the typical customer that the marketer wants to target (Barregren & Tegborg, 2013). But in order to be able to do that, the marketers must first define the factors correlated with the typical customer to make it as concrete and precise as possible (ibid.).

The third phase is involved in determining and pointing out the responsible team, which

would be the people responsible for each content and the content producers (Naseri & Noruzi, 2018). It is common that the type of content and possibilities are adapted according to internal competence and expertise so that the company can draw on its advantages and unique skills (ibid.).

The fourth step is focused on determining the content type (Naseri & Noruzi, 2018). In this section, the type of format and content that should be created will be discussed. This could for example be videos, pictures or texts (ibid.). Based on previous findings, it is now possible for deeper analysis of what is intended to be produced and should be based on customer preferences and the internal competence and expertise of the CMS team (Barregren & Tegborg, 2013).

The last step we will be taking into consideration is determining the contact points (Naseri & Noruzi, 2018). More specifically, this means the different ways and channels, in which the customer comes in contact with the company (Barregren & Tegborg, 2013). It is focused on analysis of the customer journey (ibid.).

The sixth step is more towards tactical implementation and is outside of the scope of this study and will therefore not be highlighted further.

3.1.1 Content marketing

In order to fully understand the CMS planning practice, we need to define and understand CM. CM is about creating the right content, for the right target group, through the right channel to conduct a profitable customer action (Cramer, 2012; Berggren & Tengborg, 2013; Harad, 2013). It is important to understand the concept of CM, otherwise it is easy to produce and publish a variety of content that does not produce the desired output (Berggren & Tengborg, 2013).

CM is a type of marketing that gives the customer value for the company's content (Rowley, 2008; Charmaine, 2015; Alagoz & Ekici, 2016). It is about linking customer relationships and creating trust with the content you want to reach out with (ibid). The important thing in this marketing strategy is to find the right target group through the right channels, and then convey the content message to the customers (Berggren & Tegborg, 2013; Charmaine, 2015). This will result in a relevant, engaging and credible content message with the goal of getting the sender to be seen as an expert in their area, and thus selling without selling (Wall & Spinuzzi, 2018).

CM is based on a 'pull strategy', in which the customers themselves give their attention and consume the content because they want to themselves (Miller & Washington, 2013; Charmaine, 2015; Wall & Spinuzzi, 2018;). Cramer (2012) claims that the content of the marketing will develop and distribute new and old customers through a form of interaction in communication, rather than direct sales. Channel selection will be chosen according to the target group you want to reach out to, and then the interaction between the customer and the

company takes place (Rowley, 2008; Datig, 2018; Naseri & Noruzi, 2018). Harad (2013) claims that CM is to develop the trust of its customers, which must then be done through frequent and consistent content sharing. The content must reach out to its customers frequently and preferably through many different distribution channels. The distribution channels used are proprietary media, such as social media, websites, blog post, YouTube channels and newsletters, while traditional advertising would focus more on Google, Facebook, TV and Radio ads to name a few (Rowley, 2008; Berggren & Tengborg, 2013; Charmaine, 2015).

3.1.2 Content marketing strategy

Content strategy (CS) and CMS are two concepts that are closely correlated in the literature and sometimes mistaken for each other (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016; Batova & Andersen, 2016). It is therefore important to clarify these definitions to understand CMS.

CS is a relatively broad field that is hard to define (Clark, 2016), partly because it involves people from different areas of the organization such as marketers and those working with web design and web development. These different actors in the organization tend to have different definitions of CS (Clark, 2016). Kissane (2011), argues that for marketers, content strategy involves distribution, channels, messages, branding and sometimes editorial workflow.

Additionally, CMS is considered to be a sub-strategy for the overarching larger corporate strategy and communications strategy (Kissane, 2011; Fichter & Wisniewski, 2014; Clark, 2016; Batova & Andersen, 2016). The factors that are included and taken into account when it comes to CMS are not very clear. According to Clark's (2016) literature review of the definitions of CS, the definition used for CMS includes developing personas, journey mapping, goal settings, brand strategy, style guidelines and distribution channels.

As presented above, in the eyes of marketers, CS and CMS tend to be defined as the same concept and are often misinterpreted for each other (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016). Drawing on the purpose of this study, which is to understand how external marketing consultants plan their business clients CMS, the definition of CMS, lies close to Kissane (2011) and Clark's (2016) definition of it. The definition of CMS and the focus of this study is therefore on CS defined by marketers. CMS could therefore be defined as a strategy of the CM aspects that involves distribution channels, developing personas and messages, style guidelines, objectives and goals (Kissane, 2011; Batova & Andersen, 2016).

CMS is an emerging area that is receiving more attention (Clark, 2016). But there is still a considerable gap between business practitioners and academic research professionals, and there is relatively scarce research conducted in the area of CMS (ibid.).

Clark's (2016) literature review of CS and CMS finds that there is a small number of consultants that produce the larger part of the literature in the field. But the research conducted is not based of comparative empirical research, instead it is more focused towards

definitions and conceptual understanding. Additionally, the scarce empirical research that has been conducted in CMS is mainly focused towards libraries and higher education institutions (Chauhan & Pillai, 2013; Fichter & Wisniewski (2014); Clark, 2016; Elsayed, 2017; Datig, 2018). Furthermore, CMS also lacks research in the business area and especially when it comes to empirical case studies with companies, which needs more research (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016; Naseri & Noruzi, 2018). Overall, there is a lack of research and especially case study research in the area of CMS, which is needed in order to validate the current understandings and further develop the research area of CMS (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016; Datig, 2018; Naseri & Noruzi, 2018).

3.2 Strategy as practice

In order to understand how to plan a CMS in practice we need to understand and define SAP as we will take this perspective. SAP is a relatively new and broad research area (Whittington, 1996; Johnson et al., 2003; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Langley & Lusiani, 2015), that focuses on the effects of the strategy itself, and provide an in-depth analysis of what is happening in the implementation, planning and formulation phases (Langley & Lusiani, 2015). The SAP research field first emerged in 1996 by Whittington, and was then reviewed in 2006 by Whittington, after new researchers had continued to research the area of SAP, such as Jarzabkowski and Johnson. Whittington (2006) categorizes the different research conducted and presents a framework of the SAP literature, in which he connects the different areas in SAP.

This framework that Whittington (2006) constructs, lays the foundation for future research in the area of SAP, namely praxis, practices and practitioners. These three dimensions are separate, but still interrelated and together they contribute to make up the SAP research area (ibid.). Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) emphasize that research on all three elements is necessary, as strategies exist in all of these dimensions, and they all depend on each other for the strategy to work.

Praxis is more focused towards micro-activities, while practices are more on the macro-level and practitioners are the ones actually doing the practice (Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). More specifically, this means that praxis is focused on understanding these activities in detail and can be further assigned into three levels of praxis, namely micro, meso and macro level (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). It could for example be a specific activity, such as conducting a SWOT analysis by analysing how it is conducted and the specific factors included, depending on the level of analysis (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007).

Practices on the other hand, could be defined as “[...] *shared routines of behaviour, including traditions, norms, and procedures for thinking, acting and using ‘things’.*” (Whittington, 2006, p. 619). This indicates that practices are more concerned with the macro-level phenomena that serve as guidance for actions and is a type of routine with many praxis’ or activities and procedures that constitutes the practice (Whittington, 2006).

The third element is the practitioners, who are the ones that are actually doing the practice in the strategy making, and refers to both internal and external actors (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009). This means that internal actors for example could be the organization's general manager, while external actors could be consultants or investors (Whittington, 2006; Lundgren & Blom, 2009). As we are studying marketing consultants and how they work with their business clients' organization, this study will take an external practitioners' perspective on how they plan the CMS.

By linking the three concepts of praxis, practices and practitioners, we can further understand SAP (Whittington, 2006). Of course, these elements are all interrelated with each other and can not be separated completely. Drawing on the purpose of this study, all three aspects of SAP will be touched upon. The study will mainly be focused on practices and praxis at firm-level, conducted by external practitioners in the form of marketing consultants.

3.2.1 Critique towards strategy as practice

SAP is getting more attention and recognition in research, and like many other research areas, it has received critique. Carter et al. (2008), points critique at the difficulties of the 'practice' definition, when it comes to separating praxis and practices more specifically. The definition is not clearly defined, but rather confusing and abstract (Carter et al., 2008). Another critique that Carter et al. (2008) raise, is regarding the difficulties of defining the term 'strategy', in terms of what it is concretely and what is included in it. Carter et al. (2008), draw the line, in which strategy should involve activities that are known as strategic activities in advance, and should therefore not be classified as any activity, even though the activity might be a process and result in a strategic outcome. The critique that Carter et al. (2008) raises, should be taken into consideration. SAP, is as previously stated a relatively new research area there is a need to take a critical perspective for the area to keep developing and mature.

3.2.2 How are strategies created in practice?

To understand how to plan a CMS in practice we need to understand how strategies are created in practice from a SAP view.

There is relatively scarce research conducted in the area of strategy creation from a SAP view (Regner, 2003; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007). The area of strategy on the other hand is broad, and there has been some research conducted previously in strategy process by Mintzberg, Johnson and Pettigrew (Regner, 2003). The lack of research resulted in Regner's (2003; Jarzabkowski et al., 2007) study in this area. Regner (2003) studied strategy activities on different organizational levels in four multinational corporations and identified two different forms of strategy activities.

There are differences in how practitioners create strategies in practice (Regner, 2003). This means that there is not always a single way a practice is conducted, but there can be different

practices in how strategies are created in practice. This is for example shown in all of the cases in Regner's (2003) articles, in which different managerial levels create strategies in different ways. Regner (2003) argues that there is a distinct difference in how middle managers, and business leaders, develop strategies. Centre are the ones defining the strategies that needs to be implemented in the hierarchy, while periphery are lower managers that are away from the headquarters and out in the operation fields (ibid.).

The differences that Regner (2003) find in his study are that periphery is trying to explore and build a strategy based on experience and examining new technology and nearby industries to form this strategy. It is about gathering data and then understanding what it means, more towards an inductive reasoning. Centre on the other hand are more industry focused, and doing estimates and planning with documents and reports. Basing strategies on current technologies and markets on information accumulated in previous years, which makes the new strategy not much different to the current one. This is more of a deductive reasoning based on historical strategy and previous experiences and strategy knowledges. It is therefore much more rational, formal and structured that is based on research and analysis, rather than the periphery managers that are feeling it in themselves by their own intuition and experience on the market with new fresh perspectives. In the periphery, new knowledge was accumulated, in contrast to the centre, in which business leaders wanted to build on the existing knowledge and make it better. But, it was in the periphery that the first steps were taken towards creating new strategies (ibid.).

3.2.3 Strategic planning in practice and industry volatility

To understand CMS planning in practice, we need to understand more concretely strategic planning in practice.

According to Mintzberg and Waters (1985), strategic planning can be described as business practitioners formulating a detailed strategy with budgets, control, governance and schedule, that is expected to be implemented according to plan. This view would mean that strategic planning is a static and formal strategic plan that business practitioners follow and adhere to.

As stated, a practice consists of different praxis' or micro-activities that are integrated into a routine, that creates the formal strategic planning practice. One of these activities, that is part of the bigger planning practice is strategy workshops (Hodgkinson & Whittington, 2006). This activity is regarded as a formal event and closely related to formal strategic planning procedures (ibid.). In contrast to Mintzberg and Waters' (1985) critique against formal strategic planning, Hodgkinson & Whittington (2006) finds that strategy workshops are still commonly used in contemporary business organizations in practice, during strategic planning. During these workshops, managers previous experiences are often the base for the discussions, rather than new knowledge and findings (Hodgkinson and Whittington, 2006). This new knowledge and research, that could be considered to take a more inductive approach, is something that Regner (2003), argues is an important factor for the success of strategy creation. Hodgkinson and Whittington (2006) argue on the other hand that this

challenge could potentially be solved by incorporating external consultants in the strategy process and strategy workshops. By doing so, it could prevent an over-reliance on the managers previous experience. Instead it could open up perspectives for the discussion to involve more aspects, which is more in line with both the deductive and inductive reasoning that Regner (2003) points out to be critical aspects for successful strategy creation.

Apart from strategy workshops, strategy tools such as SWOT are also widely used in strategic planning and these tools are regarded as formal strategy activities to assist the strategic planning and situation audit analysis (Grant, 2003; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2014). According to Jarzabkowski & Kaplan (2014), strategy tools are intended to be relevant when it comes to handling uncertainties during the strategy creation process. But this view is not shared by March (2006), who claims that strategy tools can be widely ineffective and not relevant during uncertainty, partly because of its simplicity. March (2006) argues that strategy tools such as SWOT should not be used in changing and volatile environments, because it uses outdated information and often too few perspectives, which could hinder the strategic actions. This view on formal strategic planning is also shared by Mintzberg (1994). Hodgkinson & Whittington (2006) also argue that during workshops, SWOT is the most commonly used tool, which has been shown to be an organizing framework for discussion, rather than a tool for analysis to a large extent. SWOT is often seen as a precursor step to strategic planning (Ruocco & Proctor, 1994; Panagiotou, 2003) and is an effective strategic tool to use in the discovery and evaluation stage of strategic planning (Ruocco & Proctor, 1994; Panagiotou, 2003). It is regarded as an audit of the organization and the environment around the company and tends to be effective when many different actors are involved in the planning process, as it gives more perspectives and insights (Ruocco & Proctor, 1994; Panagiotou, 2003). This is especially true when combining external and internal actors to fully get a comprehensive picture of the situation (Ruocco & Proctor, 1994; Panagiotou, 2003).

The formal planning of strategic planning and its impact on business performance has been discussed thoroughly for decades, with researchers arguing on both sides (Hamel, 1989; Ruocco & Proctor, 1994; Grant, 2003). Many researchers argue that the uncertainty of the constant changing business environment that businesses operate in makes it very difficult for strategic planning to be relevant and conducted in practice, as it needs continual updates to stay relevant (Grant, 2003). Mintzberg & Waters (1985) conclude that strategic planning is more relevant for industries that operate in a more stable environment. They also argue about the importance of commitment, vision and strong leadership for it to be successful. This view is also shared by Weick (1987), who argue about the importance of implementation and what happens in practice rather than what is planned, defines successes and failures. Weick (1987) puts effort toward the importance of improvisation and trust as substitutes to strategy. On the other hand, Weick (1987) states that we should not get rid of the plans as they give directions, but that we need to create meaning to the strategic plans. Because a plan cannot foresee the future. One should therefore not put too much effort into the planning phase, because the success of the plan will mainly be determined by the practical action and implementation of it

(ibid.). Weick (1987), believes that there always needs to be an overall strategy and framework that needs to be followed. The leader needs to work so that the coworkers are inside the frameworks and improvise, but there must be a defined and distinct objective, goal and vision (ibid.).

Jarratt & Stiles (2010) findings of strategy practice of executives at different UK firms, suggest that strategy practitioner's interpretation of their industry environment encouraged the type of practice conducted. This means that it was common that if the environment was perceived as more stable and predictable, the strategy planning practice would be more routinized and standard, more in line with Regner's (2003) deductive approach (Jarratt & Stiles, 2010). While a perceived uncertain future and volatile context would encourage more adaptability from a standard process and incorporate new ways, mainly a combination of Regner's (2003) deductive and inductive approaches (Jarratt & Stiles, 2010).

It is indeed uncertainty of the future and constant changes in the business environment that make strategic planning challenging to conduct in practice (Mintzberg, 1994; March, 2006). But, it is also important to mention that strategic planning in many companies is more like a ritual and routine, assuming that the environment will stay constant (Grant, 2003; Hodgkinson & Whittington, 2006; Johnson et al., 2010).

Grant's (2003) research of strategic planning in the oil majors in practice, finds that in contrast to Mintzberg's strict top-down strategic planning approach, a lot has changed over the past two decades, and that strategic planning practices have changed substantially in response to the challenges of strategy formulation in turbulent and unpredictable environments. It is more of a planned emergence strategic approach (Grant, 2003). Grant (2003) finds that the process in practice is shown to be much more informal and decentralized. The strategic plans themselves have also become shorter term, more goal focused and less specific with regard to actions and resource allocations (ibid.). Grant (2003) argues that the role of strategic planning systems within companies' overall management has also changed. Strategic planning has become less about strategic decision making and more a mechanism for coordination and performance managing (ibid.).

4 Results & Analysis

This chapter is structured by first presenting the empirical findings in section 4.1. from the conducted interviews by describing the key features of the CMS planning practice step by step. We then move on to integrate additional findings and analyze the CMS planning practice in section 4.2. and onwards. This is done by taking a strategy as practice view more in-depth, and how the practice differs depending on practitioner and industry context.

4.1 Planning the content marketing strategy - Step by Step

All the marketing consultant practitioners in the sample engaged in some type of a CMS planning process, some more formal and some more informal. Despite the differences between practitioners in the description of their CM planning practice and the vocabulary they used to describe it, the similarities were adequate to identify a general CMS planning process of the practice. The CMS planning process and stages of the planning process that were most common for the practitioners were the following:

The generic content marketing strategic planning process



Figure 2. Generic CMS planning practice by external marketing consultants (Wang & Zeidler, 2018).

Step 1. Conducting a current situation audit

The starting point for the CMS planning cycle was to conduct a current situation audit, where the marketing consultant and responsible managers in the organization would participate. Cecilia at Solberg stated the following:

“We always start with some kind of current situation audit to know what exists, that we can base our work on and also understand what our business clients want to achieve and the objective with conducting the content marketing.”

Åsa at morePR shares this approach:

“The majority of our projects with our business clients always start with some type of workshop, it works as a current situation audit in which we determine where our client stand today and what they have right now.”

The marketing consultants together with their business clients would start off the process by analyzing the current situation of the company, which in turn would lay the groundwork for the CMS planning. It would include getting a background of the organization and an understanding of the business client’s needs, to know where to begin the strategic planning. Half of the marketing consultants would use more formal activities such as strategy workshops or the SWOT tool during the current situation audit analysis.

Step 2. Defining objectives

After the current situation audit, the marketing consultants would first lay the foundation and then move on to also discuss goals and setting objectives for the plan. This was often times based on the extant broader communications strategy and would include defining vision, purpose and aim of the plan in order to get a clear direction for the CMS plan. Setting the objectives is a very important and crucial part for the success of the plan and is one of the initial topics that will be discussed thoroughly in the starting phase of the plan. This is described by Håkan at Break A Story with the following:

“The first step is always to define what the clients want to communicate and what their objectives are. We always start here with our new clients to define the content marketing strategy.”

Step 3. Defining target audience

After setting the objectives, the marketing consultants would work together with their business clients to define the target audience more specifically and create the user persona in detail. Håkan at Break A Story states the following:

“The second step is to define the target audience. What does it look like? In regard to age, income, sex, geography and so forth.”

This step is crucial to get right, since the CMS is focused on developing relevant and useful content to a specific audience (Barregren & Tegborg, 2013). But if this audience is not thoroughly analyzed and understood correctly, it will heavily affect the strategy and message conveyed and the interest of the target audience. Cecilia from Solberg argues that this is a big challenge and the part where it often goes wrong. Cecilia from Solberg states the following:

“What information do we have right now at place that can be used, what more do we need to fill. Because often times you have to move from point A to point B and that requires information. [...] Here you might have scarce information, that is crucial strategically, to achieve the set objectives.”

There is strong focus on analysis and important information to make good strategic decisions for the development of the CMS. This information needs to be collected to fully understand the customers, context and competitors.

Step 4. Filling existing research gaps

There are often times, but not always, research and information gaps that will be found after the current situation audit is conducted, which need to be filled. This will be the next step in order to move on with the planning of a CMS. It could be to conduct different kinds of analysis and research, such as competitor analysis, market research or customer research, with the aim to further understand the target audience. Cecilia at Solberg states the following:

“The current situation audit actually creates a set of gaps. Like, we have this information, but are missing this information and these parts. We don’t want our clients to guess on this. Of course, they can fill in some parts, but in order to get real answer we must talk to the ones involved, in this case the customers.”

If there is a gap the marketing consultants would offer to collect the necessary data to proceed, or as Åsa at MorePR states

“Then we map it out for them. We are the ones to gather information and knowledge to fill the gaps.”

Step 5. Deciding on message to convey and tonality

When the research gaps are filled, it is now possible to start analyzing and understanding the target audience more in-depth. In this step, focus will be on a more comprehensive understanding of the customer journey, user persona and contact points. But also where the competitors lie, in order to better target the audience and decide on relevant message to convey, that is also possible to reach through in the digital noise. Åsa from MorePR describes the following:

“We try to find the importance for the consumer, that builds the brand. And look for where our competitors lie. [...] We need to find our own arena.”

Åsa at MorePR continues to state the following:

“There are so many more channels to reach out with the content today, and a much greater noise to get through, so this has changed and is harder to get through.”

Mona at Newsroom states the following:

“We help them with deciding on strategies regarding target audience and message.”

Step 6. Deciding on distribution channels

Based on previous decisions, information and findings, the practitioners will decide on which distribution channels that should be used. It is also clearly stated by the marketing consultants that it is much easier to define the right channel strategy when already knowing and defining the target audience first. Mona states the following:

“Which channels that should be used, is unknown before we have defined the target audience, then we have effective ways and previous experience on what works and what does not work. [...] We then recommend our customers with care

on how to decide on channel strategy, but it all comes down to the purpose and objectives.”

It is therefore understandable that the planning process for a CMS should follow a certain approach, because some steps are precursors to the next one. Cecilia states that the following:

“We map out where the target audience is. [...] Then, which channels our business clients are operating in today. Which channels they are working with, is there something we can add or improve what they already have.”

4.2 Content marketing strategic planning practice and industry volatility

However, it was also clear that the developed CMS plan would not be strictly set for all of the marketing consultants. Depending on perceived volatility of the industry context, the CMS plan would be updated and revised accordingly. For some marketers, the strategic plan would be more of a living document, while for others it would be a plan that would not be revised. Göran at Newsroom stated the following:

“It is a living, strategic planned document. [...] The plan must be revised and updated all the time in order to ensure the next step ahead. It is not a set strategy or plan, but rather a framework to follow that needs continuous updates when new perspectives and ideas arises.”

This view is shared by Åsa at MorePR:

“It is very dynamic, we develop a content marketing strategy for every business clients that will be followed up continually. [...] with our customers we always revise and change, because there’s always so much that is happening.”

Both of Göran at Newsroom and Åsa at MorePR perceived their business clients to be operating in a volatile business context and would therefore require a strategic plan that is continuously relevant and up to date. It is important to understand though, that the CMS plan in a majority of cases would not be entirely updated and remade every month, but mainly some parts of it, that is being affected by competitors or events. But this is, as stated above, heavily affected by the type of context that their business clients are working in. Mona at Newsroom states:

“We regularly have monthly meetings with our business clients where we discuss and work with monitoring the context and changes with regards to customers, competitors and so forth”.

Mona states the following:

“The regular monthly meetings and follow ups vary depending on industry and customer, but we always have monthly meetings to be ready for changes, but how often we actually change strategic direction varies very much depending on

customer, industry and reality. But we must be fast on our feet, because things are happening very fast and we need to be ready and on track to these changes”.

Because as previously stated, the context and environment is always changing and so will the CMS, therefore there will constantly be monthly meetings and follow ups, but these will be adjusted according to the amount of industry change that can be expected. This is further specified Mona at Newsroom:

“The customers that I personally work with are more set and in steady industries, in which we know more concretely what is needed and is mostly about gaining visibility for the brand and we have already defined customer segments that needs continual information. It does not vary as much. But sometimes it could explode and happen something to the brand and then we must revise the strategy. This potential and preparation is always there”.

This is also shared by Gitta at Wonderbrand:

“Yes, the strategy is solid. The methodology of how we should think. [...] We revise after 3-5 years maybe. There’s not so much happening, it doesn’t change that fast.”

The findings show that the amount of revision and updates of the CMS plan is guided by the marketing consultants own perceived volatility of their business clients’ industry context. This was in line with Jarratt & Stiles (2010) findings, in which they suggest that strategy practitioner’s interpretation of their industry environment encouraged the type of practice conducted. Our findings suggest that, if the marketing consultant perceives their business client to operate in a stable industry context without much change, then the CMS plan would be rigid and followed more strictly. While, if the marketing consultant perceives their business client to operate in a volatile industry context, then the developed plan would act more as a living document and guideline that constantly would require change and adaptation in accordance with new updates in the business environment. Our findings identify many commonalities with Jarratt & Stiles (2010) research findings. But our findings also identify that the amount of revision on the already developed plan and how that was guided by the marketing consultants perceived industry context.

It was clear, that the industry context factor would be taken into consideration during the CMS planning phase, which is in accordance with Grant’s (2003) findings that industry context has an influence on the amount of planning and revision of the strategic planning process. The uncertainty of the constant changing business environment makes strategic planning very difficult to be conducted in practice, which requires continual updates to the strategic plan (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Hamel, 1989; March, 2006). Grant (2003) finds that the role of strategic planning has become more short-term planning with increased informality in the process and that the plans are used more for coordination and communication in volatile industry contexts. This view is partly shared by Weick (1987), who argues about the importance of vision,

commitment and guidance of the plan, and that these factors are what really matter during practical implementation and uncertainty.

Drawing on the researchers presented above, we believe that in more volatile industry contexts, there are constant changes in the environment, such as changes in customer preferences, competitors and new developments, which requires continual updates to the CMS plan to stay relevant and up to date. The interpretation of the environmental context therefore guides the CMS planning practice to a large extent, which is also in accordance with Jarrett & Stiles (2010) view. With that said, we believe that the CMS could still be thoroughly developed, but would function more as a guideline (Weick, 1987; Grant, 2003; March, 2006). While in environments perceived as more stable, and changes are less drastic, the developed CMS plan will be followed more strictly and not revised as often.

4.3 Formality and informality of the content marketing strategic planning practice

All the marketing consultants, except for Fanclub would follow some kind of a formal framework with a step-by-step guide for the planning process. Newsroom, MorePR and Wonderbrand would follow the steps more strictly, one by one before moving on to the next step, while Solberg and Break A Story would be more loose and adaptable on the steps and applying different approaches depending on the business client and more follow a semi-structured framework. Break A Story says the following regarding following a structured framework to base the CMS planning on:

“Following a framework step by step is in my opinion not reality. It doesn’t work like that.”

Ulla-Karin at Fanclub stated the following:

“No, we don’t follow a formal framework.”

Mona at Newsroom states the following when asked on how they work with planning the CMS:

“We have a model that we follow and it is called the Newsroom model that follows a step by step approach that we work with and have followed and used for a very long time.”

Gitta at Wonderbrand states:

“There is a finished model that we follow. [...] I would say that it is quite prevalent, not completely our own, but rather a very common planning practice. [...] It follows a linear process, in which the next step is a precursor.”

It was obvious that some of the marketing consultants would use the framework actively, while others not so much and Fanclub not at all, as they did not have one. This indicates in

accordance with Regner's (2003) findings that there are in fact different ways in which strategies can be created in practice. We believe that there could be many reasons to why these differences exist in practice. One of the reasons for this difference may be the fact that some of the marketing consultants internal company had different degrees of focus on CMS. Because of this, some of the formal routines may not have been fully developed or received much attention to develop more formal CMS planning practice routines and frameworks to adhere to, which could be an explanation to some of the informalities that are seen from some of the marketing consultants.

Another explanation to the differences found in regards to formality of the CMS planning process could be that the industry is constantly shifting, which makes a formal procedure more vulnerable (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1994; March, 2006;). This is also shown in the citation from Håkan, where he states the differences of reality in contrast to following a step by step framework. This means, that there is a requirement for greater adaptability to the specific customer and instead following overall guidelines that the marketing consultant adheres to in practice (Weick, 1987; Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Grant, 2003; March, 2006). We share their view and believe that by incorporating more informalities in the process, the marketing consultant could become more flexible and adaptable to their business client even more, rather than following a set framework, which may inhibit drastic changes. By not strictly following a formal framework and planning process, it also creates more opportunities for creative solutions and being able to think outside the box. This creates more opportunities to generate new innovative ideas, which could be important for the success of the CMS creation, instead of just focusing on the formal procedure itself (Grant, 2003; March, 2006). This more informal approach could therefore be more suitable in industry contexts that marketing consultants perceive as more volatile, because of the raised difficulties that a formal procedure has (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1994; Grant, 2003; March, 2006). This increasing informality and focus on coordination in practice is also seen in Grant's (2003) research, and shows the importance of these factors during strategy creation in volatile industry contexts.

These differences in formality in practice, were especially shown in how the different marketing consultants would use and follow the framework, but also the usage of formal activities to assist the framework, such as strategy workshops and strategy tools. Newsroom stated that they 'always' start off with a workshop for the CMS planning:

"We always start off with a workshop for half a day to get a sense and feeling of the customers needs. [...] It is sort of a current situation audit that we conduct, [...]."

We also find that these same marketers, mainly Newsroom, MorePR and Wonder Brand would use other strategic tools during the current situation audit for assistance, most notably was the SWOT model that would be used in the early stage of the planning phase. Åsa from MorePR are one of these marketers that would use this approach:

“We tend to use the SWOT-model. Explore strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities with our business clients. [...] We start with a SWOT to know where we are today.”

These citations presented above in our findings indicate that half of the marketers would take a more formal approach to the CMS planning practice than others. This was especially shown in the incorporation of different formal activities that relies on formality that enforces the formal strategic planning process such as workshops and the SWOT tool (Hodgkinson & Whittington, 2006; Jarzabkowski & Kaplan, 2014). March (2006), and Mintzberg & Water (1985), argue that formal strategic planning procedures are inappropriate and ineffective in contemporary society, because of the rapid development and changes that occur in the market. In contrast, Ruocco & Proctor (1994), and Panagiotou (2003), argue that these formal activities tend to be very useful in the initial strategy formulation phase. The formality and detailness of these formal activities as precursors to the strategic planning that follows, makes it possible to gather the necessary information for successful strategic planning. This would indicate that these formal activities could be useful in the initial planning phase, especially for information gathering and situation analysis, although they are closely associated with formal strategic planning. Hodgkinson & Whittington (2006), and Johnson et al. (2010), also argue that these formal activities are more often than not, just a ritual that practitioners follow and is heavily based on the internal organizations managers' previous experience, without external perspectives. But, using these formal activities as a base for discussion and gathering necessary information, in which different perspectives are combined together, many of the challenges raised with these formal activities can be prevented (Ruocco & Proctor, 1994; Panagiotou, 2003; Hodgkinson & Whittington, 2006); Hodgkinson & Whittington (2006) argue that by letting an external consultant facilitate the strategy workshop, new perspectives can be incorporated, in combination with the internal managers' experiences, which is in accordance with Regner's (2003) findings of combining inductive and deductive reasoning for successful strategy creation. This view is also shared by Gitta at Wonderbrand:

“[...] one of the most important thing is to use an outside perspective. This is nothing one can or should do in the internal organisation.”

The integration of an experienced outside perspective in the form of a consultant in these formal activities, creates opportunities for a more comprehensive, coherent and holistic view in the CMS planning process, as more parties are involved (Panagiotou, 2003; Hodgkinson & Whittington, 2006). This means that the reliance of formal strategic planning and formal activities are more prepared for reality and environmental change as an outside perspective is being integrated (Panagiotou, 2003). This is because, when both external and internal actors are involved in the process, it gives more perspectives, and comprehensive strategic analysis, which increases the preparation for a volatile environment. Additionally, the importance of the marketing consultants to incorporate new, up to date research to fill research gaps, leads to new perspectives and to not depend as much on the management's own previous experiences, which is in line with Regner's (2003) argument regarding the importance of combining inductive and deductive reasoning for successful strategy creation.

5 Discussion

In this section we start by discussing and reflecting the findings from the study and its implications for different actors. We will then present our conclusions of the study and the contribution in relation to previous research studies in the area. Lastly, we will recommend further research.

The aim of this research study is to understand how marketing consultant practitioners in practice conduct the CMS planning practice for their business clients. Our findings suggest that marketing consultants plan the CMS practice through a set of six activities. Furthermore, we find two distinct form of practices of the CMS planning. One that is more formal and the other that is more informal. Additionally, our findings suggest that the perceived industry volatility influences the amount of planning and updates of the CMS plan.

CM continue to be an essential part of marketing and branding. The new digital era and the changing landscape of consumer behavior influences the marketing practice. Digitalization and the emerging amounts of content, requires companies to focus on providing valuable, relevant and quality content that consumers want to consume.

Although, we have not yet investigated the effect of the CMS in this study, previous research in the area give indication towards its contribution to CM success if conducted correctly. A CMS is needed for long-term strategy, customer retention and customer loyalty. But, CMS also has its challenges. Budget and resources are one aspect that was not mentioned in our study but will continue to play a role in CMS and determining if the advantages outweigh the costs. It is also important to understand that a formal CMS plan needs to be updated and revised accordingly to stay relevant as a base for decision-making. Otherwise the CMS could be misleading and lead to incorrect decisions that could be potentially harmful for the company.

Drawing on the above mentioned, we argue that it is still necessary to have a CMS for companies that are working with content and marketing. At the very least, it should act as a guiding mechanism for coordination of the CM. This is a requirement for a majority of organizations, as the amount of content in the internal organization and external noise keeps increasing, which creates the need for a coherent strategy that can create a consistent message and direction. On the other hand, the long-term sustainability of the CMS is a rather controversial topic. Many critics believe that the downfall of CM is that the large amount of content that is being produced is too much for the consumers to handle. It is certainly becoming increasingly harder for marketing practitioners to convey their message. But we believe that this creates an increasing need for practitioners to put effort into information gathering and deep comprehensive analysis of the material collected to better target the audience and convey the message, as this is becoming increasingly harder. This in turn places focus on the planning of CMS. But, contemporary business society and industries are changing. Competitors are adapting, customer's preferences are changing, and the market is

uncertain. This should be taken into consideration during the CMS planning. CMS and CMS planning should still exist, but the extent may differ depending on volatility of the industry and uncertainties attributed to the future. But, the CMS should strive to be kept flexible and used as a guideline and revised when needed based on the circumstances to continually stay relevant and updated.

5.1 Marketing implications

Our study has implications for different actors and society at large. The research and findings are important for marketing practitioners and business leaders, as it gives insight into how the practice of CMS planning can be conducted and the different ways it can be practiced.

Furthermore, the study also gives insight into why a specific practice may be more appropriate depending on industry context and situation. The increasing informalities of strategic planning and coordination mechanisms suggest that this conceptual understanding needs to be adopted in order to adapt to the environment and is something that practitioners should take into consideration during the CMS planning. Industry context should be one of the criteria to clarify in the initial phase in order to plan the CMS accordingly, which could potentially save resources, time and create a more effective and an up to date plan that is developed with regards to contemporary business competition and society.

By developing a better CMS, it is possible for businesses to more effectively reach out with their message, strengthen the brand and increase their competitiveness. If done successfully, this also leads to increased quality of content and messages that are relevant to consumers, that they find useful and want to give their attention to, instead of the traditional advertising and noise that many consumers find irritating. It therefore creates a society that becomes more relevant, and resources can be put more effectively to use, to get the results and still provide value. Connecting the brand and their products or services with the right consumers and providing value to the involved parties.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings from this study, together with other recent evidence, show that CMS planning plays an important part of CM and is becoming increasingly relevant in contemporary business organizations with regards to marketing. At the same time, CM is still regarded as a relatively new concept, and is still an evolving research area.

In this study, our findings suggest that marketing consultants tend to plan the CMS for their business clients in practice by conducting six distinct activities. The CMS planning practice can be conducted differently, even though the practices follow a similar process, most notably we suggest two distinct practices. The first practice follows a more formal approach, where the marketing consultants would follow a step by step approach and adhere to a formal framework and also incorporate more formal activities such as strategy workshops and the SWOT strategy tool. The second practice follows a more informal approach, where the marketing consultants would not have a framework or use it more loosely in practice. Instead

this practice would focus more on flexibility and base it on previous knowledge and experience from the marketing consultant. We suggest that one of the reasons for this difference could be because of the amount of CMS focus in the particular company, but also the amount of flexibility the practice provides and potential enhancements with development of new ideas in the planning phase.

Furthermore, our study gives indications that the number of updates and revision of the CMS planning practice seems to be dependent on the marketers perceived volatility of their business client's industry context in accordance with Jarrett & Stiles (2010) findings. In an industry context that is perceived as more volatile, the marketing consultants tend to revise the strategic plan more and use it more as a guideline and for coordination. While in a perceived stable industry context, the strategic plan would be left more rigid and followed more strictly, which is partly in accordance with Grant's (2003) findings, regarding the fact that strategic planning has found a new role in contemporary businesses. In perceived volatile industry contexts, the CMS plan seems to be used more as a mechanism for coordination and continuous revision, but it does not necessarily have to be more informal during the CMS planning phase.

However, due to challenges with this research study that was pointed out in the method discussion, and limitations in the analysis. We believe that more research study in the area is needed in order to draw a more reliable conclusion on the CMS planning practice differences that we suggest, and the potential impact of industry volatility on the CMS planning practice.

5.3 Research contribution

This study has contributed to the research area of CMS by increasing empirical research in the area of CMS by conducting multiple case studies, taking a practice perspective which has previously been scarce as most previous focus has been put on definitions and conceptual understanding (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016; Datig, 2018). Our empirical research has therefore contributed to further develop the research area of CMS and the practice of CMS planning.

Additionally, this study has also contributed to the SAP research field in two ways. First, we contribute to the scarce research study of external practitioners in the area of SAP and their impact on strategy. By conducting case studies with external marketing consultants, we provide new insights into this area of research that is needed, according to Jarzabkowski et al. (2007). Secondly, our findings add to the existing literature of strategic planning, from a SAP perspective, and its new role in contemporary businesses as a mechanism for coordination in perceived volatile industry contexts in accordance with Grant's (2003) findings. We also add to Jarratt & Stiles (2010) findings on how strategy practice is dependent on the strategy practitioners own perceived interpretation of the operating environmental context, and that this may also be evident in the case of CMS contexts.

5.4 Recommendations for further research

There is cause to believe that there needs to be more research conducted in the area of CMS and SAP in general. When it comes to CMS, we suggest that more case studies need to be conducted on CMS with focus towards the implementation and evaluation phase of CMS, which takes more of a tactical approach, which has not been addressed in this study, and lacks research (Kissane, 2011; Clark, 2016; Datig, 2018). Additionally, there are opportunities to further investigate and add to our findings in this study, by conducting a similar approach, but with additional respondents to validate our findings and provide a more robust empirical data material. There are also opportunities to go more in-depth into the specific cases to further analyse these different practices that we suggest in CMS planning and why they might exist, and their potential effect on CM.

Regarding the SAP field, we recommend that more research needs to be conducted on external practitioners and its role in strategy creation in the SAP field. Our study has contributed to this research area, but has its limitations, and as Jarzabkowski et al. (2007) argues, the research is still relatively scarce and needs further research. Additionally, there is a need of further case studies of strategic planning in volatile contexts from a SAP perspective, to further validate the new findings from Grant (2003) and Jarratt & Stiles (2010).

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7 Appendix

Appendix 1

Interview guide (Original language in Swedish)

Kan du berätta lite om er verksamhet?

Vad har du för roll i företaget?

I vilka branscher är företaget verksamt?

Hur arbetar du med framtagandet av en content marketing strategy under planeringsstadiet?

Vilka aspekter tar du hänsyn till vid denna utformning?

Kan du beskriva tillvägagångs processen för framtagandet av en content marketing strategy under planeringsstadiet?

Utgår du från någon process modell vid framtagandet av en content marketing strategy under planeringsstadiet?

Hur noggrant planerar du dina kunders content marketing strategy?

Vad upplever du är den viktigaste aspekten under framtagandet av en content marketing strategy?

Skiljer sig framtagandet av en content marketing strategy beroende på kund?

Påverkar kundens industri kontext framtagandet av content marketing strategi under planeringsstadiet? Hur?

Hur länge är content marketing strategy planen aktuell?

Hur används content marketing strategy planen i praktiken?

Vilka anser du är de största utmaningarna vid framtagandet av en content marketing strategi under planeringsstadiet?

Appendix 2

Interview guide (Translated from Swedish to English)

Could you please tell us a bit about your company?

What is your position in the company?

In which industries are the company operating in?

How do you work in developing a content marketing strategy during the planning phase?

Which aspects do you consider during the development of the content marketing strategy during the planning phase?

Can you describe the process of developing a content marketing strategy during the planning phase?

Are you using any process model when developing a content marketing strategy during the planning phase?

How carefully do you plan your customers' content marketing strategy during the planning phase?

What do you think is the most important aspect during the development of a content marketing strategy during the planning phase?

Does the development of a content marketing strategy during the planning phase differ depending on the type of business client?

Does the business client's industrial context affect the development of the content marketing strategy during the planning phase? How?

For how long is the content marketing strategic plan relevant?

How is the content marketing strategic plan used in practice?

What do you think are the biggest challenges when developing a content marketing strategy during the planning phase?