Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Industrial Marketing Management

Practices and functions of customer reference marketing — Leveraging customer references as marketing assets

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ABSTRACT

This multiple-case study focuses on the practices and functions of customer reference marketing and on the ways through which customer references can be deployed as marketing assets. Analysis of 38 interviews with managers in four case companies suggests that customer references can be leveraged externally as marketing assets to (1) gain status-transfer effects from reputable customers, (2) signal passing a selection process, (3) concretize and demonstrate complex solutions, and (4) provide indirect evidence of experience, previous performance, technological functionality, and delivered customer value. Customer references can also be leveraged internally to (1) facilitate organizational learning, (2) advance offering development, (3) motivate personnel, and (4) develop understanding of customer needs, internal competencies, and delivered customer value. By identifying the practices and functions related to customer reference marketing, the paper deepens understanding of this highly relevant but relatively under-researched phenomenon and contributes to the literature on customer-based marketing assets.

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1. Introduction

The philosophy of harnessing loyal customers to become part of the sales and marketing team has increasingly become a driver of many industrial firms' marketing and sales efforts. Due to the perceived high risk faced by potential buyers, companies selling complex solutions to industrial buyers and governmental institutions need to increase their credibility through customer references (e.g., Windahl, Andersson, Berggren & Nehler, 2004; Salminen & Möller, 2006; Veres, 2009). Industrial technology and service providers such as ABB and Eaton are publishing numerous client case studies and customer success stories on their websites. Large IT firms such as Microsoft, Dell, IBM, SAP, and Sun Microsystems have coordinated customer reference programs designed to encourage their business customers to participate in various reference activities, ranging from being interviewed for a customer case or video testimonial to hosting a reference visit or talking at an industry event.

From the resource-based perspective, customer references can be considered part of customer-based assets (Hooley, Möller & Broderick, 1998), which are accumulated through the relationships the firm has built with its customers and are often regarded as the most important type of marketing assets (Hooley et al., 1998). Despite the growing body of research on marketing assets (e.g., Srivastava, Shervani & Fahey, 1998; Hooley et al., 1998; Hooley, Greenley, Cadogan & Fahy, 2005), the processes through which firms obtain, develop, and leverage customer-based marketing assets are not well understood (Sirmon, Hitt & Ireland, 2007; Zander & Zander, 2005). In addition, there is a need for studies identifying and specifying the key customer-based asset stocks in specific business contexts. By focusing on the practices and functions of customer references, the present study offers new perspectives on how customer relationships and delivered customer solutions can be leveraged as marketing assets in industrial markets. The concept of practice refers here to the "organization's routine use of knowledge," which is embedded partly in individual skills and partly in collaborative social arrangements and often has a tacit component (Szulanski, 1996, pp. 28).

Although studies have addressed the importance of customer references in reducing the potential buyer's risk and increasing the supplier's credibility (Elfring & Hulsink, 2003; Lechner & Dowling, 2003; Reuber & Fischer, 2005; Salminen and Möller, 2006; Gomez-arias & Montermoso, 2007; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010), the existing literature does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the different practices and functions that customer references serve. Moreover, it remains unclear how companies are actually leveraging customer references as marketing assets. Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to identify and analyze the various practices and functions of customer reference marketing and to explore the ways in which customer references can be leveraged as marketing assets. Specifically, we pursue this objective through the following three research questions: 1) What are the practices that companies use in customer reference marketing? 2) What are the functions of customer

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reference marketing? 3) How can customer references be leveraged as marketing assets?

We address these questions through a multiple case study from four industrial firms operating in the process and information technology industries. Our study provides a more holistic understanding of customer reference marketing by identifying and analyzing the different practices and related underlying functions of customer references. It also contributes to the literature on marketing assets and capabilities (e.g., Day, 1994; Hooley et al., 1998; Zander & Zander, 2005), in terms of illuminating the multifaceted nature of customer references as marketing assets for companies operating in industrial markets. Our findings suggest that in industrial markets, customer references may have an important role in building other intangible marketing assets such as reputation, market position, and industrial brand. We propose that focusing on customer references as marketing assets may bring out some overlooked factors explaining the role that existing customer relationships and delivered solutions play in the quest for growth and competitive advantage among industrial suppliers.

The article is structured as follows. *First*, the nature of customer reference marketing and the role of customer references as marketing assets are explained in the context of previous research on customer references and the literature on marketing assets and capabilities. *Secondly*, the selected methodology and the process of data gathering and analysis are described. *Thirdly*, the empirical findings from the four case companies are discussed with reference to illustrative extracts from the data. *Finally*, conclusions are drawn and managerial and theoretical implications are suggested.

2. The nature of customer reference marketing

Concepts such as "customer advocacy marketing," "customer evidence marketing," "customer testimonial marketing" and "customer reference marketing" overlap are used among B-to-B marketing practitioners to refer to the phenomenon of leveraging existing customers and delivered customer solutions in the company's marketing activities. In selling complex process technologies customer references have long played an important role, in the form of reference visits to existing customers' sites and reference lists accompanying the offer. The practices of customer reference marketing can be categorized as either *external* or *internal* (Salminen & Möller, 2006). In the former case, the supplier signals references to potential buyers and other stakeholders. In the latter, the supplier uses customer references internally though various practices, such as internal case studies and the use of a customer reference database (Salminen & Möller, 2006). Lately, the opportunities provided by modern information and communication technologies have enabled companies to practice customer reference marketing by displaying success-story videos and podcasts on their websites, for example, or arranging reference calls during which several potential customers interact with a single reference customer. As a result, customer reference marketing has become a diverse and multifaceted B-to-B marketing phenomenon that merits academic attention.

Although the number of studies focusing specifically on customer references is low, several authors mention their importance and relevance in passing (e.g., Currie, 2004; Das & Buddress, 2007; Forman, Lippert & Kothandarama, 2007; DeKinder & Kohli, 2008; Lehtimäki, Simula & Salo, 2009). These studies typically concern the marketing and purchasing of complex solutions and projects in the information and communication technology sector. For example, Currie (2004) found in her study on the adoption and diffusion of an emerging information systems innovation that customer references were critical in the technology-legitimating process: potential adopters wanted to see sites at reputable firms in order to be reassured that the technology was a viable option for their own firms. DeKinder and Kohli (2008) mention the "paucity of prior customers that may serve as references" as being a major challenge for a start-up firm trying to increase sales.

Although our study focuses on the supplier's perspective, it is important to take into account the evidence from the purchasing literature regarding the role of customer references. From the buyer's perspective, customer references have been suggested to play an important role in reducing the perceived risk and uncertainty related to the purchasing situation and supplier selection (Raydel & Lee, 1992; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010). Industrial buyers making purchasing decisions face several types of uncertainties, typically concerning whether or not the solution will suit the customer's need, will perform as expected, will be delivered successfully and will produce a return on the investment (e.g., Håkansson, Johanson & Wootz, 1976; Cardozo, 1980; Sharma, 1998). Due to the related uncertainties, buyers of complex capital goods often find the task highly challenging and therefore tend to rely on third-party organizations in their investment decisions (Flowers, 2007). In a study of industrial customers' purchases of higher-value, higher-price offerings, Anderson and Wynstra (2010) found that reference customers were effective as value evidence in reducing ambiguity related to the value of the offering.

Two intertwined levels can be distinguished in customer reference marketing: the relationship level and the delivery level. *Firstly*, industrial suppliers use their *relationship* with the reference customer as a marketing tool, by displaying the name of the customer on the company website, for example. Thus, on the relationship level it is a question of the benefits the supplier gains from being associated with the reference customer. The relational view has been widely discussed in the studies of the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) group, which suggests that relationships and interaction are an inevitable outcome from the nature of business and hence beyond control of a single company (Ford & Håkansson, 2006). Specifically, IMP researchers have recognized that relationships with large and prestigious customers may have particularly high reference value to an industrial supplier (Walter, Ritter & Gemünden, 2001). The situation of having a reference customer who makes it easier to obtain a new customer has been identified as an example of positively connected relationships (Geersbro & Ritter, 2010). *Secondly*, throughout the existence of a customer relationship there may be several deliveries of individual projects or solutions. The importance of these value-creation activities, in terms of customer reference marketing, is evident in official procurement procedures in which the supplier's past performance is evaluated through "reference projects" or "delivered customer solutions," for example. Incorporating both of these levels, we define the concept of customer reference broadly as *a customer relationship and the related value-creation activities that a firm leverages externally or internally in its marketing efforts.*

Customer reference marketing as a phenomenon needs to be distinguished from word-of-mouth (WOM) communications (e.g., Webster, 1970; Westbrook, 1987; Trusov, Buckling & Pauwels, 2009). Although some authors use the concepts of WOM and referencing interchangeably (Olaru, Purchase & Peterson, 2008), we suggest that it is important to make a distinction between them. While WOM is typically described as *informal interaction between customers*, and thus may be characterized as a market-level phenomenon largely beyond the control of marketers, customer reference marketing concerns *supplier-initiated activities* undertaken in order to leverage customer relationships and previous deliveries. However, WOM is also relevant in B-to-B markets, and some customer reference-marketing efforts have the potential to trigger positive word-of-mouth. These include organizing reference visits and events at which existing customers can talk to potential customers, or launching press releases about deals closed with prestigious customers known as early adopters of the latest technology. On the other hand, bad customer references may generate negative WOM, and thus harm the supplier's reputation.

Originally stemming from the consumer marketing context, word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior has also been studied to some extent in the context of industrial markets (e.g., Webster, 1970; Martilla, 1971;

Money, Gilly & Graham, 1998; Money, 2004; Hansen, Samuelsen & Silseth, 2008). However, as the concept by definition refers to informal information exchange between individuals (Westbrook, 1987), it does not provide tools to explain all the aspects of supplier-initiated customer reference marketing because it does not include the supplier's own influence on the process or the status-transfer effects (Podolny, 1993; Podolny, 1994) from reputable reference customers.

3. Marketing assets and capabilities

Intangible marketing assets, such as brand equity (e.g., Aaker, 1991; Walley, Custance, Taylor, Lindgreen & Hingley, 2007) and customer equity (e.g., Blattberg & Deighton, 1996; Rust, Zeithaml & Lemon, 2000), have attracted considerable attention in the literature. The literature on marketing assets and capabilities draws from the resource-based view (RBV) according to which a company's resources are the basis for building competitive advantage (e.g., Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984; Grant, 1991). Competitive advantage is gained either by having more resources than the competitors and/or utilizing them better (Barney, 1991).

The portfolio of customer references can be viewed as a part of a firm's customer-based assets (Hooley et al., 1998). It includes a relational element, in the form of developed customer relationships, and an intellectual element, resulting from the knowledge accumulated from the value-creation activities undertaken during the relationships. Other customer-based assets include brand names, customer loyalty and current market position (Hooley et al., 1998). The recognition of customer-based assets as key determinants of a firm's future success is widely discussed in the growing body of literature on marketing resources and assets (Srivastava et al., 1998; Hooley et al., 1998; Hooley et al., 1999; Hooley, et al., 2005; Lacey & Morgan, 2009).

It has been noted in previous research that the industry context and the business environment may determine the importance of various marketing assets (Hooley et al., 2005). According to Stuart, Hoang & Hybels (1999), the regard paid to the 'connected' actor, such as a reference customer, and its endeavors are enhanced in markets characterized by uncertainty. Further, when the perceived risk is high, potential customers and other stakeholders, such as investors, make quality judgments through careful consideration of the previous accomplishments of the organization (Stuart et al., 1999). Given these findings, we propose that the relevance of customer references is reinforced in market conditions characterized by uncertainty and high perceived risk, and thus customer references are important customer-based marketing assets for industrial suppliers operating in these kinds of markets.

Identification and analysis of context-specific, rather than general, marketing assets and capabilities is important, particularly from a managerial perspective. We contend that customer references constitute a highly relevant yet academically overlooked marketing asset for an industrial supplier. However, we do not suggest that they constitute a unique marketing asset independently; rather, combined with other assets and capabilities, such as organizational learning and technological know-how, they can contribute to the creation of a unique resource.

4. Methodology

The multiple-case study (e.g., Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) was selected as the main research method for several reasons. First of all, given that academic empirical research on customer reference marketing is at a relatively early stage, a case study will help in identifying multiple aspects of the phenomenon. Secondly, as the purpose of the research is to identify and analyze the underlying mechanisms of customer reference marketing, a case study methodology provides the tools for in-depth consideration and characterization of the phenomenon. Thirdly, the case method is especially applicable in addressing 'how' and 'why' questions (Yin, 1984), and is thus relevant in terms of finding an answer to the third research question concerning

how customer references can be leveraged as marketing assets. The selected multiple case study methodology enabled us to gain a holistic perspective on each case company's customer reference practices and thus capture all of the potentially rich and meaningful characteristics of the phenomenon. Four cases are analyzed to highlight the different aspects of customer reference marketing.

4.1. The case companies

The case selection in this study was based on theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), the purpose being to find cases that would be particularly suitable for shedding light on the phenomenon of customer reference marketing. The following criteria were used in the case selection: 1) operating in B-to-B markets, 2) growth targets, and 3) industry context.

First, we selected companies that operate in solution- and project-oriented B-to-B markets where the monetary value of transactions is high and the complexity of the offerings further increases the buyers' perceived risk. *Second*, all of the selected companies invest in the development of new solution offerings and have high growth targets and thus a specific need to use references in new technological and market areas. *Third*, we focused on industry contexts where customer references have the potential to play an important role. In prior research, the importance of customer references has been highlighted, especially in the fields of complex process technologies (Lehtimäki et al., 2009; Salminen, 2001; Rajala, 1997) and information technology solutions (Currie, 2004; Das & Buddress, 2007; Forman et al., 2007; DeKinder & Kohli, 2008). Case companies A and B operate in the process technology industry, where investments in capital goods are typically high in value and buyers tend to adopt the technologies for a long period of time as part of their production processes. Thus, the performance risk perceived by the potential buyer tends to be high. Case companies C and D, on the other hand, are active in the information technology industry, which is characterized by knowledge intensity, technological complexity, uncertainty and the rapid emergence of new technologies (e.g., John, Allen & Dutta, 1999; Blomqvist, 2002). In both industry contexts, the trend towards integrated solutions (e.g., Tuli, Kohli & Bharadwaj, 2007; Ceci & Prencipe, 2008) makes it difficult for customers to evaluate alternative offerings. Customer references are needed to display the supplier's problem-solving ability and give some estimates of its ability to deliver value to the buyer (Möller & Törrönen, 2003). Given the characteristics of these industry sectors, both could be considered contexts in which customer references have the potential to play an important role. The selected case companies could thus be described as information-rich with regard to the focal phenomenon. Table 1 gives details of the case companies.

Case company A supplies solid/liquid separation equipment and related services to the mining and metals and chemical process industries. It also offers a comprehensive range of services, including technical support, modernization and upgrading services, as well as a spare and wear parts service. *Case company B* provides process technologies for the mining and metals industry worldwide. The technologies offered cover the whole chain of processing ores into pure metals, and the solutions range from single equipment deliveries to manufacturing lines and entire turnkey process plants. *Case company C* produces different kinds of information technology solutions to corporations and governmental institutions. The offerings of the company include consulting, developing and hosting services for its customers' digital businesses. *Case company D* operates globally through five business units and offers services and solutions for the design, deployment, maintenance and management of telecommunication networks.

4.2. Data collection and analysis

The data was collected through 38 personal interviews with representatives of the four case companies. An interview schema (Appendix A) was used, designed to identify the practices and

Table 1
Characteristics of the case companies.

Case details	Company A	Company B	Company C	Company D
Main type of business	Capital equipment manufacturer	Project business company	Solution provider	Solution provider
Industry	Filtration equipment	Process technology	IT solutions	Network solutions
Sales (1000 EUR)	>200,000	>1,000,000	>1,500,000	>10,000,000
Growth target				
Employees	>500	>2000	>15,000	>50,000
Primary customers	Chemical process industry, mining and metal industry	Mining and metal industry	Banking and insurance industry, telecom and media industry, forest and energy industry	Telecommunication operators

functions of customer reference marketing and to capture the various ways in which the case companies deployed their customer references as marketing assets. The data obtained through the personal interviews was supplemented with an analysis of secondary data, including internal and external documents, such as process descriptions, annual reports, and marketing material. In cases A, B and C the unit of analysis is a company, and in case D the unit of analysis is one business unit (business solutions unit).

The interviews were semi-structured and involved open-ended questions regarding the company's external and internal customer reference-marketing practices and functions. The respondents were involved with customer references through sales, marketing, customer relationship management, service, business development, or corporate strategy. Neither the identity nor the number of informants was predetermined. Instead, a snowballing technique was used to find the most relevant informants: respondents were asked to name additional suitable interviewees who were involved in and knowledgeable about the areas covered. Detailed information about the interview data, including the position of the informants and the dates and duration of the interviews, is included in Appendix B. For reasons connected with geographical distance, one interview (with the Business Development Manager in case company D) was conducted by telephone.

The interview questions (Appendix A) were based on a review of prior studies related to customer references (Helm, 2000; Salminen & Möller, 2006; Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007). Each interview was tape-recorded, transcribed and coded with the help of NVivo software, a program designed for qualitative data analysis. The open coding was used in order to identify the different customer reference-marketing practices employed in the case companies. Information obtained from the interviews concerning the external customer reference practices was confirmed by searching the company websites and company-specific marketing materials. In the second phase of analysis the data was analyzed with a view to forming an initial categorization of the different underlying functions of customer reference marketing. As the analysis progressed, this categorization was further developed, the focus being on the ways in which the case companies leveraged their customer references as marketing assets. To demonstrate the consistency of the findings and the reasoning through which the data was interpreted, the findings are reported together with illustrative, representative quotations from the interview respondents.

5. Findings

In the following, we describe the identified practices and functions of customer reference marketing deployed by the case companies and give an analysis of the role of customer references as marketing assets. All of the case companies deployed several external and internal practices that are summarized in Table 2.

5.1. External customer reference marketing

Leveraging customer references externally by presenting them to potential customers and other stakeholders was considered an

important tool for sales and marketing in all the case companies. As shown in Table 2, the case companies deployed various, although rather uniform, practices in external customer reference marketing, ranging from reference lists and success stories to press releases, reference calls and visits to the reference customer's sites. Although they had all adopted rather similar practices for using customer references, the emphasis varied.

Reference lists and reference visits were reported to have a key role in the sales process in both process technology companies (A and B). Salespeople use customer references through different kinds of reference lists, accompanied by an offer, and through reference visits to customers' sites. Reference lists seem to have the function of signaling the supplier's track record and experience in a certain market or technology area, as demonstrated in the following statements from a representative of case company A:

> "References are an essential part of the sales process as they prove that someone else has bought from us, which helps the sales job. You need to show the potential customer a list of references located in the same geographical area where the customer operates, or from the same application area the potential customer is interested in, then it works. We also have shorter reference lists covering specific applications that include the customers' names, the type and number of sold filters and the filtering area. This gives us extra back-up that we have experience of different kinds of applications." (Application Development Manager, case company A)

As the above quotation shows, using customer references as part of the sales process, in order to demonstrate previous installations, is considered important for reducing the potential buyer's perceived risk. Reference lists seem to *provide indirect evidence about the supplier's experience*. The respondents reported that sometimes the customer relationship could be leveraged as a reference even in the early phases of relationship development. A common practice in all the case companies was to communicate a deal with a high-status customer through a press release. This type of 'closed deal' reference marketing, which occurs prior to actual delivery, may be used especially when it is a question of acquiring a first reference customer in a new technology or market area. It sends a signal that the supplier has earned a form of certification by successfully navigating the selection process of a selective and highly capable evaluator and thus may *enhance the supplier's credibility through status-transfer effects*. In highly competitive markets, the public announcement of a major deal may also serve to signal the supplier's enhanced market position to investors, competitors, and other stakeholders. In addition, for companies involved in selling complex solutions and projects, the reference cases can demonstrate the supplier's ability to deliver projects together with reputable key partners, as the following statement from a representative of case company C demonstrates:

> "If we want to tell the potential customer that we are able to deliver this solution together with Microsoft, we have a much stronger case if we can show that we have 100 references that we have done with Microsoft. In the front page of our reference

Table 2
Identified customer reference-marketing practices.

		Case company A	Case company B	Case company C	Case company D
	Identified customer reference-marketing practices				
External		• Customer reference lists • Reference visits • Reference calls • Press releases about closed deals • Case studies (detailed descriptions of customer cases) • "Service stories" on the company website	• Customer reference lists • Reference visits • Reference calls • Press releases about closed deals • "Success stories" on the Web site • Customer interviews and "success stories" in the customer magazine	• Customer reference lists • Reference visits (occasionally) • Reference calls • Press releases about closed deals • "Top stories" and "Customer cases" on the company Web site and in the customer magazine	• Customer reference lists • Reference visits (occasionally) • Reference calls • Press releases about closed deals • "Customer success stories" on the company Web Site • "White label stories" (case descriptions without the customer's name) • Customer reference podcasts • Success-story video testimonials
Internal		• Reference deliveries as a schema for evaluating equipment capacity for new projects • Company-wide internal customer reference database (in the launching phase)	• Lessons learned -practices from reference projects • Internal reference documentation template • Reference sites as a venue for employee training	• Corporate-wide internal customer reference database • Internal "customer success-story" -communication procedures • Finding solutions for other customer industries	• "Iconic cases" as a schema for offering development • Value-based argumentation teams for measuring the delivered customer value • "Case of the month" and "Customer solution of the year" announcements Advanced processes for creating customer reference marketing material and the latest information and communication technologies in communicating customer references.
Specific features		Operating in two extreme business contexts: 1) mining industry in which customers are willing to share information and to act as a reference and 2) chemical industry in which secrecy issues characterize operations for competitive reasons and customers are reluctant to take part in reference activities.	The complexity and uniqueness of individual deliveries typically very high.	IT enabled platform for sharing information on customer references	

database, we have the logos of our technology partners, and when you click the logo you will see the references that we have done with this specific partner." (Program Manager, Strategic Customer Operations, case company C)

Customer reference descriptions, such as success stories and case reports, were considered an important reference-marketing practice in all the case companies. However, companies C and D, which operate in the IT industry, had invested more effort in producing such descriptions and other reference-related marketing material than the process technology companies. Company D has success-story videos and recorded reference podcasts available on its website, and company C has a repository of over 100 written customer cases on its site. The respondents in this company reported that the technological complexity of the solutions further increased the importance of having well-documented reference cases. They considered case descriptions the only viable way of demonstrating the complex solutions and their actual business impacts to managers and high-level decision makers within and outside the case company:

> "When I go to see a customer I don't talk directly about our offering. Instead, I tell them stories through our reference cases. I may have three slides and a picture of our reference on each slide. I tell a story through the reference case, about the business impacts that our solution has had, what we have done there, what our role has been, what the customer was thinking, and what his initial goal was. References are basically the only sales tool that I have." (Director, Strategic Sales, case company C)

As demonstrated above, customer case descriptions are instrumental in making abstract and complex offerings more concrete, as they provide real-life examples of implemented solutions. Thus, an important function of customer reference marketing practiced through reference descriptions is to *demonstrate and concretize the supplier's solution*. In addition, visits to reference customers' sites were used to demonstrate how the technology works in a real-life setting. Especially in process technology companies (case companies A and B), reference visits were reported to have an important role in the technology sales process. Representative of the case company A described the role of reference visits in the following way:

> "References are a substantial part of our sales process. When we go to a customer's reference site they demonstrate the installed technology to the potential customer, and show their production figures and operation costs. In this way we can show potential customers how the technology works, how the personnel have learned to use it, and how certain malfunctions can be fixed." (Regional Director, case company A)

The respondents emphasized the role of references as an instrumental part of the risk analysis process in potential customers' investment decision making processes. References were mentioned as highly important in terms of evaluating the technological risks because they provide evidence that other customers have adopted the technology and that it is working well. Through customer references, the supplier is able to *provide indirect evidence of the functionality of the technology* and thus reduce the perceived risk of a potential buyer and other stakeholders, such as project financiers.

According to the analysis, customer reference marketing plays a crucial role, not only in demonstrating and concretizing the solution, but also *in demonstrating its value* and the business benefits that the supplier has been able to deliver. The importance of measuring the delivered customer value from reference cases was considered high in all the case companies. However, only company D (telecommunications network equipment provider) had put in concrete efforts to develop practices for estimating the delivered benefits, through their value-based

argumentation teams, which try to identify value elements through extensive description of customer cases, for example. However, documenting and leveraging the delivered customer value was considered challenging, as the benefits are often hard to measure and are realized long after the project completion. Reference customers may also be reluctant to share information about received business benefits, due to competitive pressures:

> "We have these value-based argumentation teams, and our goal is to quantify the benefits that the customer has received, but often, if the customer grants permission to use their name and gives a testimonial, then they don't want to give the exact numbers. It can be quite sensitive data for them, and therefore they may agree in doing a story with their name, but without the facts about the received business value." (Solution Portfolio Development Manager, case company D)

As demonstrated above, customers may not want to act as a reference because of competitive pressures, as they would not want to risk revealing information that might benefit their competitors. According to the respondents, positive recognition, peer-to-peer information exchange and positive visibility are important factors in motivating customers to act as a reference. The studied companies encouraged their customers to take part in reference activities, for example, by providing industry recognition, giving access to high-level decision makers and granting a key-customer status. Neither credits nor monetary rewards were used in motivating customers to act as a reference (e.g., offering reward points for taking part in reference activities) in any of the case companies, as this was against their regulations. However, when entering a new market or launching a technology, the studied companies often needed to make specific investments (e.g., extra guarantees or price concessions) to acquire a first reference customer.

Displaying reference lists to potential customers and communicating success stories are examples of practices in which the suppliers have a relatively high level of control. However, some of the practices used to leverage customer references include informal information transfer among customers. User conferences, industry events, and customer excellence awards are examples of practices that can trigger positive word-of-mouth. A representative of case company D described the role of these practices in the following way:

> "Customers say good things about us mainly through the events we organize. For example, we have a capital market based event that we organize together with our parent company, and people talk to investors and analysts, and there are many other operators there as well. The main goal there is that the operators will talk about us, say we're a nice company to work with. The benefit to the customer is the prestige and visibility." (Head of Marketing Development, case company D)

The practice described above differs from the use of success stories and reference lists in that it involves more informal information exchange that cannot be totally controlled by the supplier. It seems that the functional purpose of this type of practice is to *encourage positive word-of-mouth* by creating opportunities for customers to discuss their experiences and to learn from their peers.

In sum, the case companies deploy various practices in their external customer reference marketing, which seems to have multiple functions. It serves as a mechanism for gaining status-transfer effects, but according to the findings it also serves as a tool for demonstrating and concretizing the supplier's solution. Furthermore, customer references lend credibility, as they provide indirect evidence about the supplier's experience, previous performance, technological functionality, and ability to deliver customer value. As the analysis shows, the external customer reference practices deployed by the case

companies range from simple market- or industry-specific reference lists to recorded video testimonials (case company D) and organized customer events involving personal interaction between customers. Similarly, the contributions of a reference customer vary from giving permission to use the company name and logo to more demanding actions, such as being interviewed for a customer case, taking reference calls, hosting reference visits, speaking at events (e.g., giving a presentation at a trade show), and talking to the press. The roles of reference customers thus range from allowing the company's name and logo to be used to participating in material production and media activities and engaging in personal interaction with customers. The supplier's control over customer reference marketing seems to follow a continuum from high to low, depending on the reference customer's role. The proposed functions are not tightly connected with certain customer reference practices, but instead tend to accumulate as the reference customer's role increases (see Table 3).

5.2. Internal customer reference marketing

The internal practices for leveraging customer references varied among the case companies and involved many organizational functions, including sales, project organization, and research and development. Several respondents mentioned that the portfolio of customer references served as an important *resource pool for learning and training purposes*. Reference sites are frequently used in case company B as venues for training new employees. The company delivers complex, large-scale technology projects, and 'lessons learned' from reference projects were considered important in terms of the successful delivery and execution of subsequent projects. The sales function used reference documentation occasionally for learning purposes, such as through win–lose analyses, which aim to uncover the reasons why a specific sales case was won or lost. Customer reference descriptions were mentioned as invaluable learning material for training new salespeople in all the case companies. Case studies, success stories and other customer reference-related material seem to work as artifacts that codify experience from the reference project into a story format and serve as a means of sharing knowledge across the organization.

Case companies A and C had recently launched an internal development project for documenting and gathering customer reference-related information, and customer cases from every business unit are now documented in an organization-wide reference database. For case company C the documentation includes information about the customer's problem and needs, the reasons why the company was selected as a supplier, technical information about the solution and its delivery, and information about the business benefits the customer gained from the solution. The company has also established a specific unit, called 'digital media,' for gathering information across different business divisions about the solutions it has delivered related to an offering. The business development manager of this unit described their role in the following way:

> "We communicate internally about the delivered customer cases throughout the organization, and this develops our sales personnel's understanding about our internal capabilities and the solutions they can offer to our customers." (Business Development Manager, case company C)

Developing an understanding of customer needs and internal competences by analyzing reference cases was mentioned as being a part of the transformation process from a product orientation towards a solution orientation in case company D:

> "Using reference cases is not only for marketing and sales. In solution selling it has a connection to R&D and how well they can use reference information. If the customer challenge is well-documented in our reference cases it can help our offering-

Table 3
Identified practices and proposed functions of external customer reference marketing.

The role of customer references as marketing assets	The proposed function of reference-marketing activity (external)	The supplier's reference-marketing practices (external)	The reference customer's role	The supplier's control
Critical sales and promotional tool	• Provide indirect evidence about experience • Enhance credibility through status-transfer effects • Demonstrate and concretize the offering • Provide indirect evidence of previous performance • Demonstrate delivered customer value • Serve as a certificate of passing through a selection process • Signal an enhanced market position • Provide indirect evidence about the functionality of the technology • Generate positive word-of-mouth	• Reference lists • Success stories, customer cases, case studies, ROI-studies • Sales presentation reference slides • Audio/video testimonial (webcast/podcast) • Recorded reference interviews/podcasts • Press releases • Articles in trade journals • Promotional material • Customer presentations at seminars and conferences • Reference calls (one-to-one/one-to-many) • On-site reference visits • Customer events and meetings • Social media	Allowing company name and logo usage Participating in producing marketing/sales material Participating in media activities Participating in personal interaction with potential customer(s)	High Low

development people to listen to customer needs more carefully and form a clearer picture of the market situation." (Head of Solution Portfolio Management, case company D)

As demonstrated above, apart from its use as a marketing and sales tool, an important reason for gathering reference-related information is to build a resource pool of customer data that facilitates market sensing through the analysis and identification of changing customer needs. On the other hand, case companies C and D also strive to use the collected data for creating a more comprehensive and clearer picture of their own internal competences. Customer references were also mentioned as a valuable, although not fully exploited, *resource pool for building credible value propositions.* As a marketing manager in case company C stated:

"When we make value propositions to our customers and promise, for example, that their customer-service costs will be lower after implementing our solution, our evaluation of the cost reduction is based on calculations from our reference cases. We have measured, analyzed, and calculated the business impacts of our solution from reference cases on existing customers. Unfortunately, we don't have the resources to conduct these analyses systematically enough." (Marketing Manager, case company C)

Besides contributing to organizational learning and working as an offering-development schema, the internal use of customer references seems to have a role in shaping attitudes and the organizational culture. A delivery project typically involves many technical personnel who are not in direct interaction with the customer. The representatives of case companies C and D reported that success stories about recent customer deliveries were important in *motivating and bringing the company's technical personnel closer to the customer,* helping them to understand the customer case to which their work had contributed.

It is also possible to give recognition to and motivate employees through the internal communication of success stories and "solution of the month" announcements:

"References are important for motivating the personnel. We talk internally about the cases we have worked with in some business unit, and about the new things that we tried. This motivates our people and shows them that we can do great stuff. Then there's also the learning function. We tell them how a specific customer case was carried out and what we learned from it." (Key Account Manager, case company C)

In sum, the studied companies leverage customer references internally in various ways, and internal customer reference marketing tends to occur in many forms across different organizational functions, as a fragmented and partly unconscious phenomenon rather than as a planned process. The findings suggest that internal customer reference marketing contributes to organizational learning and can be deployed as an instrument for personnel training and motivation building. It can also help in enhancing understanding of customer needs, internal competencies and value delivery through the careful documentation and analysis of customer references. Table 4 depicts the identified practices and proposed functions of internal customer reference marketing.

5.3. The role of customer references as a marketing asset

From our observations of the four case companies we were able to distinguish different ways of leveraging customer reference marketing as an asset. *Externally*, customer references work as a critical sales and promotional tool for winning new customers and building the supplier's market credibility. *Internally*, customer references can act as a marketing asset by providing a template for organizational learning, a basis for building credible value propositions, and a tool for internal

Table 4
The identified practices and proposed functions of internal customer reference marketing.

The role of customer references as marketing assets	The function of reference-marketing activity (internal)	The supplier's reference-marketing practices (internal)
Template for organizational learning	• Enhance organizational experiential learning and reduce redundancy	• Lessons learned and best-practice exercises
Knowledge base for customer-need and market sensing, and for understanding internal competences	• Enhance understanding of customer needs and internal competences	• Systematic analysis of a well-documented portfolio of customer references
Basis for building credible value propositions	• Develop credible value propositions	• Measuring delivered customer value from reference cases
Schema for offering and new-product development	• Aid in customer-led offering development	• Selecting and documenting "iconic cases"
Instrument for internal motivation	• Motivate personnel	• Internal success stories and "solution of the month" types of announcements
Tool for training and educating personnel	• Educate and train personnel	• Internal reference case descriptions and "reference black books"

motivation and training. Next, we will discuss these identified roles of customer references in light of prior research.

Leveraging customer references as *a sales and promotional tool* has been widely acknowledged in previous research (e.g., Helm, 2000; Salminen & Möller, 2006; Gomez-Arias & Montermoso, 2007). Our study extends the previous research by suggesting that the functions through which customer references work as a sales and promotional tool are various and not limited to the "referral effect" of customer references emphasized in previous research (e.g., Webster, 1970; Money et al., 1998; Ryals, 2002; Lacey & Morgan, 2009). The combination of the suggested functions, including status transfer and offering demonstration effects, as well as the indirect evidence that references provide about supplier's experience and previous performance, propose that the underlying mechanisms of customer reference marketing are highly complex and multifaceted. For instance, the value a supplier receives from signaling a recently closed deal with a prestigious customer is similar to the benefits that certain types of organizations may receive from the endorsement of licensing agencies (Baum & Oliver, 1991) and from winning certification contests (Rao, 1994).

Leveraging customer references as *a template for organizational learning* is related to the notion of "economies of repetition" (Davies & Brady, 2000), which firms can achieve by transferring routines and lessons learned from individual projects into a set of organizational tools and a repertoire of stories, and thus, they can conduct the subsequent bids and projects more efficiently and effectively. In line with our findings, in their study on organizational capabilities and learning in firms delivering complex systems, Davies and Brady (2000) found that the firms tried to capture the knowledge and experience gained from sales bids and projects and transfer the lessons learned for reuse in subsequent projects. Through documentation and internal communication, customer references can be turned into shared experiences and stories, which are essential to building communities of practice that promote organizational learning through informal information sharing (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Leveraging customer references as *a knowledge base for customer needs and market sensing* supports the customer-based view of strategy and firm growth (Zander & Zander, 2005) and can be compared with Penrose's (1959) notion of an 'inside track,' which refers to access to information about emerging customer needs that companies can gain through their existing customer relationships, and which can be used to develop new products and offerings. As customer reference marketing requires careful documentation of customer cases and intense interaction with key customer relationships, it can help in gaining in-depth insights into the circumstances and particular needs of customers and thus facilitate the pursuit of an 'inside track.'

Leveraging customer references as a *schema for offering development* can be related to the notion of "economies of recombination" (Grabher, 2004), which result from novel combinations of familiar elements and by-products from previous projects through the reuse of knowledge modules from earlier projects (Grabher, 2004). As our findings demonstrate, customer references may be leveraged to develop offerings and enhance value co-creation with customers through the careful documentation of previous cases and delivered benefits. A key part of this process is to capture and use effectively the existing diverse elements of customer knowledge within the organization by re-organizing knowledge-management systems around customers rather than products (Payne, Storbacka & Frow, 2008).

Leveraging customer references as *a basis for building credible value propositions* reflects the importance of understanding and measuring the components of customer value (e.g., Walters, 1999; Anderson, Narus & van Rossum, 2006; Kothari & Lackner, 2006). The existing pool of customer references offers a basis for identifying value drivers through careful documentation and measurement of the delivered

value from previous customer cases. According to Walters (1999), value-based competitive advantage can be established by identifying value drivers and measuring the value provided to customers (Walters, 1999; Kothari & Lackner, 2006). Using customer references to document and quantify the value received by reference customers can contribute to building an industrial supplier's value-assessment capabilities, which have been identified as critical for creating credible value propositions to receive an equitable return on the delivered customer value (Payne & Holt, 2001; Sawhney, 2006).

Leveraging customer references internally as *an instrument for internal motivation* and as *a tool for training and educating personnel* relates to the role of stories, which have been found to be effective tools for sharing knowledge, transmitting values and forming a "collective identity" throughout the organization (e.g., Buckler & Zien, 1996; Denning, 2004). Internally communicated customer cases and success stories are basically narratives that link a set of events related to a specific customer solution in some kind of causal sequence. They involve an experience about a certain customer case from the past in which only some individuals were involved, and create a living "collective memory" of the lessons learned (Buckler & Zien, 1996). Communicating internally about successful customer cases brings recent successes into the present for all members of the enterprise, which helps the personnel to experience their role as key to the successful customer case and may thus inspire motivation.

As our findings demonstrate, customer references as marketing assets are strongly interlinked with other resources. External use of customer references contributes to building reputation, market credibility and a firm's customer equity. Internal use of customer references contributes to organizational learning and personnel's know-how, and a thorough analysis of the existing portfolio of customer references may deepen the understanding of internal competencies. Customer references thus incorporate the qualities needed for creating competitive advantage (Barney, 1991), as they take time to develop, involve complex interrelationships with other resources, and cannot be easily transferred to other organizations. We contend that it is absolutely critical for industrial suppliers not to overlook the marketing asset that resides in their portfolio of customer references. The ongoing trends in industrial markets, such as the move towards value-added solutions (Davies & Brady, 2000; Tuli et al., 2007; Matthyssens & Vandenbempt, 2008) and the increased tendency towards value co-creation with customers (e.g., Cova & Salle, 2008), seem to further strengthen the importance of customer references as marketing assets. As the complexity and intangibility of suppliers' offerings increase, demonstrating and making them concrete through customer references becomes essential.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the various practices and functions of customer reference marketing and to explore the ways in which customer references can be leveraged as marketing assets. Our *first research question* aimed to uncover the practices that companies use in customer reference marketing. The analysis of the four case companies identified a repertoire of practices (Table 2) that the case companies employ in external and internal customer reference marketing. The variety of identified practices may be partly explained by the novel opportunities that information technology provides for managing customer reference data and communicating reference-related marketing material.

Our *second research question* aimed to uncover the functions of customer reference marketing. Our findings suggest that customer references can be used (1) to gain status-transfer effects from reputable customers, (2) to signal an enhanced market position, (3) to concretize and demonstrate offerings, and (4) to provide indirect evidence of experience, prior performance, technological functionality, and

delivered customer value. Internally, customer references can be used to (1) facilitate organizational learning, (2) to develop understanding of customer needs and internal competencies, (3) to advance offering development, and (4) to motivate and train personnel through internally shared success stories.

Our *third research question* aimed to identify the ways through which customer references can be leveraged as marketing assets. Findings from the four case companies suggest that customer references can be leveraged as (1) a sales and promotional tool, (2) a template for organizational learning, (3) a knowledge base for customer need and market sensing and understanding of internal competencies, (4) a basis for building credible value propositions, (5) a schema for offering and new product development, (6) an instrument for internal motivation, and as (7) a tool for training and educating personnel.

Based on our findings, we conclude that customer references are critical marketing assets for industrial suppliers, not only because they serve as means of increasing the supplier's market credibility through several functions, but also because they incorporate several internal functions that contribute to organizational learning and efficiency. The identified functions of customer reference marketing are partly overlapping. However, their analytical classification and identification increase our understanding of the reasons why industrial firms are practicing customer reference marketing, although their importance and relevance may vary in different organizational contexts. For example, the status-transfer effect gained from having reputable customers is presumably higher for small and newly established firms than for large firms with a well-established reputation. However, the contextual effects that determine the relevance of the different functions of customer reference marketing are beyond the scope of this study.

7. Theoretical implications

The results of the study contribute to the emerging theory of customer references (Helm, 2000; Salminen & Möller, 2006) in identifying the different practices and functions of customer reference marketing and thus providing a more holistic view on the phenomenon. The findings also contribute to the resource-based view of the firm and, particularly, to the literature on marketing assets (Srivastava et al., 1998; Hooley et al., 1998; Hooley et al., 2005; Zander & Zander, 2005), shedding light on the ways in which customer references can be leveraged externally and internally as customer-based marketing assets in industrial markets. Our findings suggest that customer references are closely related to other intangible assets, as they may have an important role in building the industrial brand (Blombäck & Axelsson, 2007) and the firm's reputation and credibility (Vendelo, 1998; Reuber & Fischer, 2005; Salminen & Möller, 2006). Just as other marketing actions both create and leverage market-based assets (Rust, Ambler, Carpenter, Kumar & Srivastava, 2004), customer reference marketing may help in developing new customer relationships and thus in building other marketing assets. In terms of theory development, we propose that the identified various functions that customer references serve may provide at least partial explanation to the importance of customer-based assets as determinants of firm performance. Thus, the multiple effects of a strong portfolio of customer references on an industrial company's growth and performance should be further addressed in research on customer-based assets.

The variety of external and internal functions that customer references were found to serve gives a more wide-ranging view of their roles as marketing assets beyond the word-of-mouth and referral effects accentuated in prior studies (Webster, 1970; Martilla, 1971; Ryals & Knox, 2007; Wangenheim & Bayón, 2007; Hansen et al., 2008; Olaru et al., 2008; Lacey and Morgan, 2009). The prevailing view about the role of customer references seems to be incomplete, as

there are several internal functions of customer references that may contribute to offering development, organizational learning and the supplier's understanding of its own competencies and abilities to deliver customer value. In particular, the finding that customer references can be leveraged to assess and demonstrate the value of the supplier's solution is in line with the findings of Anderson and Wynstra (2010) and contributes to the research on customer-perceived value (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Hansen et al., 2008; Lindgreen, Antioco, Palmer, & van Heesch, 2009; Anderson & Wynstra, 2010) and to the discussion on the value-assessment capability of the industrial supplier (Payne & Holt, 2001; Anderson et al., 2006; Sawhney, 2006). The existing value assessment models tend to focus on individuals' perceptions about value attributes, rather than on the consequences of the supplier's value proposition to the customer's own value-creation processes. Research on customer-perceived value and the supplier's value-assessment capabilities should take into account the potential of customer references as a tool for analyzing and measuring the value-in-use of an industrial supplier's offering.

8. Managerial implications

The results of the present study help to better realize the considerable potential benefits of customer reference marketing and provide practical suggestions to advance such efforts. The variety of identified functions that customer references fulfill accentuates the fact that companies should treat their portfolio of previous deliveries and customer relationships not only as a source of revenue, but also as a valuable marketing asset that can be leveraged both externally and internally. The identified repertoire of external and internal customer reference practices can serve as a template for planning a firm's customer reference-marketing efforts.

Using customer references to provide evidence of the value-in-use of the offering is managerially highly relevant. Industrial buyers have increasingly adopted careful risk assessment and supplier evaluation processes and require strong evidence of the supplier's value delivery ability. Suppliers therefore need to develop their ability to assess and measure the delivered customer value in order to develop credible value propositions and demonstrate the realized value of their offerings. Value assessment requires close cooperation with key reference customers and joint efforts to measure how the supplier's solutions and services lower the customer firm's costs or increase its sales. Pre-delivery assessment of the prevailing situation is a necessity, and suppliers need to agree with customers about the baseline against which the impacts can be assessed later.

9. Limitations and further research

This study was conducted from the industrial supplier's perspective and is context-bound to suppliers operating in the fields of process and information technology. Further studies to discover how customer reference marketing differs among firms in different industry sectors are needed. For example, the customer reference practices of equipment manufacturers, project business organizations and professional service providers can be compared. In addition, an important future research direction would be to shift the focus to the customer and study the perspectives of reference customers as well as potential customers to whom reference efforts are directed. For example, the impact of various customer reference practices on industrial customers' perceived risk could be examined. In addition, studying the interaction in the triad between the supplier, the reference customer and the potential customer from the relationship and network perspective may further illuminate the characteristics of customer reference marketing.

Appendix A

Gathered interview data

Nr	Case firm	Informant	Date	Duration
1.	A	Regional Director	22.2.2008	47 min
2.	A	Manager, Application Development	22.2.2008	72 min
3.	A	Business Line Director	27.2.2008	53 min
4.	A	Area Manager, Sales	10.3.2008	62 min
5.	A	Regional Manager	19.3.2008	36 min
6.	A	Sales and Marketing Director, Service	26.4.2008	60 min
7.	A	Business Development Manager	19.12.2008	53 min
8.	B	Senior Manager, Marketing Development	31.1.2008	63 min
9.	B	Vice President, Sales Hydrometallurgical Plants, Base Metals	31.1.2008	37 min
10.	B	Vice President, Process Equipment and Automation	31.1.2008	51 min
11.	B	Vice President, Sales, Smelters, Base Metals	10.3.2008	58 min
12.	B	Vice President, Ferroalloys, Base Metals	10.3.2008	47 min
13.	B	Vice President, Technologies, Base Metals	10.3.2008	42 min
14.	B	Vice President, Hydro Copper Sales, Base Metals	11.3.2008	50 min
15.	B	Vice President, Sales and Marketing, Minerals Processing	11.3.2008	59 min
16.	C	Head of Marketing and Communications, Digital Innovations	30.1.2008	49 min
17.	C	Communications Manager	30.1.2008	56 min
18.	C	Manager, Marketing Communications	30.1.2008	40 min
19.	C	Head of Sales Development	11.2.2008	85 min
20.	C	Vice President, Communications	11.2.2008	42 min
21.	C	Sales Director	12.5.2008	56 min
22.	C	Vice President, Strategic Sales	14.5.2008	62 min
23.	C	Program Manager, Strategic Customer Operations	21.5.2008	67 min
24.	C	Key Account Manager	21.5.2008	51 min
25.	C	Key Account Director	21.5.2008	41 min
26.	C	Marketing Manager	30.5.2008	56 min
27.	C	Director, Digital Media	30.5.2008	49 min
28.	C	Business Development Manager	30.5.2008	46 min
29.	C	Vice President, Sales	23.6.2008	54 min
30.	D	Head of Marketing Development	16.6.2008	52 min
31.	D	Solution Portfolio Development Manager	16.6.2008	51 min
32.	D	Head of Solution Portfolio Management	23.6.2008	51 min
33.	D	Head of Network Solutions	23.6.2008	52 min
34.	D	Business Development Manager	23.6.2008	62 min
35,	D	Sales Manager	27.6.2008	54 min
36.	D	Executive, Strategic Marketing	30.6.2008	56 min
37.	D	Head of Marketing	30.6.2008	35 min
38.	D	Business Development Manager (telephone interview)	2.7.2008	86 min

Appendix B. Schema for the personal interviews

1. Background information and the general role of customer references in the company
1. Could you first tell me something about your background and current role in the company?
2. What do you consider a customer reference in your business?
3. How do you see the role and value of customer references in your business?
4. Do you think that the existing customer reference portfolio contributes to the growth and competitive advantage of your company? If so, how?

2. Building the customer reference portfolio
5. How large is the customer base of your business unit?
6. How large a proportion of these customers are leveraged as reference customers?
7. What do you consider the main tools for building a customer reference portfolio in a new market or technology area?
8. Do you categorise your customer references in some way? If so, how and what are the dimensions?

3. Managing the customer reference portfolio
9. How do you collect information about customer references in your business unit?
10. Who is responsible for collecting this information?
11. How do you select the customer references that you use in a certain sales process?
12. What kind of CRM system do you have in use?/What kind of system do you have for managing information about your customer references?
13. What kind of information about references do you have in your (CRM) system?

14. How do you see the role of the CRM system in managing the customer reference portfolio?
15. What kind of information on customer references do you consider the most useful?
16. What kind of information related to your customer reference portfolio is lacking?
17. How do you maintain the solutions/equipment that are utilised as references?

4. Managing relationships with reference customers
18. How do you maintain relationships with reference customers?
19. Could you tell me about your most important references (key references) and why they are important?
20. Do you treat these customers differently? (What kind of relationship-specific investments are made in key reference relationships)
21. Think about one of your most important reference customers. How would you describe your relationship with this customer? How has this reference customer affected your business?
22. What is the role of personal relationships and connections in managing relationships with important reference customers?

5. Growth targets and customer-reference-portfolio management
23. What kind of target market or technology growth areas do you have?
24. How do you see the role of your reference portfolio in relation to your current growth targets?
25. Do you plan your sales-growth strategies according to your customer reference portfolio?

6. Leveraging the customer reference portfolio
26. How do you use reference customers or reference deliveries externally in your marketing activities?
27. How do you use reference customers or reference deliveries internally?

7. Challenges and improvement areas in building, managing and utilising reference-customer portfolios
28. What kind of challenges are involved in managing the customer reference portfolio?
29. How could the management be improved in your opinion?

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