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MASTER'S THESIS

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF MARKETING STRATEGIES IN A SELECTED
MICRO COMPANY**

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LUKA BRUKETA

AUTHORSHIP STATEMENT

The undersigned Luka Bruketa, a student at the University of Ljubljana, School of Economics and Business, (hereafter: SEB LU), author of this written final work of studies with the title “The development of marketing strategies in a selected micro company”, prepared under supervision of prof. dr. Mateja Bodlaj, PHD

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BCG - Boston Consulting Group

HR - Human Resource

MO - Market Orientation

MSME - Micro, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

SME - Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

SWOT - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

WOM - Word of Mouth

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, globalization and modern technology significantly influence the organizational core of business activities such as sales, marketing, customer service, and others. The digital era has enabled that competition is not limited only to geographic regions anymore, but much further. As technology has been developing through the years, the world has witnessed the transformation of traditional to digital marketing, which has become an important global tool for attracting new customers, retaining loyal ones, learning about their preferences, engaging consumers' interest and participation, and relating to them (Nikunen, Saarela, Oikarinen, Muhos, & Isohella, 2017). Furthermore, new technology has not just changed the global trends but also the consumers' buying behavior. Namely, active alterations on the market, driven by technology development and more open markets, and regulatory structures, have highly benefited customers by providing them a wider selection of modern and innovative products provided by a broader selection of companies. Besides, the dynamic structure of the market has established new challenges for the customers and also transformed the nature of issues that customer authorities need to address. Enhanced trade and the huge internet development have enabled new opportunities for the customers, not to mention that an increased need for international cooperation has been established to identify and address consumer problems (OECD, 2010). Suddenly, customer experience has become vital since it embodies every characteristic of a company's offering - the quality of consumer care, advertising, packaging, product and service features, ease of use, and reliability (Meyer & Schwager, 2018). All of that forced the businesses to adjust their marketing strategies to stay competitive. Namely, proper marketing strategy plays an essential role when trying to improve the performance of the organization. What is more, a marketing strategy can be comprehended as the dynamic approach that helps companies adopt all necessary tools and methods to identify customers' primary needs and fulfill them efficiently (Gyanwali, Bunchapattanasakda & Walsh, 2020).

With the development of well-prepared marketing strategies, companies seek to recognize an opportunity to reach consumers' minds where the integral part is to understand consumers and their habits. Besides, a well-defined marketing plan can help a company become a recognizable player on the market, not to mention that it can also be a big contribution for enhanced market penetration, bigger sales and profit, and improved brand value. On the other hand, when developing a new marketing strategy, it is crucial that this approach is composed of multiple sub-strategies where each of them has its program prepared. Furthermore, each corporation can determine the value of their marketing strategy by asking their management and sales department some elementary and simple questions such as what message we want to deliver to our customers? Will everyone be able to understand this message? Is this message unique enough to reach a broader audience? Moreover, it is really important that this message is conveyed to the audience where the main objective is to convince them that the company's business differentiates from the others available on the competitive market: "we provide the best quality available for the price" (Laurent, 1999). Besides, several factors are impacting the

development of a marketing strategy plan. First, there are internal factors such as the assets, skills of the company, and the company's culture. On the other hand, company's marketing strategy is also affected by external factors such as different market drivers, the industry's lifestyle, strategic windows, and the nature of the competition. An optimal marketing strategy needs to follow a contingency approach that allows flexibility in meeting the unique set of factors that run the marketplace and the organization's viability (Salem Press, 2014).

On the other hand, many small businesses nowadays are fighting for their survival due to the lack of resources and data available comparing to the strong competition. In addition, marketing in small companies is not as influential and well developed as it is in more considerable competition, especially in the initial stage of development. This is so because small businesses are usually product-oriented and driven by new ideas, rather than being consumer-oriented, where the main objective is to fulfill consumers' needs. Furthermore, owners (managers) of the small firms might be biased toward their ideas. Hence, they usually neglect adverse market information and ignore valuable in-depth details since they are still fully committed to the venture ideas. Because small businesses perform marketing following their competences and circumstances, they are fully engaged in marketing activities even though sometimes they do not fully understand its form. Owners (managers) of such businesses might have a negative point of view towards marketing since they comprehend it as a cost where distribution and sales are uncontrollable issues with the belief that each case is so specific that defined rules cannot be applied. For that purpose, marketing is commonly underutilized and misunderstood by small companies due to the fact that the owners (managers) of such businesses tend to perceive marketing narrowly, in general, as a synonym for selling or advertising (Bodlaj & Rojšek, 2014). Hence small companies must prepare a well-defined marketing strategy where they need to take into consideration which marketing tool is best to use to build successful customer relationships. That kind of enterprise should put their focus on certifying that all their marketing concepts are integrated and that their marketing strategy is systematic, well-organized, tenacious, and compatible (Nikunen, Saarela, Oikarinen, Muhos & Isohella, 2017). Furthermore, the biggest advantage of small businesses is their direct and personal connection with the customers. This means that they can be more flexible when responding to customer needs comparing to bigger competitors. This usually results in higher consumer satisfaction which can build a stronger relationship between the company and its consumers. This means that the loyalty of the clients is higher; therefore, it is understandable why it is easier for small businesses to control the recognition and reputation of their brand names. This is feasible, especially in the service sector, since human capital and other non-material elements of production are difficult to substitute (Prymon, 2014).

An increased number of services has caused curiosity in the way how they could be marketed. The analysis of the nature of services proved that traditional marketing is not sufficient anymore and that alterations are needed. Measuring the significance of service elements to the desired target audience allows companies to prepare service packages suitable for various market segments. After making the final evaluation of those segments, service firms can now decide which segments they are going to target. Several strategies of service marketing can be

used for that purpose. Service companies can now choose between several strategies, depending on the company's size and needs. If the firm plans to target a wider audience, it can rely on the approaches such as undifferentiated and differentiated marketing. On the contrary, a service company can use a concentrated marketing approach if its goal is to target one specific segment or a niche. On the other hand, it can use a micromarketing approach to focus on local customer groups, such as trading areas, neighborhoods, stores, and individuals (Johann, 2015).

The purpose of this master thesis is to contribute the development and improvement of relevant marketing strategies for the chosen company who is providing educational services. On the other hand, the main goal of this master thesis is to analyze current marketing strategies of the given company where I:

- present the essence of micro companies and their impact on the economy;
- analyze the characteristics of marketing strategies in small businesses;
- analyze current marketing concepts used by the given company;
- compare the model of business with the competitors and then try to determine potential competitive advantage;
- examine the customer behavior and their journey with the given company who is providing educational services;
- determine customer personas;
- determine marketing strategies that are best likely to increase the performance. Then examining what are possible opportunities for improvements and changes of marketing strategies within the given company.

The main research question of the master thesis is what is the proper marketing strategy in order to improve the performance of given company.

The master thesis is composed of three parts. Firstly, I provide an overview of the theory that is relevant for my thesis topic and which I use as a theoretical base. More precisely I provide literature review regarding micro companies and their impact on today's economy. I also present the ideas of Market Orientation (hereinafter MO) structure, such as customer and competitor orientation and inter-functional coordination which have a big impact on the long-term focus and profit. In addition, I also shortly describe main characteristics of marketing, as well as the implementation of marketing strategies within micro companies. When analyzing this part of master thesis, I rely on sources such as Statista and Eurostat.

Secondly, I present the background of chosen company for which I do the case study in order to provide basic information about the company, such as history, financial performance, organizational structure, presence on the market, its main business activities, business processes, and also company's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. At the end of this part, I describe which marketing strategies are currently used by the company and how this strategies influence company's performance. In this part of master thesis, I support my findings with gathered secondary data from the references I am able to get within the company.

Based on the gathered insights and information, I analyze the efficiency of current marketing strategies of the chosen company, and then propose strategies which can be optimally used in order to increase company's performance.

1 MICRO COMPANIES

The first chapter's aim is to provide an overview of micro-businesses. It begins with a discussion of the definition of micro-businesses, followed by a discussion of their characteristics and significance to the economy as a source of employment and gross value added. The limitations of such businesses are discussed in the last section of this chapter.

1.1 Definition of micro companies

Micro, small, and medium businesses are characterized differently in different countries, owing to variations in economic growth rates. Experts emphasize that a country's economic development policy determines how businesses are divided into micro, small, medium, and large enterprises. Moreover, both quantitative and qualitative metrics can be used to identify business entities. In general, qualitative variables depict the nature or role of a company in a particular industry. Qualitative parameters are divided into the following categories: legal autonomy of the owner-entrepreneur; the relevant role of the owner, according to the concept of personal management; conventional organizational structure of a company; separate financial management and sources of financing. Effectiveness, competitiveness, innovativeness, ingenuity, combination, predictive capacity, and the strength of environmental influence are some of the other qualitative metrics used to describe the micro, small, and medium enterprise field. These standards are based on the owners' industry experience, the network of connections and influence, and the ability to adapt and build long-term relationships with customers. In general, a few qualitative measures that are readily observable and based on publicly available statistical data are used. The number of employees, the amount of revenue (annual turnover), the valuation of assets (the balance-sheet total), the degree of annual profits (less tax and insurance), the average bank account balance, and the length of time on the market are all factors to consider. Companies in this group have the following characteristics: they have a consistent business profile, they function in a single field of business operation, typically emphasizing commerce, services, construction, transportation, or the real estate industry (Plecka & Wlazły, 2020).

The distinction between Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (hereinafter SME) and large corporations are not always made evident in science discussions, as well as in economic policy discussions. This makes comparing statistical evaluations more complicated, and it raises the risk of forming false conclusions about the overall economic value of SMEs (Harms, 2018). The IFM Bonn classifies SMEs using quantitative parameters, such as annual turnover (less or

equal to 50 million euros) and employee number (less than 500). Companies with up to nine employees and less than 10 million euros annual turnover are defined as small companies. In comparison, businesses with up to 499 employees and annual turnover up to 50 million euros can be described as medium-sized companies (IfM Bonn, 2016).

On the other hand, SMEs are also defined according to EU recommendation 2003/361. The key factors determining whether a company is a small or medium-sized business are the total number of employees and turnover or total balance sheet. SME refers to any company with less than 249 employees, a turnover of less than 50 million euros, or a balance sheet total of less than 43 million euros. The categorization is illustrated in Table 1. Individual businesses are subject to limits. Depending on the size of the investment, the number of staff and the group's turnover or balance sheet total must be taken into account for an organization that is part of a larger group.

Table 1: Categorization of SME

Type of Company	Number of employees		Turnover per year (€)		Balance sheet total per year (€)
Micro	Up to 9	and	Up to €2 million	or	Up to €2 million
Small	Up to 49		Up to €10 million		Up to €10 million
Medium	Up to 249		Up to €50 million		Up to €43 million

Source: EU (2018).

Furthermore, a microenterprise can be defined as a small business with less than ten employees. This type of company is characterized as economically disadvantaged, meaning that the company has a low or very low income and lacks access to capital or other resources that are necessary for business success. Moreover, the lack of data on the number of emerging microenterprises continues to be the most challenging obstacle to overcome when it comes to identifying them. For instance, a self-employed individual would be categorized into the same microenterprise as a small manufacturing plant. In addition, revenues and a lack of access to capital are two of the most significant differences between small businesses and microenterprises. A typical loan for a microenterprise, for example, is less than \$50,000 and is issued by borrowers besides banks through microcredit borrowing or microlending with higher interest rates (Anastasia, 2015).

1.2 Micro companies and their features

There are several characteristics that distinguish micro-companies from larger enterprises. Catalogs of characteristics are used to classify general characteristics of microbusinesses. The variety and length of these characteristic catalogs vary. There is no such thing as an ideal-typical catalog of features that is indicative of all businesses. On the differentiation of micro-enterprises, according to Harms (2018), there are the following points to consider:

- the personality of the entrepreneur, who is both the manager and the owner, shapes the business;
- an entrepreneur has a personal network of clients, suppliers, and other vital contacts for the company;
- the organization offers services tailored to the specific needs of its clients;
- management and employee interactions are close and casual;
- the company is not too formalized;
- the organization can react rapidly to amendments in the environment;
- the company is not owned or run by a larger corporation, and it has a limited market share.

Furthermore, according to Yasmeen and Shaheen (2014), micro-companies vary from other types of businesses not only in terms of their financial and operational structures, but also in terms of the essence of their physical locations. As a result, following characteristics of micro-enterprises can be identified (Yasmeen & Shaheen, 2014):

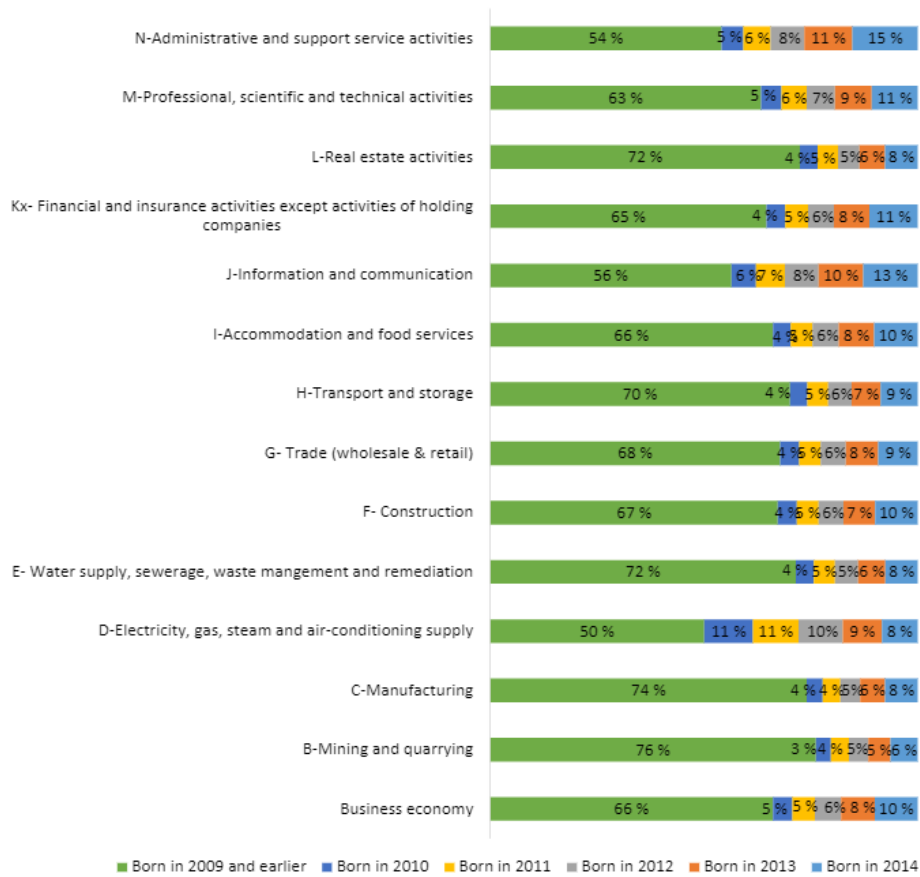
- Permanencies of the premises

Since the ownership of premises has both a short and long-term effect on business, it plays a critical role in profit margins. Even though situated companies in leased premises are still at risk of having to relocate, owning company premises necessitates significant investments. For that purpose, most of the business was found in rented premises (Yasmeen & Shaheen, 2014). Furthermore, many private companies nowadays can afford to invest in practice facilities without taking a significant risk. This is so because their expenditure is, in particular, backed by government rent reimbursement. Leases of 10 to 20 years are usually negotiated, which adds to a company's stability (Couch, 2007).

- Years of establishment of the enterprises

This feature shows the average age of the company. It has much to do with the firm's stability. As a result, assuming all other factors remain constant, the business's growth rate is positively related to the number of years it has been in operation. The number of years indicates the existence of a company (Yasmeen & Shaheen, 2014). Furthermore, according to Eurostat, more than 60% of SMEs in EU are at least 5 years old, and between 6% and 15% are less than 1 year old (Muller et al., 2017). Figure 1 summarizes these findings.

Figure 1: Age distribution of active enterprises in EU-28 business economy in 2014



Source: Muller, Julius, Herr, Koch, Peycheva, & McKiernan (2017).

Moreover, the survival or degree of success of a small business may be analyzed from two viewpoints. A venture fails when it stops operating; therefore, survival is an absolute indicator of venture success based on its ability to function as a self-sustaining economic entity. On the other hand, success is a relative measure of business success that manifests itself in the venture's ability to generate value in a cost-effective manner. Furthermore, given the high turnover rates for new companies, survival, rather than revenue growth or recorded profits, is often the primary concern within the small business market. Namely, in accordance with LeBrasseur and Zinger (2005), about half of all businesses collapse within the first eight years of existence. Micro-enterprises (those with less than five employees) launched between 1984 and 1995, on the other hand, were found to have a 64 percent failure rate after their fifth year (LeBrasseur & Zinger, 2005). In addition, Artinger and Powell (2016) claim that most entrepreneurial projects fail within five years due to excessive market risk, insufficient cash, and inexperienced management. Although these factors are likely to contribute to the

company's failure, the authors argue that the primary cause of failure is high entrepreneurial uncertainty, which leads to random blunders and, as a result, excess entry (or under-entry). More precisely, the authors discovered that random errors under uncertainty explained 60% of the excess entry. The second cause for the company's demise, according to the writers, is psychological. Namely entrepreneurs' errors are not random, but are significantly skewed toward the excessive entrance and that their actions are influenced by psychological variables like overconfidence (Artinger & Powell, 2016).

- Sub-contracting

Sub-contracting demonstrates how informal micro-businesses interact with the rest of the industry. Subcontracting is the key source of income in micro-enterprises due to the fact that it results in specialization in a specific component's output, which lowers the cost of production. Typically, the majority of the industry (small, medium, and large-scale industry) subcontracts in micro-companies for a specific component of production or service in order to save time and circumvent labor regulations, and micro-entrepreneurs subcontract to solve capital constraints as this is the only way to join the manufacturing operations (Yasmeen & Shaheen, 2014). On the other hand, Kimura (2002) refers to sub-contracting as the acquisition of a component of a product or process from a third party. A subcontracting relationship, according to him, is a contractual relationship in which a large firm requests a small firm to perform commissioned work (producing parts, components, or finished products) in a dominant position (Kimura, 2002). In addition, promoting and developing outsourcing agreements is critical for boosting SME competitiveness. Given the potential opportunities arising from the growth of global production network industries through subcontracting and outsourcing, policies aimed at improving relationships between SMEs and large corporations and multinational corporations (MNCs) are critical for the development of SMEs. Linking or matching firms, offering subcontracting and outsourcing advice to SMEs, and arranging subcontractor fairs are all ways to encourage subcontracting and outsourcing arrangements (Philippine Institute for Development Studies Research Papers, 2013).

1.3 Importance of micro companies for economy

The most simplistic examples of what microbusinesses provide to their communities go beyond the goods and services they offer. Many small businesses provide benefits such as local jobs, gathering places, and arts and culture access, representing the priorities and uniqueness of their community. However, there is clear evidence that communities are losing these advantages as a result of the loss of independent, local businesses. Furthermore, efforts are being made around the world to save small businesses and shopping centers. Economic health schemes in Australia, for example, have attempted to boost retail and commercial districts by maintaining

and attracting more small businesses and seeking uses for temporarily vacant spaces. These schemes are similar to those in the United Kingdom, where local governments and other running local businesses have subsidized temporary benefits of empty shops, such as art galleries and non-profit organizations, and small business start-ups (Campin, 2010).

According to OECD, SMEs contribute to economic and social well-being in various ways, all of which could be further improved. Namely SMEs make up most businesses in the OECD area, accounting for almost 99% of all of them. They are the primary source of employment, accounting for roughly 70% of all jobs, and are significant contributors to value production, producing between 50% and 60% of total value added on average. In emerging economies, SMEs account for up to 45 percent of total jobs and 33 percent of GDP. SMEs account for more than half of all jobs and GDP in most countries, regardless of income levels, when informal businesses are included.

Furthermore, the expansion of SMEs would aid in the diversification and strengthening of the economy. This is especially critical for resource-rich countries, which are particularly susceptible to commodity price fluctuations. On the other hand, SMEs are playing a vital role in achieving environmental sustainability. SME engagement in the transition toward more sustainable production and consumption practices is critical for economic growth to become more environmentally friendly. Small businesses' individual environmental footprints may be small, but their aggregate impacts in certain industries may surpass those of large corporations (OECD, 2017). On the other hand, Hassan and Ahmad (2016) state that micro businesses play a vital role in the production of jobs and revenue. These small-scale enterprises are more efficient in the national economy since they provide jobs and provide opportunities for low-income people to earn money. In addition, small businesses provide entrepreneurial culture and protect the economy against economic crises, including low income per capita, unemployment, and poverty (Hassan & Ahmad, 2016).

Furthermore, Clark and Douglas (2014) claim that policymakers and academics all over the world are interested in the growth of small and entrepreneurial businesses because of their possible contribution to economic development and jobs. In the OECD economies, Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Businesses (hereinafter MSME) account for 99 percent of all businesses and generate 50 –75 percent of total value added. Extensive research into the processes and dynamics of small business growth has revealed the many dynamic factors at play, such as attitudes toward growth, access to capital, as well as environmental opportunities. Also, it is worth noting that, in today's increasingly integrated and dynamic global trading climate, SMEs will aim for international sales because domestic markets are no longer the only ones available (Clark & Douglas, 2014).

Micro businesses are integral part of SMEs which account for the majority of businesses and have a direct effect on job creation, innovation, market competition, GDP contribution, and other facets of social and economic growth (Sefa, 2014). Overall, in 2020, SMEs represented

backbone of the EU economy, accounting for 99.8% of non-financial business sector enterprises. Moreover, as shown in the Table 2, micro-enterprises, classified as businesses with fewer than ten employees, account for the vast majority (93.3%) in the EU non-financial business sector (Muller et al., 2021).

Table 2: Enterprises in EU-27 non-financial business sector, by size-class and percentage, 2020

	Micro SMEs	Small SMEs	Medium SMEs	All SMEs	Large enterprises	All enterprises
Number	21,044,884	1,282,211	199,362	22,526,457	40,843	22,567,300
%	93.3%	5.7%	0.9%	99.8%	0.2%	100.0%

Source: Muller et al. (2021).

In the EU-28 non-financial market economy, these SMEs employed more than 82 million people, accounting for 65% of total employment in 2020, while large businesses accounted for 35%. In addition, micro companies provided the biggest portion of new jobs among SMEs in EU which is also shown in Table 3. More precisely, they provided 29.2% share of new employment (Muller et al., 2021).

Table 3: Enterprises in EU-27 non-financial business sector, by employment in percentage, 2020

	Micro SMEs	Small SMEs	Medium SMEs	All SMEs	Large enterprises	All enterprises
Employment						
Number	36,988,539	25,313,006	20,130,548	82,432,093	44,358,284	126,790,377
%	29.2%	20.0%	15.9%	65.0%	35.0%	100.0%

Source: Muller et al. (2021).

According to Sofa (2014), the contribution of SMEs to GDP in most industrialized economies is increasing compared to previous years. Furthermore, SMEs generated a greater gross value added in 2020, within the EU than large corporations. More precisely, micro-enterprises provided 18.7 % to the SME sector, followed by small and medium enterprises with 17 % and 17.3 %, correspondingly (Muller et al., 2021). The graphical representation of this data is described in Table 4.

Table 4: Gross value added in in EU-27 non-financial business sector, 2020

	Micro SMEs	Small SMEs	Medium SMEs	All SMEs	Large enterprises	All enterprises
Value in € million	1,179,476	1,071,196	1,087,613	3,338,286	2,956,544	6,294,829
%	18.7%	17.0%	17.3%	53.0%	47.0%	100.0%

Source: Muller et al. (2021).

Furthermore, SME profit rates in 2016 varied significantly also by size category. In 2016, the digital industry outperformed the non-digital industry in terms of profitability. This remained consistent for all SME size classes, all SMEs collectively, and large businesses. Among SMEs, micro-SMEs had the highest profitability in both the digital and non-digital sectors, while medium-sized SMEs had the lowest profitability in the latter. Moreover, in both the digital and non-digital industries, large firms were more profitable than small and medium-sized SMEs, but not more profitable than micro-SMEs.

Between 2013 and 2016, all enterprise size classes reported a fall in profit rate, with the decrease in the digital industry being substantially greater than in the non-digital sector, as shown in Table 5 (Muller et al., 2021).

Table 5: Profit rate in in 2016 by enterprise size class and change in EU-27 enterprise profit rate (in percentage points) from 2013 to 2016 by size class in the total business economy and digital/non-digital sector

	Profit rate in 2016					Change in profit rate from 2013 to 2016 (in percentage points)				
Industry /size class	Micro	Small	Medium	SMEs total	Large	Micro	Small	Medium	SMEs total	Large
Total business economy	10.3%	6.3%	6.2%	7.5%	7.7%	-2.7	-1.4	-0.9	-1.7	-0.7
Digital sector	12.7%	6.6%	7.4%	8.5%	9.3%	-5.9	-7.3	-6.3	-6.5	-7.9
Non-digital sector	10.2%	6.3%	6.2%	7.5%	7.6%	-2.7	-1.3	-0.8	-1.6	-0.2

Source: Muller et al. (2021).

1.4 Limitations of micro companies

There are considerable distinctions between micro, small, and larger businesses. Nearly a third of micro-enterprises design their operations based on their geographic niche or the location

where they conduct business. According to Starczewska – Krzysztozek (2011), only 3% of micro and small businesses believe they will be able to expand their operations outside of their geographically specific niche in the next two years. Furthermore, it is difficult to determine whether it accurately reflects the micro-organization's full potential. The opportunities arising from the quality, pricing, and even innovativeness of micro-firms' products and services appear to be enormous, but they are not revealed in the statistics. For instance, the ability to face up to procedures that must be learned and applied before these commodities and services may be traded on other markets (Starczewska – Krzysztozek, 2011).

Lahiri (n.d.) emphasizes the importance of small-scale industries providing quality employment and dismisses the short-term mindset of expanding job volume at the expense of quality. In addition, according to the author, small-oriented businesses generate a lot of jobs in terms of quantity but not in terms of quality. Small businesses would benefit from technological advancements because they would be able to produce better jobs with better payment, length, and expertise. This structural adjustment may slow the rate of job creation in the short term, but it will secure high-income job creation in the long run. Additionally, the author states that not just micro but all small businesses face ruthless competition, which causes them a lot of issues. Namely, large domestic enterprises and multinationals are armed with increased technology, management abilities, experienced workers, marketing capabilities, superior product quality, and a broader range of products, while at the same time, SMEs are limited in this aspect.

As per Kaousar Nassr and Wehinger (2015), equity markets presently provide for a minimal share of capital for SMEs. Growth necessitates equity capital, and the establishment of small Initial Public Offering markets, in conjunction with securitization and other non-bank debt financing mechanisms, could encourage a better risk distribution and, therefore, aid growth. Furthermore, a more detailed understanding of the SME finance gap is required. There appears to be an equity gap for risk financing, particularly for fast-growing enterprises, as opposed to SMEs in general or mature but non-fast-growing corporations. Funding micro businesses and all other SMEs is regarded as a tough decision since the segment as a whole is marked by low survival rates and a wide range of entities, making risk assessment particularly complex. Furthermore, due to a lack of collateral or positive cash flows, the requirement for longer maturities to support capital cost and investment, or other barriers to debt payments, such as unpredictable cash flow production, some SMEs are not suitable candidates for debt financing. Rather than a widespread lack of debt funding, the main challenge in Europe appears to be on the equity side, both public and private. This condition may represent deeper "cultural" influences to some extent (Kaousar Nassr & Wehinger, 2015).

Shafi, Liu and Ren (2020) stress the fact that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has had a significant impact on national and global economics. Namely, numerous companies are dealing with a variety of problems, all of which result in some level of loss. Enterprises, in particular, are dealing with a slew of issues, including a drop in demand, supply chain interruptions,

cancellation of export orders, raw material shortages, and transportation interruptions. Nonetheless, it is abundantly evident that the COVID-19 outbreak is having a significant impact on businesses all around the world where the MSMEs are the main victims of this disease due to the fact that in comparison to larger firms, MSMEs typically lack appropriate resources, particularly financial and managerial, and are unprepared for such disruptions that are likely to last longer than planned. In addition, these businesses rely heavily on recurring commercial transactions and a small number of consumers. As a result, many MSMEs are running out of stock, some are barely surviving, and others will soon run out of supply (Shafi, Liu & Ren, 2020).

In accordance with Bilan, Joshi, Mishchuk and Roshchuk (2020), the capacity to attract and keep talent is a critical aspect of a country's competitiveness. Hiring and retaining competent individuals is one of the most demanding challenges of the Human Resource (hereinafter HR) department at the small and medium-sized firm level. Authors state that hiring and retaining talented personnel has a connection with profitability: in unproductive organizations, filling vacancies with employees of all educational levels is nearly always a problem, whereas, in lucrative organizations, this is not the case. The key issues with filling openings based on employer estimations are external factors - a shortage of people with the necessary abilities; internal issues – assuring job appeal (material – remuneration, and intangible – career opportunities, flexible working hours, and legal employment); internal aspects of ineffective HR management, such as recruitment and psychophysiological determinants of job satisfaction. However, there are no strong correlations between criteria such as hiring efficiency and skilled worker retention as well as the organization's economic success, which can be measured by asset, revenue, and stock growth. This supports the idea that HR management techniques in small and medium-sized organizations are generally chaotic, with little consideration for the influence on the efficiency of other resources and no connection to total enterprise economic efficiency (Bilan et al., 2020).

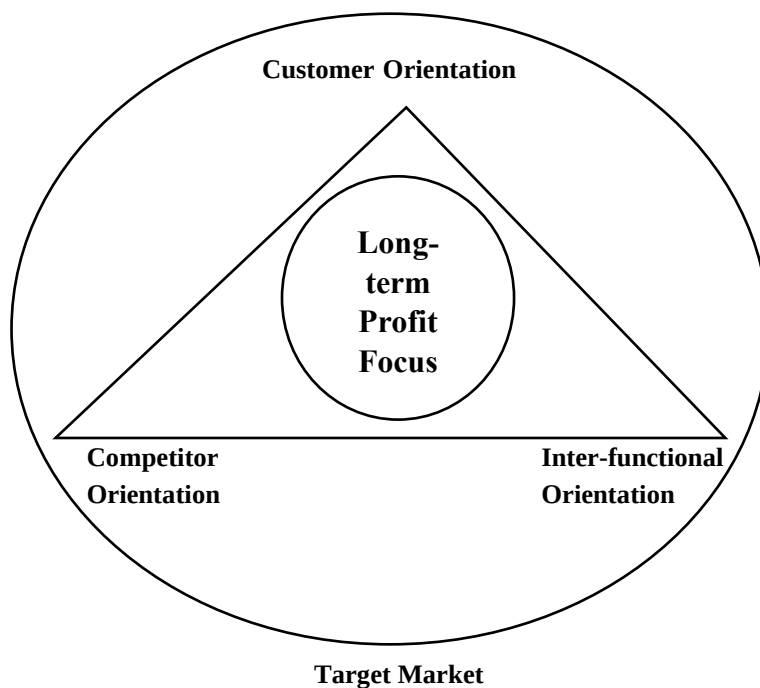
2 MARKET ORIENTATION

For more than two decades, MO, with its components such as customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination, has been thoroughly examined and found to be a significant predictor with favorable results on enterprise performance (Sefa, 2014). In this respect, the goal of this chapter is to provide an overview of MO, with a focus on micro and other small businesses. Then it examines the definition of MO and its components and the micro companies' long-term profit emphasis. The final section of this chapter identifies the major characteristics of MO in micro-businesses.

2.1 Market orientation definition and its components

MO can be described as the process of implementing a marketing concept within a chosen company (Modi & Mishra, 2010). Furthermore, in accordance with Kohli, Jaworski, and Kumar (1993), MO can be referred to the process of collecting and spreading market knowledge about current and future customer needs across a given company with the main characteristics such as an enhanced focus on market intelligence, a reliance on a particular form of inter-organizational coordination concerning market intellectual capacity, and emphasis on intelligence-processing activities. On the other hand, Narver, Slater and Tietje (1998) agree that MO can be characterized as a business culture where all employees are committed to consistently offering increasing customer value. Businesses, on the other hand, have had different outcomes when trying to build such a culture. The “programmatically” strategy, a prior approach in which a corporation tries to employ education programs and organizational changes in order to attempt establishing the desired norm of continuously producing higher value for consumers, is one way to build a MO, and it is the technique used by most organizations. The second suggested approach is the so-called “market-back” strategy. This tactic is known as experience strategy, where a firm learns from its day-to-day efforts to generate and retain more excellent value for customers and, as a result, continuously improves and adapts its customer-value skills, resources, and procedures. Both tactics, according to theory, help to increase MO (Narver, Slater & Tietje, 1998).

Figure 2: Market orientation



Source: Narver & Slater (1990).

Moreover, Narver and Slater (1990) believe that the MO is composed of behavioral elements such as customer orientation, competitor orientation, and inter-functional coordination. On the other hand, vital pieces of MO are also long-term focus and profitability as part of the decision's criteria. All these elements are closely related and co-dependent to each other. In addition, the three behavior elements are, on average, equally significant what is also presented in an equilateral triangle in Figure 2 from Narver and Slater (1990, p. 23).

2.1.1 Customer orientation

In order to consistently provide higher value to the target customers, an organization needs to comprehend customer's identities. This is known as customer orientation. Moreover, a value to a buyer can be created by the seller in two possible ways. The first one is by raising consumer's benefits relative to their cost, while the second option suggests a reduction of customer's costs in relation to their benefits. The seller must be aware of the economic and political limits at all levels of distribution channel. Specifically, this is the sole logical framework through which a seller may determine who his existing and future potential customers are, as well as what their needs are (Narver & Slater, 1990). On the other hand, according to Hennig-Thurau and Thurau (2001), the main idea of the customer orientation is to fully respond to the needs and desires of the company's customers in order to ensure that they would constantly purchase the company's products or use its services. These two authors suggest that it is critical to meet customer demands since this is the most significant component in acquiring their trust and loyalty.

2.1.2 Competitor orientation

Competitor orientation refers to a vendor's understanding of possible competitors' characteristics. More specifically, the seller is frequently aware of the competition's short- and long-term strengths and weaknesses, as well as their long-term capabilities and tactics. In addition, the whole collection of technologies capable of serving the present and predicted needs of the seller's target purchasers must be included in the study of significant present and potential competitors (Narver & Slater, 1990). Foreman, Donthu, Henson, and Poddar (2014) strongly believe that competitor orientation allows a company to utilize its resources in order to create more excellent value and satisfaction of customers through specific, distinctive marketing campaigns, resulting in supreme offers. Besides, this group of authors finds that businesses get frequently entrenched in competitive situations, to the point that their competitor orientation may have a negative impact on performance since they just replicate competition and fail to keep being innovative.

2.1.3 Inter – functional coordination

Inter–functional coordination is a third crucial behavioral component of MO. As claimed by Narver and Slater (1990), inter-functional coordination is defined as the use of firm resources in a coordinated manner to provide higher value to reach the audience. A seller has the capacity to promote value for the purchasing company at any point in the buyer's value chain. As a result, anybody in any role inside a seller organization has the capacity to contribute to the development of value for purchasers. What is more, to provide higher value to consumers, a vendor needs to use and incorporate all of its human and other capital resources efficiently and adapt if needed. As a result, that effort should be the focus of the entire company, not just one department (Narver & Slater, 1990). On the other side, Menguc and Auh (2005) describe inter-functional coordination as the integration and collaboration of multiple functional domains within a company. This behavioral component is, according to the authors, expected to promote communication, cooperation, collaboration, and coherence. Moreover, it describes how various functional departments work together to accept divergent viewpoints and deal with competing perspectives and patterns of behavior by setting functional objectives aside for the greater good of the organization. Besides, inter-functional coordination is an essential antecedent to strategic orientation stems due to the fact that along with communication, quality and consensual commitment are critical when developing a quality marketing strategy (Menguc & Auh, 2005). On the other hand, Alam (2010) is convinced from his study that even though inter-functional cooperation is favorably associated with firm performance, it is unable to have a meaningful impact. According to this author, this is a clue that inter-functional coordination, especially those controlled by a small number of people, is not a very relative function.

2.1.4 Long – term profit focus

According to the Narver and Slater (1990), MO is principally concerned with the long-term focus, both in terms of profitability and in terms of putting each of the three behavioral elements of MO into action. Furthermore, a long-term perspective is required for an organization's ultimate survival in the world of competitiveness. To prevent competitors from weakening whatever buyer-value superiority a company has developed, it must constantly develop and deploy extra value for its consumers, which necessitates a variety of appropriate tactics and investments. Last but not least, the literature suggests that profitability is the primary goal of MO for enterprises. Namely, profit was determined to be considered as an element of MO; yet, their data collected revealed that profitability might be viewed as a result of MO. Moreover, profitability is correctly viewed as a business goal, while the long-term focus is linked to the adoption of all three behavioral components (Narver & Slater, 1990). On the other hand, Sefa (2014) states that long–term focus and profit are essential decision components of MO. For a company to successfully develop a proper MO, the following must be employed (Sefa, 2014; Bodlaj & Rojšek, 2010):

- the customer must be the center of the business for management and employees;
- the customer must be listened to and understood according to its current and latent needs;
- create long-term customer and supplier relationships;
- aim must be the long-term profitability, not sales volume;
- customer expectations and desires must be measured and managed on a regular basis;
- specific customers must be accurately defined and targeted;
- commitment to progress and innovation on a continuous basis;
- expand with alliances and partners to fulfill changing needs;
- search for delivering superior customer value to increase customer loyalty;
- company must comprehend the difference between responsive and proactive MO, where responsive MO relates to identifying, comprehending, and meeting stated customer needs, while the proactive MO refers to the process of identifying, recognizing, and meeting unmet customer demands.

2.2 Features of market orientation in micro companies

Small businesses bring opportunities that other sorts of firms do not necessarily offer. For instance, scale benefits allow these organizations to be more flexible and maintain tight contact with their clients. This advantage enables this kind of organization to swiftly adjust to its consumers' preferences and supply products/services that match their requirements. Whenever a company commits to providing higher value to its consumers on a consistent basis, it is guided by MO and marketing philosophy. It is claimed that small enterprises might uncover performance consequences by aligning themselves to the market. Moreover, according to Ngo (2021), the favorable influence of MO on a company's productivity can be explained in two ways. First, MO is defined as intangible assets that allow organizations to acquire competitive advantages by enhancing their performance, according to the resource-based view. Second, this relationship is said to be conditional. According to contingency theory, strategic decisions must be aligned with contingency elements in order to develop performance implications (Ngo, 2021).

On the other hand, Laukkanen, Tuominen, Reijonen, and Hirvonen (2016) strongly believe that the essential factors to the success of small businesses are MO and brand orientation. These factors do not have a direct effect on financial performance but rather indirect effects via brand performance. In addition, the greater degree of MO makes sure that a greater level of brand orientation is achieved, which consequently leads to improved brand performance. The authors discovered that being competitor-oriented pays off monetarily for younger companies, whereas investments in branding pay off more for older companies. It can be understood that in small enterprises, MO is not as important as brand orientation in terms of performance. This demonstrates how branding efforts benefit small firms (Laukkanen et al., 2016).

Furthermore, Musa, Mustapha and Aziz (2018) argue that companies with MO behavior must pay attention to comprehending consumer wants and consistently gather information on rivals' actions in order to take required steps for the company's value. Small and micro-businesses must focus on short-term business strategies with a focus on day-to-day business operations rather than long-term objectives. As a result, these businesses should concentrate on improving their competitor-oriented culture and market environment (Musa, Mustapha & Aziz, 2018). In addition, according to Alam (2010), the performance of small businesses is heavily influenced by MO. In order to provide higher benefits to consumers, the micro company must first provide value to itself. This requires not just leadership but also the contribution from all employees in the small business sector to play a substantial role in promoting MO behavior throughout the organization. The mindset of the owner/manager is the most critical factor in supporting and appreciating this behavior, not just for a higher degree of MO, but for promotion of new strategies that a company can use to address the changing customer behavior and compete against their rivals. The author also emphasizes that micro and smaller businesses are run more by competitor orientation than by customer orientation. This means that small companies are continuously gathering clarification about their main competitors to ensure that they are aware of the fact what their competitors are doing so that they can tailor their business strategies to outperform them (Alam, 2010).

3 MARKETING STRATEGIES

In order to remain competitive, a company's marketing effort must be founded on a strategic marketing plan that ensures that the effort's goals and objectives are appropriate for the marketplace's needs (Salem Press, 2014). This chapter discusses which types of marketing strategies are most commonly used in the case of small and micro companies, what their characteristics are, and the process of marketing strategy development in these kinds of enterprises.

3.1 Implementation of marketing strategies in micro companies

The primary purpose of marketing strategy is to increase business and improve a sustainable competitive advantage. Marketing strategy encompasses all essential short and long-term marketing operations involving the examination of a company's strategic starting position, the creation, assessment, and implementation of market-oriented strategies, and thereby contributing to the company's goals and marketing ambitions. To successfully expand its customer base, each company must develop its own marketing strategies. This is accomplished by the amount of the purchase, the pace of product obsolescence, the acquisition of new product users, advertising, and the provision of incentives (Kasiso, 2017). Furthermore, as indicated by

Dzisi and Ofosu (2014), marketing strategies are the main determinants of an organization's position in the marketplace. They contribute to the creation of new products/services for existing markets by creating a dynamic environment. The findings of the authors imply that the correct combination of media might help micro-companies to construct the optimal marketing strategy (Dzisi & Ofosu, 2014). Nasyid (2013) explains that marketing strategy commences with market research, which evaluates client demands, attitudes, and rivals' products, and continues via advertising, promotion, distribution, and, wherever relevant, customer servicing, packaging, sales, and distribution. In order to survive the pressures of the global market's fierce competition, micro and small enterprises must provide a quality product with good packaging that meets customer expectations, give accessible pricing, engage in broader distribution, and back it up with an effective promotion strategy (Nasyid, 2013).

According to Ababa (2004), a good marketing strategy is all about developing well – designed marketing mix. The main components of the mix are product, price, place/channel of distribution, promotion, people, process, and physical evidence (Ababa, 2004). Moreover, Abasilim (2015) claims that the marketing mix is a set of characteristics that small and micro-businesses must integrate in order to satisfy their target market. It is necessary to create the best product for the target market. Distribution channels must be planned and regulated throughout time. The presence of the company's product must be transmitted to the target audience through a combination of the promotion mix, and the appropriate pricing must be determined to attract an audience and boost profit (Abasilim, 2015).

On the other hand, Baseline Survey Report prepared by Ethiopian Development Research Institute (EDRI) made a declaration that the majority of manufacturing micro and small enterprises (about 89 percent) rely on their customers, suppliers, or relatives/friends as their primary sources of marketing information. According to their research, 57 percent of entrepreneurs stated that clients are their direct channel of marketing information. In addition, other sources of spreading marketing information, such as other manufacturers, media advertisements, business groups, and trade shows, serve a tiny (approximately 10 percent) proportion of enterprises as primary methods of disseminating such information (Gebreeyesus et al., n.d.).

Moreover, in accordance with Valeriu, Tudor and Popescu (2011), the function of marketing in micro and small enterprises is to ensure success by determining and satisfying the requirements, wants, and aspirations of targeted customers using scientific marketing tools and to serve as the foundation for achieving strategic goals. Furthermore, management must take strategic planning into account while comprehending the marketing position inside small businesses. Segmentation, positioning, and targeting must all be tailored to the specific constraints of micro-businesses. The following are just a few of the many limits that SMEs face when it comes to marketing features (Valeriu, Tudor & Popescu, 2011):

- scarce funds, such as money, time, and marketing expertise;
- a lack of specialized knowledge — owners-managers are more likely to be general practitioners than experts;

- limited impact in the market.

On the other hand, Priyan and Selvi (2016) strongly believe that promotional strategies have a significant impact on the financial performance of MSMEs. Namely, the purpose of promotion is to arouse and stimulate customer demand for a product. It is persuasion and persuasion communication that educates potential clients of the existence of products and convinces them that the commodities can meet their needs. Promotion strategies are divided into three categories, according to the authors. The first important aspect is advertising since it allows companies and consumers to communicate effectively. The advertisement informs consumers about the various types of products available, as well as when and where they can be purchased. In addition to that perspective, Čorak and Šnajder (2016) agree that modern advertising, also known as digital marketing, has various advantages over traditional means of marketing. Namely, the low cost, measurability, and precision targeting of the specific type of audience are the main benefits of this sort of marketing. Advertising can be tracked on a daily basis, allowing for the collection of visitor information and customer-specific products and services. These data are stored in databases, and users have the capacity to access the information they need at any moment. This strategy allows for more informed decision-making, and it is clear how the particular investment pays off (Čorak & Šnajder, 2016).

The second important aspect of marketing is personal selling, sometimes known as salesmanship. It is unique in that it is the only type of promotion that involves face-to-face interaction between a salesman and one or more potential customers. If advertising creates demand for a product and encourages people to buy it, salesmanship is used to convert that desire into a sale. Last but not least, during the challenging economic periods of the past decade, sales promotion has been the quickest increasing part of the promotion mix and a vital component in the success of marketers. Advertising and personal selling are both complemented by promotional activities. As their name suggests, their goal is to increase sales (Priyan & Selvi, 2016). In addition, another powerful instrument for mass promotion is public relations. This promotion technique aids in the development of positive relationships with the company's numerous publics by acquiring a positive reputation, enhancing the company's image, and dealing with negative rumors, stories, and events. What is more, public relations can have a significant impact on public awareness at a considerably lesser cost than other promotion tools, such as advertising. Usually, the enterprise does not pay for the space or time in the media. It rather pays for a team of people to create and disseminate material as well as coordinate events. Namely, if the company creates a compelling story or event, it may be picked up by a variety of media outlets, simulating the effect of advertising at a much lower cost to the firm (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).

Moreover, Khan, Razak, Wadood, and Tasmin (2017) claim that SMEs must pursue a niche strategy, which allows them to make the most of their limited funds. For SMEs to remain competitive in the market, they must (Khan, Razak, Wadood & Tasmin, 2017):

- concentrate on a small number of consumers and avoid markets with a large number of competitors or a strong competitor;

- develop long-term and solid relationships;
- use specialization and differentiation techniques;
- add a premium to the pricing;
- put the consumer's requirements first;
- maintain a strong reputation by relying on word-of-mouth referrals.

Moreover, Srinivasan, Bajaj and Bhanot (2016) are convinced that MSMEs have a variety of marketing options, including networking and Word-Of-Mouth (hereinafter WOM) marketing. For new consumers, small businesses usually depend on WOM recommendations. Small businesses can use WOM marketing to offer customers a reason to talk about their products, making it more straightforward for WOM to spread. Small and micro firms, rather than relying primarily on their personal contact network, also depend on the networks of their consumers. These clients can also be reached through e-WOM (electronic word of mouth) (Srinivasan, Bajaj & Bhanot, 2016).

3.2 Characteristics of marketing strategies in micro companies

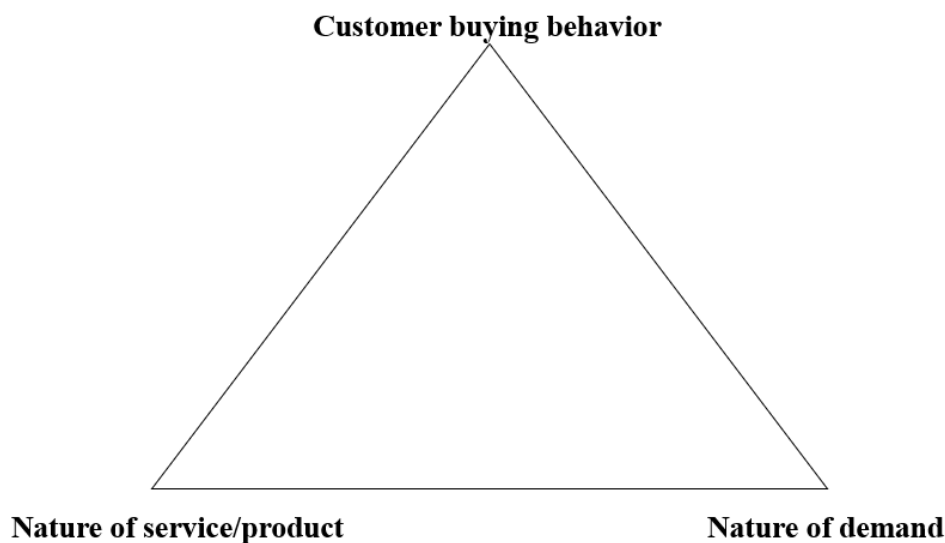
The features of marketing strategy can be classified into three categories according to Rudolf (2015). The first feature is the nature of the service/product, which is frequently purchased in bulk and whose important qualities are generally of a technical nature. Because of the specialized capabilities they fulfill, the service refers to a collection of attributes that cannot be simply changed. These are typically followed by support services such as technical assistance. The marketing challenge is to hire technically skilled employees who can adequately explain benefits without sugar-coating or unnecessary promotion.

Furthermore, the nature of demand, derived from the consumer market's demand, is the second attribute. Even while it appears that uncontrollable factors influence sales, there is still a lot that marketers can accomplish. That is, in fact, a chance for the firm to concentrate its marketing efforts not just on its own buyers but on all buyers along the supply chain leading to the final customer (Rudolf, 2015).

The final distinguishing feature is the manner how the consumer behaves in the process of purchasing a product or service (Rudolf, 2015). Furthermore, Bocconcelli et al. (2018) claim that in case of SMEs, most commonly used marketing approach is entrepreneurial marketing (EM). This sort of marketing is frequently situation-specific and does not require any prior strategy. It entails the application of specific practices – in line with SMEs' decision-making processes and highlights the role of the entrepreneur, whose professional expertise, inventiveness, proclivity for innovation, fluidity, instinct, and willingness to listen to consumers are regarded as primary sources of competitiveness. It also underlines the importance of social ties in the management of the SME–market interaction. Entrepreneurial marketing has recently been defined as "a spirit, an orientation, and a process of enthusiastically identifying opportunities, launching and growing ventures that generate customer's perceived

value through relationships by utilizing innovation capability, creative thinking, selling, market engrossment, networking, and flexibility” (Bocconcelli et al., 2018). In addition, the entrepreneur’s task as a salesman is to figure out who has the most decision-making authority, what level of formalization the process has, and the amount of time that the process will take. As shown in Figure 3, salespeople must be skilled negotiators who are willing to invest in long-term relationships with customers (Rudolf, 2015).

Figure 3: Features of marketing strategy



Source: Rudolf (2015).

On the other hand, Tadesse and Pettersson (2019) emphasize that the significant distinction between large and small businesses is their marketing and management styles, not their scale. Small businesses are, in general, focused on a domestic market, whereas large businesses serve a regional or international market with a larger market share. Management of smaller companies is thus more personalized because a manager is involved in all aspects of the firm and makes all decisions autonomously. Furthermore, marketing of micro and other small business lacks marketing specialists and resources. It has a limited influence on the market due to its lower sales volume, i.e., fewer clients, staff, and thus fewer sales than large businesses. The majority of small businesses are recognized for not having a proper strategy for marketing their product or service, and they are chastised for it. Yet, they tend to advertise their products/services in their own unique style. Because of their scarce resources, small enterprises have specific characteristics that set them apart. These include an informal structure, a limited selection, simplicity, and a focus on price. In addition, small businesses struggle to do market research, produce content, and choose suitable promotional media because of resource constraints and a lack of marketing expertise. For that reason, small business marketing

operations are frequently defined as sensible, practical, and situation-specific and are tailored to meet the needs of unique businesses (Tadesse & Pettersson, 2019).

In contrast, Vega and Rojas (2011) believe that marketing strategy is not as widely used in MSMEs and that it is primarily influenced by three interrelated factors:

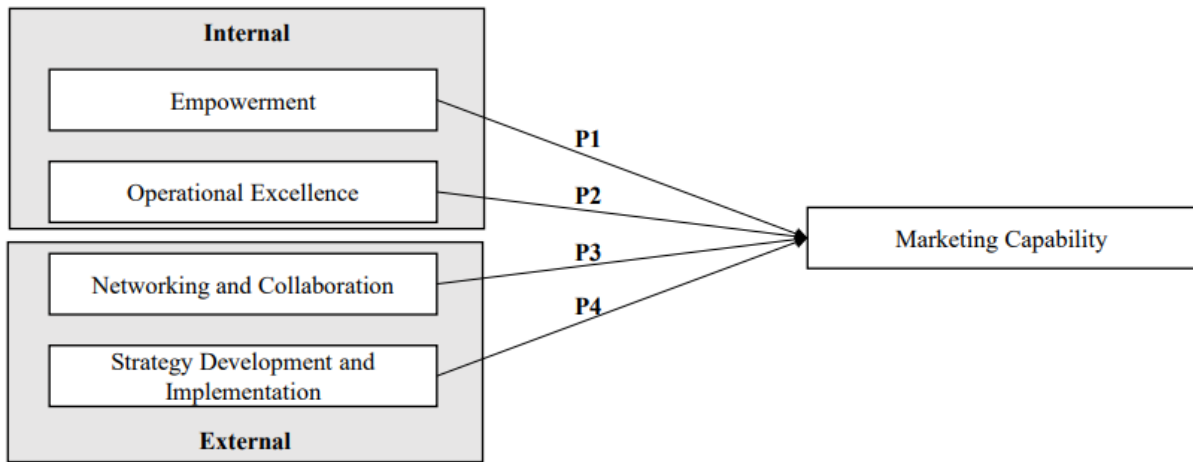
- the firm's approach toward the role of marketing in the company;
- the focus of managers' work in SMEs;
- the access to resources in order to implement this process.

The company's approach toward this process stems from a misperception that marketing is difficult to value in terms of cost and that its outcomes are ethereal and difficult to quantify. It is considered as an expense rather than an investment. Marketing hence becomes a sideline activity with little influence on business performance. Moreover, managers in such a type of organization place a greater focus on "doing" than on "thinking." They are more concerned with day-to-day operations than with the medium or long-term planning that strategic planning necessitates, and they do not produce formal marketing strategies. In terms of the resource's ability to conduct strategic planning in SMEs, the author asserts that small businesses lack the capabilities, market power, and other resources that giant corporations have. The lack of marketing knowledge and training in these types of businesses reflects the aforementioned predicament (Vega & Rojas, 2011).

3.3 Process of marketing strategy development in micro companies

Management teams must carefully analyze the environment, consumers, and competition in order to develop an effective plan for long-term success. Employees get more knowledge and skill as the procedure is repeated. Firms can design methods that increase their marketing capabilities by combining workers' experience, talents, and business resources. Furthermore, MSMEs struggle to adapt to market changes and compete with larger corporations. This challenge can be characterized by difficulties in adapting to market changes and competing with larger organizations, so developing a proper marketing plan is critical for these businesses. Namely, strategy creation and implementation are critical for marketing capability, which is defined as the measures and actions that include market research, marketing strategy, planning, and evaluation geared at satisfying customers' expectations. Hence, micro-businesses must make short-term plans to survive, but marketing requires a long-term strategy to build a loyal customer base and attract new consumers. A long-term implementation marketing plan must be designed in order to increase the competence of marketing capabilities and to meet customer needs. As presented in Figure 4, a good marketing strategy includes elements such as employee empowerment both inside and outside the organization, operational excellence within the company, and internal networking and collaboration among the departments (Inan & Kop, 2018).

Figure 4: Factors affecting marketing capability



Source: Inan & Kop (2018).

On the other hand, Evans and Ballen (n.d.) claim that developing a marketing plan helps grow any business, whether large or small. Contrary to common assumptions, creating such a strategy does not necessitate a significant investment of time and resources, but the rewards far outweigh the expenditures. The authors define a marketing plan as identifying and fulfilling the needs and desires of clients while making a profit. This entails acquiring and maintaining customers by promising and delivering superior value to the competition and continuing to provide higher levels of satisfaction. Authors suggest that every company, despite its size, should follow eight steps when preparing a simple marketing strategy: definition of marketing objectives, identification of company's target market, identification of competition, product/service description, definition of place (distribution strategy), choosing proper promotion strategy, pricing strategy development and creation of marketing budget (Evans & Ballen, n.d.).

Step 1: Definition of marketing objectives

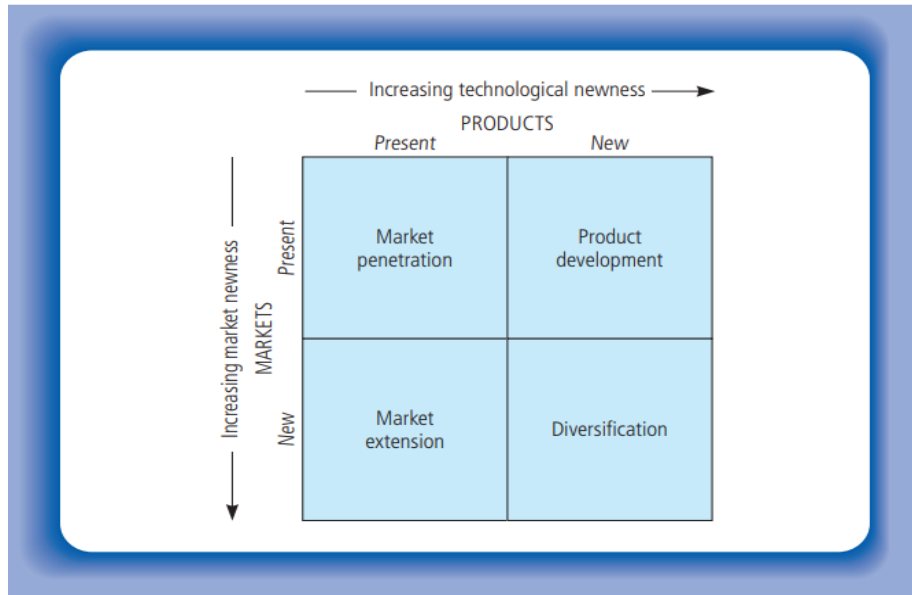
In order to track a company's progress, marketing goals must be realistic, detailed, and quantitative. Moreover, according to McDonald (2007), companies can utilize the Ansoff Matrix to clearly define their marketing objectives. Under this framework four alternative courses of action are identified for the company (McDonald, 2007):

- selling existing goods to already established markets;
- expanding the market for current items;
- creating new products for established markets
- new product development for emerging markets.

In addition, the variety of marketing objectives within this framework is quite broad because there will be varying degrees of technological and market newness (McDonald, 2007).

Nonetheless, Ansoff's Matrix provides a logical framework for developing marketing objectives under each of the four main headings depicted in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Marketing objectives with Ansoff Matrix



Source: McDonald (2007).

Step 2: Identification of company's target market

The target market is a set of clients (individuals, businesses) for whom marketing efforts are aimed; the target market the company chooses will determine its production and marketing strategies, not the other way around. Hence it is essential to determine demographic characteristics of consumers such as age, sex, profession, income level, and education level in order to obtain insights into the target audience. Furthermore, it is essential for the companies to comprehend how customers make their choices. Hence, the businesses must understand that customers differ psychologically and cognitively from one another, and as a result, they make arbitrary judgments that differ from one another. They do, however, endeavor to be sensible and careful by determining their feelings towards optimal decision-making to minimize risks and maximize their benefits. Customers typically acquire as much internal and external information as possible from different sources before making important decisions. Consumers rely more on internal information (first-hand experience) and comparing it to insights gained from friends, family, and other sources. Moreover, whenever internal information is scarce, consumers rather place greater trust in those with a deeper bond, as opposed to the media, advertisements, and other similar sources of information. In addition, customers' decision-making is often influenced by the price. In general, people expect better performance and/or quality from more expensive goods. As a result, people are more careful when purchasing

durable products versus non-durable goods, as the former is more expensive and requires a greater level of commitment. As a result, customer involvement is essential in consumers' decision-making (Ding, 2015).

Step 3: Identification of competition

The competition can be determined in a variety of ways. One strategy is to look for other small businesses that offer reasonably similar products or services to the target market while staying within the company's budget. At this point, each company must identify its competitors' strengths and weaknesses, as well as the tactics they use to sell their products, the pricing system they utilize, and whether they have anything uncommon or unique that might provide them a competitive advantage (Evans & Ballen, n.d.).

Step 4: Product/service description

In this stage, companies must describe what kind of products/services they offer, how their offer differs from the competition's, how customers perceive the value of their product/service, and what the company's unique features are at this point. It is vital to have a solid product/service description since it will present consumers with a compelling rationale to purchase the company's products (Evans & Ballen, n.d.).

Step 5: Definition of place (distribution strategy)

Place refers not only to a company's physical location but also to how the company plans to get its product/service into the hands of its customers - exactly where they need it. To do so, businesses must address the following questions: "How widely will we distribute our product/service geographically (e.g., locally, in-state, multi-state, nationally, worldwide), and will we sell directly or not?" (Evans & Ballen, n.d.).

Step 6: Choosing proper promotion strategy

The entire collection of activities that enlighten the target audience about a company's product/service is referred to as promotion. Customers are enticed to choose the firm's product or service over the competition. Simply said, promotion is how a company gets the word out about its product or service. In addition, the subject of advertising is how and what to express to the company's customers. Mass media (radio, television, internet, newspapers, magazines, billboards, etc.), direct mail, personal contacts, trade associations, and social media are some tactics that can be used (Evans & Ballen, n.d.).

Step 7: Pricing strategy development

Cost-oriented pricing, flexible pricing, and relative pricing are just some of the pricing strategies available. A cost-oriented pricing approach entails determining a price that is a proportion higher than the company's production costs. When using a flexible pricing strategy, organizations can change the price depending on the buyer and the time, while a relative pricing approach is when a company decides to use the current market price to set its own price, no matter whether it's higher, lower, or the same as the market price (Evans & Ballen, n.d.).

Step 8: Creation of marketing budget

Each company must determine how much time and money they want to spend on marketing. Furthermore, firms must estimate how much any marketing technique they offer in their marketing plan will cost and, according to that, keep to their budget (Evans & Ballen, n.d.).

On the other hand, when preparing a proper marketing strategy, it is necessary for SMEs to also understand factors such as, physical evidence strategy, process strategy and personal strategy.

Physical evidence takes into account the aesthetic and physical environment, which both validates and guarantees quality. Clients' perceptions of the quality of service they obtain can be heavily influenced by the physical environment and other apparent indications (Ikegwuru, 2019). Furthermore, process strategy is a method for assisting in the creation, development, and implementation of service planning as a company's competency and strategic assets (Ikegwuru, 2019). Rudolf, on the other hand, claims that each and every product or service evolves over time and has a four-stage life span, each of which represents the product or service's acceptability. These stages are market introduction, market expansion, market maturity, and sales decline. However, the life cycle concept does not inform marketers how long the cycle will endure, and determining requires a solid estimate, marketing research, or years of experience. It's also critical for SMEs to comprehend product externalities, obsolescence, and market growth rates, as these factors play a role in determining when to launch a service and how to remain viable (Rudolf, 2015). Last, but not least, by defining personal strategy, companies aim to emphasize the importance of employees, particularly customer staff contact, as a key component in delivering high-quality service and contributing to customer satisfaction. Before they can deliver good service to customers, employees must accept or regard what they are doing and have a soft place for their work (Ikegwuru, 2019).

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

A literature review suggests that MO and well-defined marketing strategies have a significant impact not only on the success of micro-businesses but also on overall economic growth. The following sections of the chapter briefly discuss the background of the chosen micro company, identify its market focus. Following that, the section looks at the different types of customers who use the company's services, as well as the marketing tactics that the organization uses to keep current customers and attract new ones.

4.1 Presentation of the company

The selected company is Avec plus d.o.o., which is active in the industry of education, focusing on teaching foreign languages, specializing in French. The company was founded in 1990 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, with two regular employees and up to ten outsourced co-workers. Ten years ago, the company's offerings were transformed when it became digital, offering online and offline classes. Specifically, the online way of instruction was first introduced in 2007 to extend to the overseas market, attract new consumers, and increasing the company's market visibility. Later, in 2012, a new website was launched with an emphasis on the online store and free resources to attract new consumers, such as pro-bono and free online tests to assess knowledge levels. According to CEOs of Avec plus d.o.o., the website is currently available in two languages: Slovenian and Croatian, with plans to extend to English and French in the future.

Furthermore, the organization has begun to measure its reach utilizing analytical tools such as Mailchimp and Google Analytics in the last several years. In addition, a list of potential consumers is created in the company's database, where it is determined who completed the free test by obtaining some personal information from customers, such as their email address, name and surname, date of birth, and so on. Last but not least, the company's turnover in 2020 was over 150 thousand euros, with a net profit of almost 1,500 euros. The company's financial performance for the years 2016, 2017, 2018 2019 and 2020 is summarized in Table 6. It is interesting to note, as the Equity throughout the years was rising, the other financial indicators reached a peak in 2017, while in 2018 they dropped and then remained stable until 2020. Last but not least, the Index compares company's financial performance on the market between fiscal years 2019 and 2020.

Table 6: Financial data of the analyzed micro company (in EUR)

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Index
Net revenues (in EUR)	264,860	362,653	143,571	148,411	154,148	1.04
Net profit or loss for current period (in EUR)	35,033	22,122	1,640	1,538	1,445	0.94
Assets (in EUR)	231,085	316,212	135,548	137,900	162,424	1.18
Equity (in EUR)	74,690	94,987	96,627	98,165	99,609	1.01
Short – term Liquidity Ratio	1.8	1.4	3.3	3.2	2.1	0.67
Net return on capital	46.90	23.29	1.70	1.57	1.45	0.92
Working Capital	97,530	95,073	86,149	81,618	70,579	0.86
Financial Debt/EBIDTA	2.7	6.1	10.6	7.0	20.8	2.99
Value added (in EUR)	78,836	63,057	33,743	37,173	44,068	1.19
EBIDTA (in EUR)	46,977	30,833	3,545	3,250	2,575	0.79
EBIDTA ratio	17.74	8.50	2.47	2.19	1.65	0.75
Number of employees	2	2	2	2	2	1

Source: Bizi.si (2021).

4.2 Research methodology

The main research question of the master thesis is “what is the proper marketing strategy in order to improve the performance of given company?”

Theoretical and empirical methodologies are employed to fulfill the study goal. The analysis of accessible secondary data, such as literature on micro companies’ current structure, MO, and defining marketing strategies utilized in such businesses, served as the beginning point. The major findings of the study are based on primary data gathered from the semi-structured interviews with the company’s founders, as well as former and current consumers.

In order to gather primary data, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the founders of the company, as well as the current and former customers of the given company. A listing of topics and questions that the researcher seeks to confront during the discussion is followed during a semi-structured interview. The semi-structured interview, according to Poblete and Grimsholm (2010), is neither an unstructured conversation nor an extremely detailed questionnaire. Instead, then depending solely on concepts and questions that have been predetermined in advance of the interview, semi-structured interviews provide respondents the chance to expand on their ideas and speak in great length about a variety of topics. In other words, compared to standardized techniques like the structured interview or survey, semi-structured interviews are more adaptable. In addition, semi structured interviews are more planned in terms of the topics they must cover, but the follow-up questions depend on the interviewer’s preferences (Poblete & Grimsholm, 2010).

More precisely, I prepared semi-structured interviews where the participants were responding to the questions posed by the researcher, and at the same time, his or her answers determined the direction of the interview. The order and formulation of the questions varied from interview to interview, which means that certain interviews also differ in content (Cerar, 2008). For the purpose of conducting the research, I included 7 interviews where I approached every participant with different open questions to obtain answers that were the result of the participant’s independent thinking, without any guidance. During the interviews, I also asked additional questions based on the flow of the conversation and interest, in order to further enrich the information obtained. On the other hand, I also tried to minimize any subconscious bias by focusing on the objectivity of the interviews. I was able to learn more about the company’s operations by completing the semi structured interviews with the CEOs of the company, which offered me more insights into the company itself. As a result, I was able to do various analyses such as Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (hereinafter SWOT) analysis and Boston Consulting Group (hereinafter BCG) matrix. Interviewing current and former customers, on the other hand, enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of consumer behavior, which later on aided me in performing a customer analysis.

Interview questions were structured to be answered by CEOs of the micro company, whose role in the company includes using customer data for marketing purposes. Moreover, I opted

to target CEOs of the company since their day-to-day activities include the exploiting customer data for building together all the firm's marketing communications, and also tasks related to the promotion of the company's services. In my analysis, I performed analysis with both CEOs of the company. On the other hand, I decided to interview also the former and current customers of Avec plus d.o.o. with the purpose of gaining information about their customer experience with the company. More precisely, I decided to interview four current and one former customer of Avec plus d.o.o. Furthermore, I decided to interview these two types of clients since they have been cooperating with the company long enough and consequently have great insights about the company's operations. Namely they took various types of courses, such as specialized French courses with adapted terminology which is intended for those individuals who are unable to participate in a group French course due to job obligations or they simply have unique desire for learning French knowledge. They have their own curriculum, with the proper number of hours suggested based on the level of knowledge they desire to accomplish. The other types of courses that these clients took are conversational courses in French and French refresher courses which are aimed at people who have already learnt French but have not used it in a long period of time and want to brush up on their skills and re-establish their vocabulary and grammatical structures.

More precisely, former customer of the company was with the company for more than 15 years, while the current customers are with the company now for more than 3 years already. In addition, by interviewing clients, I hoped to learn more about the company's services' touchpoints and pain areas. By doing so, I hoped to determine which marketing methods the company could use in order to emphasize its qualities in the long run. With this being said, I decided to target CEOs of the company since their tasks also encompass leveraging consumer data for putting together the company's marketing communications, as well as the tasks that are somehow related to the promotion of company's services.

Furthermore, because of COVID-19's time and location constraints, not all of the interviews were conducted in the same manner. The interviews with the company's CEOs were performed in person, and I was given permission to record interviews, despite the fact that recording interviews has a number of drawbacks, most of which are related to the sensitive content. As a result, I was completely focused on the questions I asked and the content of the responses I received, ensuring that the identity of the interviewee gone undetected. On the other hand, interviews with the current and former customers of the company were performed online, more precisely through Skype after receiving their consensus through e-mail. In addition, the interviews were conducted in such a way that I first thanked participants for their time, then said that I was working on a master's thesis on marketing strategies at Avec plus d.o.o., and that my primary goal was to gather data solely for the master's thesis. I also stated that answering all of the questions is not required. The interview guide I followed to conduct my interviews and each interview questions and answers can be found in the Appendix section of this thesis.

4.3 Semi-structured interviews

The interview process includes stages such as writing an interview guide, conducting interviews, and analyzing the results. The thorough interview guide includes fundamental company data, criteria that permitted just one company to engage in the interview, as well as key open-ended questions (Sefa, 2014). Furthermore, by eliminating answer biases, the closeness of the interviewer–interviewee relationship improves the data’s reliability. The versatility of the interview format, enables the interviewer to customize the order in which questions are asked, custom tailor question wording as needed, ask follow-up questions to clarify interviewee responses, and use indirect questions (e.g., the use of projective techniques) to encourage subconscious viewpoints, is another strength of this approach (Roller, 2020).

Following, Poblete and Grimsholm (2010), unstructured and semi-structured interviewing are two techniques of qualitative interviewing. In an unstructured interview, the researcher may begin with a question and then pay attention to the respondent as he or she speaks freely, whereas, in a semi-structured interview, the researcher follows a checklist of queries that the researcher wishes to address during the discussion. Because the aim of this study is to explore participant perceptions of a company’s services, the semi-structured interviews were used where the participants were openly responding to the questions posed by the researcher, and at the same time, his or her answers determined the direction of the interview. Open-ended interviews were mainly concerned with MO, marketing strategies in the microenvironment, and some general information about the specified micro company.

The primary chosen research method for data collecting was semi-structured interviews, which were used to better explain, comprehend, and examine the perspectives, behavior, experiences, and phenomena of research subjects. This method helps the organization to better understand its customers and, on the other hand, avoid certain biases. Because respondents may not feel motivated to provide precise and genuine responses, methods such as surveys are frequently subject to inaccurate data. It is critical to have reliable data in order to gain a better knowledge of client satisfaction, which will aid the organization in developing better marketing tactics.

Owners and former/current clients of the company were contacted to explain the research’s goal, and then meetings were scheduled. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were held over November and December 2021. The interviews necessitated significant effort not only from the author but also from the respondents who are/were associated with Avec plus d.o.o. In terms of demographics, the participants in the semi-structured interviews were aged from 29-63. The interviews with the CEOs have been held in person where I got their permission to record the conversation. On the other hand, interviews with the customers were performed through Skype. The table for the structure of the interviewees can be seen in Table 7, while the whole interview conversations with the participants can be seen in Appendix A.

Table 7: Characteristics of informants

Person	Gender	Age	Position	Company	Experience
A	Male	57	CEO	Avec plus d.o.o.	/
B	Female	55	CEO	Avec plus d.o.o.	/
C	Female	29	Client	/	3 years
D	Female	46	Client	/	6 years
E	Female	37	Client	/	2 years
F	Male	32	Client	/	4 years
G	Female	63	Former client	/	15 years

Source: Own work.

5 RESEARCH FINDINGS IN THE GIVEN COMPANY

The following sections of the chapter examines the given company strengths, limitations, and prospects, and describe potential market threats. Furthermore, answers and conclusions based on the conducted interviews are presented as well as the limitations of the research.

5.1 Research data

Interview questions were structured to be answered by CEOs of the micro company, whose role in the company includes using customer data for marketing purposes. As I interviewed the former and current customers of Avec plus d.o.o., the main purpose was to gain information about their customer experience with the company. I decided to target CEOs of the company since their day-to-day tasks also encompass leveraging consumer data for putting together the company's marketing communications, as well as the tasks that are somehow related to the promotion of company's services.

An interesting thing that I discovered is the fact that the CEOs of the micro company such as Avec plus d.o.o. are actually responsible for all marketing activities what consequently leads to fact that marketing strategies are not prepared well, what at the end also impact the overall performance of the company. This finding can be supported by the statement of one of the CEOs of the company from the interview:

“To be completely honest, we get most of our customers through word-of-mouth marketing. We also have strong written references that can be found on our website where the audience can always check our credibility. On the other hand, time constraints and occupancies due to courses, we do not have a lot of time for preparing marketing campaigns and strategies. We are aware of the fact that the company should put more focus on that matter shortly. Our main objective so far is to regularly publish online news on our website and to be active as much as possible on the social platforms where we want to regularly post-professional material for French learning. Our focus remains on the company’s Facebook page and YouTube channel where the audience can find free learning French videos for different segments. All these videos are prepared by Avec plus d.o.o.” (CEO of Avec plus d.o.o.).

Another statement that confirms the fact that CEOs of the company are overburden with the load of work and consequently do not have enough time for the development and implementation of marketing strategies which would influence the performance of the company, is the following:

“Too technical issues sometimes to implement our ideas, and therefore, from time to time we need outsourced help” (CEO of Avec plus d.o.o.).

Furthermore, with the help of semi-structured interviews, I found out that the company gains customer data mainly through its website. Namely, at the company’s website customers can check their current knowledge of French by completing free classification test. Upon completion of the test, a. This information is provided to the company’s authentic mail. On the other hand, statements of CEOs unveil that besides free classification tests, a strong tool for gaining their customers is direct marketing, more precisely word-of-mouth marketing. This can be supported by the following statement:

“In the beginning, there was no marketing at all. At that point, we were focusing on teaching within the business sector, and we did not even have physical customers. Now, our strongest marketing tool is direct marketing for sure. Besides, we want to be active also on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.” (CEO of Avec plus d.o.o.).

The above statement also supports the fact that the company was not really active on its social platforms so far. In addition, from the statement “Besides, we want to be active also on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube”, I can assume that the company strongly believes that following a proper strategy for promotion of their services through social media channels, will reflect in better overall performance of the company.

All the above statements indicate that the company does not have well-defined strategies for the purposes of marketing due to the different reasons such as overload of work, time constraint and technical issues to implement their ideas. It is evident from these statements that owners of the company are aware of the fact that the company has not developed proper marketing

strategy yet and it should put more attention on defining that matter in the future. This is also the reason why the company already has some prepared plans for the next fiscal year when the main objective is to start publishing at least two posts per week on Facebook and Instagram. By following this strategy, Avec plus d.o.o. wants to motivate the audience to start learning French at all levels and to boost company's recognition, as well as sales of its own professional material such as books concerning communication, where linguistic expressions, vocabulary, and grammar structures are provided.

On the other hand, one of the business's most recent objectives is to also target the audience of those who are willing to pay a premium price. As a result of the numerous compliments the company received on its offerings and instructional methods, it decided to adopt this strategy. These customers who are willing to pay a premium price typically arrive at a company with a respectable degree of current knowledge and demand rapid and focused upgrades. This necessitates that the company modify its instructional strategies because it typically calls for specialized knowledge from particular professions. This can be confirmed by the following statement:

“In recent years, we've focused on prospects (audiences) who are willing to pay a premium price. Those audiences are typically eager and focused on achieving certain goals in the French language. Also, they frequently arrive with a decent level of current knowledge and want immediate, targeted upgrades, as well as requiring specific knowledge from specific professions. Apart from utilizing the most recent technologies, there are no specific tactics that we employ to target those populations; rather, the majority of it stems from prior experience with new technology.” (CEO of Avec plus d.o.o.).

In addition, company of Avec plus d.o.o., delivers most of their services through online services, which can be very powerful tool nowadays. To be more explicit, the business delivers learning materials to their clients via various online platforms such as Skype and Zoom. Since customer satisfaction is a key performance indicator for the business, Avec plus d.o.o. provides free gifts to its clients in the form of electronic manuals, tests, and projects for self-learning as well as self-verification of the client's proficiency in French. This can be supported with the following statement:

“We communicate with our customers online, especially through the platforms such as Skype and Zoom. We maintain the relationship with them by providing useful and free giveaways, such as different electronic manuals for a specific topic, special tests, and tasks for self-learning, self-verification of customer's current knowledge of the French language (all in electronic format). These activities are building good relationships and loyalty of the customers.” (CEO of Avec plus d.o.o.).

According to the interviews with current customers of Avec plus d.o.o., I found out that customers have a great customer experience with the company, since the teacher of the course

is very friendly, professional and has more than thirty years of experiences with teaching. Through the course, usually customers become more comfortable due to the fact that they notice that their knowledge is increasing due to the well guided process of learning. Consumers usually become satisfied with the process of learning, hence they become loyal. The statement from the interview with the current customer of the company supports my discovery:

“I feel comfortable with them, and I am also confident that I improved a lot in my French due to the suggested directions that the company provided me” (Current customer of Avec plus d.o.o.).

On the other hand, current customers recommend Avec plus d.o.o.’s services to anyone who are trying to learn French in a fashionable and funny way. The same opinion shares former customer of the company, who was taking company’s services for more than fifteen years. She has only good memories on the experience where she stated:

“I have good memories of these times. All I can say is that I learned a lot and I am still using this knowledge nowadays. Besides, this experience was more than just learning. We (me and a teacher) stayed in contact until today, so I can say that my relationship with the company was interpersonal and friendly” (Former customer of Avec plus d.o.o.).

The company itself has a lot of space for improvement as well. Specifically, both current and former customers agree that the company is not as recognized as it could be. Both clients learned about the company from acquaintances who were previously related to it in some way, but they were unaware of the company's involvement in self-promotion or any other form of marketing. The following statements corroborate my findings:

“To be honest, I did not catch up on their posts on Facebook and Instagram if you are asking me this. I do not know about the other platforms since I do not use them” (Current customer of Avec plus d.o.o.).

“Even still, I found them difficult. What if they try to be more visible on social media, perhaps paying attention to which audiences and when they turn on” (Former customer of Avec plus d.o.o.).

Furthermore, by enhancing specific segments, the company could improve its customer experience. For example, adding customer reviews to its online store would be an excellent place to start in order for the company to obtain extra client trust. This was also confirmed by one of the current customers' statements:

“Maybe, I would add more self-learning materials or something like that. Also, while I looked on the company’s website, I discovered that none of their products have any consumer reviews. Perhaps I should suggest that they include this functionality as well. Finally, I opted to purchase

their product since I am familiar with the teacher and have great faith in her and her profession but someone else may be hesitant to do so.”

5.2 Research conclusions

The semi-structured interviews were conducted on a sample of seven participants: two CEOs of the company Avec plus d.o.o., one former, and four current customers. By following the characteristics of semi-structured interviews described in 4.3, I came to the following conclusions:

Conclusions based on interviews with current and former customers of Avec plus d.o.o.:

- the company's high flexibility to customer needs, professionalism, and high quality of teaching execution are some of the greatest qualities of the company. Some of the customers are taking the company's services for more than fifteen years already due to the reasons mentioned above;

in general, the company's social media is not efficient. Namely, posts on the platforms such as Facebook and Instagram are not recognized by the customers;

- customers regard the company's website as a valuable asset. Specifically, there is a lot of resources available to everyone interested in learning the French language, regardless of their prior expertise. On the other hand, the company may want to explore adding additional self-learning materials and customer reviews to its website in order to increase the confidence of new customers who are often unsure about the quality of a product they have not experienced before;
- the experience was an important component that clients considered when choosing Avec plus d.o.o. services. Despite the fact that pricing has an impact, clients of Avec plus d.o.o. consider the school's organizational and methodical approach to be the most crucial factors;
- Some of the company's customers have distinct requirements since they require specialized knowledge in their sector. Customers claim that finding someone with experience in such a tight and specialized subject is quite difficult. Avec plus d.o.o. has the ability to quickly adapt in that regard, not to mention the fact that unique and creative ways to teaching, such as crossword puzzles and various types of language games, lend credibility to a company in the eyes of customers.

Conclusion based on interviews with CEOs of Avec plus d.o.o.:

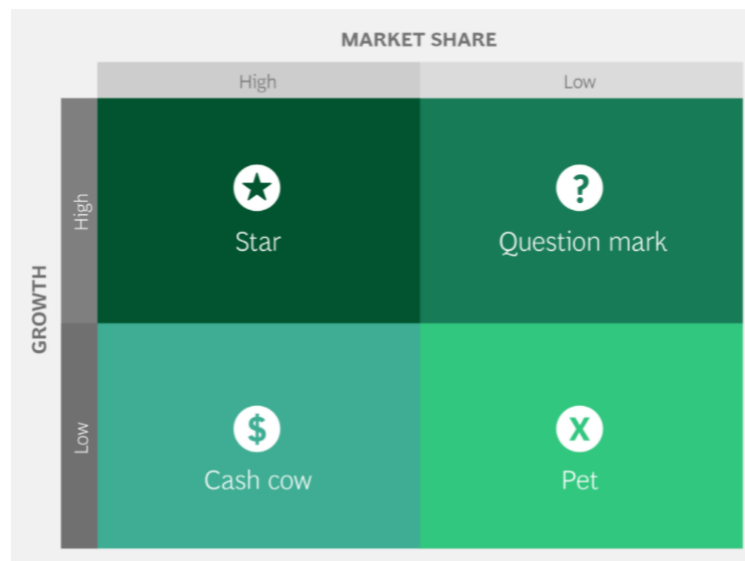
- Avec plus d.o.o. communicates with their customers through online channels, especially through the platforms such as Skype and Zoom. Because customer's satisfaction is a very important metric for the company, Avec plus d.o.o. offers their customers free giveaways such as different electronic manuals for a specific topic, special tests, and tasks for self-learning, self-verification of customer's current knowledge of the French language – all in electronic format;
- comparing to the competition such as Lingula, Mint, and Berlitz, Avec plus d.o.o. has a limited budget. Therefore, the company relies on its services to be of the highest quality. The company seeks information about the competition on the internet and on the documents that are publicly announced;
- the strongest marketing tool of the company is direct marketing, more precisely word-of-mouth marketing. Many new customers were gained due to the recommendations of current or former clients. The company's objective is to regularly publish online news on its website and to be active as much as possible on social platforms. Their focus remains company's Facebook page and YouTube channel, where they want to regularly post professional material for French learning. Their main goal is also to expand their reach to worldwide markets, add more languages to their website, and to put more focus and effort into their online store that has been established recently;
- due to time constraints and load of work, CEOs of the company are mostly concerned with day-to-day operations than with the medium or long-term planning that concern strategic planning necessitates, and therefore they did not have enough time to produce any kind of formal marketing strategy in the past. Avec plus d.o.o. hopes that this will change with a new campaign at the beginning of 2022 when they plan to be active on social media and start publishing at least two posts per week on the social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram;
- Avec plus d.o.o.'s mission is to offer education to those who would not otherwise be able to afford this service. Therefore, the company throws a pro-bono campaign twice a year for humanitarian purposes. The company believes such acts will increase company's visibility;
- the company tries to achieve higher traffic on its website by providing free online classification tests. By solving the test, the customer can check its knowledge of the French language. On the other hand, the company receives information about the visitor's profile who took the test. This information is sent to the company's authentic mail. Following this approach, the company gained the proper number of customers so far.

5.3 Market focus

According to Akintokunbo (2018), a market focus approach, whether based on a low-cost or differentiated premise, tries to address the needs of a certain market group. It is based on the idea that a company may serve a narrow strategic target more efficiently than the competition that operates on a larger scale. As an outcome, the company obtains either distinction by better matching the requirements of a certain target market or reduced costs in supplying that market, or both (Akintokunbo, 2018). Furthermore, in the last couple of years, the attitude toward customers has shifted dramatically. Customers have now taken center stage, and organizations' primary purpose is to meet their requirements. Customers, on the other hand, serve as a guidepost in today's world, where company resources are few and market rivalry is fierce. Furthermore, firms may successfully choose among technologies and invest wisely in processes by concentrating on consumer needs. A market focus is not the only thing a company requires, but it is the most important, the foundation upon which everything else is built (McQuarrie, 2008). On the other hand, it is extremely important for small companies to determine their specific business unit in order to develop successful business growth strategy (Samuel, 2018). For that purpose, the BCG matrix can be utilized. Namely, the matrix provides a solid foundation for assessing goods and strategic business units, allowing a company to determine each unit's present and future value. As a result, a company can determine how best to manage specific business divisions to maximize their contribution to the company's mission. When it comes to small businesses, segmenting them into key business units might be difficult, hence the matrix is utilized to evaluate products. Furthermore, the matrix evaluates strategic business units based on market growth rate and product market shares, where symbolic names are given to position the company's growth potential (Star, dog, cash cow, and question mark). Moreover, small businesses should divide their operations into distinct revenue streams comprised of either products or service lines and analyze the resulting units using relative market share and market growth rate to use the BCG matrix properly (Samuel, 2018).

As presented in Figure 6 below, the first business unit within the matrix is a “dog”. This unit operates in a low-growth market with a modest market share. As they predate on other business units, such business units are a liability to a company and should be dissolved. Furthermore, a “question mark”, as the term implies, throws a firm into doubt because it's difficult to tell whether or not a certain business unit can be grown into a star. “Question marks” represent business units that operate in a market with a strong growth rate but a small relative market share. On the other hand, a “star” business unit operates in a high-growth market and has a big relative market share. It has a lot of room to expand and will require some investment to boost its worth to the company. Last but not least, the term “cash cow” represents a company with a huge relative market share and operates in a market with a sluggish growth rate. To keep their revenue-generating abilities, cash cows must be cared for.

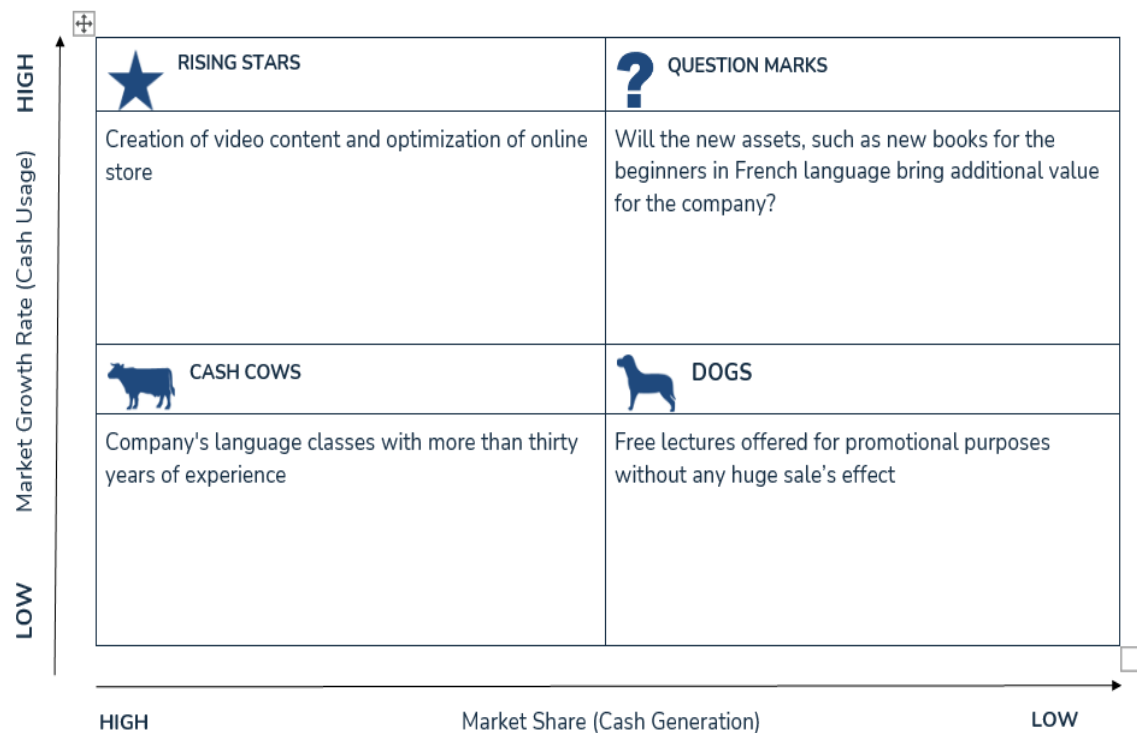
Figure 6: BCG Matrix



Source: Samuel (2018).

According to the CEOs of Avec plus d.o.o., the company's language classes, which have been offered to clients in a high-quality manner for more than thirty years, can be regarded as a "cash cow" as presented and explained in Figure 7, which represents the company's primary source of revenues. Due to the fact that the company is present on this market for such a long period of time, the firm has a clear picture how the market behaves and what is necessary to remain competitive. Therefore, no larger investment is required for this purpose. Moreover, the biggest question mark for the firm is whether to invest their time and finances into the creation of new assets, such as new books for the beginners in French language. The main question here remains whether this product will bring proportional return on the level of investment. In addition, the company sees a great opportunity to grow in the future by constant modification of its online store, as well as investing its time to create video content that will attract new potential customers to the company's website. Hence, this can be portrayed as the company's biggest "rising star" according to CEOs. Last but not least, the company has put a lot of effort to attract new customers by providing them some free lectures to show the consumers that the most important mission of the company is to enable customers a comfortable learning environment where the clients would be able to discover and critically examine their knowledge. By following described concept, the company has realized that it spent a lot of time where the reaction was not positive. Namely, a huge number of the customers took the free lectures and then did not decide to take regular and payable lessons. Therefore, this type of company's service can be illustrated as a "dog" business unit.

Figure 7: BCG Matrix analysis of Avec plus d.o.o.



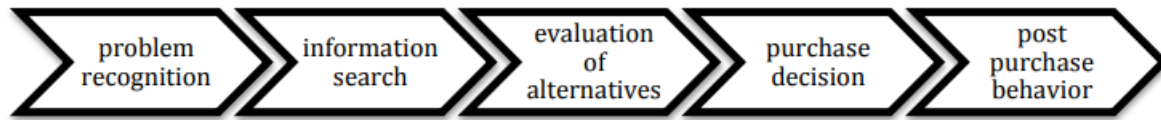
Source: Own work.

5.4 Analysis of consumers

According to Gichiri (2020), each firm must study consumer behavior and discover department changes as soon as possible to properly comprehend the client. Consumer behavior is defined by the author as the characteristics connected with selecting, purchasing, using, and discarding a product or service to meet a customer's needs (Gichiri, 2020). Furthermore, Barmola and Srivastava (2010) describe customer behavior as the dynamical interplay of cognitive, behavioral, and environmental events by which individuals undertake the exchange component of their life with numerous psychological and social variables involved. In addition, according to Engel, Kollat and Blackwell (1978), consumer behavior and their decision-making process can be understood through five main stages, as shown in Figure 8. The so-called EKB model has five stages: (1) identification of the problem, (2) information gathering, (3) alternative evaluation, (4) purchase choice, and (5) post-purchase behavior. Consumers become aware of their varied requirements during the first stage as a result of both environmental and internal stimuli. Consumers gather diverse internal and external information through many sorts of information channels throughout the information search stage. In the stage of alternative evaluation, customers analyze multiple alternatives based on various criteria and qualities, as well as their views, behaviors, and objectives. At this stage, consumers form particular decision-making, which is followed by the actual purchase decision. Following that, customers examine their options in the post-purchase stage. Customers' contentment and loyalty, or

discontent, guilt, and numerous sorts of complaints, are the end effects of this cycle (Engel, Kollat & Blackwell, 1978).

Figure 8: The basic five – stages of consumer decision – making process



Adapted from Engel, Kollat & Blackwell (1978).

Based on the literature review and the findings of the semi-structured interviews with the CEOs of the given company, as well as with the current and former customers of Avec plus d.o.o., I came to the following conclusions:

- Problem recognition: today's potential clients have high expectations in terms of gaining new knowledge and abilities. Clients do not have clearly defined their desires about learning, what amount of time is necessitated for that, and what level of budget is needed for using such a service. As a result, while contacting the organization, clients are quite undecided based on the company's experiences. Aside from being demanding due to their desire for flexible schedules, they might also be impatient because of their goal to learn as much as possible in the shortest amount of time, often adopting extremely unsystematic procedures. These features are common for the majority of company's clients, no matter to what level of prior knowledge they already have, or whether they are using services for the personal use or for the business purposes. In general, Avec plus d.o.o. has the highest percentage of clients aging from 30 and 50 who work abroad for international companies, particularly those from the francophone speaking area. The second largest group of target audience members are youngsters aged 5 to 15 who are returning to Slovenia and already have a strong knowledge of the French language but wish to maintain it. Furthermore, about half of Avec plus d.o.o. consumers are from Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Serbia. This is due to the fact that the company's website is provided in their native language, making it easily accessible to them.
- Information search: The majority of Avec plus d.o.o. customers learn about the company from friends who recommend it because of its professionalism, flexibility, and quality of the program. Moreover, customers can test their knowledge by completing free classification test. Their response to this approach is positive, since they can get great feedback on their knowledge and whether they are ready for official test (and to get a certificate). On the other hand, company informs consumers in what category their knowledge of French belongs according to the company's professional assessment.

Following that, Avec plus d.o.o. informs clients on the amount of time they should expect to spend learning. Furthermore, before taking the first class, the organization seeks to acquire information about clients' wants - what are their overall aims, and what are their expectations from the course itself. Based on the findings, the firm advises consumers on what sort of education is most appropriate or realistic for achieving their goals, how many hours of learning per week are required to achieve, and how to continue learning after the course has been completed.

- Evaluation of alternatives: The company articulates the customer which level of French expertise they have depending on their prior knowledge. The consumer then evaluates whether such a proposition meets his or her present wants and objectives based on this information. Some of the customers are undecided to buy company's products, such as books and other professional material due to the lack of information on company's website. This might be changed by adding additional self-learning materials and customer reviews to company's website in order to increase the confidence of new customers who are often unsure about the quality of a product they have not experienced before. Furthermore, Avec plus d.o.o. later modifies the course content based on the consumer's profile. For instance, the company currently has some clients in the healthcare profession. Consequently, the company constantly provides customized content to meet the needs of customers in this kind of profession.
- Purchase decision: At this point, the consumer has decided to use the company's services. Payment for new users is due a few days after the company sends out an invoice, usually a few days before the first class is taken. The user has the option of reserving a particular number of hours before the commencement of the program. Customers who stay loyal for a specified period, on the other hand, can afford to pay after the course is completed and enjoy extra incentives such as free books. At this stage, consumers are satisfied with the quality of the service and the school's organizational and systematic approach. Customers still consider pricing to be a significant element, but it is no longer their top concern, since they are willing to pay more for a good service.
- Post purchase behavior: On the company's website, customers can discuss their experience with the service. Clients can express their feelings about the service, their satisfaction with the course as a whole, as well as their recommendations what to change. Positive feedback is given most of the time. This is so because, if the clients do not see a clear goal for the service, they will drop out after a few lectures, usually without providing a review or recommendation. Furthermore, based on the organization's experiences, satisfied customers are more likely to extend their cooperation with a company because they believe they are on the right track to improving their knowledge. On the other hand, most of the consumers like the experience at Avec plus d.o.o. what results in their loyalty. Some of them are loyal to the company for more than 15 years.

5.5 Usage of current marketing strategies

According to Mansimov (2017), defining the target market is necessary before deciding on which marketing strategies to use. A target market is a group of consumers who are particularly interested in the company's goods (Mansimov, 2017). These are all the clients who should be the focus of marketing initiatives. Segmentation analysis should be carried out to find the appropriate target market. Segmentation is the process of breaking a market into various groups of customers who have various demands, features, or behaviors and who may necessitate different items or marketing strategies. The most important segmentation criteria are geographic, demographic, psychographic, and behavioral characteristics of the customers. Following the definition of the target market, the company must choose one of the following targeting strategies (Mansimov, 2017):

- **Undifferentiated marketing strategy** - market coverage approach in which a company chooses to overlook market segment differences in favor of pursuing the whole market with a single offer;
- **Differentiated marketing strategy** - market strategy in which a company chooses to target many segments of the market and creates unique offerings for each;
- **Concentrated marketing strategy** - market coverage approach where a firm focuses on a small number of submarkets.

On the other hand, Sheetal, Sangeeta and Kumar (2012) claim that marketing strategies are not one-time activities, but rather diverse and unique actions that must be revised year after year to meet defined goals. Marketing as a strategy is a growing trend where the 4 Ps or 7Ps are identified as essential variables in affecting the behavior of small businesses. Furthermore, in today's dynamic climate, numerous new and emerging notions such as relationship marketing, network marketing, inventive marketing, standardization, and clustering have been introduced to the strategy group. In the case of SMEs, marketing can be considered in three components: marketing as a culture, marketing as a strategy, and marketing as methods. Moreover, in a highly competitive environment, small and medium businesses are not adopting proper marketing techniques, according to Sheetal, Sangeeta and Kumar (2012). MSMEs have a difficult time differentiating themselves for that reason. They must follow a product differentiation strategy since they cannot use low-cost pricing tactics. Furthermore, the authors argue that SMEs must concentrate on brand endorsement to increase profitability because clients are often unaware of the brand names of small and medium businesses. Small businesses must also increase their content marketing, branding, and research basis to achieve this goal. Last but not least, in the age of globalization, the proper form of advertising is crucial for product placement, promotion, brand creation, and sales efficiency. According to Sheetal,

Sangeeta and Kumar, communication is trending in the opposite direction from promotional base, which takes the shape of many offers at regular intervals and exhibits a high level of relevance. This conflicting strategy benefits from direct human contact with customers. Because of the weak advertising foundation, indirect modes of communication are not conceivable. Small manufacturers should use consistent marketing and advertising strategies to raise consumer awareness of their goods. The use of integrated marketing communication should be considered. Better product positioning should be achieved by offering a variety of rebate coupons in publications like magazines and newspapers (Sheetal, Sangeeta & Kumar, 2012).

Small and medium businesses can now use social media marketing to increase sales, communicate messages to broader audiences, persuade customers, provide after-sales care, and a variety of other services. Every one of these solutions is not only easily accessible but also inexpensive and cost-effective when compared to other existing media marketing approaches. By empowering their customers to actively participate on social media websites, online forums, blogs, and other interactive forums to give positive feedback, and encouraging new consumers to use and recommend the company's products and services to people who have not used it yet, social media marketing largely exceeds traditional WOM promotional techniques. Namely, according to Shaikh (2017), social media marketing can beat traditional marketing and produce better outcomes in terms of promotion and sales (Shaikh, 2017). The explanation for this is that social media marketing's convenience and technological advancements make it very simple to interact with a large number of people at once, all over the world, which helps to generate a positive brand image and better consumer replies. Because of the speed and ease of today's technology, it's now quite simple to serve vast audiences throughout the world at once and generate a significant number of customers (Shaikh, 2017).

In addition, various users, members from various demographics, suggest or use comparable products, or similar brands, resulting in the formation of a new community that categorizes a particular brand as their 'favorite.' SMEs typically rely on not only the requirement to promote their products but also the development of market awareness about their service or product. It is equally critical for small and medium businesses to engage clients with their new products or services to raise public awareness. The main purpose is to establish a line of communication between businesses and their end-user customers, which will aid in identifying and understanding the market's true desires. It's also important to have a consistent presence across all digital marketing platforms. The message must be consistent and powerful across all social media platforms. Customers may become confused as a result of confusing and inconsistent communications across numerous platforms, resulting in a reduction in overall sales. Hence, SMEs need to emphasize a consistent message across all platforms (Shaikh, 2017).

According to CEOs of the company, a major goal of Avec plus d.o.o. is to pursue a marketing strategy with the primary objective of reaching English-speaking regions where the French language would provide additional value. Furthermore, the company is mainly focused on innovative marketing. The company, for instance was one of the first colleges to offer online

services. The company began offering Skype classes in 2007 and is still engaged on the platform. On the other hand, the firm provides online reference guides to its customers, which are primarily designed to meet the customer's narrowly specialized demands. These manuals are designed for managers or employees who are unable to participate in a group French course due to work obligations or unique needs for French knowledge. The unique content is created for them, with the necessary number of hours suggested based on the level of knowledge they desire to accomplish. Certain prior knowledge is required for such adopted curricula, based on which a needs analysis is conducted and, as a result, a suitable curriculum is developed. Furthermore, the business adheres to a “quality and flexibility above all” approach, which distinguishes its services. This is because the company aims to boost customer satisfaction, which leads to client loyalty. Many of Avec plus d.o.o.'s clients have been with the company for more than a decade. On the other hand, the organization is adaptable to consumer needs because it may produce any type of lecture based on the needs and interests of a certain customer.

Furthermore, the company seeks to attract new clients by continuously posting educational videos, which are subsequently shared on the company's social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, as well as YouTube. The company has also experience in delivering a specific number of flyers to educational institutions such as primary schools, secondary schools, and national libraries. The company needed to attract a varied audience, ranging from children to the elderly, who wished to improve their French language skills for personal reasons. In addition, the company used a variety of internet promotional tactics, such as free pro bono, to help people who would otherwise be unable to afford such services. Besides, customers can obtain the company's gift vouchers for a variety of online French courses in which the company continually considers the preferences and needs of the participants for whom the gift is intended. So far, Avec plus d.o.o. has spent a lot of time and money promoting its services through banners and e-mail marketing (Mailchimp), delivering promotional materials to people who had already enrolled in the database of the company.

5.6 Limitations of the research

Because it is based on data from a limited sample of interviewees, this study has several limitations. This prevented me from gaining the most optimal outcomes possible, and consequently, the results of the research cannot be generalized. Furthermore, because of COVID-19's time and location constraints, not all of the interviews were conducted in the same manner. This is also the reason why the interviews with the CEOs of the company were held in person with their permission to record the interviews, while the interviews with the customer and former customer were performed through Skype. Because of that there was time disparity between the prepared interviews. When a clearer explanation was required, they all had the option to be followed up with and asked more in-depth questions. Furthermore, due to the

sensitive nature of material relating to the company's strategy, some information was withheld from the interview(s).

5.7 SWOT Analysis

Environmental testing is an important part of strategic management strategy. Many experts propose adopting the SWOT framework to categorize significant environmental variables both inside and outside the company. The SWOT analysis has been praised for its simplicity and applicability. Furthermore, it has been widely implemented as a structure, but its application has been universally accepted without question (Pickton & Wright, 1998). On the other hand, Harms (2018) suggests that analysis aids in determining the starting situation in terms of the company's major strengths and weaknesses. Contrary, future project methods can be established by taking into account possible opportunities and threats that may arise. The four elements of SWOT analysis can be classified into external and internal factors. The corporate environment, or environmental analysis, is encompassed by external influences. External forces are the O and T, or Opportunities and Threats. They come from the outside, for instance, via market dynamics. The internal analysis, on the other hand, refers to the S and W, or the company's Strengths and Weaknesses, which are a matter of self-observation (Harms, 2018).

Alternatively, according to Das's research, every MSME company nowadays has some positive elements as well as certain issues that can be highlighted using the SWOT matrix. Because of the following considerations, the MSMEs have a tremendous number of strengths for growth (Das, 2015):

- MSMEs can be launched with a low level of investment;
- greater accountability and maturity arise from excellent client relations;
- customers who are well treated are more inclined to return to a company;
- the ability to innovate and create new products and services more quickly and creatively than larger corporations slowed by bureaucracy;
- the ordinary entrepreneur gets to know their clients better.

On the other hand, the main weaknesses for growth are the following (Das, 2015):

- the company does not offer a well-known brand of products or services;
- the company has little bargaining power;
- inadequate marketing due to a scarcity of resources;
- ignorance of the market's potential;
- a lack of commitment to the training programs;
- the majority of small enterprises lack trained people. As a result, these companies are unable to identify projects for expansion.

On the other hand, per Hedge and Sabarirajan (2018), the possible opportunities of MSMEs are:

- enhanced credit support is available, with an increasing number of government initiatives aimed at promoting it;
- access to additional opportunities has gotten significantly easier with the advent of the digital era;
- several free trade treaties have been signed, opening the door to a significant source of funding for entrepreneurs and business owners;
- alleviation in terms of accessibility to credit facilities.

Additionally, the main possible threats of MSMEs are (Hedge & Sabarirajan, 2018):

- financial constraints;
- an increase in the cost of inputs;
- unsettled worldwide economic situation and immense operational pressure;
- obstacles of handling legal, administrative, and social differences in various markets;
- technology depreciation.

Based on the literature review and the findings of the semi-structured interviews with the CEOs, current customers and former customer of the Avec plus d.o.o. company, a general SWOT analysis of the company was conducted.

As shown in the Table 8, a chosen organization has years of experience in educational services, specialized in teaching foreign languages, with a concentration on French. Furthermore, the company strives to build strong relationships with its consumers, ensuring that each customer is satisfied with the service provided. As a result, customers are usually quite loyal, with some of them using the company's services for more than two decades. This is also supported by the statement of one of the current customers, who stated that she is very satisfied with her learning process as a result of the suggested directions provided by the company. As she claims, this makes her feel at ease with the company's services, which leads to her loyalty to the company. This confirms a statement from Das who claim that one of the major strengths of MSMEs is the fact that ordinary entrepreneur gets a chance to know their clients better (Das, 2015).

On the other hand, the company's very limited marketing budget and lack of financial resources are the primary barriers to competing with larger competitors. Advertisements and other forms of marketing, such as posters, are today extremely expensive and nearly impossible to afford if a company does not have sufficient amount of revenues. Furthermore, due to the tiny size of the organization, the current workload is becoming excessive, thus it would be reasonable to consider hiring another additional employee. As a result of all of the firm's above-mentioned flaws, the company's growth has not increased in the last couple of years. As stated by the CEOs of the company, the only way to compete with the bigger competitors is to primarily

focus on our services to be of the highest quality and to be very flexible, and focused on customer-specific needs.

Table 8: SWOT Analysis of AVEC PLUS d.o.o.

Internal Factors	
Strengths	Weaknesses
- Interpersonal relationship with the customers (loyal customers); - Low salary, and therefore benefits overhead; - Micro company, but on the market since 1990; - Years of expertise in the industry of education, focusing on teaching foreign languages; - Avec plus d.o.o. has over ten years of e-learning experience, which could be an appealing factor for prospective consumers.	- Existing workload is getting too high; - Lack of expertise in some areas, especially with following the trends of digital advertising; - Marketing budgets are insufficient to compete with larger market players; - Small impact on social media; - Lack of resources; - Growth of the company seems constant/slow
External Factors	
Opportunities:	Threats:
- Expansion to the foreign market; - Getting new potential customers by optimizing marketing platforms, and social media marketing (more frequent tracking of the potential audience with free French language ranking tests, regular social media posts, etc.), - Many people switched from traditional to digital learning during the Covid – 19.	- Cost of technology investment; - The situation with COVID – 19 continues to cast doubt on the future economy of the company, from a variety of angles; - Prone to large-scale competitor action

Source: Own work.

In terms of external considerations, the company's main opportunities are prospective expansion into the Croatian and Serbian markets, as well as getting to know new potential clients through regular tracking of client data gathered from marketing platforms such as Mail Chimp. This information can be obtained by providing a free language ranking test, which allows new potential consumers to assess their level of French language proficiency. This opportunity seems to be real as some of the current customers stated that they are very satisfied with the fact that they can check their own knowledge by solving free classification tests unlimited number of times without paying anything. Additionally, according to CEOs of the company, the firm sees an opportunity to attract new clients by becoming more active on social media and informing the public about new opportunities, such as occasional Pro-bono offers, where the firm's main mission is to notify the audience that it strives to provide benefit to the community that would otherwise be unavailable. This supports the statement from Hedge and Sabarirajan (2018), that with the advent of the digital era, access to additional opportunities has become significantly easier.

Furthermore, Avec plus d.o.o. sees an opportunity to attract new customers by moderating their website. Namely, in accordance with the CEOs of the company, the main objectives in the future are to expand company's reach to worldwide markets, add to website more languages, and to put more effort into firm's online store that has been established recently. There the customers could buy manuals, dictionaries, books, and other useful resources. Conversely, the biggest threats for the company are high costs that may arise with the further development of modern technology, uncertain economic times due to the COVID – 19 pandemic, and certainly limited budget comparing to the big competitors.

6 SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

My initial suggestion for the company's improvement is to be more active on social media. According to the findings of the semi-structured interviews, the majority of the interviewees learned about the organization "by accident" – through acquaintances or coworkers. Furthermore, it is clear that Avec plus d.o.o. has not developed any marketing strategy or campaign, as revealed by the company's CEO during the interview.

Avec plus d.o.o. should consider which resources to use for promoting their services. I believe that posting engaging and professional French material on social media such as Facebook and YouTube regularly would be an excellent place to start, as those sites have the largest online audiences, not to mention the fact that those sites are also most commonly used by both younger and older audience. Moreover, by publishing regularly, a company may better identify which types of postings work and which do not. At this point the company should address the following questions "How widely will we distribute our product/service geographically (e.g., locally, in-state, multi-state, nationally, worldwide), and will we sell directly or not?" (Evans & Ballen, n.d.). This would assist Avec plus d.o.o. in determining the themes in which the ideal

client is most interested. Second, I strongly advise expanding the company's website to include English and French versions to promote the company's professional materials to a wider audience. Namely, online versions are now only available in Slovene and Croatian language, severely limiting the reach of the audience and the market's viability.

By implementing this plan, Avec plus d.o.o. will not only gain the desired exposure but will also gain recognition for what the firm stands for and its mission: to provide education to those who would otherwise be unable to afford such services. Furthermore, marketing strategies are the primary determinants of a company's market position. By fostering a dynamic environment, they support the development of new products/services for existing markets (Dzisi & Ofosu, 2014). As a result, I strongly believe that pro-bono campaigns would be more successful, as the public would understand the company's true beliefs and people-friendly goals. On the other hand, according to the company's owners, Avec plus d.o.o. has been very successful in gathering information about customers using free-classification tests, in which the customer completes the test and verifies his or her knowledge of French.

As a result, I believe it is critical that the organization adheres to this plan and, if necessary, implement adjustments, such as adding an audio/video version of the test so that the customer may assess his or her listening abilities. In addition, the next suggestion I would make to Avec plus d.o.o. is to change its online store. Specifically, the online store is scarcely accessible to the customer on their website; consequently, the company should concentrate on their navigation so that the user's goal may be easily connected with the appropriate material. As a result, Avec plus d.o.o. might take advantage of new chances that have become substantially easier since the digital era began (Hedge & Sabarirajan, 2018).

Furthermore, the type of content or publications that the company sells are not readily apparent. As a result, I would advise the company to create a mobile-friendly version of the company's website. This would make browsing considerably easier for customers and demonstrate that Avec plus d.o.o. is concerned about their satisfaction. Furthermore, to acquire customers' trust, Avec plus d.o.o. should add customer reviews for its products to its online store, as this will allow customers to learn more about the company's products and receive insights from other users' experiences. Namely according to Ikegwuru, physical evidence takes into account the aesthetic and physical environment, which both validates and guarantees quality. Clients' perceptions of the quality of service that they obtain can be heavily influenced by the physical environment and other apparent indications (Ikegwuru, 2019).

Moreover, I believe that the company's online store should include more photographs and information about its products. In other words, the purchaser can only see the book's front page and table of contents. I assume that by adding more content, information, and graphics regarding the product, Avec plus d.o.o. will be able to improve sales since buyers will have a better understanding of what they are purchasing.

In addition, I strongly advise Avec plus d.o.o. to prepare a strategy where they would clearly define their target market. According to CEOs of Avec plus d.o.o., company's goal is to focus on the customers who are willing and able to pay more for the same service. Therefore, I would recommend company to expand their reach and try to focus on the broader EU market, where the primary focus would be customers who are somehow associated with the EU administration. More precisely, the focus could be on clients who are citizens of other EU member states and who conduct business in Luxembourg, Brussels, Strasbourg, and other EU institutions. In short, I propose that Avec plus d.o.o. regard customers as contact points (relationships) rather than as a homogeneous group, which might be used to add the client to the database of potential customers. For this purpose, company may consider of using LinkedIn and similar business-oriented social networks. Namely, nowadays, a business may acquire information—specifically, a database of potential customers – by using filtering in LinkedIn or other databases, provided they naturally met the aforementioned requirements.

On the other hand, I believe that the company should make additional investments in endeavors that position it as a trustworthy provider of the most demanding services. The goal of orientation and positioning should be to accept contracts for the provision of services that command the highest rates and, as a result, generate the most profit. According to CEOs of Avec plus d.o.o., company's goal is to target such customers who are willing to pay a premium price. Those audiences are typically eager and focused on achieving certain goals in French language. Furthermore, they frequently arrive with a reasonable level of current knowledge and require immediate, targeted upgrades, as well as knowledge from specific professions. This is the niche where Avec plus d.o.o. is very flexible and has more than 30 years of experience. Company is able to adapt to specific demands and knowledge from different professions that customers require, while the other language schools more or less teach the general subject(s) available for bigger number of students. This seems as a good approach since Khan, Razak, Wadood, and Tasmin (2017) already suggest that SMEs must pursue a niche strategy, which allows them to make the most of their limited funds. For SMEs to remain competitive in the market, one of the strategies is to add premium pricing (Khan, Razak, Wadood & Tasmin, 2017).

Given that Avec plus d.o.o. has a smaller budget than its rivals, I advise the business to develop a plan that will play to its strongest advantages. Given that the company already has experience in providing this material and that it is not capital expensive, I advise that the company mainly follow content marketing's guidelines and continue to develop and distribute great content for the Avec plus's target audience. Customers appear to have had a positive experience with this strategy, claiming that the content is well-organized and has aided them in their learning process. Furthermore, according to one of Avec plus d.o.o. customers, the company's well-designed content assisted her in significantly improving her French due to the suggested directions that the company provided to her. Along with encouraging audience members to visit a company's website, this would not only advertise the services of the firm but would also result in enhanced storytelling and information sharing, which would increase consumer

engagement. Besides, given that it already has expertise creating this content and requires little capital, I urge the company to keep using direct marketing, which has been extremely successful thus far. I strongly believe that sometimes direct marketing brings more success than any other type of mass marketing since this type of marketing uses more individualized techniques and resources to target specific segments. Namely according, Srinivasan, Bajaj and Bhanot (2016), MSMEs have a variety of marketing options, including networking and word-of-mouth marketing. For new consumers, small businesses usually depend on word-of-mouth recommendations. Small businesses can use WOM marketing to offer customers a reason to talk about their products, making it more straightforward for WOM to spread. Small and micro firms, rather than relying primarily on their personal contact network, also depend on the networks of their consumers. These clients can also be reached through electronic WOM (Srinivasan, Bajaj & Bhanot, 2016).

CONCLUSION

To attain their financial objectives, micro-businesses must have a well-defined strategy in place. It is critical to have created marketing plans that assist businesses in developing greater self-awareness to achieve this. Furthermore, the internet has altered the way we live, work, and communicate, and as a result, consumers are no longer the same. Customers nowadays have more bargaining power and are thus more self-reliant, which means they are always online conversing, exchanging, and seeking readily available information. This means that communications are more difficult to control, and businesses must adapt to changing market regulations and, as a result, modify their tactics to meet the requirements and aspirations of consumers. On the other hand, businesses must design a solid marketing plan to boost the company's growth and long-term development, as well as to improve its financial benefits. Furthermore, a well-developed marketing strategy ensures the company's popularity as more people become aware of the company's commercial operations and its products or services. In other words, an effective marketing plan will not only aid in improving the company's overall performance but will also directly promote the company's business.

The main objective of this master's thesis was to provide an outline of the development of new marketing strategies in the Avec plus d.o.o. company that could influence the company's operations. Furthermore, the conclusions are based on comprehensive literature research as well as the findings of a case study that included semi structured interviews with the CEOs of Avec plus d.o.o. as well as former and current customers of the company. A SWOT analysis was conducted based on the research findings as well as the important points highlighted during the interviews with the company's CEOs. Eventually, I was able to identify the starting position in terms of the company's strengths and weaknesses, as well as future approaches based on the opportunities and threats posed by the environment in this industry. On the other hand, with the help of semi-structured interviews with the CEOs of Avec plus d.o.o., I was also able to

analyze the BCG matrix of the Avec plus d.o.o., where I tried to determine which company business units should be prioritized for achieving the better business result of the company.

During my research, I learned that Avec plus d.o.o. mostly acquire customers through word-of-mouth marketing and strong written references that can be found on the company's website, where the audience can always verify the company's authenticity. Furthermore, the findings of the interviews show that the company's inadequate usage of marketing methods has a detrimental impact on its performance. Avec plus d.o.o., on the other hand, strives to market its services by offering free pro-bono hours to prospective consumers. According to the company's CEOs, this method hasn't yielded the desired results recently, but they're still hoping for a twist because this strategy has been successful in the past. Aside from sticking to the existing marketing strategy, I believe the company may devise other effective marketing techniques that would boost the company's reputation. An excellent place to start would be to become more active on social media and to provide professional and entertaining stuff regularly, which may include both written and audio content. By doing so, I am confident that the company would gain a better understanding of their audience, as the public will be more involved in the process.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Povzetek (Summary in Slovene language)

Danes imata globalizacija in sodobna tehnologija velik vpliv na organizacijsko jedro poslovnih dejavnosti, kot so prodaja, trženje ter raznovrstne storitve za stranke. Digitalna doba je omogočila, da konkurenca ni več omejena le na geografske regije, ampak veliko dlje. Glede na to, da se je tehnologija neprekinjeno razvijala skozi leta, je svet postal priča preoblikovanju tradicionalnega trženja v digitalno trženje, ki je postalo pomembno globalno orodje za privabljanje novih strank, zadrževanje zvestih ter spoznavanju njihovih preferenc (Nikunen, Saarela, Oikarinen, Muhos, & Isohella, 2017). Z razvojem dobro pripravljenih trženjskih strategij si podjetja prizadevajo povečati svojo prepoznavnost v očeh porabnikov, kjer je glavni cilj razumeti njihove želje in navade. Poleg tega lahko dobro opredeljen trženjski načrt pomaga podjetju postati prepoznavni igralec na trgu, kar z drugimi besedami pomeni večjo prodajo, dobiček in navsezadnje tudi izboljšano vrednost blagovne znamke.

Namen pričujočega magistrskega dela je prispevati k razvoju in izboljšanju ustreznih trženjskih strategij za izbrano podjetje, ki zagotavlja izobraževalne storitve. Po drugi strani pa je glavno raziskovalno vprašanje tega magistrskega dela, katera trženjska strategija je primerna za izboljšanje uspešnosti poslovanja danega podjetja.

Cilj magistrskega dela je zagotoviti povzetek razvoja novih trženjskih strategij v danem podjetju, ki bi lahko vplival na samo poslovanje podjetja. Poleg tega sklepi temeljijo na celovitih raziskavah literature in ugotovitvah študije primera, ki je vključevala polstrukturirane pogovore z direktorji ter nekdanjimi in sedanjimi strankami podjetja. SWOT analiza je bila izvedena na podlagi ugotovitev raziskav in pomembnih točk, poudarjenih med pogovori z direktorji podjetja. Sčasoma sem lahko ugotovil izhodiščni položaj v smislu prednosti in slabosti podjetja ter prihodnjih pristopov, ki temeljijo na priložnostih in grožnjah, ki jih predstavlja okolje v tej panogi.

Kot je ugotovil Das (2015), je glavna prednost mikro, majhnih ter srednjih podjetij ta, da so zmožne ustvariti zelo močno vez s svojimi strankami, predvsem zaradi izredne prilagodljivosti in visoke kakovosti, kar posledično pomeni, da taka podjetja zadržijo svoje stranke veliko dlje kot večja podjetja, ker jim stranke popolnoma zaupajo, so zadovoljne ter predvsem zveste. Po drugi strani pa je največja težava teh podjetij ta, da imajo omejen proračun za trženje ter primanjkljaj ostalih finančnih sredstev v primerjavi z večjimi konkurenti. Oglasi ter ostale vrste tradicionalnega trženja, kot so na primer plakati, so danes zelo dragi in skoraj nemogoče je, da si take vrste podjetij to lahko privoščijo, če ne ustvarijo zadostnih prihodkov. Kot so poudarili Valeriu, Tudor in Popescu (2011), je glavna značilnost teh podjetij časovna stiska in preobremenjenost zaposlenih, zato je ključno, da za razvoj podjetja razvijejo uspešno strategijo na področju trženja, ki bi zagotovila, da bi podjetje izpolnjevalo zahteve, želje in težnje ciljnih strank, pri čemer bi uporaba trženjskih orodij služila kot temelj za doseganje strateških ciljev.

Mikro podjetje, ki sem ga izbral za analizo v tem magistrskem delu, se imenuje Avec plus d.o.o., ki je aktivno na področju izobraževanja od 1989 in se osredotoča na poučevanje tujih jezikov, specializirano za francoščino. Leta 2007 je podjetje uvedlo spletni način predavanja z namenom privabiti nove porabnike in tako povečati tržno prepoznavnost podjetja. Leta 2012 je bila nato bila prenovljena spletna stran podjetja, kje je bil glavni poudarek na spletni trgovini in brezplačnih storitvah za privabljanje novih porabnikov, kot so tečaji pro-bono in brezplačni spletni testi za ocenjevanje ravni znanja glede na skupni evropski referenčni okvir za jezike. Pro-bono ter brezplačni uvrstitveni testi so še danes eno najmočnejših trženjskih orodij podjetja,

ki služijo privabljanju novih porabnikov, kjer v zameno podjetje zbere osebne podatke kupcev, kot so njihov e-poštni naslov, ime in priimek ter datum rojstva.

Da bi lažje ugotovil, katere trženjske strategije lahko Avec plus d.o.o. razvije za izboljšanje uspešnosti, sem se odločil, da pripravim polstrukturirane intervjuje z direktorji podjetja ter sedanjimi in nekdanjimi strankami podjetja. Tu je bil glavni cilj preučiti prednosti, omejitve in možnosti podjetja ter opisati morebitne tržne grožnje. Skozi pogovore sem ugotovil, da je glavni cilj podjetja izvajati strategijo, kjer je primarna usmeritev doseči angleško govoreči trg, kjer bi francoski jezik zagotavljal dodatno vrednost. Poleg tega sem ugotovil, da je podjetje osredotočeno predvsem na inovativno trženje. Podjetje je bilo na primer ena prvih šol, ki so ponujale spletne storitve. Podjetje je tako leta 2007 med prvimi jezikovnimi šolami začelo ponujati predavanja preko spletne platforme Skype in je vse do danes ostalo angažirano na tej platformi, ki navsezadnje prinaša podjetju velik del dobička. Poleg tega pa si je Avec plus d.o.o. v zadnjem času začel prizadevati, da nove stranke privabi s stalnim objavljanim izobraževalnih videoposnetkov, ki se nato delijo na platformah družbenih medijev podjetja, kot so Facebook, Instagram in YouTube.

Iz odgovorov, pridobljenih iz intervjujev, sem ugotovil, da sta direktorja Avec plus d.o.o. dejansko odgovorna za vse trženjske dejavnosti, kar posledično vodi v dejstvo, da trženjske strategije niso dobro opredeljene zaradi različnih razlogov, kot so preobremenjenost z delom, časovna omejitev in neodgovorjena tehnična vprašanja za izvajanje poslovnih idej. Večino strank podjetje pridobi s trženje od ust do ust, saj so številne stranke zadovoljne s storitvami in zato priporočajo podjetje svojim prijateljem, znancem, sodelavcem, drugim podjetjem, družini... Velik del novih strank podjetje pridobi tudi preko svoje spletne strani, in sicer preko brezplačnih uvrstitvenih testov, kjer kupec prejme povratne informacije o svojem rezultatu izvedbe testa, medtem ko Avec plus d.o.o. prejme povratno informacije o profilu obiskovalca, ki je opravil test. Po drugi strani pa je eden od najnovejših ciljev podjetja tudi ciljna segmentacija tistih, ki so pripravljene plačati premijsko ceno. Avec plus d.o.o. se je odločil sprejeti to strategijo zaradi številnih pohval, ki jih je podjetje prejelo glede ponudb, metodologij ter učnih pristopov pri izvajanju pouka.

S pomočjo SWOT analize sem ugotovil nekaj pomembnih prednosti in slabosti izbranega podjetja. Glavne prednosti so dolgoletne neposredne pedagoške izkušnje, strokovna usposobljenost, zelo kakovostna izvedba na področju izobraževanja francoščine ter sposobnost navezave odprtega in zaupljivega razmerja s slušatelji. Po drugi strani pa so slabosti podjetja pomanjkanje strokovnega znanja na nekaterih področjih, zlasti pri sledenju trendov na področju digitalnega oglaševanja, kar je zagotovo posledica majhnega trženjskega proračuna v primerjavi s konkurenco z večjo tržno močjo. Ker je podjetje majhno, je obstoječa obremenitev z delom previsoka, kar nakazuje, da v podjetju primanjkuje obratnega kapitala, majhen pa je tudi ugled podjetja na družbenih omrežjih. Obstajajo pa tudi zunanje priložnosti in grožnje. Glavne priložnosti so nedvomno sposobnost širitve na tuje trge ter pridobivanje novih potencialnih strank z optimizacijo trženjskih platform in trženja na družbenih omrežjih (pogostejše sledenje potencialnemu občinstvu z brezplačnimi testi za razvrstitev znanja

francoskega jezika po posameznih nivojih, rednimi objavami na družbenih omrežjih itd.). Po drugi strani pa so glavne grožnje podjetju visoki stroški tehnoloških naložb, negotova situacija glede COVID-19, ki ima še vedno velik vpliv na celotno svetovno gospodarstvo ter večja konkurenca, ki razpolaga z veliko večjim proračunom ter si tako lahko privošči veliko večje trženjske naložbe.

Ob koncu sem priporočil, da bi izbrano podjetje moralo biti bolj aktivno na družbenih omrežjih ter na ta način izboljšati prepoznavnost podjetja, saj je le-to skromno. Podjetje bi tako lahko poizkusilo objavljati privlačno ter profesionalno francosko gradivo na družbenih omrežjih, kot sta Facebook in YouTube, kar bi bil odličen začetek, saj imajo te strani največje spletno občinstvo, ter so obenem najbolj priljubljena omrežja med mladimi, ki so največji uporabniki le-teh. Po drugi strani bi podjetje moralo več svojega časa vložiti v optimizacijo spletne strani. Podjetje bi lahko pridobilo zaupanje strank tako, da bi v svojo spletno trgovino dodalo mnenja strank za svoje izdelke, saj bodo tako lahko stranke izvedele več o izdelkih podjetja in prejele vpogled iz izkušenj drugih uporabnikov. Moje naslednje priporočilo je bilo, da Avec plus d.o.o. svoje stranke obravnava kot kontaktne točke (razmerja) in ne kot homogeno celoto, katere bi se lahko kasneje uporabilo kot podatkovne zbirke potencialnih strank. Podjetje bi lahko tudi razmislilo o uporabi družbenega omrežja LinkedIn ter ostalih poslovnih družbenih omrežij, ki bi pripomogla, da podjetje najde osebe, zaposlene na visokih vodstvenih položajih, upoštevajoč hierarhijo podjetij, ki bi jih storitev podjetja na področju izobraževanja zanimala. Zaradi njihovega visokega statusa bi jim izobraževanje najverjetneje plačal njihov delodajalec, kar bi pomenilo soliden dobiček za Avec plus d.o.o. Prav zaradi tega je moje zadnje priporočilo, da bi podjetje moralo dodatno vlagati v prizadevanja za najbolj zaupanja vrednega ponudnika najzahtevnejših storitev. Cilj take usmerjenosti in pozicioniranja bi moral biti sprejemanje pogodb za zagotavljanje storitev, ki omogočajo najvišje stopnje dobička. Drugače povedano, to pomeni, da bi Avec plus d.o.o. moral ciljati na takšne stranke, ki so pripravljene plačati premijsko ceno.

Appendix 2: Interview guide

»Dear Mrs/Ms,

I would like to express my gratitude for consenting to this interview concerning Avec plus' marketing strategy and marketing orientation. This research is being done in order to fulfill the criteria of the International Full Master Program in Marketing at the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana. For master thesis thopic » Development of marketing strategies in the selected micro company« prepared by me, Luka Bruketa. The data will be provided through direct conversation. I gurantee you that the data will be used only for academic purposes and statistical analysis with complete anyonimity. My interview notes do not contain your name or any other sensitive information. When I describe any of your cases in my thesis, I will concentrate on variables that are relevant to my research and if you agree, I will use your words quoted but without any specification from whom.«

Appendix 3: Interviews

Transcriptions:

Date: November 13, 2021

Key:

C = CEO of Avec plus d.o.o.

I = Interviewer

I: Hello. Firstly, I would like to kindly ask you if you can specify who are your customers?

C: Our customers are usually physical persons, mostly those who need high level and intensive educational courses, especially in the French language. The age of the customers is between 29 and 63 years old.

I: Thank you for this answer.

C: Not a problem.

I: So, if we move to the second question, I am wondering how do you communicate with your customers and how do you maintain the relationship with them?

C: We communicate with our customers online, especially through the platforms such as Skype and Zoom. We maintain the relationship with them by providing useful and free giveaways, such as different electronic manuals for a specific topic, special tests, and tasks for self-learning, self-verification of customer's current knowledge of the French language (all in electronic format). These activities are building good relationships and loyalty of the customers.

I: You mentioned that some of your customers are very loyal. What in your opinion make sure that these customers are coming back to you after so many years?

C: Because of the quality of teaching execution, high flexibility, and fully customer-oriented methods that can be switched many times within one hour if the customer demands it.

I: How do you target your audience? Are there any specific techniques that you use?

C: In recent years, we've focused on prospects (audiences) who are willing to pay a premium price. Those audiences are typically eager and focused on achieving certain goals in the French language. Also, they frequently arrive with a decent level of current knowledge and want immediate, targeted upgrades, as well as requiring specific knowledge from specific professions. Apart from utilizing the most recent technologies, there are no specific tactics that we employ to target those populations; rather, the majority of it stems from prior experience with new technology.

I: Ok, thank you for that. Now in my master thesis, I am discovering that a vendor's understanding of possible competitors' characteristics is key to a company's success.

Therefore, I am wondering if you can specify who are your biggest competitors and how do you find information about them?

C: The major competitors on the market are local schools for foreign languages, such as Lingula, Mint, and Berlitz. Our biggest issue here is that these competitors have a much bigger budget for marketing activities and therefore they are much more visible than us. We find all of their information through the internet and official financial documents that are publicly announced.

I: So how can you compete with them?

C: Well, we are primarily focusing on our services to be the highest quality and to be very flexible, and focused on customer-specific needs. Avec plus d.o.o. is very flexible in this niche and has over 30 years of experience. The company can adapt to specific demands and knowledge from various professions that customers require, whereas other language schools teach the general subject(s) available to a larger number of students. We are still watching our competition and trying to be different.

I: Thank you. Now, if we move on, we all know that the development of modern technology significantly changed the organizational core of business activities in recent years. How did you adapt in this manner?

C: Well, I can proudly say that we are early pioneers in early technology adoption. For instance, we started to offer online courses more than ten years ago, as soon as technology allowed that. We will continue to follow the trends of new technology, such as AI (artificial intelligence) and VR (virtual reality).

I: What about marketing? How did the marketing implementation change during all these years compared to marketing used when the company was established in the early 90s?

C: In the beginning, there was no marketing at all. At that point, we were focusing on teaching within the business sector, and we did not even have physical customers. Now, our strongest marketing tool is direct marketing for sure. Besides, we want to be active also on social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. On the other hand, the marketing we use has evolved over time, mostly in lockstep with technological advancements. Because our marketing budget is so tight year after year, keeping up with the latest technologies is a must. We're also attempting to target a certain demographic because our schedule is full, and we are focusing on replacing low-spending customers with those who are willing to pay more. As a result, attracting those customers from abroad necessitates focusing on a particular specific market.

I: Now, if we focus on the field of marketing in your company. Can you tell me what kind of marketing strategies does your company use in order to attract new customers? What are the outcomes of these strategies?

C: In recent years, there has been a wide range of strategies. Changes are becoming more rapid, yet we remain committed to high quality and a variety of highly specific/niche customer needs. Those requirements are typically exceedingly difficult to meet; they necessitate extensive and long-term planning. Nonetheless, it pays off in terms of time and expertise. Those successes are what we use as our marketing tool, and while it is outdated, we believe it is the greatest

option for us in light of modern technologies. We were able to invest more into marketing in the previous years, and we did so in a more focused manner, which increased our awareness among the targeted audiences. As far as the strategies concern, we are trying to attract new customers on social media, and by using direct marketing, and giving pro bono hours, free tests for customers to check their level of knowledge. Our objective here is to show the customers that we strive for their personal growth. The outcomes of these strategies pay off because we did not face any decrease in our service during the pandemic time of COVID - 19.

I: Let's talk more about pro bono hours if you agree. I am wondering how does the company benefit with that kind of promotion? I mean, it seems to me that this kind of strategy can be very time-consuming without any financial return?

C: Well, it is. It is quite difficult for us to calculate the exact return on investment of marketing resources. As I previously stated, we are unable to do so due to a shortage of marketing expertise. However, the long-term effects of marketing efforts can be seen: an increasing number of candidates come to us asking for specific services, and the majority of them do not even inquire about the price; they simply accept it.

I: Thank you for that. Can you trust me how do you advertise this strategy? What are the tools or platforms that you use in this case?

C: Sure, it's simple: we place pro bono ads on our website, as well as sponsored ads, and that's it. The aim here is to find an audience that is interested in, and then to show them what they can expect. Furthermore, there is a lot of competition on the market, making it difficult for customers to choose one. As a result, they favor those who invest more in marketing. We can't afford to invest that much due to our size (and we're not targeting masses), therefore with the help of pro bono hours (1 or 2 hours), we try to show the potential customers what they can get from us and how the learning process looks like. In other words, our only cost in this marketing technique is hours spent for pro bono.

I: Do you invest something in this promotion in order to be sponsored or do you rather stick with organic search?

C: We are actually doing both, but over years sponsored adds are used more and more commonly.

I: What do you consider the most problematic factors that hampered implementation of marketing and its strategies in your company?

C: Too technical issues sometimes to implement our ideas, and therefore, from time to time we need outsourced help since there is a distinct paucity of marketing experts. We are always faced with a shortage of activities due to the reason above due to the size we of our company. Nevertheless, we still need to be primarily focused on our business.

I: Now, you mentioned before that you advertise your pro bono hours on your website. Can you tell me how well are you satisfied with your website and what are its pros and cons in your opinion?

C: Well, we are satisfied, but there is always room for improvement. We are always searching for ways to improve our website, make it more customer-friendly, and, above all, make it better for our business. Pros include items such as pro bono and free classification test which are perfect marketing tools that are advertised on our webpage. On the other hand, drawbacks include issues we are having with our store. what we really miss is a website in other languages (English e.g.) This is a problem because we do not have enough people to work on it, but we are hoping to solve it soon.

I: Can you trust me what are your main objectives in the future? How do you plan to increase your number of clients and retain the remaining ones?

C: The main objectives in the future are to expand our reach to worldwide markets, add to our website more different languages, and to put more focus and effort into our online store that has been established recently. There the customers could buy manuals, dictionaries, books, and other useful sources. I believe that with this answer I already answered on how to increase the number of clients in our company. On the other hand, we will try to retain our customers by keeping the highest quality of the courses, as well as maintaining interpersonal relationships with them.

I: Thank you very much for your time and all these answers. This is all for today.

C: Thank you, I hope I helped you with your research!

Date: November 25, 2021

C = CEO of Avec plus d.o.o.

I = Interviewer

I: Hello there. Thank you for agreeing of meeting me. To start, I would like to ask you what kind of services does your company offer?

C: Hi. Well, we offer educational services and translation services. For instance, we offer various types of courses that take place in a group form in pairs or individual form on the other hand. We offer courses for companies and courses for individuals. We provide group and individual general and business French classes, specialized French courses with customized terminology, business communication training workshops, conversation courses, refresher courses, translation basics, and online French through Skype. Adults, undergraduates and high school students, primary and preschool children, and seniors, on the other hand, are among those who can benefit from individual French classes.

I: How important is the field of marketing in your company? I was also wondering if you can trust me how does marketing affect your services and which marketing channels do you use to reach the customers?

C: To be completely honest, we get most of our customers through word-of-mouth marketing. We also have strong written references that can be found on our website where the audience can always check our credibility. On the other hand, time constraints and occupancies due to

courses, we do not have a lot of time for preparing marketing campaigns and strategies. We are aware of the fact that the company should put more focus on that matter shortly. Our main objective so far is to constantly publish online news on our website and to be active as much as possible on the social platforms where we want to regularly post professional material for French learning. Our focus remains on the company's Facebook page and YouTube channel where the audience can find free learning French videos for different segments. All these videos are prepared by Avec plus d.o.o.

I: Who forms marketing strategy in your company?

C: This is the role of CEOs but of course we have some advisors who are specialized in marketing for social networking and online marketing. In the beginning our internet provider suggested us some tips which we utilized as recommended. It turned out that this was a good idea because our website climbed at the top of the browser's search at a very small period of time. So basically, even now, if you type "Skype Francoščina", we are still among top 5 hits in Google search.

I: Which are the major obstacles for marketing accountability in your company?

C: A major stumbling block was and continues to be a lack of marketing funding and expertise. We're still looking for a means to be visible on the market, to use our own abilities to create as unique marketing content as possible, and to be very active in attracting new clients who are willing to pay more on a regular basis.

I: Now, you mentioned before that your goal for the future is to be active on social media. How often do you plan to publish new posts and what message will you try to send to your audience?

C: Well, in the beginning, we plan to start publishing at least two posts per week on Facebook and Instagram. We hope we can start this campaign at the beginning of 2022. By doing that we want to motivate the audience to start learning French at all levels and to boost the sales of Avec plus d.o.o. professional material such as books concerning communication, where linguistic expressions, vocabulary, and grammar structures are provided.

I: Can you please tell me what factors do mostly impact on your marketing actions?

C: Well, at this point, we firstly try to up with global trends and attempt to keep up with the competition by implementing new approaches and tools. This is particularly true in the case of digital or internet-based marketing. We do not even have a big marketing budget, so we want to make the most of it, and the simplest way to achieve that is to leverage modern technologies. We've been doing things like this since the early 2000s. For the same reason, we attempt to execute marketing as far away from the traditional ways as possible, because the effect is stronger and awareness is clearer this way. As a result, the marketing strategy has only been relevant for a limited period, and we must continually be on the lookout for new approaches.

I: Thank you for that, Now, if we proceed, I am wondering how often do you set new marketing strategy(ies)?

C: This is contingent on the findings of the market analysis. In actuality, this is uncommon; instead, changes to an existing strategy are far more typical, based on the findings of the

analysis: when we discover that something needs to be added or modified, or to be more effective or closer to a specific market group, we derive it.

I: What are the biggest challenges you need to face when preparing a new marketing strategy?

C: Prepare and maintain a marketing budget (laughing). Joke aside, we have a really sensitive, tight space that is worth investing in. The main issue, other from the budget, is calculating the long-term impact of a certain marketing plan. We just do not have the resources to dive into a campaign's impact analysis, therefore we must do it more "manually" and "by feeling." This strategy has proven to be extremely successful over time and with expertise, but we are conscious that we must frequently work with big approximations. However, the regular tweaks we make, correcting and augmenting the plan, have largely shown to be beneficial. Of sure, we made mistakes, but we swiftly identified them and addressed the situation. When new technologies are brought into company operations, the strategy frequently undergoes the most significant changes, adjustments, and additions. We have a lot of work to do at that time to figure out the best strategy to communicate with existing and new consumers. These are significant problems, primarily because most clients are known to shun new matters and prefer to stick to tried and true techniques. It is vital to work diligently and deliberately throughout the process, as well as to educate customers on the advantages of the new method of doing business (education).

I: What about the website? How do you achieve to get higher traffic on your webpage?

C: The key factor that we count on here is our online classification tests. With this test, customers can check their current knowledge of French. It is a free French grading test that contains checking grammatical structures at all six language levels (A1-C2) that comply with the Common European Framework of Reference for French. The total ranking test covers 110 questions. Upon completion of the test, the customer receives feedback on his evaluation result, and we receive information on the profile of the visitor to our site who took the test. This information is provided to the company's authentic mail.

I: What have been the outcomes from the marketing implementation in your company in recent years? Is there any achievement related to the marketing activity that you are especially proud of?

C: We promoted online learning through Skype. Also, we are proud of our idea of creating free classification tests where we gained the biggest proportion of our current clients.

I: Now, you mention that you gain biggest proportion of your current customers through classification tests. Can you please describe how does this process - workflow function?

C: Sure. We have made a classification test available online for anyone to utilize. We put a lot of effort into it, and it is made in accordance with CECRL (Cadre Européen Commun de Référence pour les Langues) guidelines. This ensures that the test is of the highest quality, and that the results reflect true personal achievement. In addition, we are replacing this test with a different one that is likewise compliant with the CERCL. Every candidate must give their contact information before receiving results. Because the test takes time to complete, we assume that those candidates, at the very least in the majority, must be interested in receiving our top services. Once we gather this data, we are targeting those candidates via Mailchimp or similar marketing techniques. Additionally, individuals who require additional tests may do so through our online store.

I: Which marketing activities of the company would you like to keep or add in the future? Is there also some kind of activities that you plan to give up on?

C: We were thinking about adding banners which would bring the customers directly to our website. But this is the plan for the future, as I said before we will first start promoting the company's professional material at the beginning of the next year through channels such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. We do not plan to give up on any marketing activities.

I: How often do you advertise your professional material through social media that you mentioned above and why?

C: This is a difficult question to answer. We obviously publicize if we receive a new edition of an existing book, publish a new book or any other material. For the time being, we are making decisions upon the current information, therefore without any long-term strategy. Since, we do not have any prepared scenarios for the further future, this is a field we should definitely put more attention to it.

I: As a CEO of the company, how would you evaluate your company's overall marketing performance?

C: We must be satisfied if we compare ourselves to the competition and their budget. And, when I consider the resources we have at our disposal, we are ecstatic with the results of our marketing efforts. Specifically, we've had a full calendar for the past 3-4 years, and we've lately added new customers that are exactly what we're searching for: they're willing to pay extra for the same services we provided.

I: Thank you for the answer. Before we finish this short interview, I was wondering if you can trust me what are your plans for the future?

C: We plan to publish as many books as possible and throw a pro-bono campaign twice a year for humanitarian purposes to offer education to those who would not otherwise be able to afford this service. At our company, we believe that this would increase the company's visibility, as it would send a message to the world that our company is people-friendly and stands for its professional work and that we do not differentiate between the quality of paid and free education.

I: Thank you for your time!

C: You're welcome.

Date: December 9, 2021

C = customer of Avec plus d.o.o.

I = Interviewer

I: Hello. To start with, I was wondering if you can tell me where did you first hear of Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: Hi, A coworker at SKB bank, where I work, told me about Avec plus d.o.o. for the first time. My friend cooperated with the company for many years and informed me that she was pleased with her advancement. We also had some French lectures within the bank during that time because the bank's owners were French. I have always liked the French language, but due to my numerous duties, I have never had the opportunity to truly learn it. Anyway, I wanted to refresh my knowledge again, and since a colleague had a great experience with the school and their courses, I decided to contact them.

I: What has convinced you to take their services?

C: As I already stated before: a friend's experience, professionalism, and the content of the subject.

I: Which factors did you take into the account when searching for a new language school?

C: I mostly relied on the company's references. I did my own check analysis after my colleague recommended the school, if I may say so. So, basically, I went to their website to check whether they offered anything unique or additional to the other schools. I discovered that the company has a long list of references, as they worked with both physical and legal entities. Furthermore, there were numerous written positive remarks from other students regarding the company's approach to teaching, which further convinced me to choose them. In addition, I observed that the organization has over 30 years of experience in this industry and that the pricing for their services is not at all excessive, especially when compared to some of the schools and their courses that I was looking at.

I: Which other schools were you also checking besides Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: Well, I do not recall all the names of the schools that I was checking but I remember few such as Lingua, Berlitz and Karnion.

I: How does Avec plus d.o.o. differ from the other language schools in your eyes?

C: Mostly very correct attitude towards all of their students, great time availability, professionalism and kindness. The professor was always available to me and for my questions, even during the weekends. I remember that for a while we had been taking the course on Saturdays or Sundays, depending on my requirements, to which professor adapted. I highly respect such actions, because the fact that the school strives for its participants to take the most out of the course, it says a lot about them and their approach. Besides, the professor was always available by e-mail or phone, and she responded as soon as she could. I must say that I have never waited for their response on my questions more than few hours, even during the holidays.

I: What challenges did you want to accomplish when you decided to take Avec plus d.o.o.'s services?

C: Mostly, I wanted to become more fluent in French communication, increased vocabulary, and improved auditory comprehension, particularly while watching French movies and shows, as well as listening to French music, which I really adore. I also wanted to practice reading other texts on the French pages, such as Le Monde, Quotidiens Nationaux, L'Equipe, Midi-Olympique, Libération, Le Parisien, La Tribune, Le Figaro, L'Humanité in order to improve my comprehension.

I: Was there any specific knowledge did you want to acquire?

C: No, there was nothing specific there. I simply wanted to learn how to speak in French more effectively and make fewer mistakes when doing so.

I: How long are you now using their services?

C: Three years.

I: How would you describe your experience about company's marketing tools such as their website and social media platforms?

C: If I compare Avec plus d.o.o. to other schools, I believe the company has not been active enough on social networks (Facebook). I believe they should be more involved in this area, as it would draw a new potential audience, particularly young people, who are the most active users of social media and hence the most connected to social networking. On the other hand, I believe the website is more than adequate because it consistently provides all of the answers to my questions. I particularly enjoy their free classification test, which is by far the greatest I have ever taken. Also, I think their homepage is fantastic because you can find all of the information you need there without wasting time looking for it. For example, I discovered their free classification test online, purchased the company's book, and scheduled a one-hour free counseling session.

I: Where else did you solve free classification tests and how do they differ from the one at Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: I remember taking one at Učni center Horizont, zavod Šolt and Jezikovna akademija. A free classification test at Avec plus d.o.o., on the other hand, is made up of questions that enable you to really evaluate your knowledge. The questions are well-crafted, and they become more challenging as the test progresses. On the other hand, several of the exams I conducted at other schools were ineffective and did not even work. For example, I recall having issues with some questions since they were written half in French and half in English, and the questions were not in a logical order. Also, I recall taking one test for an extended period of time and not receiving the final result at the end even though I left all my personal information there. Later, I noticed that I had just been receiving promotional material on my e-mail. Then, when taking the test from the other school, there were just a few questions prepared for each level, so you could not get an accurate assessment of your knowledge. Because all of the questions were multiple choice, you could guess all of the answers.

I: Can you tell me more about free classification test at Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: You can begin solving the test if you wish to assess your level of knowledge. According to the CECRL (Cadre Européen Commun de Référence pour les Langues), a common European language framework, there are numerous levels available. You can take all stages of the test in order of difficulty or individually, depending on your present level of French knowledge. I recall completing the B1 exam level and receiving the results of the test by e-mail, along with the solutions provided. I opted to retake the test since I was dissatisfied with the results. The fact that you may take the same test multiple times without having to pay anything (e.g., a free first trial) seemed extremely reasonable to me, and it ultimately convinced me to start working with the company and take my first classes there.

I: You mentioned before that company's website is more than satisfactory. Can you tell me what do you like the most about it?

C: What I like best about the website is that it intermediately intermediates various parts of France, exhibiting the country's culture and primary traits. I also believe that the descriptions of the various types of course implementation are adequate since they are not excessively long and hence satisfying the page's visitor. Secondly, as I previously stated, I like the website's homepage because it contains all of the required information about the services and courses offered, as well as the ability to purchase the company's books and assess your existing knowledge by taking the free classification test.

I: Was there any specific that you were looking on the company's website?

C: No, nothing specifically really, I was just looking for a diverse range of courses and learning topics or learning workshops if you like. I recall that at one point I was seeking for a short phone conversation training. This course was available as part of Avec plus d.o.o. 30-hour's learning workshop.

I: How much time do you spend being on the company's website?

C: Well, I did not measure that yet (laughing), but I think it must be approximately 15 minutes per week. Although there are also days that I am not using the website for quite long, and then there are days that I have website opened until shutting down my computer.

I: What would you change about the website?

C: For improved reading comprehension, I would suggest including news with current themes. These topics could range from current events in the world's politics and economy to French culture, fashion, culinary art, photography, cosmetics, and even cartoons. All of this information could be found on the company's website, for example, in a newly constructed window labeled "current news." I believe that this would be something new and exciting for the majority of the company's customers, including both adult and younger course participants.

I: Would you recommend Avec plus d.o.o.'s services to your friends or maybe co-workers?

C: Of course, and I have already informed some of my friends about Avec plus d.o.o. who were thinking about learning French. Cooperating with Avec plus d.o.o. was, in my opinion, a wise decision that I will never regret. Suddenly, I began to learn French in a systematic and enjoyable manner. Progression may be seen right away. Aside from that, professor is a pleasant, talkative individual with whom it is extremely simple to work. I would say her teaching style is excellent

from a pedagogical standpoint, because throughout the lectures, you do not just learn and discuss about certain things all of the time, but also about general life experiences. It's all, of course, in French.

I: What suggestion(s) would you make to Avec plus d.o.o. to improve their services?

C: I would not really suggest improving their services since their way of work and what they offer is already on a really high level. Instead, I might rather suggest them to enhance their communication with the audience who are unfamiliar with them due to its small size. So, what I am referring to is their acknowledgment. They must get better in this field. Since I am not a digital marketing expert, I do not know how to improve that, but there must be a certain way. But they must know that better than me and will probably do everything to improve their business.

I: That will be all. Thank you for your time.

C: My pleasure

Date: December 9, 2021

C = customer of Avec plus d.o.o.

I = Interviewer

I: Hello. Can you trust me where did you first hear of Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: Hello. I heard first time for Avec plus d.o.o. from my sister, whose best friend was taking classes in this company.

I: What has convinced you to take their services?

C: Well, I got convinced after I took pro bono hours with the company. There I saw that the professor is well organized, and has well prepared structure of the program which was not hard to follow. Before I was learning French mainly through different online platforms, and the main issue there was that I did not know how to approach to that. I mean, I have learnt different topics at the same time, so I got confused after some time because I did not know how to proceed. Because of that I was starting to search for different language schools, and fortunately I found Avec plus d.o.o.

I: Can you name few online platforms you were using before coming to Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: Well, I was using some mobile apps, such as Duolingo and Busuu. I also found some material on You tube.

I: Which factors did you take into the account when searching for a new language school?

C: My main goal was to enroll in well-organized classes with interesting subject, a flexible timetable, and a pleasant professor who would answer any questions I had.

I: What challenges did you want to accomplish when you decided to take Avec plus d.o.o.'s services?

C: Since I live and work abroad (Luxemburg) for 2 years now, I was simply obligated to start learning French. So far, taking lectures at Avec plus d.o.o. helped me to get integrated a bit more within Luxembourg's society.

I: May I ask you which specific knowledge did you want to acquire?

C: I basically wanted to use French for business purposes. That is because our company started to cooperate with a French company, and as the director of sales at Damjan s.p., I wanted to become more connected with our new partners.

I: But why Avec plus d.o.o. exactly? I mean how do they differ from the other language schools in your eyes?

C: Well, there are several reasons why I decided to take Avec plus d.o.o.'s services. But mostly I decided for Avec plus d.o.o. due to extremely consistent professional pedagogical approaches, many years of expertise, exceptional adaptability, kindness accompanied by a lot of laughter and good intent.

I: What about the price of the service? How this variable impacted your selection choice?

C: Well, the price played an important role of course. I believe company's skill justifies the price, which is moderately costly when compared to the typical price on the Slovenian market. For example, I looked at the prices of various institutions that also provide French education, and their prices are much higher, especially in light of recent inflation. So, yes price also impacted my decision at the end of the day.

I: How long are you now using their services?

C: It must be around six years, I believe.

I: How would you describe your experience about company's marketing tools such as their website and social media platforms?

C: Well, I believe they are not enough active on social media. Despite the fact that I follow their Facebook and Instagram pages, I rarely see their new postings, and even when they do, I am unaware of them. If they are not already doing so, they should promote their content on occasion. On the other hand, I like website a lot because it is a precise and accurate presentation of the programs. The quality of the free classification test, which can be accessible on the website's home page, drew me intrigued. I found that really useful because you can instantly verify your French knowledge and there is no need to waste time and money on unnecessary classes merely to figure out what your current level is. The advantage is that you obtain the test results very immediately after completion. I got the test results on my personal e-mail without any forced marketing offers or spams if you like.

I: Can you please tell me more about the free classification test? What it is exactly and how does it work?

C: It's a test that assesses your current understanding of French. On the website, you may discover and open a free rating exam. You can select levels matching to standardized levels (A1-C2) based on the CECRL Common European Framework of Reference for Foreign Languages criteria. When it comes to taking the test, you'll learn what your present level of French language is based on CECRL standards, as well as your reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammatical level. You may truly verify to which program you belong with this test in order to boost your understanding. In general, tests begin with basic questions and gradually become more difficult as individual abilities increase (A1-C1). Furthermore, if you think that you will be unable to complete the ranking test owing to its complexity, you can be informed just of the partial result of the evaluation after answering all of the questions of each level.

I: Thank you for this. Now, if we return to the company's website. Can you tell me what specifically were you looking on the company's website?

C: After a friend told me about the company, I went to the website for the first time. After that, I decided to go explore what the company has to offer. What drew my attention was the fact that the organization offers online courses. I was very curious if the company has a set schedule for these meetings. I knew this was the appropriate choice because the company's timetable is adaptable according to the needs of a customer, and I didn't have time to attend a traditional language school owing to my busy schedule. I also learned on the internet that Avec plus d.o.o. offers Skype courses, which is the program I am most familiar with. After that, I contacted them, and they informed me that I could first validate my knowledge by taking the free classification test. Our collaboration began after the test was completed.

I: How much time do you spend being on the company's website?

C: Approximately 15 minutes per day.

I: What would you change about it (website)?

C: Well, I do not know exactly. The website is attractive and informative. Actually, it is ideal for my information gathering demands. Perhaps I would recommend adding more focused vocabulary in alphabetical order with the relevant notation and sound of terms due to the fact the videos so far were very appealing and useful, at least for me.

I: Would you recommend Avec plus d.o.o.'s services to your friends or maybe co-workers?

C: Definitely. To be honest, I already recommended company's services to some people already. I must call them and ask them whether they listened to my advice (laughing).

I: What suggestion(s) would you make to Avec plus d.o.o. to improve their services?

C: Well, definitely I would advise them to update their content more frequently. I believe that their material is of a high quality and well-prepared but it is just not recognized at this point. I mean, I already mentioned before that they are not enough active on social media in my opinion. Maybe they can think about increasing their reach by promoting their products and

services through social platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. But of course, I am confident that they are aware of that, and they must have some plans for the future.

I: Thank you for your time.

C: You are welcome.

Date: December 18, 2021

C = customer of Avec plus d.o.o.

I = Interviewer

I: Hello. To start with, I was wondering if you can tell me where did you first hear of Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: Hello. Well, I heard for Avec plus d.o.o. by a friend who was taking classes there for some time.

I: May I ask you how much time did your friend take services at Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: I am not sure about that, but it must be several years, since he is very good at French. Well, at least in my opinion (laughing).

I: What has convinced you to take their services?

C: As I said, a very good friend of mine recommended me Avec plus d.o.o.'s classes because they helped him a lot. Since I trust my friend, and some checking company's website, I decided to contact Avec plus d.o.o. what can they offer me. Then, they presented me a well-organized program, with all the details that this class will include. They also told me how much time on average is required to acquire this specific knowledge that I wanted to achieve. This motivated me a lot since I felt I will finally make a progress.

I: What was their approach towards you, as a new potential customer?

C: They were very kind, saying that they are flexible towards the schedule that suits me. Also, I told them what are my objectives, what do I want to learn, and how much time I am prepared to spend for learning on a weekly basis. Besides that, their approach was very professional and very direct since they honestly told me to not expect achieving the desired results immediately and that a lot of effort and time will be required to improve my knowledge.

I: Which factors did you take into the account when searching for a new language school?

C: Mostly, I was searching for the professor to be experienced and the classes to be interactive. Since, I was checking company's website, I found out that the professor has more than 30 years

of experience, not to mention the fact that there were comments from the other people who took classes at Avec plus d.o.o. The comments towards the professor's approach to teaching were very positive, therefore I did not hesitate with my choice of selecting the company.

I: What challenges did you want to accomplish when you decided to take Avec plus d.o.o.'s services?

C: Mostly, I wanted to improve my French knowledge, mostly grammar and pronunciation since I always had the biggest issues in that aspect. Specifically, I began to make less errors, and things began to run more smoothly. For the first time in my life, I understood why learning grammar in a methodical and guided manner is so vital. On the other hand, even though I required more time to strengthen my skills in this area, my pronunciation improved. We were practicing and refining my pronunciation by listening to real-life instances of speech, recording my own speech to see where I made mistakes, and singing some French songs, which I found to be a wonderfully fun and relaxing manner of learning that I had never experienced before.

I: May I ask you which specific knowledge did you want to acquire?

C: I wanted to expand my French vocabulary so that I could communicate more effectively with my French friends. Specifically, I have this problem where I comprehend the topic in general but lack the necessary vocabulary to make a whole sentence. This is why, when speaking with my French colleagues, I am frequently compelled to switch to English, which frustrates me slightly. I believe that now with the help of the professor, I am doing a progress and I hope that within a year I will be able to have the whole conversation in French.

I: In what aspect did Avec plus d.o.o. differ from the other language schools in your eyes?

C: I chose Avec plus d.o.o. and not another school because it was highly recommended to me and I continue going because I am satisfied with my progress. Also, I immediately noticed that their way of teaching is well organized and well-prepared. I also find that company's way of teaching is very creative since some tasks from vocabulary are very interactive and gamified.

I: May I ask what kind of games did you play?

C: Most of all, I remembered a game with the verbs where professor pulled out one slide each time and I had to pull out all the verb conjugations at different times and logically connect them into sentences. That was very interesting to me because I saw that French can be much more fun than I thought before. Namely, I tried to learn this kind of stuff by hard before, attempting to memorize everything at one time.

I: How long are you now using their services?

C: I take the classes for 2 years.

I: How would you describe your experience about company's marketing tools such as their website and social media platforms?

C: I do not use or follow the social media of Avec plus d.o.o. On the other hand, I use the website sometimes, especially to watch some videos that are meant for better understanding and improvement of French communication. Of course, because these videos are relevant to various topics, I only study them while I am learning about that subject. Also, I use some vocabulary books that are available on the company's website which help me to improve my knowledge.

I: You mentioned that you have use company's website. What is your opinion about it?

C: I like that there is a choice of different books made by the professor that covers different topics. There are also interesting videos which helped me to learn new words. Also, I think that the website is user friendly and explicit since it contains all needed information in one place.

I: What specifically were you looking on the company's website? Did you find it?

C: Well, the first time I saw the website, I was looking what kind of content does the school offer. Even though, friend of mine recommended me this school, I was still checking it by myself since I am very stubborn person. I went carefully through all the courses that can be offered and think which one would suit my needs best. Also, I saw that that there are the comments from some customers, which were all positive about the school, courses and professor itself. This convinced to contact the company for the first time. She told me that the best thing to figure it out which course is most suitable for me is by solving the free classification test. After I got the result, professor suggested me which course she believes is the best for me to take. I made the final decision then to book a class with the professor.

I: How much time did you spend being on the company's website?

C: I am spending 30 minutes per week on the website, learning from the books available.

I: What would you change about it (website)?

C: To be honest, I do not know. I never asked myself this kind of question since I get all needed material there. Perhaps, I would recommend them only to be more careful with the technical stuff. To be more precise, once when I was on their website, it happened that the results of the search could not be found, probably due to some technical issues on the website. I was lucky that there was the other way of finding the desired content and fortunately I found all needed material there. And yes, I do not know but it also happened to me once that I could not open the website with Google Chrome, my primary browser. Instead, I needed to use Mozilla Firefox browser and then it worked perfectly. I am not an expert in this aspect but I believe that this was a technical issue that company must fix it.

I: Now during our conversation, you mentioned that you have completed a free classification test. Can you tell me more about that? What it is that all about?

C: Well, it is an online test that everyone can solve, no matter the level of your prior knowledge. This test can be found on the Avec plus d.o.o.'s website. The thing is that you can choose a level of the test before starting solving it, or you can start from scratch. Then, along answering the questions, the difficulty of the questions constantly become more and more difficult. If the questions on the test become too difficult for you, you can always stop fulfilling it simply by clicking "finish the test". The thing I like the most about this examination is the fact that is

completely for free, and you can check your knowledge immediately. To be completely honest, I have not noticed this kind of flexibility in other language schools where I took courses. Basically, you need to pay each hour of teaching, and it is a bit frustrating when you do not know what is your current level of French knowledge and just keep paying for each teaching hour.

I: Are there any time constraints when doing the test?

C: No, there are not. You have as much time as you want.

I: How did you receive your final result of the test?

C: I received it on my e-mail soon after I completed the test. There I received all the details of the test, such as total scored points and consequently which level of knowledge you belong to according to the scored result (A1-C2). You also get the information about the time it took to you to solve the test. Of course, you can choose an option to verify which of your answers were wrong, with correct answers provided. I think this way of receiving the result is very modern since you do not need to wait long to get feedback and therefore you can immediately continue with a learning process, without losing any time.

I: Would you recommend Avec plus d.o.o.'s services to someone else?

C: Definitely. So far, I've learned a lot. I also have the impression that the learning curve is steady and in the right direction. I would recommend Avec plus d.o.o. to anyone who wants to study French in a structured, enjoyable, and pleasant manner. Of course, students must maintain discipline, but the professor's guidance is invaluable. Her mentorship appears to be very professional, and I must admit that she appears to have a lot of expertise in this industry. She is a true French language expert with a wide range of pedagogical abilities.

I: What suggestion(s) would you make to Avec plus d.o.o. to improve their services?

C: Maybe they could develop an application(s) for self-learning. These apps could have a content of every day's usual situation to those which are complex and which could use present knowledge situations and guide to future desired knowledge. All that using "smart" technology like artificial intelligence.

I: Which apps do you think company can develop due to the fact that there are already existing language applications? Also, how do you think that company can manage artificial intelligence's technology due to its limited size?

C: As said before an app for self-learning. Now, due to its size, I believe they will need to hire an app development specialist. I am guessing they do not have the resources to afford such a thing to prepare it by themselves. As a result, I believe outsourcing could be a good option. Despite the fact that such an app currently exists on the market already, the company's app must be customized and prepared to meet Avec plus d.o.o.'s requirements. They should invest in this kind of resources (time and intellectual property) to achieve these demands. Such customized, tailored apps would be novel in the market and might be extremely beneficial to businesses, not only marketers. On the other hand, I believe that a company of this size cannot use artificial intelligence on its own; as I said I am confident that they would need to require

outside assistance. However, they must prepare a "features demand list" or so-called "blueprint" book.

I: That will be all. Thank you for your time.

C: You are welcome.

Date: December 21, 2021

C = customer of Avec plus d.o.o.

I = Interviewer

I: Hello. To start with, I was wondering if you can tell me where did you first hear of Avec plus d.o.o.?

C: Hello. Well, I found out about the company through my friends who told me that the school of Avec plus d.o.o. is very professional at what they are doing. Besides, I heard that the teacher is very kind and flexible, with more than 30 years of experience. Even though I was doubtful at the beginning, I gave it a try by completing a free classification test. Now I am very satisfied and I am glad that this worked out.

I: Well, this is really nice to hear. On the other hand, what has convinced you to take their services?

C: As I mentioned before, company's flexibility and professionalism. Also, the quality of the course is on the high level.

I: Which factors did you take into the account when searching for a new language school?

C: Well, I was looking for something where I would find specific learning field that would fit my needs. Because I was not able to find such specific language needs at usual group language courses, I was very happy when I find Avec plus d.o.o. However, I was not 100% sure that they will provide me what I wanted until I used first free pro bono hour. I was very happy what they showed me, and the price was not that important at the moment.

I: What challenges did you want to accomplish when you decided to take Avec plus d.o.o.'s services?

C: Well, I had specific demands. To be fair, I needed specific knowledge to acquire. I was looking long time before I found what I was looking for at Avec Plus d.o.o. I had acquired a proof, was certain that there I might have gotten exactly what I wanted when using their PRO BONO hours, which I was given for free. So, following the initial engagement, I've continued to rely on them until now.

I: May I ask you which specific knowledge did you want to acquire?

C: Since I am lawyer expert for acquiring and merging in my professional life, I needed vocabulary and expressions that are commonly used in this particular legal environment. Also, how and when to use it. It's difficult to locate someone with experience in this field, but I discovered it at Avec Plus d.o.o. Personnel at the company claim that their hourly preparations are sometimes significantly longer than the hour I spend with the trainer/teacher. This is something you should appreciate, and I have no objection to paying more for such a service.

I: But why Avec plus d.o.o. exactly? I mean how do they differ from the other language schools in your eyes?

C: As I already stated, I had no idea at first glance. I was looking around, checking out different schools, and asking questions, but here at Avec Plus d.o.o., I found exactly what I was seeking for here. I would recommend their expertise and quality of services to anyone looking for any type of service, even the most specialized or niche.

I: How long are you now using their services?

C: More than three years, almost four I believe.

I: How would you describe your experience about company's marketing tools such as their website and social media platforms?

C: To be honest, I did not catch up on their posts on Facebook and Instagram if you are asking me this. I do not know about the other platforms since I do not use them. On the other hand, I have visited the company's website several times, watching what the company offers. Firstly, I completed a free classification test.

I: You mentioned that you have visited company's website several times. What do you think about it?

C: I have never seen that much information on any of the other websites I have visited. Indeed, there is a wealth of material available that can benefit everyone; personally, I was interested in seeing how many ways are available, as well as the specifics for each. So far, I have not come across any website that provides such a wealth of information.

I: What specifically were you looking on the company's website? Did you find it?

C: I was searching for what entails or what amount of knowledge is required to obtain a B2 certificate. I understand what B2 means - it refers to the level of language understanding - but I was just not sure what it takes to get it. Then I proceeded to the website of Avec plus d.o.o., where everything is neatly organized under the CECRL (Cadre Européen Commun de Référence pour les Langues) category. This is the information that I couldn't locate anywhere else, at least not in the form that I just have stated.

I: How much time did you spend being on the company's website?

C: Not that much. Usually, I went there to find the information I wanted, to see some videos, read news and to go through the test(s). But even though I did not spend much time on the website, I often come back.

I: What would you change about it (website)?

C: I am not sure what exactly. Maybe, I would add more self-learning materials or something like that. Also, while I looked on the company's website, I discovered that none of their products have any consumer reviews. Perhaps I should suggest that they include this functionality as well. Finally, I opted to purchase their product since I am familiar with the teacher and have great faith in her and her profession but someone else may be hesitant to do so.

I: Now during our conversation, you mentioned several times that you have completed a free classification test. Can you tell me more about that? What it is that all about?

C: Well, there are 5 different tests, one for each level. All those tests are made according to the CERCL's standards; therefore, you can go with easiest one, go on to the more difficult ones and see how far you can get. This is great way to test yourself and see whether are you ready for official test (and to get certificate) and if not, how much you need to learn to get there.

I: Are there any time constraints when doing the test?

C: No, you have unlimited amount of time to solve the test.

I: How did you receive your final result of the test?

C: Well, I received an automated e-mail with my results shortly after completing the test. Despite the fact that I was not entirely satisfied with my final result (laughing), I appreciate this type of feedback because it informs you exactly how many points you earned and also shows you your incorrect replies alongside the perfect solution. This is the perfect way to improve your knowledge and skillset.

I: Would you recommend Avec plus d.o.o.'s services to your friends or maybe co-workers?

C: Yes, definitely. I feel comfortable with them, and I am also confident that I improved a lot in my French due to the suggested directions that the company provided me.

I: What suggestion(s) would you make to Avec plus d.o.o. to improve their services?

C: Perhaps, I would recommend the company to pay even more attention to interactivity. This means there should be more learning services that are somehow correlated to "funny" learnings. Namely, I believe that when you have fun, you learn the most.

I: Thank you for your time.

C: My pleasure

Date: December 28, 2021

FC = former customer of Avec plus d.o.o.

I = Interviewer

I: Hi, thank you for taking your time to participate in this short interview!

FC: Not a problem.

I: To start, can you tell me how long were you using the services of Avec plus d.o.o.?

FC: I believe it was a little bit less than fifteen years.

I: How did you hear of Avec plus d.o.o.?

FC: Well, I heard it through my friends who knew the teacher from before and ensured me that I will not be disappointed at the end. And to be honest, they were right!

I: Can you tell me what is then your overall (customer) experience of Avec plus d.o.o.?

FC: I have good memories of these times. All I can say is that I learned a lot and I am still using this knowledge nowadays. Besides, this experience was more than just learning. We (me and a teacher) stayed in contact until today, so I can say that my relationship with the company was interpersonal and friendly. I still remember an interesting enrichment of lessons where our knowledge was tested through quizzes, which included knowledge of French literature, art, film world, grammar, etc. Also, an interesting memory was when we were describing different images to enrich vocabulary from very different areas. During the lessons at Avec plus d.o.o., found it particularly interesting that for the first lesson, all listeners took on a French identity that accompanied us through all the lessons and helped us to learn French more easily.

I: Can you trust me your which experiences do you bear in mind best and which least?

FC: Definitely, I was positive surprised on the very first meeting the level we were talking about my profession: all in details, many of the vocabularies were completely new to me. That were the facts I was looking for around but I could not have found anywhere. That was the fact you cannot simply find on internet or even if you do, it is almost impossible to explain on the right way. You can find it only if you go in typical French Court and look for it, of course if you know what to look for. I still do not understand how they did it. Surely, I checked on my French colleagues and they confirmed me. Amazing!

The least experience – I really cannot recall of any, because every time I was positively surprised not only with the level of knowledge but also with explanation, even with a simple pedagogue approach.

I: How would you describe company's services?

FC: I recall their services being fairly priced and well-organized. They were always eager to provide detailed answers to all of my questions, even if they were off-topic. I am still grateful for such thorough and precise responses because I can still use these answers nowadays. Since I learnt French from scratch at Avec plus d.o.o., I can talk about them and their services in superlatives.

I: What kind of materials did company provide for you?

FC: Well, company gave me an access to their professional material that I could use as their customer. We were using special videos prepared for particular topic we were working on at the time. This videos along with other such special materials all based on the available technology that were prepared for each particular topic. It was obvious that a lot of time had been spent for preparation for each hour. Most of the materials were in digital form, even simple games like crosswords. At the end, besides increasing my knowledge, I had also learned a lot about computers for free!

I: Through which channels was this material provided to you?

FC: Well, I received a lot of material(s) on my personal e-mail after the online lecture was finished. They also explained me which material is suitable for my demands and that it can be always found on company's website. Besides, they also provided me useful links that I could use if I wanted to learn more about the certain topics from different sources. So basically yes, I was relying on these sources most of the time.

I: You mentioned that you relied a lot on the company's website. What is your opinion about it?

FC: In terms of the website itself, I do not have anything to say. I always pay more attention to the content than the design. Perhaps I might simplify the price model, which is currently somewhat complex. Another thing I would do is simplify the packages. For example, splitting packages into two levels: business sector and physical individuals, with distinct offers for each level, would be a good place to start. I am thinking of bank offers here, where they present you with a variety of bank packages (both business and personal) that are comparable but distinct, and you may pick the one that best suits your needs. When it comes to design, on the other hand, I believe a corporation should pick a certain template and use it for its website.

I: What was your buying criteria when choosing the new language school?

FC: The lecturer who would focus on my demands was first on the priority list. This means I was looking for someone who could provide me with the services I require. To be honest, I was quite demanding here because I am a pretty organized person in general. Specifically, I prefer a step-by-step approach that is systematic and logical, with few out-of-focus topics. In this aspect, several schools failed to meet my general expectations. True, some schools meet those requirements, but in the end, I chose Avec plus d.o.o. since it provided the best interpersonal approach.

I: Ok, thank you for that. What about the price? Was that important factor to consider in your case?

FC: Yes, but it was not at the top of my priority list. As I said before, the quality of the service and the school's organizational and systematic approach were the most important factors for me. Personally, I am always willing to pay more for the good service. I did not go elsewhere for a better pricing because I immediately had a great experience at Avec plus d.o.o. Hence, I accepted the given price right away here.

I: In what segments do you think that the company could improve?

FC: It is a really difficult question since I have only good memories of this experience. But maybe they should pay more attention on their self-promotion. Namely before meeting the Avec plus d.o.o., I have never heard of the company before, and it was the coincidence of events that a friend of mine suggested their services. Perhaps, I wish I could find more of their material online, maybe in the audit edition where you can practice your listening skills. Here I mostly have in mind a short dialog.

I: Now, you mentioned that company should pay more attention to their self-promotion. I am wondering what in your opinion company can do to be better in this segment?

FC: To be honest, I am not sure. Even still, I found them difficult. What if they try to be more visible on social media, perhaps paying attention to which audiences and when they turn on? I do not see any other way of reaching the companies or individuals you want to contact these days.

I: Ok thank you. How do you think that they can reach the target audience since the size of the company is not big?

FC: Again, social networks: it can be managed through minimum staff. However, I think problem is still existing, because staff at the company definitely have IT knowledge but they are not specialists in online marketing, therefore they should ask for assistance elsewhere on the market.

I: What was then the reason that you decided to stop using the company's services?

FC: Mostly the fact that after such a long time of cooperation, I realized that I become fluent in French and I did not need any more guidance. After all, at the end of our cooperation, our whole communication was in French, and we did not use the Slovene language anymore. But since nowadays I am not using French that often, I might consider coming back to Avec plus d.o.o. for a few courses to refresh my knowledge a bit.

I: Would you recommend Avec plus d.o.o.'s services to anyone?

FC: Absolutely! I would recommend Avec plus d.o.o.'s classes to everyone who would like to learn French in a fun, kind and very professional way.

I: Ok, that would be all. Thank you for your time!

FC: You're welcome.