

Customized sales strategies for international subsidiaries

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**A strategic approach for medium-sized B2B
organizations of the HORECA supply industry**

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Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Worcester and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award.

The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas. Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the university.

Signed:

Maximilian Schwaller

Date: 26 June 2022

Abstract

This study investigates the influence of customized sales strategies on salesperson performance and business success as well as the corporate framework needed to successfully apply such strategies in the German hotel, restaurant and catering supply industry.

Even though that the business world has changed and has become more individual and volatile over the last years, many organizations are still using centralized sales strategies that must be applied by every subsidiary to have full strategic and operative control on the global business. Many researchers have recognized the importance of sales strategies for business success; however, little is known about the benefits and risks of customized sales strategies in the business-to-business B2B field that are developed, implemented, and executed at the subsidiary level. There has been almost no research on the opportunities and challenges of customized sales strategies for international subsidiaries of B2B organizations, nor possibilities to overcome resistance to central strategies among local subsidiaries and internal divisions. This thesis examines environmental factors and their effects on local sales strategy performance by focusing on the influence on sales performance and sales strategies in dynamic and challenging times where local requirements differ from the global needs.

Data for the research were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 executive managers and sales managers from the hotel, restaurant, and catering supply industry. All participating organizations are part of the German Mittelstand and have annual turnovers between 50 million and 1 billion Euro. The interviews were conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic and provided insight on the influence of customized sales strategies before and during the pandemic as well as an outlook on the importance of customized sales strategies for the future

The findings expand the knowledge about B2B sales strategies, reduce the knowledge gap between theory and practice in the field of strategy implementation and contribute to deeper knowledge about individual factors on sales strategies in a single industry. Furthermore, the thesis confirms that sales strategy has a positive influence on salesperson and organizational performance and that this effect can be bolstered with a customized sales strategy. This thesis demonstrates the influence of customized sales strategies on salesperson

performance based on a multi-level model of sales strategy and explores the influence of customized mid-term sales strategies for international subsidiaries on business success in a single industry. Moreover, it shows, that organizations and their subsidiaries must reach a certain level of maturity to significantly raise the likelihood of success of the strategy development and implementation process.

To evaluate an organization's level of maturity and to expand the current literature, a model for practice was developed. It was designed to help German medium sized B2B organizations determine when it would be useful to develop individual sales strategies for international subsidiaries based on their corporate strategy rather than relying on a centralised strategy and should therefore help to close the gap between theory and practice.

Dedication

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Abbreviations and Glossary

APAC – Asia Pacific region

B2B – Business-to-business

B2C – Business-to-consumer

CAGR – Compound annual growth rate

CEO – Chief executive officer

CSO – Chief sales officer

D-A-CH – Germany, Austria and Switzerland

EBIT – Earnings before interest and taxes

EMEA – Europe, the Middle East and Africa

Guardrails – Rules or structures that management and employees agree to operate within

HORECA – Hotel, restaurant and catering

IT – Information technology

KPI – Key performance indicator

NSV – Net sales volume

OEM – Original Equipment Manufacturer

RBV – Resource based view

RQ – Research question

SGM – Standard gross margin

SME – Small and medium-sized companies

Subsidiary – Legal entity in a country where the headquarter of this entity is not located

UK – United Kingdom

US – United States of America

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The role of business-to-business (B2B) sales has changed in recent decades. The ways in which buyers and sellers interact and organizations present themselves have been highly influenced by the internet, particularly social media (Agnihotri *et al.*, 2015). As a result, many organizations have started to move away from the use of centralized sales strategies to customized sales strategies and optimized their sales process. Furthermore the interaction between marketing and sales departments has become stronger and artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to play an important role in the sales process in the future (Moncrief, 2017).

The role of classic B2B sales has evolved, and relationship management has become a key factor in future sales success (Davies, Ryals and Holt, 2010). Contact- and solution-oriented exchanges with customers have grown in importance, and value-based selling can increase an organization's B2B sales performance (Pöyry, Parvinen and Martens, 2021). However, the development of e-commerce platforms has created many opportunities and challenges that often lead to channel conflict for B2B organizations (Webb, 2002). Moreover, more aggressive competition and the internet's transparency have led to a loss of margins and profits for some, which may need to be mitigated through new business models and greater efficiency (Nisar and Prabhakar, 2017).

However, developing a sales strategy can be used to combat these trends and help organizations achieve sustainable sales success (Rainsberger, 2021). In fact, they have become a common management tool in German mid-sized organizations. The goal of implementing sales strategies is to generate initiatives and activities which help to increase the enterprise's turnover, cost effectiveness and profit (Williamson and Chandler, 1964).

While a corporate sales strategy is often strategically developed (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019), it can also be used to guide different business divisions in creating their own customized sales strategies. This customized sales strategy can include different customized divisional sales targets as well as activities how these targets should be achieved, supported with concrete key performance indicators (KPIs) for the next business term.

Even though that many managers perceive a need for more global flexibility, many organizations still have a generic sales strategy as a global standard. Lower complexity and full control of the development and implementation process, an easy comparison of different subsidiaries as well as the lack of local strategic skills in the subsidiaries are the main drivers for this decision (Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri, 2019). Additionally, many executive managers are aware of the importance of the sales strategy for their organization and fear the consequences of the risk that the business might suffer if a local strategy is not developed or executed properly.

Previous research has suggested that the sales departments and other divisions (e.g. Marketing or Service) are often excluded from the strategy development process (Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy, 2006). Consequently, they do not support and implement the developed sales strategy because they believe it to be ineffective, inappropriate, irrelevant or disconnected from reality (Strahle, Spiro and Acito, 1996). Tawse and Tabesh (2021) confirmed this view and highlighted that an effective strategy development and implementation process is a critical component of organizational success and a potential source of competitive advantage. Involving different sales divisions in this process and using their input to formulate divisional strategies could help solve this challenge and increase the success, effectiveness, implementation and outcome of a strategy (Malshe and Sohi, 2009). However, this process is often very time consuming and costly which is one of the reasons why some organizations decide to develop the strategy centrally without the involvement of the executing functions.

But there is disagreement among management at B2B organizations about the amount of time and effort that should be invested in developing customized mid-term sales strategies for individual departments and the magnitude of their positive influence on the operational business (Schill, 2013). According to the available literature, some managers argue that a well-developed strategy is valuable and that the more accepted it is, the easier it is to implement. Conversely, other managers believe that an agile working environment is more important than a strict and less flexible sales strategy in constantly changing and volatile times.

This thesis focuses on this tension and provides insight on the need for customized sales strategies, the appropriate circumstances in which to implement

them and their influence on the behaviour of sales managers at Mittelstand B2B organizations. It investigates when a customized sales strategy is useful and when organizations should stick with a centralised strategy. Additionally, it has a clear focus on the German Mittelstand which must deal with special cultural and organizational characteristics as well as a special headquarter-subsidary relationship. The research approach relies on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 leading chief executive officers (CEOs), chief sales officers (CSOs) and sales managers and experienced strategy consultants from leading Mittelstand organizations in the hotel, restaurant and catering (HORECA) supply industry.

1.2 Research gap

1.2.1 Research gap in the literature

Whilst centralized sales and marketing strategies are prominently featured in the literature on business management, few studies have focused on customized sales strategies and considered their influence on an organization's various sales divisions or provided guidance on the needed corporate requirement when implementing such strategies among Mittelstand organizations (Terho *et al.*, 2015). This is very surprising considering the challenges that organizations have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic or in the face of new global trends or economic developments in the past, which have led B2B sales operations to look fundamentally different than they did before (Gavin, Harrison and Candace, 2020).

According to Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010), sales strategy is operationalized at the level of the sales force but developed centrally. In addition, sales strategy has a positive effect on an organization's performance and sales force. Although their study helped clarify the link between an organization's sales strategy and performance, important gaps remain. For example, little is understood about the influence of customized sales strategies on business success. Customized sales strategy means that a sales strategy is not developed centrally in the headquarter and then implemented but developed locally in the individual country.

Beyond its contributions to business practice, sales strategy remains an under-researched topic in the field of B2B sales which should be further examined. (Terho *et al.*, 2015). Most studies focus on the determinants of individual sales

performance (i.e. sales effectiveness) rather than factors that are not under a salesperson's direct control (Ohiomah, Benyoucef and Andreev, 2020). Additionally, despite increased attention to the role of B2B sales forces in strategy implementation, few empirical studies have focused on one single industry and the effects of individual factors on sales strategy performance.

The research gap was also underlined in a study by Inyang and Jaramillo (2020) that involved 190 B2B salespeople. The researchers recommended that future studies examine the effects of environmental and individual factors and their influence on sales strategy performance in a single industry as well as possible scenarios to utilize this influence as a competitive advantage. This gap was also mentioned by Malshe *et al.* (2021) who stated that future research should compare whether implementation processes of sales and marketing strategies diverge across industries and what certain industries require in order to properly implement a sales and marketing strategy.

Furthermore Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019) asked for a closer investigation of the role of individual distribution channels and customized sales strategies for international markets and its influence on business decisions and business success. Pullins *et al.* (2017, p.17) stated that many scholars have identified 'a gap between theory and practice and the discrepancy that exists between what is being taught in classrooms and sales training and the actual everyday practice of selling' and call for further research that tries to support practical strategy implementation of theoretical research. Finally, Schill (2013) recommended that future studies focus on opportunities to overcome resistance to central strategies among subsidiaries and internal divisions. This thesis should also contribute to this gap and show if customized sales strategies that are derived from the global sales strategy can help to overcome this resistance and contribute to the overall business success.

1.2.2. Research gap in practice

Alongside the insufficient scientific research regarding the use of customized B2B sales strategies there is also a gap in the practical knowledge about flexibility in the strategy development process of Mittelstand companies that belong to the German HORECA supply sector. Many organizations want to have more local flexibility in their strategic decisions but fail to give responsibility to their subsidiaries and prefer to develop central sales strategies with clear regulations and instructions for their

subsidiaries. The reasons therefore are often a missing knowledge about the needed requirements in the organization as well as in the subsidiaries to successfully implement this approach as well as bad experiences from implementations attempts of the past. Additionally, for many executives of the organizations in this industry the risk of losing strategic power outweighs the benefits of customized sales strategies and decentralized decision makers.

Despite the gaps in the literature, this practical research gap was another motivation for this thesis. The author wants to show executives of the German Mittelstand HORECA supply industry the advantages and disadvantages of a customized sales strategy approach and show how to reduce the resistance to global strategic guidelines. Additionally, a model should be developed that supports the executive management in implementing the needed global and local requirements for a successful implementation of the customized sales strategy approach

1.3 Research aim

The broad aim of this thesis is to explore the influence of customized mid-term sales strategies for international subsidiaries on business success in the German B2B HORECA supply industry. It investigates in detail the advantages and disadvantages of the use of customized sales strategies in the German B2B HORECA supply industry compared to the development and implementation of centralised sales strategies. Additionally, it delivers information about the necessary organizational requirements for organizations in the German B2B HORECA supply industry and the requirements in the subsidiaries which support the implementation of the customized sales strategy approach. This research will thus make an important contribution to the current discussion of how to react to the volatile market conditions in the HORECA supply industry that was hit very hard from the global challenges over recent years (e.g. Covid-19) and how future sales strategies can be developed to generate business success in very dynamic environments.

1.4 Research questions

Derived from the identified research gap and the research aims the following research questions were developed:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of a customized sales strategy approach compared to a centralized sales strategy approach in

the German B2B HORECA supply industry?

This research question seeks to see how a customized sales strategy may add value to the above-described target group, but also which challenges may appear if this approach is used for the development and implementation process of sales strategies in different subsidiaries.

2. How can customized sales strategies influence the results of different subsidiaries in mid-sized German B2B organizations in the German B2B HORECA supply industry ?

The researcher not only explored the advantages and disadvantages of the different strategic approaches but also analysed the concrete findings and its influence on the corporate goals of the organizations that occurred when a customized sales strategy approach was implemented.

3. What are the corporate and local requirements to successfully implement a customized sales strategy in organizations belonging to the German B2B HORECA supply industry?

The answer to this research question should lead to a model that describes corporate as well as local conditions that are needed to successfully develop and implement customized sales strategies on subsidiary level for German B2B organizations in the HORECA supply industry.

1.5 Research objectives

- To investigate the advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies for international subsidiaries of the HORECA supply industry that are managed by German Mittelstand headquarters by conducting a literature review and in-depth interviews
- To examine how customized sales strategies influence the results of different subsidiaries in mid-sized German B2B organizations which belong to the HORECA supply industry by conducting expert interviews
- To develop a model which states corporate and local requirements to successfully implement a customized sales strategy by conducting expert interviews

1.6 Rationale for the study

This section discusses the two main reasons why the author has chosen this topic for his study. The reasons derive on one side from the identified literature gap as well as from the practical experience of the researcher.

1.6.1 Research purpose

Even though global flexibility is one of the most important business drivers in today's world, many organizations of the German Mittelstand try to save time and costs and still execute centralised and inflexible global strategies to steer their local subsidiaries (Heider et al., 2020, Hollensen, 2020).

Whilst sales and marketing strategies are prominently featured in the literature on business management, few studies have focused on customized sales strategies and considered their influence on an organization's various sales divisions or provided guidance on the amount of time and effort that should be invested in developing and implementing such strategies among Mittelstand organizations (Terho et al., 2015). This is very surprising considering the challenges that organizations have faced during the Covid-19 pandemic or in the face of new global trends or economic developments in the past, which have led B2B sales operations to look fundamentally different than they did before (Gavin, Harrison and Candace, 2020).

Moreover, the literature has indicated that the field of sales strategies remains ambiguous. Researchers in this area, including Ingram (2002), Lane (2009), Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010), Schill (2013), Terho (2015), Cespedes and Thompson (2015), Inyang and Jaramillo (2019), and leading consulting organizations such as the Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey and Deloitte have recommended wider qualitative and quantitative studies to enhance the academic understanding of the influence of customized sales strategies on corporate success.

In summary, there is a lack of empirical studies on how to overcome resistance to corporate strategies among regional management teams; a call among researchers to generate insight, enhance knowledge and better understand the influence of customized sales strategies on corporate success; and a need for studies that explore the influence of environmental factors on sales strategy. Thus, the present study seeks to address these gaps in knowledge and

contribute to the academic understanding of the importance of customized sales strategies for individual business divisions at Mittelstand organizations.

1.6.2 Practical purpose

The second reason for this research resulted from the fact the researcher is an International Sales Director and responsible for the strategy development and the strategy implementation of a defined international region. He experienced very often the disadvantages of global sales strategies and their negative influence on the results of the organization but also the resistance of the executive management to give more strategic freedom to the individual subsidiaries for the development of their own sales strategy. Due to the missing framework of requirements for a customized sales strategy approach for subsidiaries, the few approaches to implement locally developed strategies were most of the time not successful. However, if the right requirements would have been in place, management teams were convinced that this strategic approach could have generated more local business. By conducting this study, the author can develop useful insights in this field of work and implement them if suitable.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Underpinnings

Chapter 1 introduced the topic and objectives of the research. To explore the influence of sales strategies on B2B organizations in greater depth, this chapter consists of a literature review that summarizes the theoretical background of the research, including key definitions, models, and findings on corporate and sales strategies, their development process, and their efficient implementation.

Today, strategy development, customization, and implementation for B2B organizations is a broad topic that exists in various modifications. Thus, the appropriate sales strategy for a B2B organization is not easy to determine (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010). Accordingly, this chapter examines different types of strategies, key factors in their development, and possibilities for strategy customization and implementation for different subsidiaries. In addition, it explores data collection for strategy development, the use of AI for strategy optimization, and possible leadership styles and tools for implementation at the sales force level. The current research focuses on Mittelstand organizations from the HORECA supply industry and their special relationship to corporate and sales strategies.

At the end of the chapter, the literature review forms the basis for the conceptual framework of this thesis, which combines three well-known models of sales strategy to identify the influence on business success and salesperson performance of a customized sales strategy for Mittelstand B2B organizations. This framework should be 'an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous' (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017, p. xv) and support to outline possible courses of action and to present ideas or thoughts (Elangovan and Raju, 2015). The thesis focuses on the influence between sales strategy and salesperson performance, sales strategy and business success, and salesperson performance and business success. To better understand the importance of sales strategy and the differences between a sales strategy and a classic marketing strategy, the literature review begins by comparing and investigating the relationship between sales and marketing.

2.1 Relationship between sales and marketing

Many researchers have examined collaboration between functional departments at organizations and the relationship between the quality of this collaboration and organizational performance (Müller and Jugdev, 2012; Salas *et al.*, 2015; Sanyal and Hisam, 2018). Research has shown that the better the relationship between the marketing and sales departments, the higher the likelihood of achieving strong results for both the client and the organization (Le Meunier-Fitzhugh and Piercy, 2010). The literature has also confirmed that the smooth functioning of the interface between marketing and sales is an important success factor for organizations and underlined the importance of its relationship to performance (Beverland, Steel and Dapirn, 2006). Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy (2006, p. 12) stated, *'Every company can and should improve the relationship between sales and marketing' to optimize its customer orientation and results.'*

Although the relationship between the sales and marketing departments is critical for an organization's success, there are often barriers that negatively affect their daily work. While the role of sales is *'to stimulate, rather than satisfy, demand for products'* (Weitz and Bradford, 1999, p. 243 quoted in Le Meunier-Fitzhugh and Piercy, 2010), the role of marketing is *'structured around major customers and markets, not products, and will integrate sales, product strategy, distribution, and marketing communications competencies and activities'* (Webster, 1997, p. 64 quoted in Le Meunier-Fitzhugh and Piercy, 2010). While salespeople often blame marketers for not knowing what customers really want or setting prices too high, marketers insist that salespeople focus too much on individual customers and short-term success at the expense of long-term profits and goals (Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy, 2006).

Another challenge in the relationship between sales and marketing is the disparity in goals set by senior management, which results in a loss of effectiveness and efficiency (Yandle and Blythe, 2000). While a typical sales goal is to generate as much turnover as possible, a classic marketing goal is to generate as much (percentual) profit margin as possible. While salespeople prefer low prices and lower profit margins but more sales turnover, marketing managers aim to raise profit margins at the risk of losing turnover due to excessively high prices. These differences in goals often stem from a lack of understanding of the

sales and marketing functions and a lack of coordination on the part of senior management (Homburg and Jensen, 2007)

However, the relationship and collaboration between sales and marketing can be improved through the regular exchange of the two functions, clear rules about each department's responsibilities, a positive mindset among leaders that promotes the exchange of ideas and teamwork, complementary goals, and a clear understanding of when to consult the other party about decisions (Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy, 2006). Regarding the development of sales and marketing strategies, another important factor to consider is differences between sales and marketing approaches adopted by B2B organizations and business-to-consumer (B2C) organizations.

2.2 B2B sales, its particularities, and its differentiation to B2C sales

According to Kumar and Raheja (2012), the route to market for B2B sales focuses on marketing and selling goods or services to other businesses, while B2C organizations sell their goods directly to consumers. Additionally, B2B sales typically have higher order values, longer sales cycles and a greater complexity than B2C sales (Rėklaitis and Pilelienė, 2019). Furthermore, in B2B sales, average margins are lower, the price for the same product can vary from customer to customer, the sales decision is more rational than emotional, and the target market size is typically smaller than in B2C sales (Saha *et al.*, 2014).

Hague, Hague and Harrison (2021) identified 10 main differences between B2B and B2C marketing and sales, which are detailed below. These differences have been corroborated by many researchers (e.g. Kumar and Raheja, 2012; Saha *et al.*, 2014; Rangarajan *et al.*, 2018; Rėklaitis and Pilelienė, 2019).

1. B2B markets have a more complex decision-making unit.

While ordering products of low value and low risk may not be very complex, purchasing decisions about large B2B investments involve a complex decision-making unit. The latter sometimes comprises several experienced decision makers from various departments and with different interests who need to be convinced about a product. This differentiates B2B sales from B2C sales, in which even the most complex decisions are made by a family or even a single person (Hague, Hague and Harrison, 2021).

2. B2B buyers are more 'rational'.

The discussion on whether B2B buyers make more rational decisions than B2C buyers is controversial since emotions also play a role in B2B environments. However, a B2B purchasing decision is usually made according to certain criteria and must sometimes be justified to other employees and supervisors (Saha et al., 2014). Rook (1987, p. 191) defined the opposite of rational purchasing as impulse buying, which is mainly observed among B2C consumers: *'Impulse buying occurs when a consumer experiences a sudden, often powerful and persistent urge to buy something immediately. The impulse to buy is hedonically complex and may stimulate emotional conflict. Also, impulse buying is prone to occur with diminished regard for its consequences'*.

3. B2B products are often more complex.

While consumer products are mostly standardized, industrial B2B products are often bespoke and require a higher degree of customization (Hague, Hague and Harrison, 2021). Additionally, B2B products are often made to withstand heavier use and may entail consequences for the seller when they break down, like a stop of the production and therefore, ensuring their robustness is more complex, and they must be adjusted to the individual needs of the buyer (Rėklaitis and Pilelienė, 2019). This complexity in the products creates a need for skilled salespeople that can explain the products and its advantages to the customers.

4. There are a limited number of buying units in B2B markets.

Compared to B2C businesses, in which many consumers are potential buyers, a small number of customers dominate the sales ledger in many B2B markets (Hague, Hague and Harrison, 2021). The presence of key consumers in a B2B market can represent an opportunity for organizations that are able to increase demand and secure a long-lasting business relationship. However, there is also the risk of one customer's share becoming too large, which may make the seller dependent on them.

5. B2B markets have fewer behavioural and needs-based segments.

An investigation of more than 2,000 B2B studies showed that B2B markets have fewer behavioural needs-based segments than B2C markets (Hague, Hague and Harrison, 2021). This is mainly because the behaviours and needs of a business customer tend to vary less than those of a consumer customer. Buyers are less

likely to be influenced by insecurities or indulgences when the purchase is work-related rather than personal in nature.

6. Personal relationships are more important for B2B markets.

Due to the limited number of buying units and the presence of complex products with related services in B2B markets, a long-lasting and continuous relationship between the seller and the buyer can be a crucial factor for success. This differentiates B2B sales from B2C sales, in which the influence of losing one customer is lower; therefore, personal relationships are not as important (Bonner and Calantone, 2005).

7. B2B buyers are long-term buyers.

Due to the importance of personal relationships and the fact that many B2B products require after-sales service, long-term relationships in the B2B field are more common than in the consumer market, where consumers are more likely to change their purchasing resource (Bonner and Calantone, 2005). This brings advantages when a relationship with a customer is established since it is harder for a competition to switch that customer to their products. On the other hand, it is particularly challenging when a B2B customer is already purchasing products from a competitor to win this customer for the own organization.

8. B2B markets drive innovation to a lesser extent than consumer markets.

For the last 20 years, most innovation was driven by the consumer market (Majava et al., 2014). Although innovation is increasingly recognized and essential in the B2B market, many B2B organizations do not see themselves as innovative (Edelmann, 2019). When innovation is low, product quality, reliability and after-sales service become even more important.

9. Packaging is less important in B2B markets.

While packaging is a critical aspect for marketing and sales in the B2C market, adding value or supporting sales through packaging is far more challenging in the B2B market (Anjana, 2018). Purchasing decisions are primarily based on technical criteria and value for money, not product packaging.

10. Sub-brands are less effective in B2B markets.

The role of marketing in B2B markets has become increasingly important over the past few years (Cartwright, Liu and Raddats, 2021). However, sub-brand marketing is less effective in B2B markets than in B2C markets. This approach is efficient when diversified organizations, such as Unilever or Nestle, recognize the need to develop several brands for segments and sub-segments of a large target audience. In B2B markets where the customer base is smaller and a higher focus on relationships and trust in well-known brands' sub brands can confuse the customer without delivering additional benefit (Lilien and Grewal, 2012).

These observations are especially apparent in the hypercompetitive markets that B2B organizations now operate in. Many organizations must focus on consultative selling and solution selling approaches to attract new customers and secure profit margins (Rangarajan *et al.*, 2018). For example, a producer of commercial B2B tools (e.g. drilling machines) may need to convince a potential client about their product's quality, rapid return on investment, after-sales service and advantages compared to competitors and price options for various order volumes. If successful, the organization can sign an agreement worth more than 1 million Euro that will help to secure their business for the next couple of years. For organizations that sell B2C drilling machines online, nearly every household is a potential customer; thus, they are likely to be more emotional and less rational in their purchasing decisions and may not need a personal contact with the selling organization, only some information, pictures, and complimentary reviews. On the other hand, their customers may need only one machine for the next 10 years; thus, it is much more difficult to interest them in after-sales offers, since the tool may not be as important to them as it would be for an organization that uses it daily.

The above example and the findings from the literature show that there is a crucial need for different sales strategies, routes to market and requirements for salespeople due to differences in target markets, customer needs and buying behaviours between B2B and B2C organizations. By acquiring knowledge about the differences between B2C and B2B markets and developing awareness about challenges and opportunities related to the relationship between sales and marketing, organizations can build a stable foundation for strategy development and implementation.

However, since the main success factors of the German Mittelstand are mainly a result of outstanding products and services as well as a long-term strategy that is often driven by the owning family, these strategies differ very often from the strategies that are taught in business schools or executed by bigger organizations (Venohr, Fear and Witt, 2016). Many Mittelstand companies in Germany have a global control in niche markets, a focus on customer loyalty not on competitor dominance as well as a very strong strategic influence of the owning family. These families often prefer pragmatic and cost efficient strategies compared to complex, customized and local strategies (Venohr, Fear and Witt, 2016). This leads often to very centralized and strict strategies in German Mittelstand companies that do not give the local subsidiaries the strategic flexibility mentioned above.

2.3 Corporate strategy, business unit strategy and functional strategy

Broadly defined, a strategy is a pattern in an organization's actions and decisions that involves the allocation of various resources that are necessary to achieving their goals (Snow and Hambrick, 1980). Strategic management refers to decisions and actions which result in the formulation and implementation of a strategy designed to achieve an organization's objectives (Pearce and Robinson, 1988). Experience has often shown that a corporate strategy is not about predicting the future but creating the future desired by the corporation (Brenes, Mena and Molina, 2008).

One of the first managers credited with developing and implementing business strategies was Alfred Sloan, the president of General Motors (GM) from 1923 to 1937. Among Sloan's achievements was the reorganization of GM, which was documented in his book *My Years with General Motors* (Horwath, 2006). Another individual who shaped the concept of business strategy was Peter Drucker, who is considered a pioneer of modern management theory and an original and independent thinker (Horwath, 2006). One finding from Drucker's studies was that the purpose of business is external, as it creates and satisfies customer needs, and that the most successful organizations were centralized and effective at goal setting.

The literature on strategic management often distinguishes between corporate strategy, business strategy and functional strategy. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, a corporate strategy consists of 'the ideas and plans a

company has for its future business activities or the process of deciding these ideas and plans within a company' (The Cambridge dictionary, 2020). Meanwhile, Andrews defined corporate strategy as '*the pattern of decisions in a company that determines and reveals its objectives, purposes, or goals, produces the principal policies and plans for achieving those goals, and defines the range of business the company is to pursue, the kind of economic and human organization it is or intends to be, and the nature of the economic and non-economic contribution it intends to make to its shareholders, employees, customers, and communities*' (Andrews, 1987 p. 13).

Bowman and Helfat (2001) provided a more granular view of business strategy by examining it at the level of the business unit. They defined business strategy as a pattern that consists of the ways in which an individual business unit or a larger organization competes within a particular industry or market. While corporate strategy defines the types of businesses in which an organization decides to be involved, a business unit strategy refers to how a business unit or division competes and behaves in the market, and a functional strategy concerns the maximization of resource productivity within each specified function, such as marketing, production, or sales (Venkatraman, 1989). Each business unit must establish its own mission and objectives, define how it will compete in the market and contribute to the corporate strategy (Slack and Lewis, 2003).

In summary, a corporate strategy focuses on the businesses and products that an organization should compete with, while a business strategy focuses on how an organization should compete in different markets. Lastly, a functional strategy specifies how each functional unit within a business (e.g. sales, marketing, finance, and production) will contribute to the corporate and business strategies (Venkatraman, 1989; see Figure 1). It is important for the various levels of strategy to complement and build on each other, aim for the same goals and follow the same strategic timeframe (Bowman and Helfat, 2001).

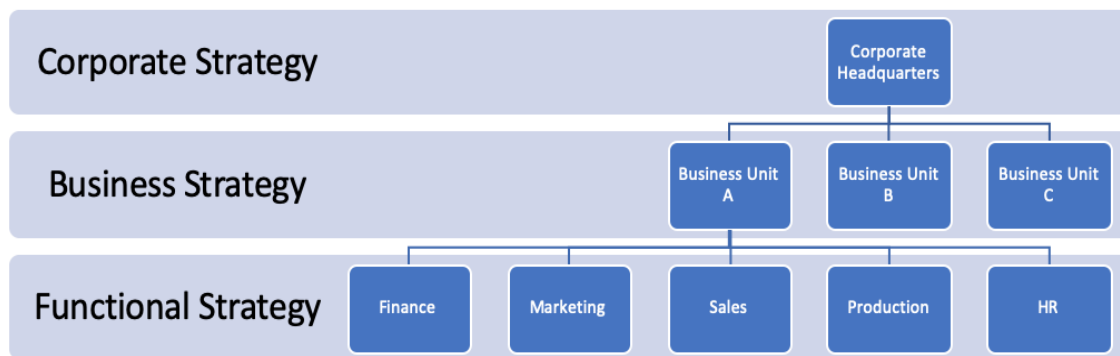


Figure 1. Strategy levels in business-to-business organizations (Source: authors own, 2021)

2.3.1 Strategy timeframe

In their work on the influence of strategic planning at more than 650 SMEs in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Skokan, Pawliczek and Piszczur (2013) defined three strategic timeframes that can be used to develop a strategy. Periods of less than one year to three years, three to five years and five to ten years or more correspond to a short-term strategy, mid-term, and long-term strategy, respectively. Although there is no official definition of the timeline for a mid-term strategy, many organizations, consultants, and managers follow this definition for their strategic planning. For example, Adidas (2021) presented their ‘Own the Game’ strategy in 2021 for 2021–2025; BRITA, a German B2B producer of water dispensers, launched a four-year strategy called ‘Shaping sustainable solutions’ in 2020 (Rapp, 2020); and the Deutsche Post (2020) presented a strategy called ‘2025’, which also corresponds to the 2020–2025 timeframe.

Breuer (2021) defined mid-term planning as a link between long-term planning and short-term planning; it involves the definition of medium-term targets for the entire organization and its various areas, the development of measures and steps to achieve these targets, and budgeting for sub-periods of the short-term plan. According to Breuer, a medium-term plan encompasses one to five years. While a long-term strategy may be so broad that it is difficult to create tangible milestones and a short-term strategy is often based on the urgent and immediate needs of an organization, a mid-term strategy combines the clarity of short-term goals with the vision and depth of long-term planning (Gartenstein, 2018). Particularly for sales strategies that require clear goals and KPIs (Brenes, Mena and Molina, 2008) and must consider current national and global trends (Cross *et al.*, 2001), a mid-term strategy enables organizations to react to an

volatile environment when needed and provides enough time to build a foundation to support the corporate strategy (Gartenstein, 2018).

2.4 Sales strategy

Ingram, LaForge and Leigh (2002) defined a sales strategy as a necessary tool for translating an organization's defined marketing strategy from the market level to the customer level, which results in interactions with distinct customer groups. Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010) developed the concept of a sales strategy and identified differences between a sales strategy and a marketing strategy. They defined a sales strategy as *'the extent to which a firm engages in a set of activities and decisions regarding the allocation of scarce sales resources (i.e., people, selling effort, money) to manage customer relationships based on the value of each customer for the firm'* (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010, p. 48). This view matches with the findings from Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019) who defined sales strategy as a mix of segmenting customers, prioritizing and targeting customers, relationships and selling, and utilization of multiple sales channels.

In general, the literature broadly represents two perspectives on sales strategies: sales strategy at the organizational level and sales strategy at the individual (i.e. salesperson) level (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010). While the first perspective has dominated the literature in the past, recent studies have focused on the second perspective. For example, Terho et. al. (2015) found that a sales strategy improves salesperson performance by driving effective selling approaches. According to their definition, a sales strategy *'produces performance outcomes through its effects on the actions of sales organizations,'* and *'salespeople are sales organizations' key actors who implement their firms' sales strategy through their conduct and behaviour'* (Terho et.al, 2015 p. 14).

Over the past few decades, sales have largely been viewed as a tactical activity at many organizations, and the sales force is considered to be responsible for implementing the marketing department's strategies and needs to be skilled enough to execute the developed strategy properly (Lane and Piercy, 2009). However, this perception has evolved; sales is now viewed as an independent strategic function (Lane and Piercy, 2009). In the current literature, sales strategy is considered a multidimensional construct consisting of four elements: customer segmentation, customer targeting and prioritization, the development of relationship and selling models, and the use of multiple sales channels

(Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010; Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri, 2019). These dimensions enable sales strategy to be treated as an index that aggregates the extent to which an organization engages in the abovementioned activities. The influence of these four elements on business success and salesperson performance can be optimized when developed and executed decentralized. However, if the right conditions are not in place, there are also examples where customized approaches to these four elements were not successful and lead to negative results for the executing organizations.

2.4.1 Dimensions of Panagopoulos and Aventis's (2010) conceptual model of sales strategy

To better understand Panagopoulos and Avlonitis's (2010) model of sales strategy (figure 5) and the conceptual model of this thesis, the key dimensions of sales strategy are explained below based on evidence from various researchers. This four key dimensions were also reviewed and confirmed from Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019).

1. Customer segmentation

Customer segmentation refers to the systematic process undertaken by an enterprise to develop a highly granular customer typology for individual customer identification within each target group (Zoltners, Sinha and Zoltners, 2001). Kotler et al (2016) stated that organizations must develop sales and marketing mixes to satisfy the preferences and needs of broad customer segments that result from a thorough process of customer segmentation and marketing. Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019) also suggest that the segmentation process should focus on broader groups of attractive customers that present opportunities for the organization.

The identification of customers can become the basis for customer prioritization and further sales activities. Classic segmentation criteria include the size of the customer measured by the realized turnover per year, customer potential and customer profitability. However, based on interviews with the Hill-Rom Company, a 1.2-billion U.S. dollars manufacturer of patient care products, Kinni (2004) found that it might be more advantageous to segment customers according to their needs and priorities, not classic parameters. When the

organization implemented this new sales structure, sales effectiveness and customer satisfaction improved while costs significantly dropped.

Similarly, the Graham Company, a large commercial insurance broker, managed a conversion rate of 75% (compared to the industry average of 15%) through significant investments in customer research. Then, the organization only contacted customers whose business objectives aligned with their risk management strategies (Kinni, 2004).

2. *Customer prioritization and targeting*

Customer prioritization refers to a systematic approach to cluster and contact each customer segment according to their strategic or economic value for the enterprise (Cross *et al.*, 2001). Customer targeting involves allocating resources and selling efforts to different customers. Woo, Bae and Park (2005, p. 447) defined customer targeting as '*finding and keeping [the] right customers, who are profitable and loyal*'. Customer prioritization and targeting dimension resembles the 'customer prioritization' concept that Homburg, Droll and Totzek (2008, p. 114) define '*as the degree to which customers are treated differently with respect to marketing instruments according to their importance to the firm.*'

Over the past few decades, thousands of businesses have concluded that their most important assets are their customers and that, to develop winning strategies, they must identify ways to attract and retain the right customers (Woo, Bae and Park, 2005).

3. *Development of objectives and selling models*

The development of objectives and selling models refers to the creation of systematic activities that support the organization in reaching the desired customers or customer group to begin a long-term relationship (Spiro and Stanton, 2008). In her *Harvard Business Review* article, Andrea Ovans (2015) collected different definitions of 'business and selling model' and found that many people recognized the concept when they saw it but could not define it. In addition, managers use the term in many ways, which potentially skews and conflates existing definitions. While Levis (2014) offered one of the simplest definitions of a selling model ('*All it really meant was how you planned to make money*'), Drucker (1994) defined a sales model as assumptions about what organizations are paid for. Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019) developed a conceptual model that

which shows that the development of objectives and selling models leads to a better market performance of the organization.

According to Magretta (2002), business models are 'stories that explain how enterprises work and that answer the questions, 'Who is the customer? And what does the customer value?' It also answers the fundamental questions every manager must ask: How do we make money in this business? What is the underlying economic logic that explains how we can deliver value to customers at an appropriate cost?' Table 1 shows examples of business models, which were collected from Johnson (2010, cited in Ovans, 2015).

Model	How it works	Example
Affinity club	Pay royalties to large organizations for the right to sell the product exclusively to their customers	MBNA Corporation
Brokerage	Bring sellers and buyers together and charge a fee per transaction	PayPal, eBay
Bundling	Package related goods and service together	Fast food value meals iPod and iTunes
Mobile phones	Charge different rates for discrete levels of a service	Sprint Better place
Crowdsourcing	Persuade a large group of people to contribute content for free in exchange for access to other people's content	Wikipedia YouTube

Disintermediation	Sell directly, sidestepping traditional middlemen	Dell WebMD
Freemium	Offer basic service for free and charge for premium service	LinkedIn
Leasing	Rent rather than sell	Cars
Low-touch	Lower prices by decreasing service	Walmart IKEA
Negative operating cycle	Lower prices by receiving payment before delivering the offering	Amazon
Pay-as-you-go	Charge for actual metered usage	Electrical utility organizations
Razor blades	Offer high-margin razor blades at below cost to increase sales volume of low-margin razor blades	Printers and ink
Reverse razor	Offer low-margin items at below cost to encourage sales of high-margin companion products	Kindle iPod and iTunes

Table 1. Different business models for business-to-business organizations (Source: Johnson, 2010, cited in Ovens, 2015))

4. Use of multiple sales channels

The fourth dimension is an organization’s systematic utilization of different sales channels (e.g. direct sales, wholesale, distribution, internet sales, etc.) to sell products and services that satisfy the needs of their customers. Multiple sales channels are used to increase effectiveness and allocate the organization’s

resources across customer segments with different values (Smith, Gopalakrishna and Smith, 2004). While a broader distribution of products or services with many resellers or partners can lead to the efficient management of human capital and an increase in reach among potential customers, it can also mean a loss in margins since profits must be shared with other organizations (Weber, 2001). However, in a direct sales approach, the organization can retain profits while making greater investments in sales and marketing. Thus, it is important to evaluate whether a loss of margin in percentage terms can be compensated by higher overall sales, which may lead to an increase in the absolute margin.

2.4.2 Customized sales strategies

In the broader literature, sales strategies relate to the different functions of an organization, are developed at the level of the business unit, and located at the level of functional strategy, which means that there is one single global sales strategy for each business unit which is valid for the global business (Varadarajan and Jayachandran, 1999; Homburg and Jensen, 2007; Kotler et al., 2016; Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri, 2019; Harrison and Candace, 2020; Malshe *et al.*, 2021). Commonly, the strategy is presented at the subsidiary level, and the regional management and sales force must define actions and initiatives to execute it and develop plans to achieve the desired results, which should contribute to the functional strategy (Hrebiniak, 2006; Schill, 2013; Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019).

This thesis delves deeper by using the functional sales strategy – which serves as the basis for the business strategy – as a framework for developing a customized sales strategy at the local subsidiary level and identifies the conditions required within an organization for this to be the appropriate course of action. Each subsidiary potentially develops their own sales strategy with an individual vision, mission, and local priorities, which ultimately contributes to the business unit's functional sales strategy. Additionally, each subsidiary creates their own KPIs for their sales force, which can be adjusted to the needs of each market. Potentially, this approach may lead salespeople to identify more with these targets compared to a global strategy, which results in better performance and results (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019). This approach may also increase sales since the local management are more familiar with challenges, opportunities, and competitors in

their market than the management team at the headquarters and can thus develop appropriate measures (Schill, 2013).

Where appropriate, this strategy customization represents an opportunity for business units, since research has shown that it is critical to involve employees who must implement and execute a strategy in the strategy development process (Shah, 2005). However, this approach can be very time-consuming, and the strategy would be developed by operational staff, not strategic experts which may explain one reason why it is not commonplace. These disadvantages could be addressed by assigning an external or internal strategy specialist to support the development of customized sales strategies. Still, this requires considerable time and money and may lead to an outcome that is unsatisfactory for global management. Another challenge for executive management at various organizations is that it is difficult to compare the individual subsidiaries and the performance of the sales force due to differences in KPIs and targets. Since a clear relationship between sales strategy and sales success has been identified (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010), a customized sales strategy could generate advantages that organizations with only a global sales strategy do not have.

In the field of global marketing strategies, Hollensen (2020) described this mix of a centralized (global) and customized (local) developed strategy as 'GLOCAL'. It combines the advantages of both approaches to utilize local knowledge and the existing knowledge of the headquarters. Hollensen (2020, p. 18) stated that to be successful in today's knowledge intense economy, '*the ability to manage the global knowledge engine*' is one of the key factors for successful strategy management. In his framework (figure 2), the left-hand side highlights certain advantages associated with following a standardised marketing approach, including a standardised (or global) sales strategy. When looking at sales strategies, examples for advantages with global approaches include supportive sales systems that should be the same for the whole organization to lower complexity, a global pricing framework to ensure a consistent global market situation or a global sales philosophy that the whole salesforce works in the same direction with high speed. The right-side highlights certain advantages associated with following a localised marketing approach, including a customized (or local) sales strategy. These include that the cultural approach should fit to the local customer and not the German headquarter, a flexible response to local customer

needs when presenting the products or the offer of individual sales channels to optimize local market penetration.

The goal of large and medium sized companies should be to find the right mix between global integration and market responsiveness (Hollensen, 2020). Global integration means recognizing and integrating similarities in international markets into a global strategy. Market responsiveness describes to respond to the individual needs of each market. An example of a successful combination of these two points could be a global pricing strategy that has the goal of stable international market prices. How these prices are reached and how a discount structure is management is the responsibility of the local entities and can be organized individually.

Czarnecka and Schivinski (2022) confirmed that glocal sales and marketing strategies are important for the successful promotion of a product. In their study with 432 respondents they stated, that purchasing decisions are driven by global and local identities of the consumer and that this are meaningful variables when it comes to choosing the right organization and the right product. Even global foodservice companies like McDonald`s which are known for their worldwide standardised processes are implementing both global and local strategies to reduce costs and to be more efficient (Hamza and Karabulut, 2021). Due to the positive effects in international markets local strategies became even more important than the focus on global rules and approaches.

To make this approach successful it is important to overcome the lack of personal relationships, the absence of trust and cultural distance and to create a culture that encourages local decision-making processes within a global framework (Hollensen, 2020).



Figure 2. The glocalization framework (Source: Hollensen, 2020)

2.5 Sales strategy and sales success

Factors that contribute to sales success at B2B organizations have been widely researched in the field of industrial sales and marketing for decades (e.g. Churchill, Gilbert A *et al.*, 1985; Cross *et al.*, 2001). Organizational and marketing scholars have sought to understand the process and the nature of strategy development and implementation at the corporate and business unit levels (Hambrick, 1980). In the literature, there is evidence to suggest that a mid-term sales strategy is positively and consistently associated with an enterprise's performance and that a fully developed sales strategy pays off (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010). Moreover, salespeople who implement and follow an appropriate sales strategy can positively affect sales performance (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019). In this thesis, a mid-term sales strategy is understood as a strategy that covers the next three to five years. In addition, an organization's sales strategy is related to their market performance and can both directly and indirectly affect a salesperson's performance (Terho *et al.*, 2015). Organizations with a strong sales strategy, which includes multiple sales channels, selling models for different customer segments and an effective prioritization strategy for salespeople, achieve greater success than organizations that do not have these elements in place (Terho *et al.*, 2015). In other words, the better an organization and their sales force know their customer characteristics, potential and purchasing preferences, the higher the likelihood that they will be more successful than their

competitors (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010). However, if an organization's sales activities are not aligned with their corporate strategy, there is a risk that they will incur significant direct and indirect costs (Cespedes and Thompson, 2015).

For example, a recent McKinsey study showed that economic crises (e.g., the Covid-19 pandemic) have had a massive influence on how B2B organizations interact with customers and that sales managers have had to rapidly react to clients' changing needs. In addition, it demonstrated how these sales managers would approach them in the future (Gavin, Harrison and Candace, 2020) and that the need for accurate and detailed plans might be overrated in the literature (Acur and Englyst, 2006). In this case organizations which have a centralized sales strategy may not be able to react quickly enough to changing local conditions.

Many mid-term B2B sales strategies lose much of their validity when a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the September 11 terrorist attacks, or the financial crisis of 2007–2008 emerges (Gavin, Harrison and Candace, 2020). For example, the ways in which new relationships could be established changed due to restrictions in social contact associated with Covid-19; as a result, sales shifted from offline to online channels, and customer prioritization changed as organizations diversified their customer base to reduce risks. In addition, some revenue targets were no longer feasible or over-achieved, and a business's profitability became more dependent on products and services that were in high demand.

In very uncertain times, when information and key success drivers at an organization may constantly change, there is a risk that considerable time and money are invested in implementing sales strategies that are eventually discovered to be infeasible (Lipshitz and Strauss, 1997). Moreover, the need for local market intelligence and the risk of defining goals that are not reachable when going in the wrong strategic direction or insufficient market knowledge often fuel tensions between global and local management (Schill, 2013).

2.6 Influence of global strategies on subsidiaries and independent sales divisions

Birkinshaw and Hood (1998, p. 774) defined a subsidiary as '*a value adding entity in a host country*'. A subsidiary may be established to in search of resources, new markets, and greater efficiency. According to Birkinshaw and Hood (1998), there

are two overarching theories on the development of subsidiaries. On the one hand, the product life cycle model views subsidiaries in terms of low-cost manufacturing opportunities; on the other hand, the internationalization model views subsidiaries as being implicated in a continual process of learning about the foreign market and investing in resources to reach the headquarters' goals. Due to its focus on customized sales strategies, this thesis mainly examines subsidiaries through the lens of internationalization and local sales.

There are two fundamental strategies for managing international subsidiaries of multinational organizations. Gestetner (1974) identified the centric approach, in which the headquarters' objectives are prioritized over the needs of the international subsidiary. By contrast, in the non-centrist approach, subsidiaries have the same decision-making power and hierarchical status as the headquarters and are subject to minimal control: *'provided a satisfactory, continuous growth in profit and return on investment, the head office maintains a policy of non-interference'* (Gestetner, 1974, p. 103).

Although many organizations understand the need for the effective development and implementation of a subsidiary strategy, implementation fails in most enterprises due to several obstacles (Shah, 2005). In many subsidiaries and business units of global corporations, there is resistance to global coordination efforts or strategy implementation by the organization's headquarters (Schill, 2013). The main reasons for this resistance are cultural dissimilarity, quick innovation cycles, price competition and emerging market dynamics. In a global strategy, organizations attempt to serve markets with different specifications and actions based on ideas from headquarters; in a local strategy, organizations strategically manage markets from various national centres (Baden Fuller and Stopford, 1986). A study involving more than 100 managers from cross-functional corporations showed that a lack of employee commitment and inadequate leadership and direction on the part of departmental managers were two of the main obstacles faced by corporations when trying to implement a new strategy (Shah, 2005).

Research has shown that, when sales and marketing managers can adjust the global strategy to different locales and are viewed as credible and accepted partners in local strategy implementation, the success of an organization's global strategy is more likely than if it was implemented as communicated from

headquarters (Schill, 2013). Morrison, Ricks and Roth (1991) agree with this view. They discovered the success of regional strategies for pharmaceuticals and health care products. In addition, Stopford and Baden Fuller (1986) showed that organizations in the tyre and white goods industries that implemented global strategies lost sales to small, regional and flexible competitors.

Moreover, Birkinshaw, Morrison and Hulland (1995) studied the relationship between industry globalization, business performance and business strategy and found that the main factors that determine whether a corporation should have a globalized strategy is the industry's level of globalization and the extent of globalization among their competitors. In their study of seven industries, the researchers discovered that four out of seven industries were under-globalized and unsuited to a globalized strategy; instead, they deemed a customized local strategy to be the appropriate approach and concluded that it would lead to greater success. Thus, having this knowledge, ensuring a good mutual understanding between an organization's headquarters and different local entities, and the ability to determine when a global or local approach is needed comprise the foundation of strategy development and subsequent strategy implementation.

2.7 Successful strategy development and implementation

To develop a successful and efficient sales strategy, it is important for the sales and marketing departments, which are the main revenue generators at most organizations, to work together (Malshe and Sohi, 2009). In addition, they should synchronize their strategic and tactical activities and goals to create and communicate customer value (Guenzi and Troilo, 2007).

In many organizations, strategies are created at the executive sales or marketing level without direct input from the sales department and simply handed over to the sales department for implementation. As a result, employees who must implement the strategy do not support the process (Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy, 2006). The literature has shown that, the more a salesperson is involved in the strategy development process, the more they support and buy into the sales strategy (Strahle, Spiro and Acito, 1996; Judson *et al.*, 2006; Ulaga and Kohli, 2018).

It is even more difficult to identify the appropriate strategy implementation process, which is one of the most important factors in determining the success of

a strategy (Hrebiniak, 2006). In a study of more than 400 managers who were involved in strategy implementation, Hrebniak (2006) found that one of the main challenges was that most participants were strategy experts, not implementation experts. Thus, the strategies were ideal from a strategic perspective but very difficult or even impossible to operationalize. To ensure successful strategy implementation, Hrebniak advised that employees who are responsible for the execution and implementation of the strategy should be involved in its development process. In addition, it is crucial for managers to simultaneously consider the execution and formulation of the strategy.

These findings align with Shah (2005), who described key factors in strategy implementation: the strategy's soundness, sufficient resources, and understanding and commitment on the part of the management and employees. A sound strategy demonstrates an understanding of the organization's customers, competitors, and capabilities, as well as opportunities and challenges in the near future. If a strategy is formulated without considering these factors, the likelihood of success is low. To ensure that employees understand the strategy and are committed to executing it, the management must persuasively and substantively communicate it to them and provide guidance on how to operationalize it (Shah, 2005).

Similarly, Brenes, Mena and Molina (2008) described strategy implementation as a combination of five processes in their model. The first process with the steps one to three can be seen as a sequence of independent actions that allow an organization to move from defining the assumptions in their strategy to the mechanism, feedback, performance plan (see Figure 3). The other two dimensions relate to managers, who are responsible for ensuring that the implementation process is effectively completed.

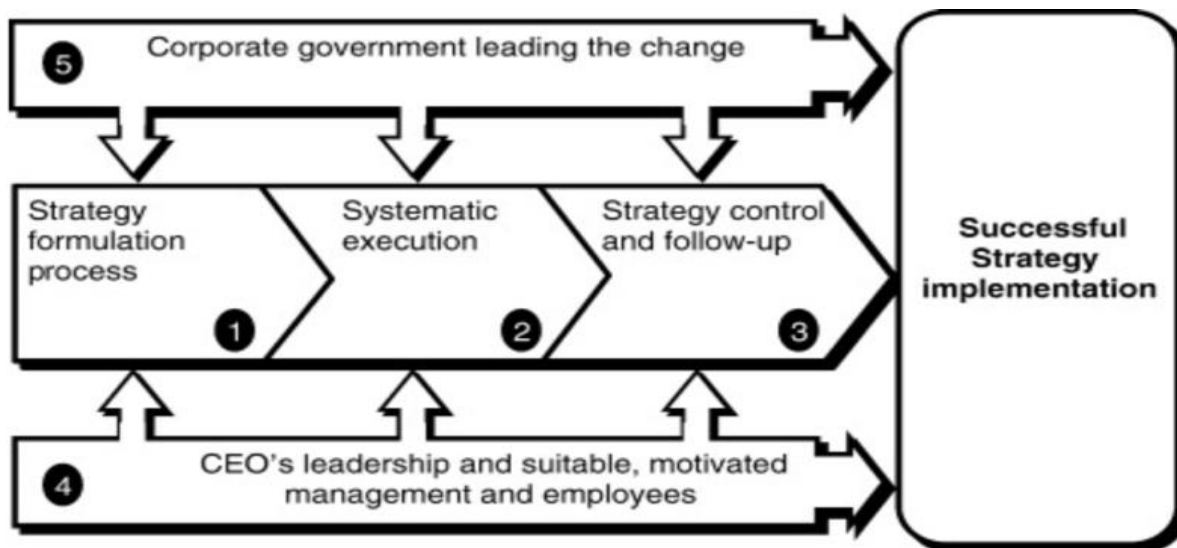


Figure 3. Key dimensions of strategy implementation (Source: Brenes, Mena and Molina, 2008)

Based on Brenes, Mena and Molina's (2008) findings, in-depth market knowledge is needed to develop strategies that are valid for each market and enable the management to effectively communicate them to the teams that are responsible for operationalizing them, thus successfully implementing the global strategy at the subsidiary level. Moreover, the greatest obstacles to successful strategy implementation include a lack of input from the employees who must operationalize the strategy and a lack of commitment from the executive board and other shareholders. Therefore, it is important to balance local knowledge and corporate involvement during the strategy development process to ensure the strategy's effective implementation. In particular, involving salespeople in the strategy development process is crucial for the success of both the strategy itself and future sales (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019).

2.7.1 Sales strategy implementation at the salesperson level

A study involving more than 190 B2B salespeople from different industries underlined the importance of involving salespeople in the strategy development and implementation process (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019). Additionally, it showed that different types of sales force control systems had both direct and indirect effects on a salesperson's successful strategy implementation. While an outcome-based control system, which mainly tracks a salesperson's results and not the underlying process (e.g. high sales commissions), has a negative effect on salespeople's motivation to implement a sales strategy, a behaviour-based control system that tracks specific activities set by managers led to greater

implementation and strategy-based sales success (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019). Moreover, the study found that a salesperson's sales experience and technical and market knowledge had direct and positive effects on their motivation and the quality of sales strategy implementation. At a time when various KPIs can be measured and a large amount of data are available to sales managers for decision making and sales generation, it is critical for managers and employees alike to judiciously choose and use the right data.

2.7.2 Using the right data for strategy development and goal setting

Another important aspect of strategy development is the selection of the right data as a basis for customer segmentation, prioritization, and the selection of the suitable sales channels. Different technologies have been developed by international organizations to collect data and enable salespeople to sell more effectively by building closer relationships with their clients (Rodriguez, Peterson and Krishnan, 2018).

To evaluate these data, the importance of technologies – especially customer relationship management tools – has grown due to the strategic emphasis that multinational organizations place on building good relationships between the buyer and the seller (Cannon and Perreault, 1999). A study involving more than 1,000 participants showed that organizations with high customer relationship management effectiveness were better at creating and managing sales opportunities and overseeing relationships than organizations without these CRM tools (Rodriguez, Peterson and Krishnan, 2018).

As customers have shifted from remote to digital engagement, B2B organizations have had to cover more channels, manage more interactions, and interact with more data than ever before. A McKinsey study revealed that, because more data are available than in the past, many organizations struggle to collect and use them to develop their sales strategy and insights related to commercial opportunities (Dierks *et al.*, 2021).

Due to the availability of large amounts of qualitative data, the current target-setting approach should not be based on a certain percentage of sales and margin targets, which are derived from historical results. Instead, the target-setting process should be influenced by forecasting models and based on external market factors, granular internal sources and account-level sales potential, which can be driven by Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools (Chung *et al.*,

2019). In addition to data management programmes, the use of AI can help organizations to gather, structure and interpret data to obtain the best results for the strategy development process.

2.7.3 Artificial intelligence for strategy development

Artificial intelligence is *'the branch of computer science that is concerned with the automation of intelligent behaviour'* (Luger, 2005, p. 1). It is an important part of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with the goal of shifting decision-making processes from humans to machines (Syam and Sharma, 2018). Artificial intelligence will influence the ways in which sales are conducted in certain industries and decisions are made.

One of the most important pieces of information for B2B organizations is customer knowledge, as it relates to the short-term performance needs of a product or service and can be a helpful resource for improving an offer (Paschen, Kietzmann and Kietzmann, 2019). Artificial intelligence can support organizations by creating comprehensive profiles of important or potential customers through various types of structured or unstructured data, such as *'recency, size, frequency and the type of past purchases, current web browsing behaviour, psychographic and demographic characteristics and interactions with the organization to create this profile'* (Paschen, Kietzmann and Kietzmann, 2019, p. 1411). Thus, knowledge about actual or potential key accounts can be applied to correctly prioritize and target these customers, which may improve outcomes for the sales strategy.

Additionally, AI could take over repetitive, non-productive and time-consuming tasks (e.g. order entries or new product announcements) to give salespeople more time to develop relationships, drive sales or implement the sales strategy (Syam and Sharma, 2018). While people still prefer to interact with each other in a face-to-face environment, they are less concerned about who responds to their online queries (Siau and Yang, 2017).

In addition to increasing efficiency, AI could be used to predict certain trends or developments to prepare the organization for a rise in demand for certain products. By building an algorithm that collected and interpreted more than 2.5 million Twitter tweets, Asur and Huberman (2010) found that it clearly outperformed traditional surveys and opinion polls about the future success of movies. The algorithm was able to predict box offices revenues on the release

date of each movie, which represented a significant advantage for the film industry.

If B2B organizations could predict the success of new products at a very early stage, this could give them a competitive advantage by allowing them to optimize sales channels, support existing partners with this knowledge or identify new reselling partners that want to participate on the success in an early stage. This would also enable sales managers to steer their teams in the right direction and provide support where needed.

One more case where AI can give a competitive advantage in the strategy development or execution process is the support in the monthly forecasting process of an organization. Forecasting sales of existing products plays an important role in the strategic planning process and the development of a market strategy for almost every organization to assess past and present sales statistics and to predict potential results (Saraswathi et al., 2021). As supply chains and logistic costs are becoming more important, raw material becoming more expensive and the customer less patient, lead times for ordered products can become an important part in the sales decision process of the customer (Lambert and Cooper, 2000). Especially customers that produce just-in-time or prefer low stock levels might be willing to pay a higher price for products if the supply is secured. The forecast algorithm can use the data and information from the past as well as features like the number of customers of the organization, the assortment, the promotion count per week, school holidays, the actual month and the distance of the customer to the next competitor and calculate the demand of different customers for a defined period of time (Saraswathi et al., 2021). Furthermore Saraswathi et al. (2021) stated that sales predictions that are using multiple features will produce a better accuracy comparing to prediction that are based on single feature or just on historical data

As a summary it can be stated that AI can play a significant role in the sales strategy development process of B2B organizations and might become another very important factor for predicting customer demands, market trends or challenges that might have a direct or indirect influence on lead generation and sales results.

2.7.4 Transformational leadership and successful strategy implementation

In addition to the fact that sales strategy is positively associated with an organization's performance, a survey of more than 170 organizations showed that a transformational leadership approach has significant moderating effects on this relationship (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010). The study found that not only it is worth investing in the development of a well-crafted sales strategy, but managers would also maximize its benefits by adopting a transformational leadership approach when working with their teams.

According to the resource-based view (RBV), an organization's capabilities and resources are key factors in the conceptualization and implementation of a sales strategy that will influence their final results (Barney, Ketchen and Wright, 2021; Shaw 2021). The RBV recognizes that one of the most important resources in the improvement of an organization's performance is their human capital (Barney, 1991). Accordingly, firms should recruit, integrate, and deploy employees by leveraging their executives' leadership capabilities (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010).

In 1978, James MacGregor Burns described leadership as either transformational or transactional. Transformational leadership occurs when leaders engage with followers in such a way that 'leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality' (Burns, 1978, p. 20). He identified four factors in transformational leadership: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. Today transformational leadership is seen as one of the most complex and multi-dimensional phenomena in the business world which has become more important for today's fast-paced and more complex world (Benmira and Agboola, 2021). Research indicates that transformational leadership is beneficial to employees attitudes and behaviours at work and can improve their performance (Harms *et al.*, 2017).

Idealized influence describes the idea that leaders should behave as role models that their followers can identify with through extraordinary capabilities, persistence, and determination. Inspirational motivation means that leaders should behave in a way that motivates and inspires employees around them (Bass and Riggio, 2005). Intellectual stimulation refers to leaders' efforts to stimulate their followers to be creative and innovative by questioning assumptions, and

individualized consideration means leaders' attention to the individual needs of followers to help them in their personal growth (Burns, 1978).

According to Bass and Riggio (2005), transformational leaders go beyond engaging in simple exchanges or expressing agreement with colleagues. They behave in ways that achieve impressive results by employing one or more of the four core components of the transformational leadership model.

The advantages of the transformational leadership approach are that it *'involves a complex and intangible network of trusted social relationships with subordinates that are very difficult to observe and, thus, are also difficult for competitors to imitate'* (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010, p. 48) and that it *'is so deeply embedded in the organizational routines and practices that it is difficult for competitors to understand the causal relationship between this capability and organizational performance'*. In effect, resource embeddedness, or its incorporation into the surrounding context, *'creates barriers to imitation, enabling firms to enjoy sustainable advantage over their rivals'* (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010, p. 48).

However, an organization must also be aware of the risks associated with a transformational leadership style when implementing a sales strategy. One of the greatest risks is that transformational leaders may foster negative outcomes which are then implemented by all their employees. This issue is called the 'Hitler Problem', which demonstrates the negative influence that a vision without moral values can have on a group (Bass and Riggio, 2005).

A study with 327 participants showed that transformational leadership can lead to higher burn-out rates if employees are over-motivated but do not have the capacity to transform motivation into performance and that a transformational leadership approach is very time-consuming, which may lead to reduced focus on other topics that are also critical (Salem, 2015).

In summary, transformational leadership is a key factor in the implementation of a customized sales strategy, and it can bring advantages when it is correctly executed. However, it also entails risks and disadvantages if the transformational leadership approach is not underpinned by appropriate skills and ethical principles. Thus, a transformational leadership approach can either improve or lower salesperson performance depending on how it is executed.

2.8 Salesperson performance

Sales and salesperson performance is widely accepted as an important index of organizational and individual performance, which requires access to organizational, personal and job resources to function effectively (Albrecht and Medhurst, 2011). To identify the connection between a customized sales strategy and salesperson performance, it is important to define salesperson performance. Reducing salesperson performance just on the turnover level of the region, which means the net volume sales that was realized in a certain territory the salesperson is responsible for, would have falsified the results. Some factors are out of the salesperson's control, such as a large project that was planned and approved by headquarters but undertaken in the salesperson's region as well as cross border purchasing, where projects are realized in a certain territory, but the needed resources sourced from somewhere else.

Churchill et al. (1985) defined 'salesperson performance' as the terms that a salesperson contributes to the goal of the organization.

2.8.1 Individual-level determinants of salesperson performance

Terho et al. (2015) identified several individual-level determinants that can be used to measure a salesperson's performance, including customer orientation, value-based selling and a combination of these. Customer orientation means a salesperson's ability to implement the organization's marketing concept at the customer level to help them to make purchasing decisions that satisfy their needs and generate long-term customer satisfaction (Saxe and Weitz, 1982). On customer orientation, Kotler (1988, p.17) wrote, *'the key to achieving organizational goals consists in determining the needs and wants of target markets and delivering the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than competitors.'* Other researchers share this view. Ruekert (1992) extended the definition of customer orientation, describing it as the degree to which the salesperson obtains and uses information from customers, develops a strategy which will meets their needs and implements that strategy by being responsive to their needs and wants.

Value-based selling was defined as *'the degree to which the salesperson works with the customer to craft a market offering in such a way that benefits are translated into monetary terms, based on an in-depth understanding of the*

customer's business model, thereby convincingly demonstrating their contribution to customers' profitability' (Terho et al., 2012, p. 178). The higher a salesperson's customer orientation, the higher the degree of value-based selling (Terho et al., 2015).

2.8.2 Organizational-level determinants of salesperson performance

In addition to individual-level determinants of salesperson performance, organizational-level determinants are important in determining the capabilities of a sales manager. These include sales strategy performance and use of sales strategy dimensions. Sales strategy performance and sales strategy dimensions refer to a salesperson's skill in effectively allocating limited resources to execute the organization's sales strategy (Homburg and Jensen, 2007). In particular, they refer to a salesperson's ability to execute the organization's customer segmentation and prioritization in their region and the transfer knowledge to use the organizational sales channels and selling models to its favour (Terho et al., 2015), which finally leads to Churchill's definition and contributions to the organization's goals. If a salesperson lacks these skills, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to support and coach them to improve their performance.

2.8.3 Coaching as method to improve salesperson performance

A study with 184 salespeople found out that coaching can help salespeople to develop better individual level determinants and organizational level determinants (as mentioned in 2.8.1 and 2.8.2) and support to be more effective in interactions with customers as well as increase the sales performance (Pousa, 2020).

Especially since recruiting highly qualified sales managers has become a challenge for Mittelstand organizations coaching became more popular. Research from the Humboldt University of Berlin showed that searching for a new sales manager took 12 weeks on average, with hiring costs of approximately 10,000 Euro and a potential loss of revenue, as hiring the wrong sales manager could cost the organization up to 200,000 Euro (Pauleweit, 2017). Therefore, many organizations prefer to train their existing staff rather than hire new sales managers which can help to coach the skills needed to develop and execute customized sales strategies.

As an efficient management tool for guiding and developing subordinates, the practice of coaching became increasingly prominent in organizations at the beginning of the 1990s (Gegner, 1997). However, there is no universally accepted definition of coaching. While Heslin, Vandewalle and Latham (2006) defined it as *'managers providing one-on-one feedback and insights aimed at guiding and inspiring improvements in [employees'] work performance'* (p. 872), Kinlaw (1996) defined coaching as a *'disciplined conversation, using concrete performance information, between a leader and an individual ... that results in the continuous improvement of performance'*. Next to the different definitions of coaching, many researchers state that it can be seen as a toolbox to facilitate learning from organizational development (Egan and Hamlin, 2014; Ladegard and Gjerde, 2014). It can also focus on individual development for improved performance, which is often a popular approach for businesses to use (Tsai and Barr, 2021)

Although fundamental issues with coaching include the measurement of effectiveness, return on investment and the value of engaging business coaches for organizations (Leedham, 2005), four different studies on coaches and coachees in SMEs showed that there is a direct correlation between employee coaching, salesperson performance and the success of an organization (Crompton, 2012).

In fast-changing and volatile environments, many organizations have realized that their managers do not have all the answers to the challenges in the markets and that command-and-control leadership is no longer viable (Ibarra and Scoular, 2019). This development has also accelerated organizations' shift towards a coaching model in which managers facilitate problem solving and encourage employees' development by asking questions and offering guidance and support rather than giving orders or making judgments.

Ibarra and Scoular (2019) argued that a manager's role is to be a coach for their employees; as a result, they develop a learning organization in which managers not only help employees improve their daily work routines but also define and shape organizational culture. A study of 234 South Korean workers showed that managers' coaching of employees had a direct influence on employee satisfaction and role clarity and an indirect influence on work satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance (Kim, 2014). This view was echoed by Huckermann (2021), who stated that a sales leader's role has

changed, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, and that leaders must shift from drivers and controllers to mentors and supporters for their employees to obtain the best results from them. Then, outcomes be collected, compared, and evaluated at the end of a strategic period to determine whether it was successful.

2.9 Evaluation of a successful strategy

At the end of a strategy period, many organizations want to know whether their strategy approach was successful and whether it was worth investing resources in the strategy development and implementation process. Over many years, different approaches have been created to evaluate the success of business strategies (Ives, 2008) with the most common approach to compare a sustainable, above average profit with the competitive organizations over a defined period of time (Gaffney, 2019).

While Rumelt (1982) and Andrews (1987) proposed criteria to support the evaluation of an overall organizational strategy, Slack (1991) and Hays and Whellright (1984) focused on the development of criteria that evaluate functional strategies. Acur and Englyst (2006) examined different studies, including those of Ramanujam, Venkatraman and Camillus (1986); Raghunathan and Raghunatan (1994); Segars, Grover and Teng (1998); and Segars and Grover (1999), which provided complete reviews and critiques on these criteria. In general, these studies detailed four different approaches for evaluating a strategy: (1) the goal-centred approach, (2) the comparative approach, (3) the normative approach and (4) the improvement approach.

The goal-centred approach assesses the extent to which planned objectives were fulfilled by examining defined targets, while the comparative approach compares the effectiveness of a particular organization with that of other organizations to evaluate their performance. The narrative approach measures the status quo against a theoretically ideal system rather than a unique planning goal, while the improvement approach evaluates how the strategy has evolved or adapted to changing circumstances (Nuran Acur and Englyst, 2006).

In their study of more than 80 managers, various workshops and two in-depth case studies, Acur and Englyst (2006) discovered that the goal-centred approach and improvement approach were mainly used to evaluate the success of a business strategy. However, the need for accurate and detailed plans may be overrated in the literature since the volatility in today's business world will need

a flexible adjustment of the developed strategy when needed. The most important task during the implementation process strongly relies on continuous improvement and empowerment. This finding complements the research of Brenes, Mena and Molina (2008), who examined key success factors for strategy implementation in Latin America. Most organizations in their study also measured the success of the implemented strategy in terms of the achievement of planned activities, which represented a combination of individual growth goals and a focus on the own development versus the development of the competition. This finding is also crucial for German organizations, especially the Mittelstand, since their business models and the competitive environment that they operate in require sound strategic planning and a regular control if their strategic decisions lead into the right direction (Heider *et al.*, 2020).

2.10 Relevant Models for this research

This section reflects the findings of well-known models in the field of sales strategy development and implementation. It examines the influence of sales strategy on salesperson performance and the success of an organization but also addresses the boundaries of knowledge and how this thesis can add knowledge to the current literature.

2.10.1 Relationship between sales strategy and salesperson performance

The relationship between sales strategy and salesperson performance was drawn from Terho *et al.*'s (2015) model. This model demonstrates the importance of salespeople and their behaviours in understanding the performance implications of a sales strategy. It was selected because sales strategy produces performance outcomes through its effects on the actions of sales organizations and because salespeople are key actors who implement their organization's sales strategy through their conduct and behaviour (Terho *et. all*, 2015).

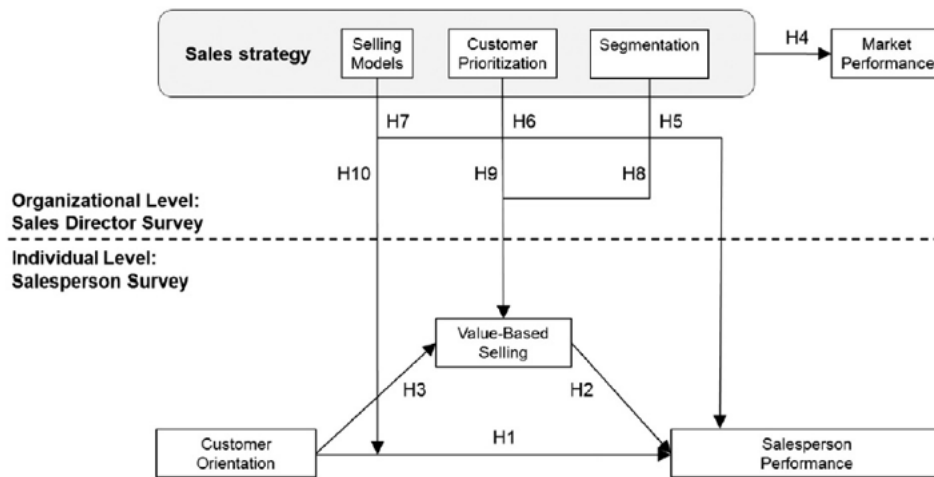


Fig. 1. Multilevel conceptual model.

Figure 4. Multi-level conceptual model (Source: Terho et. al., 2015)

This model shows that sales strategy improves market performance and that firm selling models increase the performance of a salesperson. However, it does not differentiate if there is one global sales strategy that is developed on functional level and how the results would differentiate if the strategy was developed and implemented on subsidiary level. Additionally, this model expects a certain maturity in the organization and that the development and the implementation of the strategy works smooth but does not show which framework is needed to higher the probability of a successful strategy implementation.

2.10.2 Relationship between sales strategy and business success

The relationship between sales strategy and business success was research by Panagopoulos and Avlonitis's (2010) which developed a conceptualization of sales strategy. The key takeaways from their model are that (1) sales strategy consists of customer segmentation, customer prioritization, relationship objectives and the use of multiple sales channels and that (2) sales strategy is related to performance outcomes, which encompass both subjective (i.e. sales force performance) and objective (i.e. an organization's financial performance) measures.

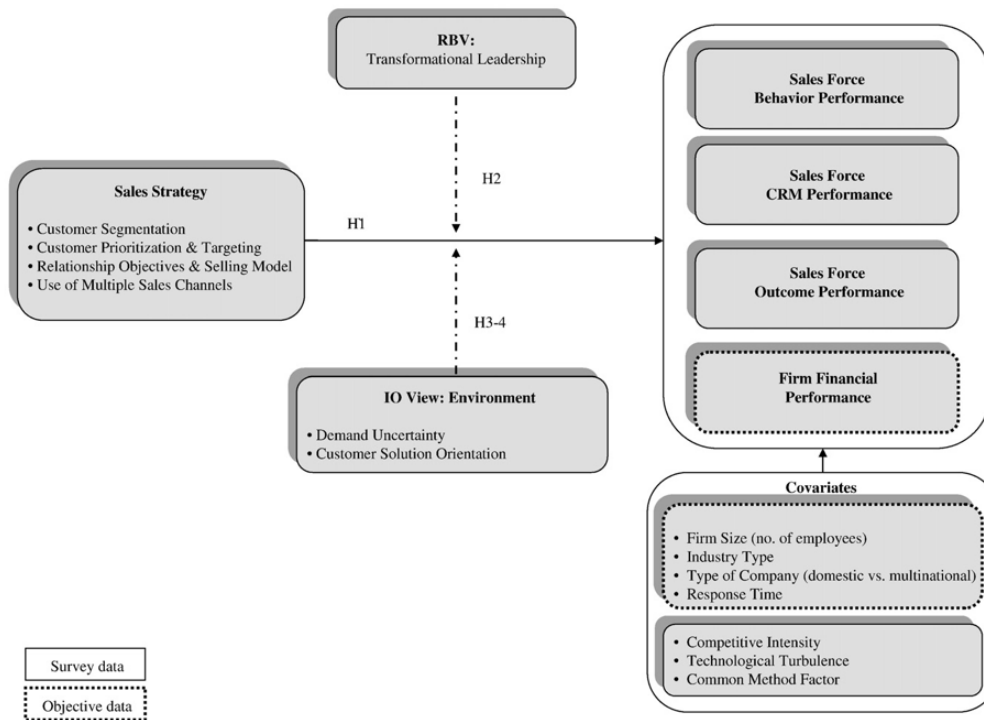


Figure 5. Conceptualization of sales strategy (Source: Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010)

Even though this model gives a clear guidance about the influence of a sales strategy on sales force performance and firm financial performance, important gaps remain. This model focuses on a centralized sales strategy where customer segmentation and prioritisation criteria as well as selling models and sales channel guidelines are developed centrally. It does not evaluate how the different outcomes will change if the sales strategy is developed locally in the individual subsidiaries and which requirements are needed to successfully develop and implement sales strategies. This thesis will help to develop and clarify the extant theory. Additionally, the study did not focus on one industry, and mixed B2B and B2C sales executives, furthermore the survey was conducted via mailing / questionnaires so that there was no opportunity for qualitative exchange with the participants.

2.10.3 Salesperson performance and business success

To investigate the influence of customized sales strategies on the relationship between business success and salesperson performance, Inyang and Jaramillo's (2019) strategic model was reviewed. Their model was based on a study of more than 190 B2B salespeople from different industries. The researchers stated that

a salesperson's motivation often influences and determines their behaviours and goals. In addition, they suggested that sales force control systems positively affect sales strategy implementation and the performance of individual salespeople. Since the basis of this study was also a centralized approach regarding control systems and sales strategy implementation, the goal of the current study is to explore how sales performance would be influenced based on the ability of the salespeople to implement a sales strategy customized for the needs of each subsidiary rather than being forced to implement a global sales strategy.

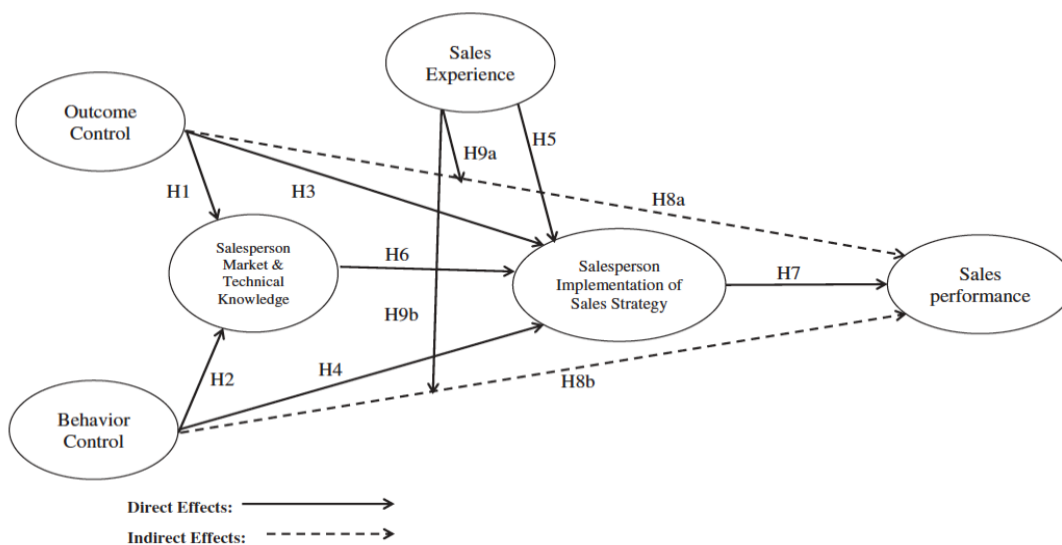


Figure 6. Model of a salesperson's strategy implementation (Source: Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019)

2.10.4 Research gaps and calls for further research in these models

Next to very helpful insights about the influence of sales strategies on the results of an organization and its salesforce, these models support the gaps in the research, presented in section 1.2.:

- Many studies in the field of sales strategy are quantitative studies and lack a deeper understanding of the individual thoughts and actions of the participants as well as their motivation.
- Two out of the three models mixed the results of B2B and B2C companies. The researcher has with his thesis a focus on German B2B Mittelstand companies in the HORECA supply industry and contributes to the research

gap that sales strategy remains an under-researched topic in the field of B2B sales (Terho et al., 2015).

- Furthermore, the three presented studies use data gathered from participants of various industries for their results and do not focus on a single industry. The researcher will contribute with his work on the research gap presented by Inyang and Jaramillo (2019) to examine the influence on sales strategy in a single industry.
- The authors of the three models used centralized sales strategies for their studies while the researcher follows the call for further research from Inyang and Jaramillo (2019) to examine the effects of individual factors and their influence on sales strategy as well as possible scenarios to utilize this influence as a competitive advantage.
- All models expect a working and mature organization that accepts and implements the global strategy but do not address the needed framework and the corporate requirements for this process as well as how the resistance of individual subsidiaries to central strategies can be reduced as requested from Schill (2013). This study contributes to this gap and examines how customized research strategies can help to overcome central strategies ideas and which framework is needed to successfully implement the strategies in the German Mittelstand B2B HORECA supply industry.

2.11 The Mittelstand

The Mittelstand is a central element of the social market economy and a success factor in 'the German economic miracle' of the post-war period (Goeke, 2008). Thus, the word 'Mittelstand' is used by many institutions and politicians as a synonym for and a source of growth, innovation, and employment.

Although there are not many buzzwords that are used more often in the German economics, there is no legal or general definition of the Mittelstand (Süß, 2020). The German minister for economics, Peter Altmaier, sees the Mittelstand as the engine of the German economy. It accounts for more than 99% of registered organizations in Germany, employs 60% of the German workforce and occupies more than 50% of the country's GDP (Altmaier, 2019). Although classic SMEs are defined as small and medium-sized enterprises with a revenue of up to

50 million Euro per year and a workforce of up to 250 employees, many larger organizations in Germany consider themselves to be part of the Mittelstand.

Mittelstand organizations are part of an institutional setting characterized by tight-knit relationships with external and internal stakeholders, which means it is more difficult for them to drive business model innovation (BMI; Heider et al., 2020). On the product market, these organizations – most of which are SMEs – are part of a well-connected supplier-buyer network in which every organization is specialized in their field and thus strongly rely on the network for complementary services and products (Pahnke and Welter, 2019). The focus of this study is on B2B organizations with an annual turnover from of 50 million to 1 billion Euro per year.

2.12 Mittelstand organizations and their relationship to strategy

It is especially important for Mittelstand organizations to have a corporate strategy since they often occupy niches and are market leaders in their field. Their strategic business model is based on a sustainable positioning of their products and services and the strict delimitation of their competences from the competition (Kahle, 2008). Although the need for a clear vision and strategic perspective is evident for most organizations, the process, and the intensity of developing and implementing a strategy varies from organization to organization.

A Deloitte study from 2008 found that, in 94% of the organizations that belong to the Mittelstand, the owner is heavily involved in strategy; in just 50% of the organization, an external partner is consulted for the creation and implementation of the strategy (Kahle, 2008). The fact that many owners of Mittelstand Organizations are involved in the daily business of the organization as well as in the strategy process as well as the lower level of external consulting brings advantages and disadvantages to the corporate strategy and the emerging implications for the corporate sales strategy.

Another challenge that German Mittelstand companies are facing when implementing strategies is that there are often only family members in the top management that built the organization and have made all crucial business decisions by themselves (Venohr, Fear and Witt, 2016). Due to the high quality of the products as well as the high level of service and limited production resources there has been no need for decentralized strategies since the world was demanding German Mittelstand products and the German management was in

the position to tell the local subsidiaries what to do and expected that their orders were executed (Venohr, Fear and Witt, 2016). With this history many German companies still have a challenge with giving decision and strategic power away. Due to the changing market conditions, the need for local decision power has become more important, and a competition-oriented strategy is often needed in order to grow in international markets. These strategies can hardly be developed centrally since they need local knowledge about the market and the competition.

If sales strategy is developed centrally and lacks the local knowledge about the markets, the local salesforce will have challenges to implement and execute it properly which leads to demotivation and worse business results (Terho et al., 2015).

2.13 The German HORECA supply industry

Since there is no official definition for the HORECA supply industry in Germany, the following definition is used in this thesis. The HORECA supply industry consists of all organizations that deliver capital goods, food and drinks, consumables, or any other products that hotels, restaurants or caterers need for their operations. Close industries that are delivered as well from these organizations are bakeries, butcheries, supermarkets, gas stations, airline catering institutions, cruise ships, hospitals, elderly home facilities and any other place where people can consume food that is delivered from a professional organization.

In 2018, 1,048 organizations participated in the INTERNORGA, the main trade show for the HORECA industry in Germany (AUMA, 2019). There are four main groups. First, food and beverage organizations deliver food (e.g. meat, fish, vegetables, baked goods) or drinks (e.g. beer, wine and soft drinks) in raw or processed form. Second, restaurant and hotel equipment organizations provide restaurants and hotels with equipment and supplies, including coffee machines, dispensing systems, furniture, hotel room equipment, cleaning materials and cutlery. Third, kitchen appliance organizations provide kitchen equipment to the abovementioned organizations, including ovens, deep fat fryers, refrigerators, accessories, combi steamers, smokers, and stoves. Finally, point-of-sale and hotel software solution organizations provide the abovementioned organizations with software and hardware to optimize digital processes, such as reservation software, order management tools and hotel booking software.

2.14 Complexity and volatility and its influence on the HORECA supply industry

Employees are generally well prepared to deal with unpredictable changes and challenges in the working environment (Mierke and Amern, 2019). The physical stress reaction helps to concentrate and is not harmful per se if tension is followed by relaxation. However, constant stress affects health, well-being, memory, the ability to concentrate and the quality of decisions (Mierke and Amern, 2019). To manage these unpredictable changes and protect employees in a world that becomes increasingly complex, global strategies with local individualization (Bauernhansl, Schatz and Jäger, 2014) can be a tool to take countermeasures against this trend. A word that has been used frequently in the last years to describe this situation was the acronym VUCA. VUCA stands for volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity and was cited first in the US-Army War College documents in 1987 (Johansen, 2012). While almost every organization and almost every individual had a VUCA phase in their lives, the big difference to the situation in 2020 and 2021 is that the entire world experienced VUCA at the same time (Yoder-Wise, 2021). The four characteristics of VUCA were explained from Bennet and Lemoine (2014) in the Harvard Business Review:

- Volatility: The environment around us is becoming even faster. What has previously been experienced as stable and permanent can change at a rapid pace
- Uncertainty: Under the given circumstances, decisions always have unpredictable consequences
- Complexity: Due to the increasing globalization and the penetration of various, previously unknown influencing factors, problems are becoming increasingly complex and less manageable
- Ambiguity: The ambiguity of the signals that our environment sends is increasing. Decisions must be made even though there is no longer a secure basis for them

Especially in the HORECA supply industry which is one of the industries that was hit extremely hard by Covid (Vogt, 2020), the VUCA characteristics cause a lot of uncertainty and tension. Many restaurants and hotels had to suffer significant financial losses during the lockdowns where the restaurants had to be closed and

were not able to reopen their venues due to a critical shortage of staff that changed their jobs during the Covid-19 crisis and did not want to start working in the hospitality sector again (Neu, 2021). This led to a shortage in investments of this customer group which resulted in an overall loss of turnover of the 21 biggest German HORECA supply organizations in 2020 compared to 2019 of 17.1% and 800 million Euro (Brodkorb-Kettenbach, 2021). Other strong influencing factors for the industry within the last years were terror attacks, the higher customer demand of sustainable dining and hotel experiences as well as the climatic change (that reduced for example snow time in skiing resorts).

Another big customer segment of organizations that belong to the HORECA supply industry, corporate food service supplier, have reduced their investments in new corporate kitchen and canteens since it is very uncertain when and how many people are going to return to the office and therefore have a need for corporate coffee machines or corporate kitchen equipment. The revenue of the 5 biggest corporate food service suppliers decreased in 2020 compared to 2019 with 40% and 600 million Euro (Dierig, 2021).

To protect the employee's mental health and to avoid longer sickness periods of the employees caused by this constant stress and negativity and to keep their motivation high, the training of the employees' resilience becomes an essential element for organizations (Heller and Gallenmüller, 2017). Especially in the sales function this resilience is important. When a bad economic situation leads to deadline pressure, a pressure to perform and a decrease of the demand from the customers (Steinhardt, 2020).

Sharma, Rangarajan and Paesbrugge (2020) discovered in their research about the increase of resilience in a salesforce that flexibility in the sales process, the creation of an adaptive salesforce and the adaptiveness in the technology that is used can significantly increase salesperson resilience and improve the results of a salesforce in very volatile and challenging times. They suggest that '*the key aspect of a resilient salesforce is flexibility, such that the salesforce can shift efforts and resources where they are needed*' (Sharma, Rangarajan and Paesbrugge, 2020, p. 238). This flexibility in the sales process and the adaptiveness in technology are also important aspects of customized sales strategies which shows that customized sales strategies can help to higher the resilience in a salesforce in volatile times and therefore have also a positive effect on the health and motivation

of the salesforce (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010; Terho *et al.*, 2015; Rodriguez, Peterson and Krishnan, 2018; .

2.15 Summary and expansion of the literature with this research

This chapter summarizes findings from the literature review. It provides an overview of different aspects and outcomes in the development and implementation of sales strategies. Descriptions of various academic concepts and models are presented and synthesized as a basis for the present research.

Many researchers have developed sales strategy models and have shown how important sales strategy development and sales strategy implementation are for the success and the continues development of an organization (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010; Terho *et al.*, 2015; Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019; Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri, 2019; Gavin, Harrison and Candace, 2020; Malshe *et al.*, 2021). New technologies, changing market circumstances as well as a change in the behaviour of the customers have not changed the conceptual framework of a sales strategy (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010). What has changed are the individual tools and how the needed steps (e.g. customer prioritization /customer interaction / sales channels) have to be developed and executed.

Additionally, literature has shown that, the more a salesperson is involved in the strategy development process, the more they support and buy into the sales strategy and the more likely the sales strategy will be successful (Strahle, Spiro and Acito, 1996; Judson *et al.*, 2006; Ulaga and Kohli, 2018).

Driven by multiple advantages of proper strategy development many studies are focusing at the moment on the influence on artificial intelligence on strategy development (Kitanaka, Kwiatek and Panagopoulos, 2021), the use of social selling (Terho, Giovannetti and Cardinali, 2022) or how the value creation process of salespeople can be implemented in a sales strategy (Alnakhli, Inyang and Itani, 2021).

However, the investigations of the influence of sales strategy development and implementation do very often not focus just on B2B markets as recommended by Terho *et al.*, (2015) and even rarer on a single industry as requested by Inyang and Jaramillo (2020) and Malshe *et al.* (2021). Furthermore, Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019) asked for a closer investigation of the role of individual distribution channels and customized sales strategies for international

markets and its influence on business decisions and business success that has not been in the strong focus of researchers in the past.

To expand the current literature and to contribute to the needs of practice, it is also important to examine the effects on customization on sales strategy performance (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2020) and to evaluate how it is possible to overcome the resistance to central strategies among subsidiaries (Schill, 2013).

This research should also contribute to the call of Pullins et al (2017) who stated that there is a big gap between theory and practice when implementing business strategies and that concepts and frameworks are needed to practically support the implementation process. The conditions found in the literature and the answers from the interviews will lead to a model that supports the decision-making process and states the requirements for companies that want to implement a customized sales strategy approach. The main criteria named in the literature were:

- Global Sales strategy / High level of globalization (Birkinshaw, Morrison and Hlland, 1995)
- Cooperation between Sales and Marketing (Malshe and Sohi, 2009)
- KPI measurement systems (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019)
- Functioning CRM system (Rodriguez, Peterson and Krishnan, 2018)
- Sales forecasting system (Saraswathi *et al.*, 2021)
- Transformational Leadership (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010; Huckermann, 2021)
- Individual determinants of a salesperson (Terho *et al.*, 2015)
- Local decision power (Bennet and Lemoine, 2014)

Understanding these concepts, how they work together, and their limitations helps in the subsequent evaluation of organizational and situational factors that are important for determining how customized sales strategies can make a significant difference in the sales performance and business success of Mittelstand organizations of the German HORECA supply industry.

Based on the literature review this study seeks to contribute to deepening knowledge about customized sales strategies in the field of B2B organizations. It will also seek deeper knowledge about individual factors in a sales strategy on sales strategy performance in a single industry and deliver a framework of needed

requirements for a successful strategic implementation on subsidiary level to overcome resistance to central strategic thoughts among subsidiaries.

This was achieved by using the findings of the mentioned models from Panagopoulos and Avlontis (2010), Terho et al. (2015), Inyang and Jaramillo (2020) as a basis and further developing them with the knowledge of the research participants. The goal was to evaluate the influence of customized sales strategies in the German HORECA supply industry on business success and to further contribute to the knowledge of the field of sales strategy in B2B organizations. To expand the literature further, the participants of the current study were asked about their experiences with sales strategies and customized sales strategies in their organizations and what hindered or accelerated successful strategies. With this information the author developed a framework with the needed requirements to successfully implement this approach in the mentioned organizations.

The review of the literature informed the following concluding remarks which consists of the main concepts/topics to be covered in the interviews.

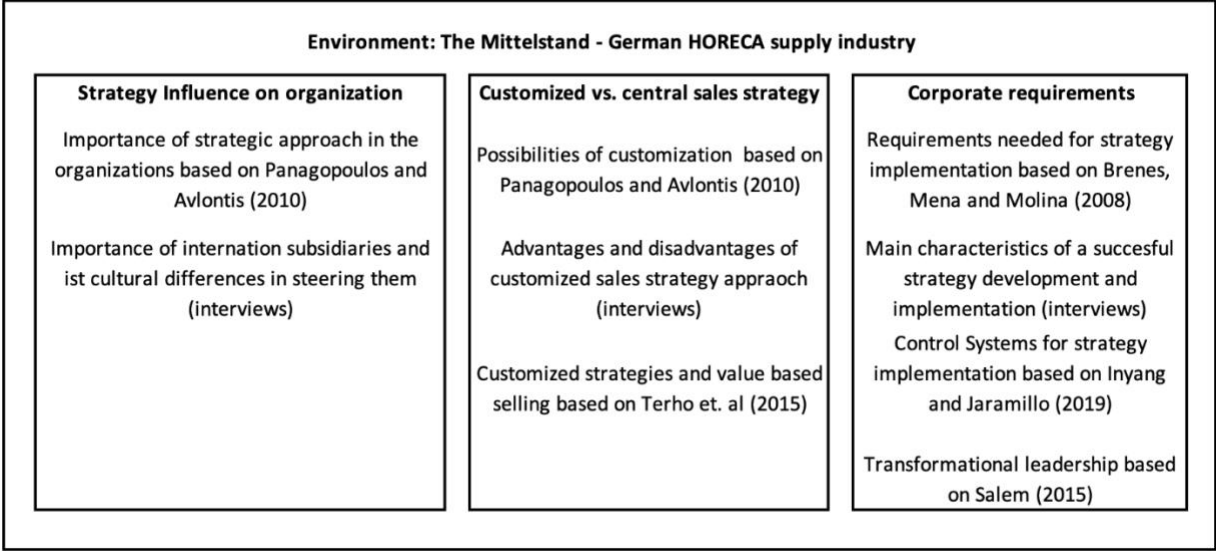


Figure 7. Concluding remarks (Source: Authors own, 2022)

Chapter 3: Research Design

3.1 Introduction

Making philosophical assumptions to decide how to undertake a qualitative study as well as setting the views, paradigms, and the set of beliefs of the researcher to the research project is one of the core pillars of the research designs, when writing a qualitative study (Creswell, 2007). The research design is a principal element in the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) research that helps to position the thesis within a framework chosen by the researcher.

This chapter highlights several factors that were considered in the development of the research design and methodology used in this thesis. It reviews and explains the philosophical stance, methods and methodological approach used to achieve the research goals. The core of this chapter consists of the design and framework for the in-depth interviews with various CEOs, CSOs and sales managers from Mittelstand organizations. Several stages were needed to establish an agenda, develop appropriate questions, and find a balance between obtaining valuable knowledge about the participating organizations and their strategies without asking participants for information that they were not permitted to share. The following sections also highlight measures taken to ensure the participants' data protection and anonymity and explain the interpretation of the collected data, since they may be subjective and influenced by many factors. Lastly, this chapter sheds light on the underlying research paradigm, which clarifies the author's role in this thesis.

3.2. Research paradigm

A research paradigm is *'the set of common beliefs and agreements shared between scientists about how problems should be understood and addressed'* (Kuhn, 1962, p. 43). Flick (2012, p. 15) suggests that a research paradigm refers to *'a set of beliefs concerning the nature of the reality investigated, is the underlying definition of the nature of knowledge and provides justification for the methodology used'*.

Philosophical factors affect the overall research design and determine the outcomes of the research process (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). Research paradigms can be characterized according to how scientists respond to

three basic types of questions: ontological, epistemological, methodological (Guba, 1990).

3.2.1 Ontology

Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p. 22) stated, '*Ontology is concerned with the nature of the social world and what can be known about it*'. Whether a researcher is a realist, or a nominalist depends on whether they believe that there is a single reality (realist) or different realities constructed by different people (nominalist); this influences how the research questions are answered, and the research aim is achieved.

The researcher approached the current research from a nominalist perspective. This is because the reasons ascribed to the success of a customized sales strategy by a manager can be influenced by various individual factors, such as personal experience, organizational guidelines, or personal beliefs. Personal definitions of 'quality,' 'success' or 'sustainability,' which are needed to determine a sales strategy's influence on a division of an organization, may vary from person to person without being right or wrong.

3.2.2 Epistemology

According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p. 23), '*Epistemology is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it can be acquired*'. A key question is whether the knowledge that will help fulfil the research aim consists of objective data (positivist) or subjective data (interpretivist), which pertains to the opinions and views of participants.

The researcher approached this research with an interpretivist view because the knowledge needed to achieve the research aim was subjective. It comprises the personal beliefs and experiences of and complex relationships between various executive managers and sales managers. Perceptions about the importance of a customized sales strategy for each business unit differ from manager to manager and depend on their opinions, views, beliefs, and attitudes. Indeed, two sales managers who work at the same organization and follow the same strategy may have different opinions about how it influences their daily work. Their views may depend on several factors, such as how they worked in the past, the manager's personal situation or the overall economic situation in the region.

3.2.3 Axiology

To answer the axiology of this work, the researcher must prove if he can measure the answers that he gets from the participants of this research value free, or value bound (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). In this thesis, the answers are value-bound, not value-free. For example, if a sales manager tells the researcher that 'the tasks related to the corporate sales strategy were OK,' their answer can be interpreted in various way depending on their vocal delivery and gestures. It is especially important to consider axiology to prevent the research from being biased.

3.3 Research Philosophy

The research philosophy encompasses assumptions about the way in which the author views the world (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). The researcher followed two different approaches to identify the research philosophy for the thesis. First, he asked himself where he does not position this thesis and was thus able to exclude positivism, which is more appropriate for mathematical research; realism, which is useful for generating and testing theories; and pragmatism, which works with a variation of different philosophies and fits if he would like to do research about car accidents for example (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). From the three remaining theories (constructivism, interpretivism and phenomenology), the author decided to position the current research in constructivism for the following reasons:

1. *Factors such as culture and the environment must be considered.* To achieve the research aim, the author had to determine whether executive managers could speak candidly about their opinions during the interviews or had too much respect for their employer to provide details on the success of and time invested in their organization's strategy. This helped to establish whether an investment of time in the strategy development was worth the outcome, as measured by business success. Additionally, the author had to consider whether the participants' answers were influenced by ongoing events such as the Covid-19 pandemic or good business of external factors (e.g., realised projects that were not expected and had nothing to do with the strategy of the organization).

2. Interviews are needed to construct an understanding of reality (Ponterotto, 2005).

When examining the usefulness of a customized sales strategy for sustainable business success, it is crucial to understand why a manager thinks the way that they do and give them a chance to ask clarifying questions if there is uncertainty about the interview questions. The researcher must understand and therefore must have the chance to ask questions, for example how the participant defines 'success' or the meaning of a reply such as 'it was good'.

3. The data collected during the interviews help the researcher understand reality.

When executing the interviews and speaking with different participants, the researcher wanted to get a clear picture of the meaning and knowledge of the executive managers and the salespeople. Asking the questions and discussing the influence of customized sales strategies on business success and salesperson performance helped him to understand the reality in the case and the framework where the author made the research.

4. The author must capture the lives of participants to effectively understand meaning.

When investigating the influence of a customized sales strategy on sales managers' day-to-day work, the researcher had to understand the participants' attitudes and current situations to evaluate their answers. For example, a sales manager might dislike the new strategy because they have to work longer hours due to the new documentation of tasks; even if the resulting outcomes are beneficial to the organization, the additional work might create friction in the manager's family life. Thus, it is not the new strategy that makes the manager unhappy but his personal time management. This phenomenon was highlighted by Gloger (2007), who researched the relationship between job satisfaction and compatibility with work-life balance and family time. Thus, to successfully follow and execute a new strategy, supervisors must address individual factors that are not under their direct control to identify solutions for each employee.

5. The interest is constructed reality of involved persons

One of the interests of the author was to understand the perceived reality of the participants and how this reality was constructed. The goal was not to prove the executive managers or the salespeople if they were right or not but to discover

how their thought process was formed and how their definition of the reality has shaped. This was particularly important since the researcher wanted to find out the differences in the perception of a sales strategy of the executive management level as well as on the sales force level.

3.4 Methodological approach

The research approach used in this study was inductive, as the collection of data through interviews with different executive managers and salespersons helped uncover patterns, which allowed the author to develop a theory about the role of a customized sales strategy in achieving sustainable business success (Jane, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Personal interviews and interaction for the collection of qualitative data helped to build a rapport with the executive managers to get detailed information and high qualitative information (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). Seeking depth in a few cases helped the author to identify the importance of a customized sales strategy but also to find potential risks that come when strategy is used as the main tool for future corporate decisions. These three points helped do develop a theory as a result based on the observation of empirical data (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009).

3.5 Quantitative vs. qualitative research

Quantitative research is appropriate for research questions of incidence and measurement that aim to answer 'how many' or 'how much' to test theoretical predictions with precise measures of variables (Tharenou, Donohue and Cooper, 2007). By contrast, qualitative research provides details and sensibility to context which will help to understand the meaning and to build theoretical explanations from participant understandings (Tharenou, Donohue and Cooper, 2007). In addition, qualitative research allows the researcher to ask participants whether an answer was not correctly understood. Since this research approach tries to answer 'how' and 'what' questions and aims to understand participants' actions through data based on meanings and expressed through words (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009), it was chosen for this study.

3.6 Summary of the philosophical spectrum of this work

Given the abovementioned indicators, this research can be situated within a specific philosophical spectrum. This work uses a constructivist, inductive and qualitative research approach. It is designed to answer 'how' and 'what' questions to understand the meaning behind participants' actions and meet the research objectives. The author's ontology is nominalist, with an interpretivist epistemology and a value-bound axiology.

3.7 Research strategy

To identify the two most suitable strategies for a detailed comparison for this research, the author compared most common research strategies in qualitative research: ethnography, narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory, and the case study approach.

3.7.1 Finding the right research strategy

First, the research questions were revisited and assessed in terms of how they could be answered. In other words, the author identified which methods were best suited to the research aims. He determined that the most effective method was to directly interact with participants. By linking the study's philosophical position with the research questions and research goals, the author understood that he needed to develop an in-depth understanding of their answers and the factors that shaped their way of thinking. In addition, participants needed the opportunity to speak up if they did not understand or wanted to clarify the researcher's interview questions. Based on these considerations, grounded theory was excluded as a research strategy, since the research aim was not to create a theoretical model that fully covered the research topic. Phenomenological research could also be excluded since the research aim concerned the importance of a sales and marketing strategy for individual divisions at Mittelstand organizations, not the commonality of a lived experience. Second, the author asked himself which methodology was best suited to his current situation. As a father of two children and a full-time international sales director, he had to plan his research according to a busy schedule. Therefore, he needed flexibility. This meant that ethnography was excluded, since the researcher would not be able to involve himself in the lives of participants over a prolonged period. Another argument that excluded the ethnographic approach was that during the Covid pandemic a long term and close

contact with participants would have been risky in terms of an infection. Additionally, being too close with the participants for a longer period of time might have led to a bias.

Given the research aim and his personal limitations, he concluded that the most appropriate strategies for this study were the narrative and case study approaches.

3.7.2 Narrative approach and in-depth interviews

The narrative approach and the in-depth interview strategy

The qualitative research interview is used to gather in-depth information that allows the researcher to interpret the meaning of a described phenomenon (Kvale, 1983). In-depth interviews are one of the main methods of data collection in qualitative research and are crucial for grasping the perspectives of multiple research participants (Jane, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). Webb and Webb described in-depth interviews as '*a conversation with purpose*' (1932, p. 130). The length and depth of the interview can help researchers understand a phenomenon, the occurred circumstances and planned and actual outcomes to implement this data in a valid bigger picture. In this study, interviews with executive managers were conducted to learn about their knowledge and experiences with customized sales strategies.

In-depth interviews are '*a qualitative research technique that involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program, or situation*' (Boyce, 2006, p. 3). The goal of in-depth interviews is to achieve both breadth and depth of coverage across key issues (Jane, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In this study, participants had the opportunity to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies, and the interviewer was able to ask about or uncover aspects that were crucial to the study. Additionally, participants could share their feelings, thoughts and other circumstances that may have influenced the success or failure of an implemented customized sales strategy (see Section 4.2). All interviews were conducted via telephone or online using videoconferencing tools such as Skype or Microsoft Teams.

Characteristics of in-depth interviews

The characteristics of in-depth interviews have been intensively researched by scholars such as Kvale (1983), Ritchie and Lewis (2003), Qu and Dumay Boyce (2006 and 2011) and Guion, Diehl and McDonald (2011).

1. *Interview preparation*

Potential participants that were able to help the author to answer the research questions were identified and informed about the data that was needed from them. The participants were asked if they wanted to participate in the study, an interview date was set up and equipment for recording the interview was bought.

2. *Instrumentation*

Before the interviews, the researcher developed an interview protocol, which contains rules and guidance to ensure that all interviews are conducted in a way that enables them to be compared (Boyce, 2006). The interview protocol covered the interview questions, the way how the questions can be answered and other information, such as the duration foreseen for the interviews, the interview setting (online or offline) and the researcher's behaviour (active or passive).

3. *Combination of structure and flexibility*

Another major advantage of in-depth interviews is that they provide the researcher with the structure needed to ensure that all topics are covered while allowing them to respond to relevant issues that are spontaneously raised by participants (Jane, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

Advantages of in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews provide researchers with much more detailed information like most other data collection methods (Boyce, 2006). Thus, participants' answers were not limited by answer options, as in surveys, or space constraints, as in open-ended survey questions. Instead, the researcher can ask follow-up questions if they did not understand a respondent's answer or believe that their body language or tonality may indicate a different interpretation of the answer (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). If the researcher can create a rapport with the interviewee, they are likely to obtain valuable insights about the topic of interest that may not be expressed in a larger group or on a survey (Guion, Diehl and McDonald, 2011).

1. *The right number of participants to answer the research questions*

To explore the importance of a sales and marketing strategy for business success, the researcher spoke with 10 CEOs and division leaders from Mittelstand German organizations and 10 sales managers to understand the influence of the sales strategy on their daily work. By contrast, researching a single organization and interviewing a single CEO (as in a case study) would not have yielded enough data to answer the research questions. Studying a small number of cases, such as four to 10 as Eisenhardt (1989) suggested, would not have allowed the author to establish reliability. Although the goal was not to generalize the results over an entire industry, the researcher aimed to determine whether there were any links between organizations with and without successful strategies and whether there was an influence on the business success of these organizations. This would have been difficult to assess using a case study, since *'case study research is not sampling research. We don't study primarily to understand other cases. Our first obligation is to understand this one case'* (Stake, 1995, p. 4).

2. *Lower risk of bias*

The researcher did not involve himself with the study participants for longer than was necessary, as this could have biased the findings. He collected data on how the sales strategy shaped each organization but did not want to be influenced by other topics, such as products, corporate culture, or different management styles. The risk of biased answers was reduced by speaking to several people at the same organization and conducted one or two interview sessions with each person rather than engaging in a long-term case study (Qu and Dumay, 2011).

3. *Access to a personal network*

Due to his professional experience, the researcher has many connections at many Mittelstand organizations who were willing to participate in a one-to two-hour interview. His network did not allow him to examine the operations of these organizations for a longer period to find results related to the success of their strategy.

4. *Compatibility with the researcher's personal situation*

Due to his job as a sales director, the researcher must travel extensively

and thus be very flexible. His current work does not allow him to involve himself in a case for an extended period; it was more feasible to arrange interviews with participants in two- to three-hour blocks. To be successful over a longer period, the researcher believes that a healthy work-life balance is also key to success. While significant work for the in-depth interviews (e.g. preparation and evaluation of the data) could be accomplished from home in the evenings, case studies are less flexible; access to the right participants can be difficult to secure, and research obligations may be difficult to balance with personal obligations

Disadvantages of in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews require considerable preparation and depend on participants' willingness to speak to the researcher for a significant amount of time. In addition, there is a risk that the answers will be biased since interviewees want to present their ideas or views in a positive light (Boyce, 2006). Bias, its influence on the research and potential solutions are discussed in Sections 4.11 and 7.6.1. There is also the risk that the researcher will exert an unconscious influence on the respondents to obtain answers that align with their own mindset and strengthen the thesis. Often, data gathered in-depth interviews are also not generalizable since the studies involve small sample sizes and do not use random sampling methods (Boyce, 2006). Thus, it is crucial to extract the right insights from the collected data for the results to be valid and unbiased rather than pick and choose information that supports the author's own mindset (idem).

3.8 Sample size

There are many debates about the appropriate sample size for qualitative research. Patton (1990, p. 184) stated that '*there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources.*' Leavy (2014, p. 115) argued that the '*deeper the topic of investigation, the smaller the sample size*'.

The answer can vary from project to project depending on criteria such as the study's timeline or budget and the homogeneity of the target group. Many books, articles and journals suggest a sample size of five to 50 interviews (Dworkin, 2012). According to Charmaz (2011), studies with small sample sizes

are legitimate when research categories are saturated and an increase in sample size provides no additional theoretical insights. To identify the right sample size for a study, factors such as *'the quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of useful information obtained from each participant, the use of shadowed data, and the qualitative method and study designed used'* must be considered (Morse, 2000, p. 1). The sample size for this study is 20 in-depth interviews. Therefore, it falls within the range of 20 to 25 in-depth interviews suggested by Saunders and Townsend (2016). In addition to theoretical guidelines, practical considerations also helped to determine the sample size.

Since the industry and the organizational size of the research was given, the questionnaire design was open but focused on clear strategic questions and the organization's strategic direction when interacting with their subsidiaries. After conducting 10 interviews, saturation is achieved (Charmaz, 2011). The same phenomenon was observed during the interviews with sales managers. Since the industry is relatively small, sales managers at many organizations know each other and often think and work in similar ways. After conducting interviews with eight sales managers, the researcher noticed recurring patterns and opinions and participants' references to other organizations within the industry. Often, their views of other organizations often matched the descriptions of other participants who worked for these organizations. Despite a relatively small sample size, this enabled the researcher to cross-check the participants' responses and use them to develop answers to the research questions. Additionally, the quality of the participants and their answers were higher than expected and gave the researcher enough data to address the research questions.

3.9 Data collection

At the beginning of the data collection phase, the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework was used to develop and refine the interview protocol. It included four steps: (1) ensuring that the interview questions were aligned with the research questions, (2) designing an inquiry-based conversation, (3) receiving feedback on the interview protocol and (4) piloting the interview protocol (Castillo-Montoya, 2016). The IRP framework strengthens the reliability of interviews and interview protocols in qualitative research and contribute to the collection of high-quality data (Castillo-Montoya, 2016).

3.9.1 Pilot study

In this research, the pilot study used similar methods and procedures as the main study. The aim was to collect data to justify the latter's methodology and facilitate its preparation. The purpose of the pilot study was not to test the effectiveness of the process, but to test whether the process is feasible (Jairath, Hogerney and Parsons, 2000).

To ensure a smooth interview process and to prevent planning mistakes, the pilot study was conducted before the beginning of the interview stage. Two executive managers and two sales managers who were on a list of potential participants were randomly selected and informed that they would be part of the pilot study to collect initial data and receive feedback about the study's process and feasibility. First, they received an invitation, all preparatory documents and information about study's goal. Then, they were asked to assess the materials according to three main criteria: whether they understood the topic and interview the process, whether they saw any conflicts of interest with their gatekeepers (i.e. supervisors or departments that had to approve their participation in the study) or organization and whether they had any interest in participating in the study. The initial feedback was very good; recommendations for minor adjustments were discussed with the supervisory team and adjusted accordingly.

The second step of the pilot study was to conduct the interviews and gather information from participants to help answer the research questions. The researcher's goal was to evaluate whether the questions were precise enough to obtain valuable data and broad enough to allow participants to speak about their experiences and opinions. Additionally, it was important to ask participants about their feelings and level of comfort with the type and content of the questions and to determine whether their gatekeepers approved of their participation in the study. Overall, the feedback was positive; the participants were able to understand and answer the questions, saw the research as valuable to their organization and wanted to be informed about the outcome of the research. The main points of improvement that they suggested were to send respondents an agenda with more detailed information on the topic, research aim and research questions to allow them to better prepare and to re-formulate some questions to avoid misunderstandings. These points were checked and implemented in the interview process.

Finally, all participants confirmed the relevance of the researched topic for their organizations and the industry. While the executive managers argued that customized sales strategies would be crucial in a faster and more volatile global environment, the sales managers highlighted the conflict between global strategic initiatives and the resistance of local subsidiaries to these initiatives as an important issue in their daily work.

3.9.2 Main study

The answers and reflections from the pilot study became the foundation for the structure of the main study. To answer the research questions, the concluding remarks became the basis for the development of the interview questions. The interviews were conducted between June and August 2021. The research consisted of 20 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 10 executive managers and 10 sales managers from 12 B2B organizations in the German HORECA supply industry with an annual turnover of between 50 and 1,000 million Euro. To identify appropriate organizations and managers for the study, a scorecard was created with the following criteria:

Organization size: Organization size was measured by annual turnover, which was specified at 50 million to 1 billion Euro.

Products: The goal was to secure the participation of a range of organizations that sell capital goods (e.g. coffee machines, combi steamers, dishwashers, and refrigerators). Organizations that made other products that were not as touchable and comparable (e.g. software, tableware, and hygienic articles) were rated lower.

Access to the organization: This rating was affected by the researcher's network or third-level network (i.e. the contacts of contacts in the researcher's network). The higher the likelihood of an organization's employee participating in the study, the higher their score.

Strategic fit: Strategic fit was defined as the degree to which the organization's resources and capabilities are aligned with this research. Considerations included the existence of international subsidiaries, a clear hierarchy with executive management and an active B2B sales force.

At the beginning of the recruitment stage, potential respondents were contacted via social media (e.g. LinkedIn) or directly via e-mail with an invitation

to participate in the research. The invitation contained the rationale for the study, the research questions, and an offer to send the candidate the doctoral thesis as soon as it is completed. If their reaction was positive, further details (when needed from the participant) were clarified and the official documents for the participation of the research were provided to them. Then, each participant received a file with personal information about the researcher, the theoretical background of the thesis and the research questions via e-mail. Three dates were proposed for an individual interview session, and participants had to choose one.

The first research question ('How can a customized sales strategy influence the results of different subsidiaries in medium-sized German B2B organizations?') was answered using results from the CEO and CSO interviews, while the third research question ('How will a customized sales strategy influence the behaviour of a salesperson?') was answered through the interviews with sales managers. The second research question ('What are the characteristics of organizations that suit for customized sales strategies?') was answered with results from both sets of interviews. The triangulation of responses from the CEOs, CSOs and sales managers led the development of a model that can help Mittelstand B2B organizations to evaluate the corporate conditions needed to implement a customized sales strategy and to determine its usefulness.

The participants were selected from leading German B2B organizations in the HORECA supply industry that are part of the Mittelstand and have international subsidiaries. The selection was conducted in such a way that all regions in Germany, different types of B2B products and an equal number of executive managers and sales managers were represented in the study. In terms of job titles, the participants were vice presidents of sales, managing directors, CEOs, CSOs, regional sales managers and regional key account managers. To ensure anonymity, all participants were assigned generic labels (see table 2).

Organization	Label	Position
Organization A	Exec 1	Vice president of Key Account Management
Organization B	Exec 2	Area sales manager
Organization B	Exec 3	Managing director

Organization C	Exec 4	Vice president of sales for Europe, the Middle East and Africa
Organization D	Exec 5	Vice president of international sales
Organization E	Exec 6	Managing director
Organization E	Salesperson 1	Regional sales manager
Organization G	Salesperson 2	Regional sales manager
Organization G	Exec 7	Vice president of international sales
Organization I	Exec 8	Managing director
Organization J	Exec 9	Chief sales officer
Organization K	Exec 10	Head of sales
Organization L	Salesperson 3	Regional sales manager
Organization M	Salesperson 4	Sales manager
Organization N	Salesperson 5	Key account manager
Organization O	Salesperson 6	Regional sales manager
Organization P	Salesperson 7	Key account manager
Organization Q	Salesperson 8	Sales manager
Organization R	Salesperson 9	Area sales manager
Organization S	Salesperson 10	Regional sales manager

Table 2. Overview of research participants (Source: Author's own, 2021)

To accurately convey the content of the interviews, direct quotations from the participants are presented in this thesis. To minimize bias during the data collection stage, interviews with German participants were held in German and subsequently translated into English by the researcher.

3.9.3 Post-study interviews

Sharing the findings from a qualitative study with participants is perceived as an important methodological procedure which can help to enhance study credibility (Holloway and Wheeler, 2003). From a methodological perspective, the goal is to minimize misinterpretations of participants' answers. From an ethical standpoint, the goal is to empower participants through their active involvement in the

research (Holloway and Wheeler, 2003). Therefore, the author decided after discussing with the research team to plan and execute post study interviews.

During this process, all or some of the participants obtain access to the findings to either confirm or deny that they reflect their experiences and feelings, thus supporting or challenging the researcher's understanding (Morse et al., 2002). The goal of sharing the developed model was to increase its trustworthiness, as measured by the criteria of transferability, confirmability, dependability, and credibility (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller and Neumann, 2011). To verify the validity of the findings and the developed model, post-study interviews were scheduled with five executive managers and two sales managers. They were not presented with detailed interview answers, only the final conceptual framework for practice. The participants were randomly selected and contacted via e-mail with an invitation to participate in an additional 30-minute post-study interview. The latter focused on two questions to assess the validity and logic of the framework. First, the participants were asked to interpret the framework from their own perspective. Second, the researcher explained the framework and gathered feedback about its usefulness and applicability. The outcome of the post-study interviews is detailed in Section 7.2.

3.10 Semi-structured, in-depth interviews

The interviews were semi-structured and designed to stimulate discussion through open-ended questions, allowing the respondents to answer in greater detail when needed. However, they followed a pre-designed script to minimize unnecessary conversation and to be mindful of participants' time. While discussion was desirable, the researcher was aware of each question's purpose and contribution to the research aim. The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes each; the average duration was approximately 45 minutes. This aligned with Robson's (2007) recommended limits to maximize respondents' concentration.

Two sets of questions were asked during the interviews: one for CEOs and CSOs (see Table 3) and the other for sales managers (see Table 4). Tables 3 and 4 summarize the links between the interview discussion points and primary research questions.

Interview questions for CEOs and CSOs			
No.	Interview question	Topics covered	Link to research question
1	General questions	Personal questions, annual turnover, sales model, profitability, shareholder, mission, business model	2
2	Does your organization have a sales strategy in place? What does it look like?	Defined customer segmentation, defined customer prioritization, defined sales models, defined sales channels	1
3	Is there a chance for subsidiaries to develop their own sales strategy or is the global strategy implemented?	Can they make their own segmentation and prioritization and sales models and sales channels? Can they give their employees or themselves individual KPIs (e.g. consultants at events)?	1
4	What are the advantages of Interview Question 2 compared to the other option?	Is it better to have a global strategy or a customized sales strategy?	1
5	How much time is each subsidiary investing to implement or execute its sales strategy?	Do they officially report their strategy and progress? Is there a strategy development period, or is it an ongoing process?	1, 3
6	How large is the percentage of revenue done out of the German market?	How much revenue do the subsidiaries bring in? How important are the subsidiaries or the overall turnover?	2

7	How do you steer your subsidiaries? Are there individual KPIs?	Are there regular business review meetings? Are the subsidiaries managed with special KPIs? What are the soft facts when managing the subsidiaries?	2
8	What are the main characteristics of a successful subsidiary?	Mix of German and local attitudes, deep local market knowledge, will to 'challenge' global strategic initiatives	2
9	Is there a correlation between subsidiary success and local strategy development and implementation?		1
10	Do you have control systems in place to track strategy execution or salesperson performance?	Quarterly meetings, strategic one pagers, measured KPIs	1, 2, 3

Table 3. Interview questions for executive managers (Source: Author's own, 2021)

Interview questions for sales managers			
No.	Interview question	Topics covered	Link to research question
1.	General questions	Position, responsibility, organization affiliation	3
2	How satisfied are you at the moment with your job, and what are the reasons?	Freedom with the work tasks, sales monitoring, target pressure	3
3	How would you define the sales process at your organization?	Freedom with business planning, strict KPIs to	2, 3

		follow, strict sales process to follow	
4	Do you know your organization's corporate strategy or sales strategy?	Defined customer segmentation, defined customer prioritization, defined sales models, defined sales channels	2, 3
5	Have you ever worked on a sales strategy?	Were you part of a strategy team? Were you asked for input?	2
6	What would you change in the current sales strategy? Does the sales strategy support you in your daily job?	Defined customer segmentation, defined customer prioritization, defined sales models, defined sales channels	3
7	What would your work or results look like if you had more freedom in decision making with regard to the sales strategy?	Freedom to prioritize customers, choose the best sales channels, business models	3
8	How are your sales activities measured, and has that had an influence on how you execute the sales strategy?	KPIs for special customers, special activities, special sales models	2, 3
9	Has the sales strategy had a positive influence on your sales results, or does it limit you?		1

Table 4. Interview questions for sales managers (Source: Author's own, 2021)

3.11 Researcher's reflexivity

Reflexivity generally refers to the examination of one's own beliefs, practices and judgments during the research process and how these may influence the research. Malterud (2001, p. 483–484) described this effect as follows: '*A researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of*

investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions'.

This section describes the contextual intersecting relationships between the participants and the researcher to increase the credibility of the findings and deepen the understanding of the authors work (Dodgson, 2019)

The researcher has occupied different roles within the hotel, restaurant, and catering supply industry globally since 2012. Schön (1983) argued that reflection is a vital element of all effective practitioners; practitioners can reflect on their experience and learn from their experience. This research therefore benefits from the researcher's reflection on the global HORECA supply industry. In this study, the researcher's background was viewed as an opportunity to build rapport and discuss the participants' answers. Since the researcher has worked in the HORECA supply industry for more than 10 years, he knew some of the participants, their organizations and their organization's characteristics before the interviews began. Additionally, the researcher has worked at different organizations with different views on business strategy and the need for sales strategy development and implementation; therefore, he had some personal experience with the topic before embarking on the interview process.

These considerations and the process of reflexivity from Palaganas, (2017) were discussed with the supervisory team to ensure that the data collection methods were consistent and that the participants' answers were not influenced by the researcher's knowledge. To get the information as meant by the participants the researcher's background was addressed with participants at the beginning of each interview, and each participant was asked to interrupt the researcher when their interpretation did not match that of the participant. Therefore, the respondents' answers were repeated when their meaning was not completely clear to the researcher. To further optimize the quality of the data for its interpretation and the development of the conceptual model for practice and to enhance the study's credibility (Holloway and Wheeler, 2003), post-study interviews with five executive managers and two sales managers who participated in the research were conducted.

3.12 Ethical considerations

According to research ethics this research was highly significant due to the sensitive topic of personal thoughts about the participants employers as well as

the strategies that were the basis for the future of the organizations business decisions. Babbie (2012) identified ethical challenges in social research that were considered within this thesis: confidentiality and anonymity, voluntary participation, no deception, institutional review boards, preventing harm to the participants and professional codes of ethics of the University of Worcester. Therefore, the entire process of developing this thesis was covered by the University's Research Ethics Sub-Committee which granted this research full ethical approval.

3.12.1 Data collection and analysis methods

Ethical considerations for the study were based on the University of Worcester's guidelines. Namely, the research had to be justified, informed consent had to be obtained from participants, their participation had to be voluntary, confidentiality had to be ensured and risks to participants arising from the study had to be mitigated (University of Worcester, 2019). In addition to the university's regulations, national laws (e.g. the Common Law Duty of Confidence, the General Data Protection Regulation, and the Concordat of Research Integrity) were considered.

Since the main method of data collection was in-depth interviews, it was important for participation to be voluntary and that none of the participants were put under pressure due to the interview questions. To minimize this risk, the interviews were held in an environment that felt safe for the participants and the author ensured that the participants backgrounds and their current situations were suitable for the interview. Each participant's rhetorical skills, background and experience were considered, and the interviews thus required individual preparation (Turner III, 2010). The questions were designed with the author's supervisors to avoid leading the participants in a certain direction and to ensure that the data were gathered and analysed as objectively as possible. However, it was also important to ensure that the participants could freely share their thoughts about the effectiveness of corporate sales strategies and that their answers could not be traced back to them.

Each participant received an information sheet (see Appendix 1) and participated in a pre-interview meeting in which they had the opportunity to ask questions and obtain initial information about the topic. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it was also crucial to consider the university's safety regulations and

minimize the risk of possible infection for both the participants and the researcher. Thus, no interviews were conducted in person, only online or on the telephone.

3.12.2 Data protection, data storage and disposal plans

The confidentiality and security of the data were ensured by keeping them on a laptop that was only used for the research work. This laptop was locked with a highly secure password, and all data were saved with an additional password. All other devices needed for the thesis were also password-protected. The processed data were transferred to the university's OneDrive, which features two-way authentication.

Primary data related to the research were collected through in-depth interviews. The latter were not recorded on an audio recorder without a Wi-Fi connection. As soon as the interviews were completed, they were stored on the secure laptop and a hard disk drive that was kept in a private office with a low risk of being lost or stolen. The data will be kept for the minimum period of two years as requested from the University of Worcester or until the successful award of the degree, after which they will be deleted.

3.12.3 Ethical conclusions

Ethical policies and procedures were essential to ensure a safe and fair data collection process and to help the university safeguard their reputation. The most challenging part was to find the right balance between respecting all rules and guidelines and ensuring the quality of the data. A valuable compromise was found through strong collaboration with the author's supervisors, the literature review and the materials provided by the university and frequent exchanges with other students.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter summarizes and analyses the data collected from interviews with sales managers and executives at Mittelstand organizations. It describes the data transcription methods, data analysis methods and data analysis process. Finally, it presents the findings from the data analysis.

4.2. Transcription approach

The literature distinguishes between naturalized transcription and denaturalized transcription when transferring data collected from interviews to another medium (Davidson, 2009). Naturalized transcription is less filtered and includes details from the conversations, such as laughter, mumbling and body language (Davidson, 2009), denaturalized transcription accurately describes the conversations but limits the descriptions of involuntary sounds or accents (Bocholz, 2000).

Denaturalized transcription was chosen for the current research because it is easier to read (Mero-Jaffe, 2011), yields clean data without any socio-cultural characteristics and information and may even improve the results of the study (Oliver, Serovich and Mason, 2005). If information that was potentially important for the interview (e.g. sarcastic laughter or waving off) was encountered, a follow-up question was asked to better understand it and added to the interview transcript. This aligned with Forbat and Henderson (2005) and Oliver, Serovich and Mason's (2005) statement that most researchers use a combination of naturalized and denaturalized transcription. Combining approaches allows researchers to find the right balance between ease of reading and the reproduction of useful and meaningful reactions to the interview questions.

4.3 Qualitative data analysis method

Of the 'Big 6' data analysis methods (i.e. qualitative content analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, thematic analysis, grounded theory and interpretive phenomenological analysis), thematic analysis was selected for this study. It is useful '*for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning, or 'themes' within qualitative data*' (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297). Thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible and accessible approach to analysing qualitative data and

can be used to summarize key features of large data sets, highlight similarities and differences across the data and enable social and psychological interpretations of the data (Clarke and Braun, 2017). In addition, it is *'unbounded by theoretical commitments' and 'emphasises an organic approach to coding and theme development, with the active role of the researcher in these processes'* (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 298).

The goal of the analysis is to identify interesting or important themes or patterns in the participants' answers to answer the research questions. This process reflects different opinions and views; in this study, the participants had diverse backgrounds, worked at different organizations with individual cultures and had a range of experiences. The interview questions were not simply used as the themes, as this would suggest that *'the data have been summarised and organised, rather than analysed'* (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017, p. 3352).

To ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the data analysis process, it was to be crucial to be aware of the method's disadvantages, such as the decision on which data should be used and the limited interpretative power beyond mere description if it is not executed within a designed theoretical framework that anchors the analytic expectations that are made (Clarke and Braun, 2017).

4.3.1 Data analysis process

The following guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87) were followed to avoid the pitfalls of thematic analysis and maximize its benefits:

1. *Familiarizing oneself with the data*

The researcher obtained a good understanding of the data because of the interview process. Each interview was manually transcribed to deepen the author's understanding of the data and related to the literature. The more interviews were conducted, the clearer frequently occurring patterns became, which facilitated the generation of initial codes.

2. *Generating initial codes*

After the transcription, the researcher began the systematic analysis of the data. A code is *'a label for a feature of the data that is potentially relevant to the research question'* (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 61). The researcher assigned relevant data to each code. Specific parts of the data were summarized as codes because they were mentioned by several

participants, singled out as important or reminded the researcher of an important aspect that he had read in an interview or matched / did not match with the theories summarized in the concluding remarks. For example, most of the executive managers said that supportive systems are crucial to ensure flexibility and reduce global risks associated with national decisions that were not sufficiently considered in an international context. All relevant data were coded using the label 'framework'.

3. *Identifying, generating, and defining themes*

A theme '*captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set*' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Codes were grouped into potential themes, and all data that were relevant to each potential theme were gathered (Clarke and Braun, 2017). This process resulted in eight codes, which were analysed and further condensed into three final themes: business influence of customized sales strategies, advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies and organizational requirements.

4. *Producing the report*

Finally, the themes were related to the codes in a logical and meaningful way (Braun and Clarke, 2012) and with the existing literature and models.

Theme	Description	Codes	Keywords
Business influence of customized sales strategies	Business influence means the influence to reach individual KPIs that were set at the beginning of a year, a strategic period or another pre-defined timeframe. It covers financial goals such as turnover, CAGR or EBIT but also organizational goals such as sustainability, share prices or market share.	Organizational Success Financial influence Influence on employees KPI measurement Strategy customization	Turnover; Timeframe; Customer satisfaction Cost savings; local turnover generation Motivation; employee branding; employee turnover Yearly targets; financial targets; sales targets Cultural differences; global and local measurement
Advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies	Condition of greater or lower chances of success when customized sales strategies are used compared to central developed and implemented sales strategies	Growth drivers Risk mitigation	Motivation; Flexibility; Individual business solutions; Local decision with global influence; Inconsistency; Workload;
Organizational requirements	Either corporate requirements or requirements in the subsidiary	Local requirements Global requirements	Capable Salesforce; support Capable Salesforce Skilled local management Board support, sales strategy, KPI orientation

Table 5. Data analysis results (Source: Author's own, 2021)

4.4 Data analysis results

In this section, the interview results are analysed and summarized according to the defined themes and codes. The qualitative data gathered from the interviews is presented through illustrative quotes to demonstrate the range of participants who contributed to the study (Anderson, 2010). The structure of this section is based on Pratt's (2017) remarks that researchers should find a balance between theory and data and avoid presenting qualitative research as quantitative research. However, Sandelowski, Voils and Knafl (2009, p. 210) stated that quantizing in qualitative research can be done to '*allow analysts to discern and to show regularities or peculiarities in qualitative data they might not otherwise see [. . .] or to determine that a pattern or idiosyncrasy they thought was there is not*'

This section shows and interprets the data rather than just showing the data and being careful when quantifying qualitative data. The key findings are reported under each of the main three themes and their sub-codes with appropriate direct quotations (Burnard, 2004).

4.4.1 Theme 1: Business influence of customized sales strategies

1. Organizational success and its meaning for the researched organizations

To explore the influence of a customized sales strategy and business success and salesperson performance and business success, it is important to understand the meaning of the term 'business success' for the participating organizations. In addition, it is important to understand how business success can be achieved and the main drivers of business success for these organizations.

Definition

The Oxford dictionary (2021) defines success as '*the fact that you have achieved something that you want and have been trying to do or get*' and the Cambridge dictionary states that success is '*the achieving of the results wanted or hoped for*'. Referring to these definitions, success seems to necessitate an original aim or goal. Although there is no universal understanding of 'business success', many researchers have attempted to define it. Brockner, Higgins and Low (2004) defined business success as the extent to which an organization fulfils the needs of its stakeholders. Meanwhile, Watson, Hogarth-Scott and Wilson (1998) viewed business success as the result of a complex set of interrelated factors that increase the probability of success, which can be

measured through factors such as profitability, revenue growth or employee growth (Grønholdt and Martensen, 2009). While success is often measured with financial KPIs, more and more business owners define success broader. Hope Wilson, a senior marketing specialist at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP defined business success in her interview with Kiely Kuligowski (2020) as *'running a profitable firm that conducts business with honesty and integrity, makes meaningful contributions to the communities it serves and nurtures high-quality, balanced lives for its employees'*.

The participants in this study described business success as the achievement of various clearly defined goals within a pre-determined timeframe set by the organization. These goals are often measured with KPIs that are reviewed on a regular basis. The main KPIs were turnover, earnings before interest and tax (EBIT), compound annual growth rate (CAGR) and cost revenue ratio. Less frequently mentioned success factors included employee satisfaction, sustainability goals, cash flow KPIs and outstanding dues, market share, turnover per unit, product mix and customer satisfaction. Table 6 summarizes how the executive-level participants understood business success at their organizations. The goals are given in order from the most common answers to the least mentioned answers.

Organizational goals	Description
Turnover, Net sales value (NSV)	The amount of income taken by an organization in a certain period
Earnings before interest and taxes (EBIT)	An organization's profit, minus interest, and taxes
EBIT compound annual growth rate (CAGR)	Average growth rate of EBIT over a defined period
Cost-turnover ratio	The ratio of generated turnover and sales and marketing-related costs
Employee satisfaction	Results of individual employee surveys (in percent) on their satisfaction and identification with the employer

Sustainability goals	The amount of CO2 emissions that can be prevented within a defined period
Cashflow	The difference between income and expenditure as a measure of organizational liquidity
Outstanding dues	The number (i.e. value) of invoices that are due but unpaid
Market share	The portion of a market controlled by a particular organization or product
Turnover per unit	Total turnover divided by all units sold
Product mix	The ratio of sales of different products
Customer satisfaction	Results of individual customer surveys (in percent) on their satisfaction with the product and the sales process

Table 6. Measurements of business success by participants (Source: Author’s own, 2021)

KPI Timeframe

The timeframe for the individual KPIs was remarkably similar among all respondents and connected to the organizations’ success. While all participating organizations set their KPIs for one calendar year, 80% reviewed them monthly and held large quarterly review meetings. The five largest organizations in terms of turnover had three- to five-year goals for the entire strategic period, which ‘*should give more strategic guidance for long-term decisions than an operational goal that is reviewed regularly*’ (Exec 5).

The answers about the strategic timeframe from the participants align with the existing literature, which argues that goals set by managers can foster a belief in personal efficacy within a team and in turn lead them to persist in accomplishing their objectives (Conger and Kanungo, 1988). However, if the timeframe for a goal is too short (which makes the goal unachievable) or its progress is not monitored, this could lead to negative outcomes such as demotivation, disappointment, poor results (Sibin, Matthews and Dagher, 2007). Only one participating organization had few goals and did not regularly monitor them; it was also the organization with the lowest EBIT margin and in which the participant had the lowest expectations for the future.

2. Influence of customized sales strategies on financial KPIs

To identify the most important abilities and influencing factors for achieving satisfactory results at the subsidiary level, participating executive managers were asked about success factors that differentiate successful organizations from their less successful competitors. A clear majority of participants defined a well-developed and consistent global sales strategy as the most important factor in business success but Exec. 1,3,4,6,8 and 10 added that local amendments are needed to get the best results in local markets. Referring to the interviews, customized sales strategies can have a positive influence on financial business results, and it is important to identify and execute local initiatives to stay on top of the competition and the market needs (Exec 1,3,5 and 9).

The interviews revealed many examples that show a positive influence of customized sales strategies on the turnover results of the organizations. These results link back to the organizational goals described from the participants and the results from Hollensen (2020) that described the importance of 'glocal' sales and marketing strategies. For example, Exec. 4 stated that 'at the moment where we gave our American subsidiary the freedom to choose their own sales channels, the turnover increased by 32%'. This comment is recognizing a clear improvement in sales following an increased degree of customization. A similar point is made by Exec. 1 who spoke about a local initiative that was blocked for several years since it was not in line with the sales strategy:

'As soon as we allowed our Austrian subsidiary to develop their own refurbishment market our revenue and margin increased by 150%. This became then a global initiative and stands for 9% of our global turnover today.'

A third respondent reply illustrates a similar point: Exec 3 mentioned that the subsidiary in the Nordics was allowed to launch a new sales approach which meant that they could give away free units for 6 months to test it at customer venues which has been prohibited by the global management in the past since it has not worked out in other countries.

'It was one of the biggest success stories of the last 10 years since the market was mature enough for this approach and because the salespeople had the right skills to execute this promotion.'

What is interesting about this response is that it captures both the logic that might argue against a customized approach but also shows how, due to specific local conditions such as salespeople skills, a customized approach did in fact work very well. Even though that it is often possible to save significantly on costs through local initiatives, headquarters often prefer solutions that are organized and purchased centrally. This centric approach as mentioned from Gestetner (1974) can lead to a disadvantage regarding the business goals and the success of a strategy implementation (Shaw, 2005) since higher costs can lead to lower profits and EBIT margins. This contradiction can lead to a tension between strategic financial objectives and strategic control or branding objectives.

This tension was explained from Goold and Quinn, (1990) and is nicely illustrated by Salesperson 5 who spoke about a local initiative that was also not aligned with the global strategy.

'Even though we were able to become more efficient and save a lot of money, the idea had to be executed without anybody knowing in the beginning, since the Germans did not like this idea'.

Through outsourcing the initial customer contact to an external service provider and not letting the skilled salespeople do the acquisition of new customers, the costs per lead shrank by 85% and the salesforce was able to be more productive due to less costs which had a very positive influence on margin and EBIT. This episode illustrates how subsidiaries can become more cost effective and efficient when using local sourcing options instead of global defined suppliers. A conceptually similar point was made from Executive 10 who explained how important it is to have tailor made market concepts are.

'Our biggest mistake when entering the Chinese market was, that we thought we know it all and can tell our subsidiary what to do. This cost us three years of development and 8 million Euro in costs because our

concepts did not work, and the Chinese employees were afraid to tell us that we were wrong. If I could do it again, I would let them define the sales strategy from day one’.

This example shows again very good the weaknesses of centralised and ethnocentric strategic approaches as mentioned from Hollensen (2020). Hollensen explained how important it is to use the existing knowledge of the headquarter but then to transfer this global know-how with local knowledge and best practice initiatives from the countries to become the best results. Focussing only on headquarter knowledge will very often lead to higher costs and lower efficiency (Hollensen, 2020).

The interviews showed that many subsidiaries still have disadvantages in their markets due to a very strong central management from the headquarters and could save costs through local solutions. Salesperson 2 confirmed that and said: *‘We are not able to decide how to represent ourselves at trade shows or at local events since there are very strict regulations from our headquarters. These constraints are very expensive and do not bring the value that we would like to have’*. This provides further evidence that a higher level of customization can lead to a better cost-turnover ratio and attract more local customers.

However, alongside all these positive influences on sales strategy customization there were also examples where central strategies are important. Executive 5 mentioned how important a global corporate communication and corporate design is.

‘To protect our brand and how it is perceived on the whole world, we have to look for standards and standardisation. It is not possible that everybody does whatever he wants just for getting another dollar turnover. This does also include how our sales managers speak to our customers and how our units are sold’.

He later added that *‘we as a company do not want that every shop and every re-seller can sell our products. We want to have a certain standard, and this is sometimes hard to understand for our subsidiaries’*. Salesperson 3 mentioned a similar case where his organization did not sign a 2 million euro deal because

the customer wanted to buy from a special re-seller and the organization did not support this approach since this re-seller had a different route to market approach than his organization. This indicates again that some organizations, where the central and local condition as described in the model for practice are not met, have not had success with local strategic decisions and therefore may be reluctant to move away from a centralised strategy.

The overall results and answers from the participants showed that customized sales strategies can have a positive influence on financial KPIs since local managers know the local cost structures better (Exec 2), knew the exact needs of their customers (Salesperson 4,6 and 9) and can use the local business conducts to their favour (Exec 6, 7 and 9). On the other hand, local initiatives need to be within certain strategic guardrails in order not to harm the brand which would have negative long-term effects on financial KPIs as turnover, margin, and EBIT (Exec2, 3 and 7).

Using Pratt’s (2009) tips on writing up and reviewing qualitative research, Table 7 below contains further comments regarding the business influence of customized sales strategies on financial KPIs.

Theme 1: Business influence of customized sales strategies	
Code	Illustrative quote
Financial influence	<p><i>‘At the moment where we gave our American subsidiary the freedom to choose their own sales channels, the turnover increased by 32%. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘Our biggest profit driver today started as a local idea that was developed in a subsidiary and then rolled out globally. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘The lack of local strategic freedom cost us much money over the last years. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘With global initiatives we were not able to excite our customers and therefore had a disadvantage against the local competition. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘As soon as we were allowed to choose local suppliers for our sales material, we became more efficient and saved a lot of money. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘The combination of global thoughts mixed with local details helped us to get the breakthrough that the management was expecting for years. ‘</i></p>

	<i>'I am convinced that on subsidiary level, customized sales strategies outperform almost every global developed sales strategy regarding turnover and market share '</i>
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Table 7. Participants quotes financial influence (Source: Author's own, 2022)

3. Influence of customized sales strategies on employee motivation, employee turnover and salesperson performance

The interviews suggest that a strict and clear sales strategy is motivating salespeople in their first year by giving them guidance and orientation with their first tasks. However, Salesperson 2 said that *'the longer [one works] for the organization and the better [one gets] to know the process, the more monotonous the work'* if a sales strategy cannot be adjusted. Similarly, Salesperson 1 said, *'The more experienced I got, the harder it was to follow the strict process and it hindered me to build my network and to realize my ambitious plans. It was not motivating'*. What is interesting is that a clear trend emerged with almost all participants liking the idea of a central approach and clear rules in the beginning but the more skilled they got, the more they thought that it hindered them from doing good work. This felt very demotivating for them.

In addition, Salesperson 8 added that their main motivation was to determine how to perform their daily work at their organization: *'Every sales manager can define their own sales strategy. There is freedom in the process, and if we can reach our goals, we are allowed to do whatever it takes to generate turnover. We are allowed to choose our own sales models, target the customers we think are the right customers and approach them however we want'*. This phenomenon was also described from Fenner (2021), who stated that financial compensation and awards often motivate just a short amount of time and do not significantly improve performance. However, if employees are motivated over a longer amount of time, the reasons are mainly that they see a purpose in what they are doing and that they have the change to actively influence the business with their ideas.

Among the sales managers who stated that their results significantly improved when they had the opportunity to individualize the strategy, freedom was a key component of job satisfaction. Tighter rules and a strict strategy or sales process would lead to a high risk for them losing their identification with the organization and their will to remain at the organization in adverse times.

Salesperson 7 added that most of his colleagues did not leave the organization because of financial interest or any career advantages, but just because of the wish to make more individual decisions and not to follow a process that is always predefined. This view was also expressed by Exec 1, 5 and 8 who said that employees today are not only motivated by a nice car, a lot of money and flexible working hours but also want to be able to make an influence. *'They want to build, define and drive the business with their own ideas and plans. This is what makes them stay in our company (Exec 1).'*

In times where it is very hard to find skilled and motivated staff which is a big problem of the German Mittelstand as described in the literature review, these comments show how important it is not to demotivate the salesforce with rules that are too tight. Research shows that after the big Covid lockdowns employees are more likely to leave the organization than in the previous years if they are not happy with the working conditions since they had a lot of time to reflect and to realise what they really want (Christian, 2021)

Sales managers from organizations with lower turnover and EBIT margins said that they would be demotivated by having to constantly think about new ways to perform their work. Salesperson 6, who is part of a five-person sales team, said, *'There is no motivation to have a customized strategy, and our old and experienced managers see no need for that as long as the figures are good, even though if there is no real progress'*.

A similar observation can be made when the influence of strong financial KPI measurement is compared with the sales force's motivation. If a salesperson feels conviction about their work, transparent KPIs are not an issue; they merely reflect the status quo. Many sales managers from the organizations with the highest growth rates see KPI measurement as *'a motivating competition that is needed in sales if the goals are realistic'* (Salesperson 1). *'We win as a team, and we lose as a team, and the KPIs are the court we are playing on'*, said Salesperson 4, who believed that their organization would not be as successful without measuring KPIs.

The importance of a good KPI measurement system for employee motivation and satisfaction was also mentioned by executive managers. For example, Exec 3 said, *'This is a very important tool for us and allows us to lead and steer our sales and service managers. But it also gives them the opportunity*

to optimize themselves and make their daily work as efficient and productive as possible to have a bit of operational freedom'. However, if a sales strategy cannot be customized, 'it is very hard to implement KPI measurement tools, since we are then comparing pears with apples' (Exec 1). For many sales managers, it was challenging to identify with their KPIs since they believed that they could achieve better results with a customized sales strategy. Thus, they felt that the current strategy hindered these efforts and that the KPIs were not representative for the success of their organization.

In summary it can be said that a customized sales strategy can have a positive influence on job satisfaction and employee motivation of skilled and motivated sales managers. These managers are motivated when they can develop and implement new strategies and see positive results. They even do not mind having strong KPI measurements that are checking their progress and their level of success, and it can have a positive influence on the turnover rate of an organization. If the chance of individualisation and customization is lacking, skilled sales managers can feel demotivated and might not see a promising long-term career in these companies.

Sales managers of smaller companies or sales managers that are lacking skills prefer strict strategies where they do not have to adjust their behaviours and can do the same every single day. In this case a very high level of customization can be seen as too demanding which demotivates this kind of employees.

Theme 1: Business influence of customized sales strategies	
Code	Illustrative quote
Influence on employee motivation and salesperson performance	<p><i>'The very strict sales strategy helped in the beginning as a guidance but started to be very demotivating after the first year. '</i></p> <p><i>'It was very motivating to see that I was able to develop and execute my own ideas to generate business. '</i></p> <p><i>'I expect that the organization trusts me in what I am doing within my field of responsibility, and this trust motivates me to go the extra mile'</i></p> <p><i>'The main reason why many of my colleagues left the company was that they were not able to implement their own ideas. '</i></p>

	<p><i>‘There was also training needed since I was lacking the needed strategic skills when I started. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘Employees want to build, define and drive the business with their own ideas and plans. This is what makes them stay in our company. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘From the moment I started to believe in the ideas of my team and implemented them, the motivation of the team and the quality of our strategy became much better. ‘</i></p>
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Table 8. Participants quotes employee influence (Source: Author’s own, 2022)

4. Salesperson KPI measurement and its influence on customized sales strategies and salesperson performance

To measure the effects of customized sales strategies on salesperson performance, this thesis relies on Churchill et al. (1985) and Terho et al.’s (2015) understandings of ‘salesperson performance’ (see Section 2.5). According to Churchill et al. (1985), a salesperson contributes to the goals of the organization. Meanwhile, Terho et al. (2015) identified the individual-level determinants (i.e. customer orientation, value-based selling and the combination of both factors) and the organizational-level determinants of salesperson performance (i.e. sales strategy performance and sales strategy dimensions).

In this study, the performance of a salesperson and the factors that were named from the participants that influence the level of contribution to the goals of the organization were the capabilities of the salespeople and their motivation to make regular use of their capabilities.

Salesperson capabilities

The evaluation of a salesperson’s quality differs from organization to organization. While the four largest organizations (in terms of annual turnover) had a broad and strict KPI management system for measuring the performance of their sales force, organizations with a lower turnover mainly focused on the revenue of their sales managers. In this context, ‘capabilities’ means the extent to which a salesperson can meet the relevant KPIs. In addition to turnover, KPIs included the following measures:

In addition to the sales and KPIs, executives expect salespeople to be mindful of a second 'soft' level that also contributes to the organization's long-term goals:

The influence of these soft factors and the 'hard' KPIs measured by organizations is not simple. More experienced and long-term employees tend to lack the soft factors of '*constant development and improvement*' (Exec 6), a '*high level of ambition*' (Exec 2) and the ability to accept feedback (Salesperson 1), which are important for reaching organizational-level determinants. On the other hand, these employees often have a wide network within the market (Exec 6), know how to achieve certain KPIs (Exec 3) and have the composure and experience needed to handle challenges (Exec 4). The answers of the participants confirm that these qualities can foster individual-level determinants such as customer orientation and value-based selling (see Sub-section 2.8.1).

Very motivated and driven salespeople are skilled at developing organizational-level determinants of sales strategy performance, effectively allocating limited resources (see Sub-section 2.8.2 and the conceptual framework for practice) and executing the given strategy. However, they experience challenges when attempting to achieve organizational KPIs that they do not understand (Exec 2 and Salesperson 4).

What was interesting is, that all sales managers confirmed that in the beginning, a strict KPI measurement was perceived as very positive at the beginning of their careers, since rapid progress could be achieved, and young sales managers had the opportunity to be seen because of good numbers. In the first year of their careers, a strict sales strategy, no allowance for individualization and strict KPI measurement can be seen as motivating factors for the sales force.

However, the better a salesperson's skills (see Section 2.8), the more they desire individualization and freedom in the sales process. Six out of ten interviewed sales managers said that their results significantly improved as soon as they had more control over how they accomplished their work. In addition, the positive results that stemmed from their own ideas and actions motivated them to think more deeply and creatively about new ideas (Salesperson 5) and improve 'soft skills' sought by their organization. However, all six of these sales managers agreed that certain guardrails should not be contravened in the course of their daily work.

Sales managers employed at organizations with a lower turnover and EBIT CAGR margins stated that they preferred to perform their work as instructed and that they did not want to consider new ways of working that were not yet approved. According to Exec 4, their team preferred a *‘very reactive way of selling with a very good network that was built over the past few years. They are not going to think outside the box since they believe that they are not trained enough to do special jobs. But that is fine for them’*.

Thus, high-quality salespeople need opportunities to customize their sales approach, which will allow them to optimize their results and improve their capabilities but agree with guardrails if they are understood. The lower the salesperson’s quality, the stricter the strategy should be. In the absence of guidance, individualization can lead to sub-optimal results. As defined in the conceptual framework for practice and Section 2.8, a salesperson’s quality is a combination of their KPI orientation and organizational-level and individual-level determinants of salesperson performance.

Theme 1: Business influence of customized sales strategies	
Code	Illustrative quote
Salesperson KPI measurements	<i>‘Target number of visits and contacts made by a salesperson within in a certain period ‘</i> <i>‘High-level organizational results, such as overall turnover ‘</i> <i>‘Number of re-sellers were active in a region ‘</i> <i>‘Number of customers who made active purchases within a period of 24 months ‘</i> <i>‘Number of generated leads ‘</i> <i>‘Number of closed leads ‘</i> <i>‘Size of the future sales funnel ‘</i> <i>‘Product mix, such as sales of units vs. accessories ‘</i> <i>‘Average discount given to customers</i> <i>‘Customer satisfaction</i> <i>‘Completion of ‘special projects’</i> <i>‘Individual development goals ‘</i>

Table 9. Participants quotes KPI measurement (Source: Author’s own, 2022)

5. Practical possibilities for sales strategy customization

The practical possibilities and limitations for customization at the subsidiary level vary from country to country. In the US, it is particularly important to work with different sales channels as in the rest of the world. REP (representative) groups as individual and independent sales and marketing organizations must be

implemented in your sales process (Exec 2). These REP groups are individual resellers that interact with dealers and end customers and act as a link between the industry and dealers. Exec 5 said, *'At the beginning, no one saw the needs for rep groups since they were just cost factors, and we thought that we could do business without them. We realized after a very short time that we must change that and adapt to local needs. From this moment, our business became much better'*.

Salesperson 5 explained that, in the Scandinavian countries (i.e. Finland, Denmark and Sweden), people are much more open to digitalization and digital business models than in the rest of the world. Their organization was very resistant to the chance for customers to purchase capital goods via the internet if the customer experience and the chance to return the product was given in case that the customer was not happy. They said, *'It was a hard fight with our management but, in the end, we tried it and it was a big success. We save a lot of costs and can do much better, customized marketing, which helps us increase our sales'*. It was interesting to see that especially in markets with a different culture, the resistance of the global management was very high and the results when the strategy was customized were very good. The participants gave many examples about business situations in the UAE or the UK that confirmed that view.

In addition, Salesperson 6 said that a key success factor for their English subsidiary was a new sales model: *'There was a big need for our products, but the initial investment was very high compared to the long-term return on investment. As soon as we got the 'go' to work with another organization and offer our customers a leasing model, our sales increased significantly'*.

Other aspects mentioned by the participants included special customer events to secure long-term relationships in the US (Exec 2), different pricing for national key accounts due to different service regulations in Russia (Exec 8), all-inclusive packages that encompassed service in Austria (Exec 1) and the possibility of direct sales to key accounts in the Netherlands or Spain (Exec 3).

All participants understood that there is a need for central regulations and that an organization must have certain guardrails to ensure a uniform global appearance but think that a certain level of customization will help the companies to perform better and to keep their employees motivated. Most of the Executives believed that individualization should occur within a well-defined framework, with

clearly delineated limits to individual discretion, and that all major activities must be aligned with the global management. According to Exec 9, *‘there was a big need for our products, but the initial investment was very high compared to the long-term return on investment. As soon as we got the ‘go’ to work with another organization and offer our customers a leasing model, our sales increased significantly’*. Exec 10 added that the *‘the guardrails come from headquarters, and I want to be informed about every special operation that is executed internationally if it is not aligned with our strategy’*. For the participants, it was important to maintain a balance between ongoing discussions about possibilities for improvement, possibilities for individualization and attention to global initiatives. The worst-case scenario was if a subsidiary did not follow strategic rules and failed to mention this. *‘That destroys trust and is not acceptable’*, said Exec 3.

The main strategic pillars where executives were not willed to negotiate with the local subsidiaries about individualization were the KPIs that measured the success, the sales models, and the sales channels of the local organizations.

Interesting was, that strict KPI management is the basis for all executive reporting and must be uniform across all territories, without space for individualization. Although KPIs must be defined by headquarters, there was agreement on the idea that they should be interpreted differently according to each country’s situation and maturity.

Theme 1: Business influence of customized sales strategies	
Code	Illustrative quote
Practical strategy customization	<p><i>‘Arabic culture strongly demands the possibility of price negotiation. If the buyer is not able to lower the price by at least 10%, he will not purchase the product. Therefore, it was essential to have this price increase of our list price, which allowed our partners to play the game.’</i></p> <p><i>There was a big need for our products, but the initial investment was very high compared to the long-term return on investment. As soon as we got the ‘go’ to work with another organization and offer our customers a leasing model, our sales increased significantly.’</i></p> <p><i>‘With our global discount strategy, we would have not sold one single product in Russia.’</i></p>

	<p><i>'We definitely need global rules, otherwise we would have a strategic Wild West situation.'</i></p> <p><i>'We understand the need for global regulations and understand that it would not work without them.'</i></p> <p><i>'We need global KPIs but have to have the freedom to interpret them slightly different in the individual markets.'</i></p>
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Table 10. Participants quotes practical customization (Source: Author's own, 2022)

4.4.2 Theme 2: Advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies

The second of the three themes of the data analysis process concerned the advantages and disadvantages when using customized sales strategies. Next to the influence on the sales results of an organization and the motivation of a salesperson to reach good results, this thesis tried to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies compared to centrally developed and implemented sales strategies. This means what are the conditions of greater or lower chances of success (in this case the reach of the individual defined KPIs within a defined timeframe) when the two strategic approaches are compared with each other. Participants reported about their positive and negative experiences with customized sales strategies as well as the challenges and risks but also chances when using centralized sales strategies that are valid for every subsidiary in the whole world. The answers of the participants can mainly be divided into two groups: growth drivers which means possibilities to reach or achieve the set goals as well as risk preventers which are initiatives that should help to prevent any bad circumstances to happen which might have a negative influence on the desired results. All executive-level participants highlighted the importance of a customized sales approach for each country and said that it was not possible to treat all countries in the same way. Many executives stated that it was crucial that their local management will not stick for 100% to the corporate strategy and *'go their own ways, which can be enriching. They must be creative and challenge the management and headquarters'* (Exec 9). Exec 3 said, *'we don't want to have soldiers. For us, it is very important to have international directors who listen to the global strategy but then individualize in their own countries'*.

1. Growth Drivers of customized and centralized sales strategies

One advantage that was mentioned by almost all the participants is the need for flexibility as one of the main growth drivers for the success of an organization. For example, *'The individual needs of the countries have changed so fast within the last years, that there is just not a one size fits all strategy for every market'* explained Exec 1 and Salesperson 4 reported that. It was interesting to see that, *especially during the very volatile time with Covid-19, as a critical success factor for companies as well as the shortage of raw materials made decentralized decision-making processes very important. Exec 4 mentioned a similar point and said that they were not able to visit any Asian countries for the last two years and due to the time difference a regular exchange was very hard. 'If these subsidiaries would not have been able to make their own strategies and execute them without the headquarters approving everything, we would have lost a lot of speed and momentum (Exec 4)'*. Exec 10 explained that his organization does not try to hire the best people in the market to tell them what to do, rather they expect their local managers to know the market and strategic needs better than the employees in the German headquarter. This response also confirms the findings made before, that smart employees want to make decisions and want to move the organization forward.

More than 90% of participants mentioned another important factor in the success of international subsidiaries: a customized sales strategy based on the global framework. A quotation from Exec 6 summarizes most participants' views on this front:

'A successful subsidiary needs a mix between following the rules and individualization to have the management but also the local team behind you. In the end, you should never be independent since that just works if the results are coming. The most successful countries have a leader that is able to adapt the strategy at a local level'.

This leads to a higher identification of the salesforce with the strategy and a higher will to implement it properly. Salesperson 4 confirmed that *'it is important to get some strategic guidance from the headquarters. This gives orientation and identification with the organization since it is good to know that everybody works*

to go into the same direction'. For sales managers, the strategic framework for the level of individualization was also crucial. All sales managers said that, at the beginning of their career, a rigid and clear strategy is helpful for starting a business and understanding '*what is allowed and what is not allowed*' (Exec 2).

However, most participants specified that a good sales strategy alone is insufficient for business success. Instead, it must be embedded in an appropriate strategic framework that includes a marketing, service, product, and digitalization strategy. This finding aligns with the literature, which states that the sales function has become more complex and that the initiation, development and enhancement of customer relationships require various functions to work together to ensure a positive customer experience and efficient customer relationship management (Ingram, Laforge and Leigh, 2002; Gonzales and Claro, 2019; Annunen *et al.*, 2021). This factor can be a disadvantage of customized sales strategies since these strategies should be aligned with the other corporate functions named above which could lead to a very time consuming and complex task. Executive 2 explained that it is very important to focus on key countries for customized sales strategies and don't start every country at the same time, since this would lead to a very high level of complexity for the whole organization.

Another disadvantage of customized sales strategies regarding the growth of the organization is that most of the subsidiaries are not able to develop their strategies completely by themselves. 'In our industry the strategic knowledge of the local management is often missing, and we have to take care that we support and manage the process' said Exec 6 and Exec 2 said that 'it is not the goal to get a PowerPoint presentation where the local staff invested 1000 hours that is just not good enough'. Many companies installed either external services or internal resources that support the local teams to develop their individual strategies to ensure that the local strategies have a good qualitative basis and have no negative influence on other subsidiaries on a global scale.

Another point that was mentioned by many sales managers was that the customized strategy was often not as ambitious as the executive management wanted it to be. '*Our subsidiaries are often so operative in their way of thinking that they lag the visionary thinking*' explained Exec 5 and Exec 1 saw this also as a disadvantage of customized strategies since '*a strategy should not be influenced too much of the daily challenges but be a plan were the organization*

wants to go.’ However, Salespersons 2, 5, 8 and 9 saw this as big benefits of customized sales strategies since ‘subsidiaries plan strategies more realistic which motivates us since we see a vision that we believe in and can achieve’ (Salesperson 2). A strategy that is too visionary often frightens salespeople since they think that the goals are not achievable.

Next to the explained advantages and disadvantages, customized sales strategies can help executive managers to become more efficient and to spend less time on local strategic initiatives. ‘From the moment I started to let go, I had so much more time to focus on the topics that are really important’ said Exec 10 and Exec 1 added that ‘our goal is to develop joint KPIs, but it should be the task of the subsidiary to evaluate how to get there, as long as they are within a corporate framework’. The task of the management is more an ongoing controlling and challenging process through quarterly business reviews to see if the developed strategies pay off than telling the countries what they should do. Almost all of the participants have quarterly business review meetings with the most important markets to see and challenge the progress. The managers that had subsidiaries that were using their own customized strategies had much more time for these review meetings compared to managers that wanted to develop all sales strategies centrally.

The task of the executive managers was to set the strategic guardrails and the rules in which the subsidiaries were able to operate. For example, Exec 1 said that ‘it is very important to obtain a proper sales mission and vision from headquarters that give the subsidiary guidance on the direction that they have to go’. Meanwhile, Execs 4 and 5, who worked at the largest organizations with the highest EBIT margins, agreed that the basis of their success was their global sales strategy, which was consistent across countries. According to Exec 4, ‘this gives countries a chance to share best practices and the advantage of management being able to compare different countries and decide where to offer support’.

Theme 2: Advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies	
Code	Illustrative quote
Growth drivers	‘A certain level of customization is a big advantage since it gives us the chance to react to market specific needs which can lead to a higher success rate of closing a deal.’

	<p><i>If we have to ask the headquarter for approval it takes too much time and until the we might have already lost the deal. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘A successful subsidiary needs a mix between following the rules and individualization to have the management but also the local team behind you. In the end, you should never be independent since that just works if the results are coming. The most successful countries have a leader that is able to adapt the strategy at a local level.’</i></p> <p><i>‘From the moment I started to let go, I had so much more time to focus on the topics that are really important.’</i></p> <p><i>A disadvantage of our industry is that often the strategic knowledge of the local management is missing, and we must take care that we support and manage the process.’</i></p> <p><i>‘To develop our own strategies can cost us a lot of time and we do not even know if it is good what we are developing. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘Our subsidiaries are often so operative in their way of thinking that they lag the visionary thinking. ‘</i></p>
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Table 11. Participants quotes growth drivers (Source: Author’s own, 2022)

2. Risk mitigation of customized and centralized sales strategies

In addition to improving and meeting pre-defined goals, the second important factor in achieving results and securing business success is sound risk management, which prevents the organization from losing business or margins on their products and helps them weather events that could negatively influence their goals.

The executive-level participants mentioned that wrong local decisions can lead to a mismatch between the local strategy and the global strategy. Exec 3 explained the importance of ensuring clear and globally aligned pricing, which was echoed by many of the participants. *‘If a subsidiary sets price that are not aligned with the global framework, they may result in huge disadvantages since the local pricing will become a pricing that is globally available. The internet and new digital sales models have led to the very transparent and fast communication of prices. To secure our margin, a centralized pricing strategy is very important’.* Exec 4

confirmed that view and said that a global pricing, with recommended sales prices that fit to pre-defined country clusters, is very important, especially since there is so much transparency now. *'Cross border business does help nobody, and we have to ensure that all subsidiaries have an equal position to do their business and not become competition within the own company.'*

Hollensen (2020) also mentioned cross border business (grey marketing) as a challenge of heterogeneous price models and too much local individualisation which leads to an import and sales of products through market distribution channels that the organization has no authorized and which have a high chance to harm the organization on the long term. Next to wrong pricing models, oversupply of individual countries or distributors or the wrong considerations about local taxes and supply situations can lead to such a situation.

It was interesting to see that also the salesforce shared that point and that there were areas where no customization was required. Salesperson 3 confirmed this and did not want to have too much flexibility in the pricing process since they believed it would not be good for the organization. *'We would like our products always to be cheaper'* said Salesperson 1 and Salesperson 7 and 8 admitted that their focus on the margin is not as big as it should be when selling their products and that they believe that a corporate pricing and margin control is very helpful. These answers show that a skilled local management is very important in order that a wrong local decision does not become a global problem for the organization.

Companies lost business and margin in the past due to decisions that were made locally which had an advantage for one but a disadvantage for another country. An example that was named often was cross border business where one country sold products to the neighbour country and weakened the position of the local entity. A global initiative to reduce cross border business was needed and helped to stabilize this challenge

One respondent (Exec 7) recounted an incident that clearly demonstrates the issues that can arise at global level, especially in a connected world, from inappropriate customisation at the local level. Exec 7 indicated that one of their subsidiaries offered a special, non-economic solution to a customer: a customized product with a unique appearance and paint scheme but that was so expensive that production costs were higher than the selling price. They said:

‘That customer was so happy that he shared the product via social media and within a few hours, we had requests from all over the world that we could not fulfil’.

Therefore, it is crucial for every subsidiary to understand how far they can go with local initiatives and be aware of the risks that can occur when they snowball at the global level, endangering the entire organization’s results in the process. Another risk of customization at subsidiary level is the global appearance of the brand. Exec 5 spoke about a very thin line between ‘hitting exactly the local needs of the customer and diluting the global brand perception when speaking with potential clients. ‘Our brand is our biggest asset’ said Exec 6 ‘and we have to be very careful how much freedom we give our local entities to use and customize our brand relevant topics’. However, if salespeople are only allowed to communicate non customized information to their customers, there is often no product-market fit which makes a product very hard to sell as many sales managers confirmed. Salesperson 8 reported about sales arguments like *staff cost savings* and *energy cost control* which are not important in his market but ‘the biggest advantage that everybody can repair the product by themselves since it its very simple’. However, this selling argument does not fit to the wished global brand perception and therefore it should not be mentioned or stated in any official articles.

A helpful tool for mitigating major risks while allowing some leeway for local initiatives are best practice initiatives. A professionally developed and globally approved local initiative has significant potential to increase the subsidiary’s turnover and overall results if it is developed and communicated in a way that minimizes global risk in case it does not work. The main goal of the development process is that, if the initiative is successful, it can be implemented into the global strategy and made accessible to all other subsidiaries as a fully developed and successful tool.

According to Exec 1, one of their organization’s largest profit drivers – the refurbishment and resale of used units – was developed 10 years ago as a local best practice initiative: ‘*It was very risky to start that project globally, so we started in Austria, a small market, to see how it worked*’. As a result, all challenges and open questions were locally resolved. When the project was proven to work and

generate profit, it was rolled out to other countries and became a global strategic initiative. Exec 5 confirmed that this method of testing new business models in single markets is still used today. To complete their portfolio, an international subsidiary was allowed to source a product from a third-party supplier with Original Equipment manufacturing (OEM) branding and sell it directly to their customers. *‘On a global scale, that would not be possible since it is too risky and too complex, but we will look at the learning and results in one year and decide afterwards if the project should be stopped or if it is something that could be rolled out as a global strategic initiative’.*

Theme 2: Advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies	
Code	Illustrative quote
Risk mitigation	<p><i>‘If a subsidiary sets price that are not aligned with the global framework, they may result in huge disadvantages since the local pricing will become a pricing that is globally available. The internet and new digital sales models have led to the very transparent and fast communication of prices. To secure our margin, a centralized pricing strategy is very important.’</i></p> <p><i>‘We would like our products always to be cheaper, but we know that this is not the right approach to have a healthy company.’</i></p> <p><i>‘I think that crucial strategic decisions should not be in the hand of the salesforce. I could and do not want to deal with it. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘We need clear central guidance in order to lose business to decisions that are and advantage for one country but a disadvantage for another country.’</i></p> <p><i>‘Our brand is our biggest asset. There is a high need for a consistent global appearance and a small line how this can be interpreted differently on a local basis.’</i></p>

Table 12. Participants quotes risk mitigation (Source: Author’s own, 2022)

4.4.3 Theme 3: Organizational requirements for customized sales strategies

Theme 3 summarizes the findings about the necessary organizational requirements for customized sales strategies. The results from the interviews are explained in more detail under point 5.2.3 Model for practice.

To identify the characteristics of organizations that are well-suited to customized sales strategies at the subsidiary level and to develop the framework for practice, it is important to understand the current possibilities and limitations of customization at successful organizations and the views of responsible sales managers on the advantages or disadvantages that it brings to their daily tasks. Next to the corporate and local requirements for customized sales strategies that were identified in the literature (see 2.15) participants shared their insights why customized sales strategy approaches have worked in the past or what they thought was missing when it did not work out as planned.

The main reason underlying the lower acceptance of customization regarding sales models and sales channels in the view of the global management was the risk of a subsidiary that lacks a certain level of maturity or skills engaging in a high level of individualization for these strategic pillars, which entails global risks for international sales activities.

Exec 1 stated that *'before a subsidiary is able to customize its strategy locally it needs a clear understanding of its mid- and long-term goals and their own strategic needs and tasks.'* It was interesting to see that this point was mentioned by almost all global managers but only by a few local managers which shows that there was no clear understanding of the different requirements.

Also, the missing tools and the lacking skills of the salesforce were reasons named from the Executive management why they were hesitant to local approaches. Exec 5 made an important summary that many global managers were mentioning. *'In the end, I am responsible for the whole region. If there are local decisions that do not work, I must be aware of the consequences and in the end, I must live with the consequences.'* The maturity of the organizations can be divided in the quality of the local salesforce, the needed systems to support the customized sales strategy approach as well as a skilled local management. It was interesting to see that almost all salespeople and executives agreed on this summary.

Another important aspect of the interviews was to investigate whether special types of businesses have successfully implemented the customization of sales strategies at the subsidiary level. Executive-level participants from the three largest organizations (as measured by EBIT) said that it is crucial to have a very strong management with the strategic capacity to adapt the strategy within defined

guardrails to optimize the subsidiary’s output and the operational capacity to successfully execute it in the market

The second main reason for a customized sales strategy approach that has not worked was a lack of support from the headquarters that was either missing a global sales strategy (Salesperson 4, 7, 9), a proper KPI management (Exec 4, 5, Salesperson 4, 6, 9) or did not have the support from the board to execute the customized sales strategy approach (Salesperson1, 4, 5, 7, 9).

Based on the gathered information a conceptual framework for practice was developed that shows all needed organizational requirements that need to be fulfilled in order to develop and implement customized sales strategies on subsidiary level. This framework as well as the development process can be found in section 6.2.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the higher the quality of the subsidiary, the more freedom and customization it should be given in the strategy development process. The lower the quality of the subsidiary, the greater the need for strict reporting to achieve standardization and efficiency and the fewer the benefits associated with a customized sales strategy. In this context, ‘quality’ refers to established and functioning processes, good leadership skills at the executive level, good strategic knowledge on leadership and operational excellence at the sales force level.

Theme 3: Organizational requirements	
Code	
Local requirements	<p><i>‘Before a subsidiary is able to customize its strategy locally it needs a clear understanding of its mid- and long-term goals and their own strategic needs and tasks. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘I am responsible for the region. If there are local decisions that do not work, I must be aware of the consequences. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘The more local requirements are fulfilled, the easier it is for me to give away decision power. And this is what I want in the end. ‘</i></p>

<p>Global requirements</p>	<p><i>‘In the end it is all about local systems, local management and the local salesforce. Yes, it is that easy. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘The board has to support the customized strategy approach and has to know that there will be mistakes made on the way, which has to be ok if we learn from them. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘Sometimes I have the feeling that our global management does not know where to go. We need clear global goals and KPIs to reach. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘It is crucial to have a consistent global management and a clear strategic direction. ‘</i></p> <p><i>‘There has to be global support for local initiatives. Only in this way we can be successful for the challenges of the future. ‘</i></p>
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Table 13. Participants quotes local and global requirements (Source: Author’s own, 2022)

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

Chapter 4 validates and outlines the analytical process of determining the significance of customized sales strategies for international subsidiaries. This chapter combines the results of the literature review and analysis of the interviews with executives and sales managers. It presents the research results, the answers to the research questions and the model for practice. Finally, it highlights the contribution to both the literature on sales strategy, and practice through the model.

5.1 Research results

To answer the research questions, insights gained from the literature, the in-depth interviews and intensive discussions of the findings with the supervisory team and other students were considered and merged. This section summarizes the results of the interview questions and present the condensed answers on the research questions.

5.1.1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of a customized sales strategy approach compared to a centralized sales strategy approach?

In this study, the participants identified the customization of the sales strategy as one of the most important drivers of sustainable sales and business success as well as for efficient cost management, as measured by annual turnover, EBIT margin, employee satisfaction and other individual goals. Especially in volatile times, customization can help organizations grow their business within global strategic guardrails while allowing individual subsidiaries to country-specific initiatives to support, influence and attract new and existing customers. Customization helps to build sustainable business in emerging markets and to combine the advantages of an international organization with the flexibility of local start-ups. Additionally, it gives the executive management the time to take care about important global challenges. This factor is crucial for Mittelstand organizations since their strategic business model is based on the sustainable positioning of their products and services and the strict delimitation of their competences from the competition.

Customized sales strategies can also support the familiarisation of the employees with the global strategy and with the organization. This comes from the feeling

that the employees can do what they think is right which makes it easier to accept global guardrails and rules. Additionally, it strengthens the feeling of having a positive influence on the business. This feeling can lead to a positive influence on salesperson satisfaction.

However, if the strategic guardrails are not accepted or the subsidiary lacks maturity in the strategy development process, a customized sales strategy can also have a negative influence on the subsidiary and the organization on a global scale. This can lead to many competitive disadvantages, such as dissatisfied customers, inefficient teams, damage to the brand, damaged sales channels and sales prices that are too low to generate profit.

If the corporate and subsidiary requirements are in place, the invested time in the strategy development, implementation and review process are important factors for the results of the strategy process. The participating organizations with a smooth and concrete implementation and review process reported about good results and more advantages than disadvantages with the use of customized sales strategies compared to the centralized strategy approach that was used in the past.

5.1.2 How can customized sales strategies influence the results of different subsidiaries in mid-sized German B2B organizations?

Customized sales strategies can support organizations to reach individual KPIs that were set at the beginning of the year, the strategic period, or another pre-defined timeframe. In this study the main goals of that the participants wanted to reach with their organizations were annual turnover goals, pre-defined EBIT margins, as well as continued growth over a pre-defined period. Customized sales strategies can support and positively influence to achieve these goals through:

- Local strategic initiatives within a global strategic framework that fit to the needs of the local customers and therefore have an advantage against other global competition but also against the smaller local competition
- Cost effective local sales activities that are more economic than global planned sales activities.
- The use of local business conducts to the favour of the organization
- A higher identification and motivation of the employees with their organization and the strategy
- Lower turnover of qualified employees

- An individual and goal oriented KPI measurement

The exact influence depends on many internal and external factors such as the organizational structure, how the strategies were executed in the past as well as the economic circumstances the different subsidiaries are facing in the moment. All participants agreed that the results of a customized sales strategy will outperform results that come from strategies that are developed and implemented centrally

5.1.3 What are the corporate and local requirements to successfully implement a customized sales strategy?

As explained in the literature review (2.15) and in the model for practice (see section 5.2), two dimensions must be examined when defining the requirements of organizations that are well-suited to customized sales strategies. The first dimension consists of corporate requirements, which are KPI orientation, board support and the global sales strategy implemented by headquarters. The second dimension consists of the subsidiary's local requirements that must be available in the given country, which are a capable salesforce, supportive systems, and a skilled local management.

It is also important that the sales and marketing functions, which are the main revenue generators in most organizations, must work together (Malshe and Sohi, 2009). The organization, especially the responsible executive managers, must view the strategy as a long-term investment – not a short-term profit driver, but a sustainable three- to five-year plan. A management team that focuses on short-term rather than long-term success may struggle and request to change the customized strategies if the desired results do not immediately manifest.

5.2 The model for practice

5.2.1 Introduction

This section presents the model for practice and its development. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) defined a model as '*an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous*' (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017, p. xv). Elangovan and Raju (2015) described a model as a framework used in research to outline possible courses of action or, to present ideas or thoughts. Fawcett & Desanto-Madeya (2005) state that a

model provides structure for a phenomenon, direct thinking, observations, and interpretations and further provide direction for actions. If a model is developed in a logical manner, it can provide rigor to the entire research process.

The model of practice presented in this section should aid executive managers regarding the requirements necessary for a successful implementation of a customized sales strategies on subsidiary level. Furthermore, the model contributes to a deeper knowledge of B2B sales strategies and can help Mittelstand organizations in the HORECA supply industry to identify when it may be useful to develop customized sales strategies for international subsidiaries(Terho *et al.*, 2015; Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019; Malshe *et al.*, 2021). Additionally, it should support practical strategy implementation of theoretical research (Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri, 2019).

The model will guide them about their corporate strategy and how much time and effort should be invested in developing and implementing a customized strategy. All the research elements contributed to the model, namely the literature and sales strategy theory, topical research and the author’s personal interests and goals, identity and positionality (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017).

5.2.2 Development of the conceptual model

To logically develop a conceptual model, there is a high need of theoretical knowledge for the foundation of the conceptual model (Elangovan and Raju, 2015). According to Popper (1980), a conceptual model consists of conjectures about an observed phenomenon in the real world, imagination, insights, feelings, or problems.

Holton and Lowe (2007) developed a seven-step general research process, which was used to construct the conceptual model for practice for this thesis. The above-mentioned theoretical foundation for the model was discussed with supervisors and other students within the development process of the model. In addition to the theoretical basis and practical input from participants, ‘*quality parameters for a model evaluation*’ (Elangovan and Raju, 2015, p.16) were used; they are shown in Table 14.

Clarity	Easy to understand and to interpret
Simplicity	Parsimony and understood quickly
Expressiveness	Describes the reality in detail

Minimality	Does not contain redundant concepts
Completeness	Covers all aspects of the application domain
Accurate	Conformity to reality
Abstract	Does not go down in detail but rather remains at a high abstraction level
Consistent	Consistent diagrammatic standards
Un-ambiguous	All sections are clearly linked with each other
Testable	Can be translated into testable hypotheses
Recoupable and reproducible	Easily represented in different media

Table 14. Quality parameters for evaluating a conceptual model (Source: (Elangovan and Raju, 2015, p.16)

In this case the model was developed with theoretical knowledge (Elangovan and Raju, 2015) coming from the literature review and the conceptual model, such as needed board support for strategy implementation (Brenes, Mena and Molina , 2008), local control systems for strategy development and execution (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019), the importance of a corporate sales strategy for local success (Cespedes and Thompson, 2015) and the influence of salesperson and local management involvement in the strategy development process (Ulaga and Kohli, 2018).

Additionally, it builds on the input of the research participants which explained the main characteristics of a successful subsidiary in the German HORECA supply industry, the need of global and local KPIs and the connection between local strategy development and implementation and the success of a local entity. Executives and salespeople shared their experience on why a customized sales strategy approach was successful or why it failed and what they would have done different today to be more successful.

Finally, a recommendation on the sales strategy implementation and review process was added based on knowledge from the literature (Inyang and Jaramillo,

2019) as well as answers from the interviews with the executives and sales managers on how the subsidiaries are steered and how the strategy implementation process is monitored.

5.2.3 Model for practice

One of the contributions of this research and the key output of this thesis is the model which evaluates the characteristics of organizations in the German HORECA supply industry that are well-suited to customized sales strategies and the time that should be invested in the strategy development and implementation process to have a positive influence on the outcomes. The quotations which support the development of the model can be found in Appendix VII.

The proposed conceptual model for practice is shown in Figure 8.

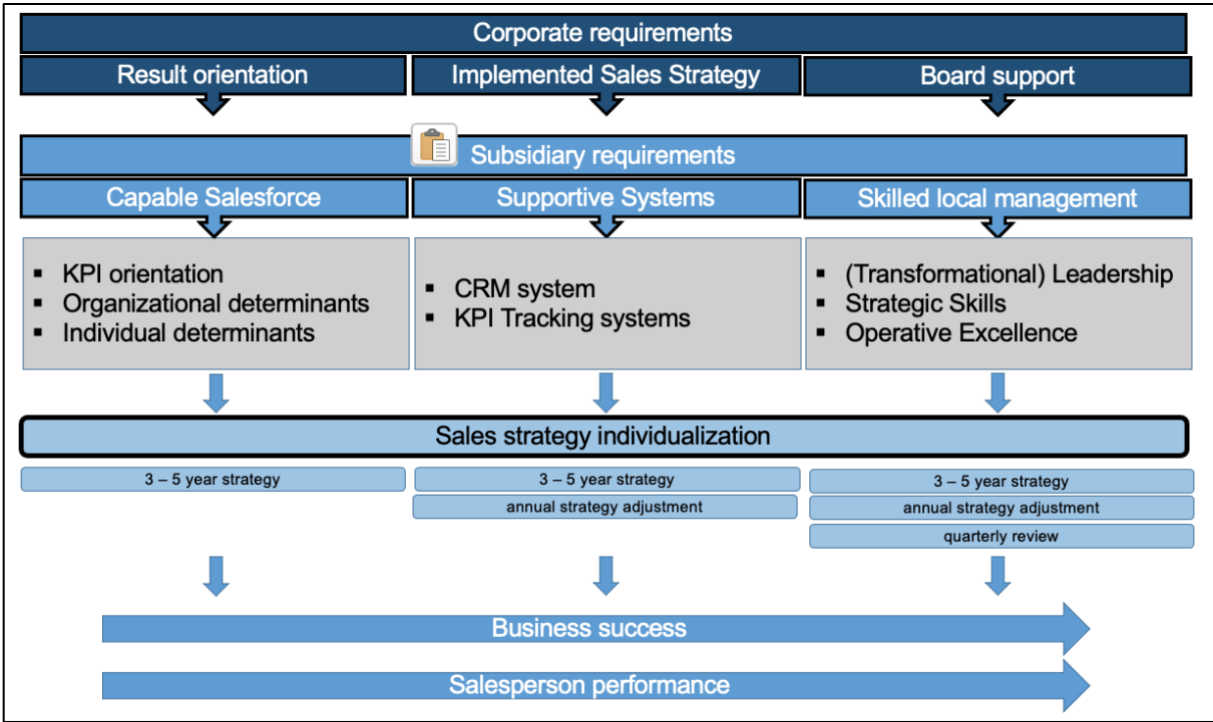


Figure 8. Model for practice (Source: Author’s own, 2021)

1. Model structure

The model consists of two stages that emerged from the in-depth interviews (corporate requirements and subsidiary requirements) that should be fulfilled to provide a stable foundation for the use of customized sales strategies: one at the corporate level and the other at the subsidiary level. The process of working with this model is linear, which means that all requirements must be fulfilled at one level before moving on to the next level. It is counterproductive to work on requirements

at the subsidiary level if requirements at the corporate level are not met (Brenes, Mena and Molina (2008). After the requirement stages, there is a section that states how much time and detail should be invested in the strategy individualization process and how this will influence outcomes related to business success and salesperson performance.

2. Corporate requirements

The model begins with three corporate requirements that have been under investigation by many scholars (Brenes, Mena and Molina, 2008; Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010; Cespedes and Thompson, 2015; Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019; Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri, 2019) and were mentioned in the interviews by the research participants.

To set the foundation for a structured and successful process of sales strategy customization at the subsidiary level, it is important to ensure that the corporate requirements are met. Otherwise, there is a high risk of failure at the subsidiary level. The corporate requirements are detailed below.

2.1 Result orientation

In this model, result orientation means the will to reach pre-defined goals within a given time frame and resources. For a customized sales strategy to work, an organization must set goals and ensure high prioritization to reach these goals. If there is no need for KPI-oriented working and if the senior management does not focus on reaching pre-defined KPIs, the will to invest time and money in the customization of a sales strategy is very low (Exec 4). This view was also mentioned from Exec 1 who said that one of the main drivers for the success of the organization is a strict KPI management and that this is an important requirement before starting local strategy implementation. These answers match with the literature and the findings of Inyang and Jaramillo (2019) explained in section 2.10.3.

This leads to cascading goals and a clear orientation for the salesforce. Exec 3 stated that 'how could we expect the local salespeople to hit individual goals if we would not know what the goals of the entire organization are.' Salesperson 6 added that accepting challenging goals is easier when everybody is in the same position and the overall corporate goals are as transparent and ambitious as the regional goals. In this case a challenging goal is more motivating than demotivating.

However, if there is a corporate need to reach KPIs, which might be even split up at the subsidiary level, openness to and the will to invest in supporting and promoting customized strategies is much higher (Salesperson 1).

2.2 Implemented sales strategy

The implemented sales strategy as described in point 2.4 (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010; Terho *et al.*, 2015; Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri, 2019) is a crucial requirement for sales strategy customization at the subsidiary level. The local management and sales force need strategic guidance and guardrails in which to operate and build on (Exec 2). Salesperson 6 added that the global sales strategy gives an important orientation and a guardrail in which a sales team can operate'. Additionally, it is the basis for all local strategic decisions (Exec 7) and without them there would be a 'wild west situation where everybody would do whatever he wants' (Exec 6). The answers of the participants show that customized sales strategies need some clearly defined boundaries that should be developed in the global sales strategy and that it cannot be unconstrained.

The global sales strategy forms the basis of all strategy individualization activities. If an organization's sales activities are not aligned with the corporate strategy, there is a risk of significant direct and indirect costs to the organization (Cespedes and Thompson, 2015). Additionally, a certain understanding of the strategy must be present within the organization for central departments to support customized strategy development efforts in local subsidiaries.

2.3 Board support

As described in Section 2.7 and Brenes, Mena and Molina's (2008) model on the key dimensions of successful strategy implementation, board support is one of the most important factors in the implementation of new strategies. A lack of commitment from the executive board and shareholders was identified as one of the main obstacles to implementation in the literature.

Also, the research participants saw board support as a very important requirement for the implementation of customized sales strategies. Salesperson 2 stated that 'it does not make sense to start strategic initiatives that are changed by the board after 2 months because they do not work. We need the trust and the commitment of the board to give us enough time to successfully implement our plans.' Exec 6 added that it is important to have the support, the patience, and the experience of the Board for the local initiatives to implement the needed actions

properly. Exec 9 stated that it is important to have the trust in the board and the trust of the board in the subsidiaries and that mistakes are allowed, because there is 'nothing worse than employees that are afraid to make mistakes and to try new ways.' Another participant stated that this was one of the main reasons that there approaches in the past were not working. 'We started very promising attempts to implement local initiatives but if the results were not reached after a very short amount of time, everything was cancelled and we were, where we were before.'

There must be a clear commitment from the board that adaptations to the global strategy will be accepted and supported, even if the desired results are not observed in the short term. Moreover, internal and external resources must be provided or approved to support local initiatives.

3. Subsidiary requirements

Once corporate requirements are met, requirements at the local level must also be fulfilled (Exec 6). For a subsidiary to develop, implement and execute a customized sales strategy, each subsidiary should meet the following criteria. These criteria emerge from the literature review as well as the participant responses.

3.1 Sales force capabilities

A crucial requirement for the successful implementation and execution of a customized sales strategy at the subsidiary level are the capabilities of the sales force. These skills are defined as individual level determinants (Terho et al., 2015) and organizational level determinants (Homburg and Jensen, 2007). Exec 1 described these skills in his own words and explained that '*a salesperson has to know what to do and why to do it*'. Salesperson 4 and 7 added that following the strategy became much easier as soon as they understood the 'big picture' and '*why certain things had to be done in a special way*'. Exec 7 said that '*we do not need soldiers that do just what we tell them to do but people that know their job and how their actions can contribute to the overall results and strategic goals.*'

In addition to organizational- and individual-level determinants of performance (Terho et al., 2015), the sales force must have a KPI orientation. In other words, they must be interested in contributing to the organization's goals, regardless of the personal advantages or disadvantages that this may bring. Exec 2 explained that 'organizational goals and KPIs are worth nothing if the salesforce is not keen and motivated to reach them' and salesperson 1 said that he believes 'that the

internal competition to reach the individual KPIs are a key success factor of his company'. Salesperson 10 explained that his biggest success factor 'is the believe in reaching my goals and questioning myself every day how to reach them' while salesperson 8 explained that the colleagues that are not as successful as others often do not care as much about their KPI and their targets as other employees. While a lack of organizational- and individual-level determinants can be addressed through coaching or trainings, KPI orientation and the will to contribute to the organization's goals are character traits that can often be fostered through leadership or explained, but not trained.

3.2 Supportive systems

In addition to developing the sales force's capabilities, it is important to assist their work with support systems. For example, CRM systems can be used to manage customer interactions, prepare for important meetings or analyse a region or customer base to determine the most appropriate sales activities (Rodriguez, Peterson and Krishnan, 2018). These systems can be upgraded with AI software and can help the sales force to plan and regionally implement the customized sales strategy in the most effective and efficient way. Exec. 5 mentioned CRM systems as very important since they help the sales managers to find the right customers and to get the needed information. Exec. 4 and Exec 9 confirmed that view and said that the information that the salesforce has is just as good as the information that the employees put into the system and that the system needs to support the work of the salesforce. Many other executives explained similar experiences. Sales manager 7 and 10 added that a good CRM system is very important because otherwise nobody is going to use it or just put in information that are not helpful. Sales manager 2 said that 'a CRM system should support the sales manager and not the other way around. '

In addition, other participants said that a good CRM system can help organizations gain insight on their customers and their characteristics (Salesperson 8), sales activities and their direct and indirect results (Exec 2), the most successful sales channels (Exec 7) and special sales promotions and their outcomes (Salesperson 4). In fact, Exec 6 saw a direct relationship between a good CRM system and the successful implementation of a customized sales strategy: '*The sales managers report via CRM and are tracked how the execution of the strategy has progressed. Also, strategic initiatives from headquarters are*

controlled via monthly reports based on CRM data, the regular communication with customers is steered and the main information regarding the number and the quality of the sales activities is extracted when executives visit the countries.

However, until employees accepted the CRM system, all participating organizations experienced challenges. Exec 4, the regional sales manager of a small organization, stated that his organization did not frequently use a CRM system: *'We try to explain the advantages [to the sales force], and they use it more or less frequently. We do not use the CRM as a control system, and it does not measure financial KPIs'.*

In addition to CRM systems, KPI measurement systems are also crucial for sales and management staff. These systems enable past activities and results to be measured and interpreted and decisions to be made about the future based on information and data about the organization's current customer base and sales force activities (Inyang and Jaramillo, 2019). Thus, they can be aware of the status quo and have an opportunity to develop and implement countermeasures. If these systems are not in place, it is difficult to build a foundation for country-specific strategic initiatives and monitor the progress and success of strategy implementation.

Such systems should allow all stakeholders to see their target process and the level how much of the annual KPIs they have already hit in real time and tell the sales manager how much of his goals he has already reached (Exec 5). Execs 1, 3 and 4 said that the most successful sales managers check their goals and the level of achievement several times a week, however sales manager 4,6 and 9 added that it is important that the system is easy to open, has a good structure and easy to understand. Exec.4 said that the 'easier and the more efficient a KPI tracking system is the more likely is that a sales manager checks the status quo of his goals'.

3.3 Skilled local management

The last subsidiary requirement is skilled local management. As explained from Salem (2015) and Benmira and Agboola (2021), a transformational leadership approach has significant moderating effects on the relationship between sales strategy and performance (Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010). When strategies can be customized, good leadership skills are especially important for guiding the sales force and fostering an environment in which skilled salespeople can be

successful (Exec 4, 6 and 9). Salesperson 1, 3, 6 and 9 mentioned the importance of the leadership skills of their supervisors in volatile times and how much it can motivate or demotivate them in the daily work. Executive 1, 3, 5 and 9 mentioned this also as big challenges since the local management teams do often not have the leadership standards needed to keep the employees satisfied and productive in very challenging times which can lead to demotivation and a higher employee turnover.

When the executive managers were asked about the characteristics of successful subsidiaries, the majority focused on the abilities of local management. Exec 5 said, *'We don't want to have people that do just what we tell them to do. For us, it is very important that we have international directors that are listening to the global strategy but then individualize in their countries and excite their team for their ways of working. There is a global strategy but there is freedom within the given guardrails that is needed to convince their sales force'*. Exec 6, the managing director of an international subsidiary, added, *'It needs a mix between working by the rules and individualization to have the management but also the local team behind you. Without the commitment of the team, you will not be successful'*. Exec 5, the vice president of a leading organization in the industry (as measured by turnover), said that the best managers *'adapt the strategy to the individual needs of the market and the development of their employees'*.

For Exec 10, criteria for the success of an organization were also related to employees' skills and leaders, who are responsible for improving their employees' skills: *'I prefer subsidiaries that think outside the box and are creative. The same process does not work in every country. Therefore, it is very important to have skilled employees.'* However, it was also important to regularly coach employees (Exec 4) and look after them (Exec 3) to give them enough time to implement the new strategy and achieve the best results.

The sales managers also believe that leadership was a key element in the successful implementation of a customized sales strategy, although they viewed the issue from a different perspective. Exec 2 stated that salespeople are at their best when they can make their own decisions within a framework established by their leader. Salesperson 4 said that their leader is a great help: *'he will cover my back if I try something new and if it doesn't work. This encourages me and gives me confidence in my actions'*. Salesperson 5 also cited the importance of trust

and coaching from a leader: *'As soon as I understood that I could trust my leader and that he wanted to bring the best out of me, the more motivated I was to think outside the box and try new things'*. Many participants said that most of the actions that they took to customize a strategy were successful *'or gave [them] the chance to reflect on [themselves] and improve'* (Salesperson 4). This 'trial-and-error' approach within defined guardrails helped many sales managers develop new skills and improve both personally and professionally. Salesperson 8 added that an open atmosphere and open communication with his leader was crucial: *'I don't mind if someone shows me my limits or my guardrails, as long as it is in a professional and kind manner. And I understand that, in the end, it is the results that matter for the organization, and I want to contribute to them'*.

Leadership is also crucial for small organizations that do not have a strict sales strategy in place, as Exec 4 explained: *'If we have too much push to our sales managers, we might lose our sales force and they go somewhere else but if we do not give them any guardrails, we won't make successful business. This is a very important leadership topic because the direct leader has to have the power to guide their sales force and keep them working but also give them the freedom to keep them happy'*.

These answers show that, in addition to superior operational and strategic skills, leadership skills and the ability to guide, develop and control the sales force in a motivating and understanding way is crucial for developing and implementing a sales strategy at the local level and achieving the best results.

As described in the data analysis section, another important skill for local management is the strategic and the operational skills of the local leaders. Local management must be able to develop high-quality mid-term strategies and require the skills to operationalize the strategy and deliver results with their teams (Executive 1,3,6 and 9). Sales managers 3,4, 5,8 and 10 answered that it is hard to work for a management that is either very operational and can't give strategic guidance or is too strategic and does not know how hard it is to implement their strategic ideas in the operative working routines. Exec 5 stated, *'There is definitely a relationship between strategic skills and subsidiary success at the management level, but it is also very important that the strategy gets implemented. We do not only need PowerPoint slides but also the operative capacity to implement the strategy and make the sales'*. Exec 4 also confirmed the relationship between

strategic skills and subsidiary success: *'It is one of our key factors. The more successful a manager is in his strategic planning, the better the results for the organization'*. Exec 3 added that *'the more a subsidiary question the status quo and thinks about how an existing strategy can be optimized (with small steps and not with big individual actions), the better their performance. The intense discussion makes us better, but we also need a focus on our current business and on the customer. That is the basis for our success'*.

4. Resource management for strategy development, implementation, and execution

This model should also help to evaluate the time and resources that organizations should invest in strategy development, implementation, and execution to positively influence sales results. For a successful strategic period, it is important to develop the customized sales strategy and obtain approval from senior management (Brenes, Mena and Molinas, 2008). Resources must be invested, and external or internal help should be provided when needed to reach the required qualitative level of the local strategy (Executive 1,3,5,7 and 9). Thus, business development staff within the organization or an external consultant could support the subsidiary in the development process when needed.

Generally, it is difficult to determine the best use of resources (including time, money, and employees) to develop a customized sales strategy, as this varies from organization to organization (Executive 4,6,9 and 10). The number of subsidiaries, the organization's products and the internal structure of headquarters are internal factors that can influence resources that should be invested. In addition, external factors include costs, the need for external consultants, the overall economic situation in the relevant countries or individual customer needs for certain products that vary from country to country or organization to organization.

How a customized sales strategy is developed, implemented, and reviewed affects business success and salesperson performance. While the development and implementation of a three- to five-year strategy has a positive influence on these measures (compared to the absence of a customized sales strategy), performance and success increase when the customized strategy is annually adjusted to the needs of each subsidiary (Exec 1,2,4,5,6,9 and 10). The best results regarding business success and salesperson performance are observed

when a three- to five-year strategy is developed, adjusted on a yearly basis, and reviewed every quarter (Exec 1,2,4,5,7,8 and 10). These reviews should occur at each level of the organization: between a salesperson and the sales director, the sales director and the managing director, and the managing director and the vice president of the region. These review meetings should have a clear structure and communicated expectations to enable all parties to be adequately prepared.

5. Conclusion of the model

Good results are possible when all the organizational and subsidiary requirements are met before a customized three- to five-year sales strategy is developed. All the resources and knowledge needed to develop such a strategy should be provided, and the strategy should be developed according to the process described in this thesis. Upon obtaining the approval of the board or area vice president, the strategy should be adjusted yearly, approved from the next hierarchy level, and reviewed on a quarterly basis according to a fixed meeting structure.

6. The model as expansion of the existing literature

The goal of the conceptual model of practice is to help organizations determine whether customized sales strategies are appropriate for them or what they must change to develop and implement them. It should help to higher their chances and reduce their costs of a successful local strategy development and implementation.

This model shows the needed requirements and that the use of customized sales strategies at the subsidiary level influences business success and sales force performance for B2B organizations that are part of the HORECA supply industry and the Mittelstand compared to the use of a single global sales strategy for all subsidiaries.

The model contributes to deeper knowledge about customized sales strategies in the field of B2B companies as requested from Terho et al. (2015) and Inyang & Jaramillo (2019) and focuses on individual factors in sales strategies on sales strategy performance in one single industry as requested from Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019) Due to the qualitative approach through in depth interviews with sales managers and executives of the German HORECA supply industry it helps to generate deeper understanding of the individual thoughts and actions of the participants as well as their motivation as requested from Malshe et al (2021).

Finally, it shows what requirements are needed to implement customized sales strategies as an expansion of the global strategy and therefore reduce the resistance of subsidiaries to global strategies. This contributes to the call for further research from Pullins et al (2017) who asked to close the gap between sales strategy theory and practice with practical strategy implementation tools.

5.3 Summary

This chapter provided a detailed description of the research results as well as of the development of the conceptual model for practice by following approaches recommended by Holton and Lowe (2007), Ravitch and Riggan (2017) and Elangovan and Raju (2015). In addition to knowledge derived from the literature, it incorporates insights gained from interviews with sales managers and executives and exchanges with supervisors and other DBA students.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

Thus far, the thesis has answered the research questions (Chapter 5) and helped to gain deeper knowledge about customized sales strategies in the B2B field. It identified influencing factors and required implementation tools for a successful strategy customization and implementation (Chapter 5) and helped to close the knowledge gap between theory and practice in the field of strategy implementation. It described the corporate requirements for customized sales strategies (Chapter 2 and 5) and individual strategic factors for a single industry. This chapter highlights this study's contributions and implications. It interprets the significance of the findings considering existing knowledge on the research problem (Annesley, 2010) and underlines new insights pertaining to the questions about how much time and effort should be invested in customized sales strategies that emerged from the study. It lists recommendations for follow-up research and provides an insight into the personal learning journey and the personal development of the author through this doctoral journey. Finally, it presents the practical handbook for practitioners which states a summary and a handbook of this thesis for the participants of the study and interested managers.

6.2 Contributions to research

The influence of sales strategies on business success and salesperson performance has been researched by many scholars. For example, Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010) developed a conceptual model of sales strategy, Inyang and Jaramillo (2020) focused on the sales performance influence of sales strategies, Terho et al. (2015) developed a multi-level conceptual sales strategy model, Shah (2005) examined strategy implementation and Ingram, Laforge and Leigh (2002) studied the strategic leadership and steering of a sales force. However, these studies focused on a global and standardized approach for an entire organization in different industries and not on customized sales strategies for subsidiaries.

The current research examines the influence of customized sales strategies on business success and salesperson performance as well as the model needed to implement customized sales strategies. It contributes to deeper

knowledge about sales strategies and customized sales strategies in the field of B2B companies as requested by Terho et. al. (2015).

The research shows that a sales strategy has a positive influence on sales performance and organizational performance and shows that this effect can be bolstered by using a customized sales strategy. This research contributes to the deepening of knowledge about the influence of individual factors on sales strategies and on sales strategy performance in a single industry as urged by Inyang and Jaramillo (2020), Malshe et al (2021) and Katsikea, Theodosiou and Makri (2019). Furthermore, it demonstrates the influence of customized sales strategies on salesperson performance and establishes that customized sales strategies can have an even more positive influence on salesperson performance. Finally, it shows the positive influence of a customized sales strategy on an organization's business success.

The study suggests possibilities for overcoming resistance to central strategies among subsidiaries and internal divisions (Schill, 2013) and highlights the advantages that can be generated when local management are involved in the development process for their own customized sales strategy. Furthermore, the study helps to reduce the gap between theory and practice and to support practical sales strategy implementation as called by Pullins et. al (2017).

Additionally, it underlines environmental factors (e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic), their effects on sales strategy performance and how they can be mitigated through customized sales strategies and local initiatives within a global model. The study contributes and extends the existing literature with a model of needed requirements for a successful strategy implementation and shows how central strategic ideas can be implemented successfully on subsidiary level.

Finally, this thesis responds to the recommendations of researchers such as Terho (2015), Panagopoulos and Avlonitis (2010), Ingram (2002), Lane (2009), Inyang and Jaramillo (2019), Cespedes and Thompson (2015) and Schill (2013) and leading consulting organizations such as the Boston Consulting Group, McKinsey and Deloitte, who requested wider qualitative and objective studies to enhance the academic understanding of the influence of customized sales strategies on corporate success.

6.3 Contribution to practice

The developed model presents a systematic approach for Mittelstand organizations to evaluate their level of maturity and the potential advantages that a shift from central sales strategies to customized sales strategies can bring.

To evaluate the usefulness of the findings, the model and its contribution to practice, post-study interviews were held with five executive managers (Exec 1, Exec 3, Exec 5, Exec 7 and Exec 8) and two sales managers (Salesperson 4 and Salesperson 9). The post-study interview process is described in Sub-section 4.9.3. The post-study interviews confirmed that senior managers at successful organizations have already implemented various customized strategies for their subsidiaries and confirmed the usefulness of the model for managers at less mature organizations.

In addition, this thesis corroborated the challenges that emerge when organizations that lack maturity attempt to implement customization processes. The post-study interviews revealed that organizations that had already implemented successful customized strategies followed the developed model *'by a gut feeling or by accident'* (Exec 5) and *could have avoided 'a lot of pain and time due to the learning curve if such a model was shown to them in advance'* (Exec 1). This model of practice can help organizations to structure and visualize ideas that are often present and to structure the ideas that many managers talk about when speaking about sales strategy development but are then forgotten when it comes to the operationalization of the strategy development or its implementation.

Exec 5 confirmed that the model was *'the conceptualization of [the] experience that [they] have gathered over the past few years and even added some details that [their organization] had not considered in the past'*. Both sales managers validated the findings and said that the model allowed them to perceive their organizations' weak points. According to Salesperson 4, the organization's *'strategy development process and its implementation would work much better if [the] executive management followed this guidance'* (Salesperson 4).

Additionally, the model is well-structured and easy to understand; all participants in the post-study interviews were able to correctly read and interpret it. They described the approach as very interesting and logical and asked for more

information of the thesis since they saw the topic and the model as valuable as well as an opportunity to improve their global sales performance.

The discussions also showed that other organizations that participated in the research began to consider customized sales strategies. Participants said that the model *'was a very good starting point for evaluating [the] status quo and what [they] have to change internally to save a lot of time in the implementation phase'* (Exec 3). The thesis also aligns with the literature, as it shows that a sales strategy will fail if certain requirements are not met, and adequate preparation is not undertaken (Brenes, Mena and Molina, 2008). Additionally, the model provides guidance that incorporates input from experienced managers in the HORECA supply industry and findings from the literature, including Kotler, Rackham and Krishnaswamy (2006); Strahle, Spiro and Acito (1996); Hrebniak (2006); Shah (2002); Inyang and Jaramillo (2019); and Rodriguez, Peterson and Krishnan (2018).

In summary, the model was found to be useful and appropriate in an evaluation of the influence of a customized sales strategy for Mittelstand organizations. It can help organizations save considerable time and money and to develop new strategic approaches to expand and optimize their sales strategy and business. This research provides rich insights for organizations that seek to develop or optimize their existing sales strategies to achieve greater business success and salesperson performance. However, certain challenges and barriers must also be considered, which are explained in the next section.

6.4 Barriers and challenges related to the use of customized sales strategies

This research provides insight on factors that can help organizations grow their business through the implementation of customized sales strategies and the preparation needed to maximize the success of this process. Several challenges and risks were identified with regards to the use of customized sales strategies. Some are mentioned in Chapter 5 and summarized in this chapter. It is important to identify and examine these barriers because understanding the challenges of a research can help to foster the implementation the practical realization and can therefore optimize the outcomes for practice (Brown *et al.*, 2010).

6.4.1 Barriers and challenges related to senior management support and perception

Among the participants, especially the executive managers, there was a strong conviction that board support as well as the support from the executive vice president level is crucial for the success of a customized sales strategy. This view is confirmed by the literature, which states that board support is a key factor in strategy implementation (Brenes, Mena and Molina, 2008). Freedom in the operative business (Exec 6), the opportunity to make decisions and mistakes to learn for upcoming tasks (Exec 8) and the view that KPIs are not everything and that a subsidiary must be holistically assessed (Exec 1) were broad answers to the question about which elements were needed to ensure the success of customized sales strategies. Executive managers from the top five participating organizations stated these possibilities for the daily work of their subsidiaries as '*lived practice*' (Exec 5) and an element that was implemented more than five years ago because the organization did not want to encourage a '*boss-employee mentality*' as in the past (Exec 4).

However, the sales managers from the same organizations described their employers' working routines differently. Exec 2 described their organization's model as very good, but a strict KPI measurement system was used as soon as sales figures were lower than expected and the opportunity to work independently became very limited. According to Salesperson 4, it was very difficult to implement ideas that did not align with the expectations of executive managers, and pressure to succeed for sales managers was much higher if they implemented their own ideas rather than following the corporate strategy. One participant who has been in both positions (as an area sales manager and a leading executive at one of the top three participating organizations) also mentioned this tension. Although that situation as it was five years ago and the organization's working methods have not changed over the past few years, their perception changed when they moved from a sales manager to a senior manager role. As a sales manager, the participant felt limited by the sales strategy and the way that they were asked to work at the time; now, their employees have considerable freedom to operate and can make their own decisions. As a sales manager, they felt that the strict KPI measurement system created considerable pressure; now, they see it as a steering instrument that is not as important as their employees think it is. This

difference in perception between managers and employees was also highlighted by Sánchez-Vidal, Cegarra-Leiva and Cegarra-Navarro (2012) who found that corporate rules and benefits are judged and perceived differently by employees and managers, which can lead to a conflict of interest.

This difference in perceptions about board support and the leadership approach at various organizations is one of the limitations of the conceptual model developed for this thesis. The way in which an organization is steered is not linear and depends on several factors, such as the overall economic situation, the interests of different stakeholders and shareholders, and the individual skills of executive managers and salespeople. Thus, soliciting external support and an unbiased view on the situation can be extremely helpful for organizations to determine the appropriate level of board support, leadership skills and operational freedom for individual subsidiaries that aim to implement customized sales strategies.

6.4.2 Barriers and challenges related to salesperson performance and development

As described in the model (see Sub-section 5.2.3), a skilled sales force is crucial for the successful implementation of customized sales strategies. Although organizations make substantial investments in the training and development of their sales force, a study of 42 organizations by Laforge and Dubinsky (1996) showed that single sales trainings are not very effective to raise the skills of a salesperson most of the time and that long-term professional sales training programmes are needed to sustainably improve salespeople's skills. This was corroborated by many executives who participated in this research. Improving salespeople's skills and transforming them from '*people who execute what they are told to independent minded entrepreneurs within their own organization*' (Exec 5) is a process that can take several years, significant investment and excellent leadership skills on the part of sales directors.

This research also shows that the KPI orientation required of salespeople represents a thin line between working hard to reach the organization's goals and making unsustainable decisions that harm the organization but allow it to meet certain numbers. Four out of 10 interviewed sales managers said that they work to deliver the results that they are asked for and that a strict KPI measurement system adds more pressure and reduces their effectiveness. The most successful

sales managers regarding to the level of their KPI achievement were able to find a balance between goal orientation and KPI orientation, and they were not afraid to challenge or oppose the requirement to meet a certain KPI if they believed that it would harm the organization's long-term success. For example, Salesperson 4 said that it did not make sense to make a final last order in December to meet annual sales goals, only to generate no turnover over the next three months due to high stock levels.

Finally, another challenge is that the best salespeople are promoted to sales directors, which is a lived practice at many organizations. A study involving more than 500 German sales managers and sales directors showed that many of the skills needed to be a good sales manager are not needed to be a good sales director and that more than 40% of the promoted sales managers did not feel prepared for the job (Frauen, 2019). As a result, many organizations lose good sales managers with wide customer bases and deep product knowledge when they promote them to sales directors; they then lack the skills to develop their sales team in their new role, which leads to a lose-lose situation.

6.4.3 Barriers and challenges related to volatile environments

Another risk related to customized sales strategies is the fact that strategy development and implementation often take place in very volatile environments. The executives interviewed for this research confirmed a finding from various studies that strategy development must be a very flexible process (Hrebiniak, 2006). On the one hand, external factors (e.g. change of the way how the sales process has changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic or political changes) should be considered, and the strategy should be adjusted when needed. On the other hand, it should be robust and provide guidance in uncertain times. However, finding a balance between taking the time to adjust a sales strategy when needed and not acting to opportunistic when unexpected situations occur is a strategic skill that not every subsidiary leader might have. If the strategy development and customization process is entrusted to subsidiaries, there is a risk that strategies will be adjusted too early, which can lead to restlessness and insecurity in sales teams, or too late, which can lead to a substantial loss of business. Adjusting and developing strategies is also very time-consuming; if a strategy must be repeatedly adjusted at the subsidiary level, this means that time is taken away from other important operational or strategic tasks.

6.5 Recommendations

This section contains a call for action and solutions to the challenges described in the first section of this thesis. In a world that has grown increasingly dynamic and agile over the past few decades, sales strategies will become more and more important for medium-sized B2B organizations. To compete with large multinational corporations and cheap local suppliers, address shortages in raw materials, and weather the associated price increases and delivery delays, higher requirements on qualified staff and strategic plans are needed.

Thus, the author recommends that organizations invest time and money in developing a global sales strategy. However, the evidence from this thesis indicates that it should not be used as a 'one-size-fits-all' solution; instead, each subsidiary, if the right conditions are in place, should have the freedom to develop their own plans within this strategic model since this thesis shows that sales strategy customization has a positive influence on organizational and salesperson performance. In addition, skilled sales managers should be identified within the subsidiaries to develop and implement new and innovative business models that can be rolled out to other units once they are successfully tested.

For executive management, it is crucial to ensure that the organization as a whole and the subsidiaries can develop, implement, and execute the customized sales strategy. The developed conceptual model for practice can help organizations identify the most important requirements to set the foundation for a customized sales strategy approach. As soon as the largest deviations from the model are identified, internal or external support should be sought to improve the situation of the subsidiary.

To ensure the psychological health of the salesforce and to keep up the sales activities of the salesforce in very volatile times when constant stress affects health and the well-being of the employees, resilience and wellbeing training is very important for organizations. Leaders are needed that spread optimism, drive solution orientation, and create an environment where the challenges are accepted but also where every member of the team tries to support each other in order to master the challenging situation.

Finally, it is important to persevere in the implementation of the developed strategy and allow enough flexibility to adjust it if necessary. Regular meetings should be held to ensure that all stakeholders are aligned on the strategy's

progress and that help, and support can be offered, where needed. The customized sales strategy should serve as the main source of guidance for the current strategic period.

6.6 Limitations of the study

The main aim of this research is to investigate the influence of customized sales strategies on business success and salesperson performance at German B2B organizations that are part of the HORECA supply industry and to help them determine the appropriateness of customized sales strategies for their own goals. The study used a qualitative research approach, and in-depth interviews with executives and sales managers from leading German organizations in the HORECA supply industry were conducted to create a conceptual model of practice. The latter integrates findings from the study and the literature review to help organizations initiate the strategy individualization process.

However, certain limitations were encountered during the research. A limitation is a '*systematic bias of a study design or instrument that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the research results*' (Price and Murnan, 2004, p. 66). There are two main types of limitations in research studies: threats to internal validity and threats to external validity (Price and Murnan, 2004). In addition, possible bias on the part of the researcher, which was discussed in Section 4.11, must be mentioned again in this section. The author and his supervisory team tried to minimize this bias through constant reflection and the tools and methods mentioned in the section 'Researcher's reflexivity' (4.11.).

6.6.1 Threats to internal validity

Internal validity is defined '*as the extent to which the observed results represent the truth in the population we are studying and, thus, are not due to methodological errors*' (Patino and Ferreira, 2018, p. 188). One risk is the Hawthorne effect, which refers to the increase in performance of individuals who are noticed or watched by researchers or supervisors (McCambridge, Witton and Elbourne, 2014). Since all participants knew that they were part of a study, there is a possibility that they embellished some of their answers. While organizational metrics such as turnover and EBIT margins were cross-checked with other sources, questions regarding leadership style, employees' degree of operational

freedom or a strategy's influence on an organization's success depended on the participants' honest answers and could have been affected by what they viewed as modern management techniques.

Another salient issue is the recency effect, which the Oxford Dictionary defines as '*the tendency in free recall for individuals to be better able to recall the last items in a series or the tendency to remember better information that was more recently learned*' (Oxford Reference, 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic is one of the most disruptive events that the HORECA supply industry has faced in many years. Sales turnover have drastically decreased, which required many organizations to engage in strict cost management, and the outlook for the future remains very uncertain. The Covid-19 pandemic, in combination with the recency effect, could have influenced the participants' answers based on the events of the past 12 months and may not represent past or future years.

6.6.2 Threats to external validity

External validity is defined as '*the extent to which the results of a study are generalizable*' (Patino and Ferreira, 2018, p. 188). In other words, it is the degree to which the conclusions of this study are applicable to other industries in other countries and times. Stake (1980) asserted that single qualitative studies do not provide an adequate basis for generalizations. Since this thesis followed a qualitative research approach, the results are not generalizable. Although interviews were conducted with very experienced executives and sales managers, asking the same questions to different executives and sales managers of the same organizations might have led to different answers. This thesis also focuses on the HORECA supply industry, and its results may not be applicable to other industries, in which market conditions are different. Finally, this thesis examines organizations based in Germany. Since other countries have varying cultures and leadership styles (Taleghani, Salmani and Taatian, 2010), the results from this study are also not generalizable in a different international context.

6.7 Suggestions for future research

The study provides insights on the influence of customized sales strategies at German B2B organizations that are part of the HORECA supply industry and the Mittelstand as well as the conditions required to begin implementing such strategies. It provides an overview on the opportunities and challenges linked to

the use of customized strategies at the subsidiary level and the value of in-depth interviews with leading executives and managers. Challenges identified during the research provide a starting point for future research.

The in-depth interviews generated useful data. Thus, it is recommended as a research approach in other industries. Particularly, the interviews provided detailed information on the use of customized sales strategies and the challenges and opportunities that organizations face regarding strategy development and implementation. However, the results from this study only cover 10 of the most successful B2B organizations in the HORECA industry in Germany. To support the findings, further research on other industries and organizational structures (e.g. corporations with an annual revenue of more than 1 billion Euro or B2C organizations) is needed. Additionally, the study could be expanded to an international setting to verify whether the findings vary when an organization's headquarters and executive management are in a country other than Germany.

The main advantage of using in-depth interviews in this study was the ability to obtain detailed and sensitive information, which helped the author understand the relevance of customized sales strategies for organizations and to construct theoretical explanations of the researched topic (Tharenou, Donohue and Cooper, 2007). However, since a single qualitative study cannot be used to generalize (Stake, 1980), future research should follow a quantitative approach with a wider range of participants to test theoretical predictions through the precise measurement of variables (Tharenou, Donohue and Cooper, 2007).

The in-depth interviews relied on the opinions, views and explanations of experienced executives and sales managers. Personal interactions enabled the researcher to build a rapport with participants and to gather highly qualitative information (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). However, due to the duration of the interviews and the research aim which wanted to examine the HORECA supply industry and not just one organization, the researcher could not probe each participating organization in depth. Thus, future studies could use a case study approach to construct a 360-degree view on the use of customized sales strategies at a single organization by involving employees from several departments; in the process, researchers would develop a better understanding of the influence of customized sales strategies on business success across the organization and salesperson performance in greater depth (Stake, 1995).

6.8 Personal learning journey

Composing this doctoral thesis was an enjoyable, challenging, and intense journey. Researching and authoring the thesis in a foreign language and discussing the topic with my supervisors in English helped me to further develop my language skills, my analytical thinking and has forced me to leave my comfort zone many times. The exchange with the other doctoral students and discussing their ideas and receiving challenged from them was refreshing and interesting. The doctoral journey gave me the chance to speak with very experienced leaders and sales managers of the HORECA supply industry and has expanded my business and academic network.

The Covid crisis that hit in the middle of my studies forced me to re-think my topic since many things that were valid before February 2020 changed from one month to the next. Also, my private life was affected heavily from writing this Doctor of Business Administration thesis part time, managing the stress this created, but it also strengthened the relationship with my family. At the beginning of my doctoral journey, one of the first pieces of advice that our tutors told us was that this journey would permanently change the way we think about our researched topic and approach challenges in the future. I therefore wrote about my progress and my reflections in a research diary; my findings and reflections are summarized in this section.

6.8.1 Personal professional development

At the beginning of my studies, my thoughts on sales strategies were strongly influenced by my past. Working as a chef and working in organizations that followed a strict and authoritarian leadership style, I initially thought that a good strategy would be a strict process that is clear to everyone at the organization and executed in the same way all over the world. Different customer needs because of different geographic regions, different mentalities of the customers and their influence on the sales process as well as the different mentalities and personalities of the own salesforce were not considered as that important as that they could 'overrule' a sales strategy.

However, this view changed during the study of the literature and the interviews with participants. Surely, having the same KPIs, selling models and customer prioritization would ensure comparability between subsidiaries, low complexity, and full control. However, this journey taught me that, in a world that has become

more volatile, unpredictable, complex, and ambiguous, local competence, individualization and market orientation are increasingly important. I learned that an organization needs to be flexible and diverse and must regularly question and challenge the status quo. It must encourage the people who question the things that have been done in the past instead of letting them fall silent with the excuse that it has been always done like that. Many of the participants quoted Charles Darwin, who said that *'it is not the strongest species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the most responsive to change.'*

This is also true for successful teams and leadership. While I initially preferred harmonious teams with salespeople and managers who think the same way, have the same attitude, goal orientation, and understand each other in every situation, this view also changed. To master the challenging situation mentioned at the beginning of this section, diverse teams with different personalities are the key to success. While my understanding of a good leader was initially the tough manager who shows everyone what to do and pushes their employees to be successful, I now see a successful leader as a coach or conductor who knows how to treat each person on their team and take advantage of their distinct characteristics to get the best results. This task is not easy, but another crucial aspect of a supervisor's work is to ensure the sustainable and successful development of the department that they are responsible for. In addition to good leadership skills, modern leaders must have a mix of operational excellence and strategic foresight to handle daily challenges, plan long-term goals and steer the subsidiary through volatile times. This complexity was something that I was also not aware of and that developed over time.

However, in addition to individualization, it is crucial for organizations to have a solid foundation of the operational and strategic business. Goals must be aligned with those of the general management at headquarters, and there must be a global strategy that everyone accepts and lives to be seen from customers as one global brand. One of the main goals of the sales and marketing function must be that this global strategy is equipped with guardrails and regulation that cannot be crossed without executive approval to ensure a global stability that cannot be destabilized by decisions that were made and implemented at a subsidiary level.

6.8.2 Personal development

In terms of personal development, I have learned how to be more precise when explaining different topics and delegating tasks. Conversations with my supervisors have helped me to sharpen my thinking and wording when using business buzzwords like 'growth', 'success' or 'timelines'. Although this process was initially very intense, it enabled me to explain more precisely to other people what I expect from them, which in turn increased the acceptance and quality of the delegated tasks. I have received a lot of positive feedback that I have become clearer and have seen an increase of the quality that my team has delivered.

I also started to challenge my own views more frequently because of reading the available literature (including business journals and studies) that I have come across in this thesis and listening to the experienced managers, trainers, and colleagues on my teams. Being aware of several types of bias and how they arise has helped me to question myself and articles from sources that are not 100 percent reliable.

Another important lesson that this doctoral thesis has taught me was an efficient time management. Applying the Eisenhower Matrix (Bratterud *et al.*, 2020) that was introduced to me during this doctoral journey had helped me to manage my business, academic and family tasks according to the urgency and importance to not neglect one of the three topics and to maintain a good work – life balance with high qualitative business and academic results.

Finally, I have become very critical about facts that are without proper sources or clear arguments. While many decisions were made in the past based on a gut feeling, the way in which I try to convince others about ideas or expect my team to convince me has become more fact driven and supported with various sources. Being aware of possible bias and how different parties try to manipulate information for their own cause has been an interesting topic that was raised during this doctoral journey and has helped me also a lot in my private life.

6.9 Practical handbook for practitioners

Based on the high demand from participants, one of the goals of this thesis is to make the collected data available to others by summarizing the findings from the conceptual model for practice in a short presentation and offering it to interested sales managers and organizations. The presentation, which can be found in Appendix VI, includes the introduction to the researcher, an executive summary,

a rationale about the need for customized sales strategies, the advantages and disadvantages of customized sales strategies and the conceptual model for practice, which shows the conditions needed for organizations to follow a customized sales strategy approach. The main intention of the author is to present the findings to interested managers in a personal meeting and not just by sending the handbook to the participants or interested managers without any additional information since an explanation is needed to understand the process and the meaning behind the data and the presented facts.

The handbook summarizes the main outcomes of a customized sales strategy at a subsidiary level in terms of turnover and margin development, the motivation of skilled staff and the reduction of fluctuation and shows the need for individualization in a world that becomes more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. The presentation transfers this complex world on the practical needs of the customers in the HORECA industry as well as the occurring challenges in the HORECA supply industry and is supplemented with quotes of research participants. Additionally, it presents the need of a strong corporate strategy as a foundation for an organization to mitigate against these challenges and the role that a strong sales strategy has for ensuring turnover and margin in uncertain times. The handbook shows how crucial it is to adapt to these new challenges but also the hurdles that organizations of the German Mittelstand are facing when they try to adapt and transform but don't want to lose their heritage and tradition. The final chapters of this thesis refer to the different ways how a sales strategy can be executed and explain the main differences, advantages, and disadvantages of a traditional global sales strategy approach as well as a customized sales strategy approach at a subsidiary level. Finally, it introduces the conceptual model for practice to the reader to explain which requirements are needed for an organization to realize the customized sales strategy approach and which investments need to be made to prepare an organizations sales strategy for the future. The presentation ends with the quote of Charles Darwin about the need to adapt to situations to survive as explained already in the 'Personal learning journey' (7.8).

6.10 Final summary

This study shows that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to strategy development, implementation, and individualization. It strengthens a prevailing

view in the literature that a sales strategy is positively linked to organizational and salesperson performance and that, when developed and executed correctly, a customized sales strategy at the subsidiary level is more successful than a global strategy. However, it also identifies limitations and situations in which even the best strategy is doomed to fail due to the lack of a corporate foundation. In addition, it highlights the importance of leadership, support from stakeholders and a skilled sales force, which is responsible for executing the strategy.

Ultimately, a sales strategy should be more than a piece of paper or a PowerPoint document. It also needs more than one kick-off presentation to become a supportive guardrail and orientation for a successful upcoming strategic period. Finally, it should support the way how people work together and how they act to further develop the business. It should give a guidance to follow in good times and in challenging times that is accepted by the management and local teams; at the same time, there should be enough flexibility to adjust it when needed. If all the parameters of the developed model for practice come together, an customized sales strategy should clearly state goals that need to be met for the organization to be successful in the next strategic period while giving individual salespeople the freedom to decide how to reach these goals with the given guardrails.

Based on the conceptual model for practice, the research results and the findings from the literature review, this study may serve as a benchmark for executive and local management at Mittelstand organizations in terms of how to define, develop and execute a customized sales strategy. It can support them in establishing the right foundation, finding the right coaching, and consulting services and conferring a balanced level of responsibility on local teams to maximize results for the organization as a whole and maintain a long-lasting, sustainable, and successful business.

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Appendix

- I. Participant Information sheet for executive participants
- II. Participant Information sheet for sales manager participants
- III. Interview questions for executive managers
- IV. Interview questions for sales managers
- V. Letter for gatekeeper approval
- VI. Practical handbook for practitioners

I. Participant Information sheet for Executive participants



Version 6
Date: May, 10th 2021

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND PRIVACY NOTICE

TITLE OF PROJECT:

**Customized sales strategies for international subsidiaries -
A strategic approach for medium sized B2B organizations of the HORECA
supply industry**

Invitation

The University of Worcester engages in a wide range of research which seeks to provide greater understanding of the world around us, to contribute to improved human health and well-being and to provide answers to social, economic and environmental problems.

We would like to invite you to take part in one of our research projects. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done, what it will involve for you, what information we will ask from you, and what we will do with that information.

We will in the course of this project be collecting personal information. The UK continues to be bound by the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation which is now the 'UK GDPR' and under UK GDPR this research will be carried out in the public interest. You can find out more about our approach to dealing with your personal information at <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/visitor-privacy-notice.html>.

Please take time to read this document carefully.

What is the purpose of the research?

This study aims to show European B2B organizations in the HORECA supply industry when it makes sense to develop professional, customized sales strategies for international sales subsidiaries and how much time and effort should be spent on this to achieve the best possible sales success for the subsidiary and your company.

Who is undertaking the research?

Maximilian Schwaller
DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) Researcher

Who is funding the research?

The research is self-funded.

Who has oversight of the research?

The research has been approved by the Research Ethics Panel for the College of Business, **Psychology and Sport** in line with the University's Research Ethics Policy. The University of Worcester acts as the 'Data Controller' for personal data collected through its research projects and is subject to the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. We are registered with the Information Commissioner's Office and our Data Protection Officer is Helen Johnstone (infoassurance@worc.ac.uk). For more on our approach to Information Assurance and Security visit: <https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/index.html>.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have received this invitation because you are an Executive of one of the leading European organizations in the HORECA supply industry. We are hoping to recruit 15-20 Executives for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part in this study. Please take your time to decide and talk to others about it if you wish. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw from the study until 14 days following data collection. If you wish to have your data withdrawn, please contact us (our contact details are given below) with your participant number and your data will then not be used. You will be given this number via E-Mail. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. **Participants can withdraw from the data collection at any time, and after the interview they can withdraw their data up to two weeks.**

What will happen if I agree to take part?

If you agree to take part, you will:

- **Receive all pre-interview documents with further information to the research, ethical considerations, and the usage of the given data.**
- If you want to participate there will be a 30-minute introduction meeting regarding my person, the research topic, its goals and the questions that I would like to ask you.
- The interview itself can be scheduled to your convenience primarily via an online video call.
- The interview will be recorded via audio and the conversation transcribed. The transcription will be sent to you for approval and then the data will be analysed so as to answer the research questions.
- **The data will be stored on the One Drive of the University according to the data security regulations of the University of Worcester.**
- All collected data will be anonymized and neither participants nor organizations will be identifiable.

What are the benefits for me in taking part?

You will get access to my thesis and the findings will be shared with all participants to aid in strategic sales planning. Additionally, if you wish, I will share my personal findings in a face-to-face meeting with you as soon as the thesis is published.

Are there any risks for me if I take part?

Since all data will be anonymized and all Covid regulations will be in place there are no risks for you in participating in this research.

What will you do with my information?

Your personal data / information will be anonymised and treated confidentially at all times.

During the project, all data / information will be kept securely in line with the University's Policy for the Effective Management of Research Data and its Information Security Policy.

We will process your personal information for a range of purposes associated with the project primary of which are:

- To use your information along with information gathered from other participants in the research project to seek new knowledge and understanding that can be derived from the information we have gathered.
- To summarise this information in written form for the purposes of dissemination (through research reports, a thesis, conference papers, journal articles or other publications). Any information disseminated / published will be at a summary level and will be fully anonymised and there will be no way of identifying your individual personal information within the published results.
- To use the summary and conclusions arising from the research project for teaching and further research purposes. Any information used in this way will be at a summary level and will be fully anonymised. There will be no way of identifying your individual personal information from the summary information used in this way.

If you wish to receive a summary of the research findings or to be given access to any of the publications arising from the research, please contact us.

How long will you keep my data for?

Your personal data will be retained until the project has been completed

At the completion of the project, we will destroy all data relating to the project.

How can I find out what information you hold about me?

You have certain rights in respect of the personal information the University holds about you. For more information about Individual Rights under GDPR and how you exercise them please visit:

<https://www.worcester.ac.uk/informationassurance/requests-for-personal-data.html>.

What happens next?

We will wait for at least 10 days before asking for your decision on whether you would like to take part and will be delighted to answer any further questions you have about the research.

My contact details are:

Maximilian Schwaller

Email: schm1_18@uni.worc.ac.uk

If you have any concerns about the project at this point or at any later date you may also contact my Director of Studies:

Dr. Tim Sellick

Email: t.sellick@worc.ac.uk

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

If you would like to speak to an independent person who is not a member of the research team, please contact the University of Worcester, using the following details:

Secretary to Research Ethics Panel for College of Business, Psychology and Sport
University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester WR2 6AJ
ethics@worc.ac.uk

II. Participant Information sheet for Sales manager participants



Version 6
Date: May, 10th 2021

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Invitation

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We would like to invite you to take part in one of our research projects. Before you decide whether to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being done, what it will involve for you, what information we will ask from you, and what we will do with that information.

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Why have I been invited to take part?

You have received this invitation because you are a **Sales Manager** of one of the leading European organizations in the HORECA supply industry. We are hoping to recruit 15-20 **Sales Managers** for this study.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part in this study. Please take your time to decide and talk to others about it if you wish. If you do decide to take part, you can withdraw from the study until 14 days following data collection. If you wish to have your data withdrawn, please contact us (our contact details are given below) with your participant number and your data will then not be used. You will be given this number via E-Mail. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. **Participants can withdraw from the data collection at any time, and after the interview they can withdraw their data up to two weeks.**

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University of Worcester
Henwick Grove
Worcester WR2 6AJ
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III. Interview questions for executive managers

Interview questions with CEOs & CSOs			
Nr	Question	Example	Answer of RQ
1.	General questions	Personal questions, Annual turnover, Sales model, Profitability, Shareholder, Mission, USPs	2
2	Does your organization have a Sales strategy in place? What does it look like?	Defined customer segmentation, defined customer prioritization, defined sales models, defined sales channels	1
3	Is there a chance for subsidiaries to develop their own sales strategy or is the global strategy implemented	Can they make their own segmentation/prioritization/sales models/sales channels? Can they give their employees / themselves individual KPIs? (e.g. consultants at events)	1
4	What are the advantages of question two compared to the other option?	Why is it better to have a global or a customized sales strategy	1
5	How much time is each subsidiary investing to implement / execute	Are they officially reporting their strategy and the progress? Is there a strategy development period or is it an ongoing process?	
6	How big is the percentage of revenue done out of the home market?	How much revenue is done in the subsidiaries? How important are the subsidiaries or the overall turnover?	2
7	How do you steer your subsidiaries? Are there individual KPIS?	Are there regular business review meetings? Are the subsidiaries managed by special KPIs? What are the soft facts when managing the subsidiaries	2

8	What are the main characteristics for a successful subsidiary?	Mix from German and local attitude, deep local market knowledge, will to 'challenge' the global strategic initiatives	2
9	Is there a correlation between subsidiary success and local strategy development/implementation?		1
10	Do you have control systems in place to track the strategy execution / salesperson performance?	Quarterly meetings, Strategic one Pagers, Measured KPIs	1,2,3

IV. Interview questions for sales managers

Interview questions with Sales managers			
Nr.	Question	Example	Answer of RQ
1.	General questions	Position, responsibility, organization affiliation	3
2	How satisfied are you at the moment with your job and what are the reasons?	Freedom in the work process, Sales monitoring, Target pressure	3
3	How would you define the Sales process of your organization?	Freedom in business planning, Strict KPIs to follow, Strict Sales process to follow?	2,3
4	Do you know the Corporate Strategy / Sales Strategy of your organization?	Defined customer segmentation, defined customer prioritization, defined sales models, defined sales channels	2,3
5	Have you ever worked on a sales strategy?	Where you part of a strategy team? Where you asked for input?	2
6	What would you change in the current sales strategy that you have? Does your sales strategy support you in your daily job?	Defined customer segmentation, defined customer prioritization, defined sales models, defined sales channels	3
7	How would your work/results look like, if you had more freedom in making decision regarding the sales strategy	Prioritize the customers by yourself, Chose the best sales channel , business model?	3

8	How are your sales activities measured and has that an impact on how you execute the sales strategy	KPI measurements for special customers, special activities, special sales models	2,3
9	Has the Sales strategy a positive impact on your sales results or does it limit you?		1

V. Letter for gatekeeper approval

Letter to participant

Dear Mr. xy,

My name is Maximilian Schwaller, after my apprenticeship as a chef and studying hotel management, I have been working in the sales of investment goods in the HORECA industry for more than 10 years. After national and international sales positions at Rational AG and responsibility for the national B2B key account business at Liebherr Hausgeräte GmbH (Retail & Gas Station), I am now responsible for the B2B partner business in the EMEA region at BRITA GmbH.

With this message I would like to ask you for your support with my doctoral thesis on the subject of 'Sales strategies for international sales subsidiaries in the HORECA equipment industry'.

The aim of the study is to show German B2B organizations in your industry when it makes sense to develop professional, individualized sales strategies for international sales subsidiaries and how much time and effort should be spent on this in order to achieve the best possible sales success for the subsidiary and your company as a whole.

In addition to a detailed examination of the existing research and interviews with internationally recognized professors, I would like to make your expertise on this topic part of my work. The data are anonymous, confidential and cannot be viewed as individual results.

Your support would be one to two hours of your time, during which I would like to talk to you about your experiences and approaches in regards with Sales Strategies on subsidiary level. In return, I will send you a copy of my research paper and personally bring the knowledge closer to you.

In case that permission for sharing this data is needed please contact your Compliance department. As a participant you have to confirm in the beginning at the interview that you are allowed to share the content explained above.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at schm1_18@uni.worc.ac.uk.

With best regards

Maximilian Schwaller

Letter to gatekeeper

Dear Mr. xy,

My name is Maximilian Schwaller, after my apprenticeship as a chef and studying hotel management, I have been working in the sales of investment goods in the HORECA industry for more than 10 years. After national and international sales positions at Rational AG and responsibility for the national B2B key account business at Liebherr Hausgeräte GmbH (Retail & Gas Station), I am now responsible for the B2B partner business in the EMEA region at BRITA GmbH.

With this message I would like to ask you for your approval that your employee XY will be allowed to support me with my doctoral thesis on the subject of 'Sales strategies for international sales subsidiaries in the HORECA equipment industry'.

The aim of the study is to show German B2B organizations in your industry when it makes sense to develop professional, individualized sales strategies for international sales subsidiaries and how much time and effort should be spent on this to achieve the best possible sales success for the subsidiary and your company as a whole.

In addition to a detailed examination of the existing research and interviews with internationally recognized professors, I would like to make the expertise of **XY** on this topic part of my work. The data are anonymous, confidential and cannot be viewed as individual results. **After the interviews each participant will get the transcript for approval and has the right to withdraw from the interview up to 14 days after the interview took place.**

The support would be one to two hours of **his/her** time, during which I would like to talk to **him/her** about **him/her** experiences and approaches in regards with Sales Strategies on subsidiary level. In return, I will send **your company** a copy of my research paper and personally bring the knowledge closer to you.

Your employee XY must confirm in the beginning at the interview that **he/she** is allowed to share the content explained above.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at schm1_18@uni.worc.ac.uk.

With best regards

Maximilian Schwaller

VII Quotations which support the development of the model

Participant	Illustrative quote
Exec 4	<i>'If the company has no focus on KPI orientation and does not set clearly defined goals with linked benefits, the executive management will not force their employees to reach that goals'</i>
Exec 1	<i>'What I have seen throughout my career is that a strict KPI management is a very good basis for a strategy development and implementation.'</i>
Exec 7	<i>'The global sales strategy has to be the basis for all customization approaches '</i>
Salesperson 2	<i>'The global sales strategy gives us orientation and guidance on what we should focus on a broader scale'</i>
Exec 6	<i>'For me it is very important to have the trust and the go of my board members to be fully convinced. This will be seen by my employees and show them that I am fully committed.'</i>
Exec 4	<i>'A global CRM system is the basis for a good decision-making process '</i>
Salesperson 7	<i>'If there is no focus on a proper CRM usage, nobody is going to use it '</i>
Exec 6	<i>'Yes, I see a correlation between CRM usage and organizational success '</i>
Exec 1	<i>'My most successful sales managers check their KPIs on a regular basis'</i>
Exec 4	<i>'I expect from the senior sales managers that they know their numbers when I call them '</i>
Exec 1	<i>'There is no one-size-fits-all solution for resource allocation within a strategy development process '</i>

Exec 10	<i>'Sometimes it might be more effective to hire external support than instead of trying to do everything within the own company '</i>
Exec 1	<i>'In volatile times, the goals need to be adjust during the year if needed '</i>
Salesperson 5	<i>'It is very hard to work for a management team that is either to strategic without operational knowledge or to operational without strategic guidelines '</i>
Salesperson 3	<i>'I do not need a manager that changes its mind every day '</i>
Salesperson 8	<i>'The perfect combination is a strategic guidance that is developed with operative knowledge '</i>
Exec 6	<i>'It does not make sense to stick with goals if the environment has changed significantly '</i>
Exec 7	<i>'The KPIs need to be developed but then reviewed and checked on a quarterly basis'</i>

VII Practical handbook for practitioners

Person



Doctor of Business Administration- University of Worcester

Individualisierte Vertriebsstrategien für internationale Tochterunternehmen

-

Wie B2B Unternehmen ihren Umsatz und ihre Marge nachhaltig steigern können

Zu meiner Person

- ❖ Geboren 1988
- ❖ Verheiratet, 3 Kinder
- ❖ Ausbildung zum Koch
- ❖ B.S. in Hotel Management, M.B.A. in General Management, Doctor of Business Administration
- ❖ 10+ Jahre nationale und internationale Vertriebs- und Key Account Management Erfahrung in Irland, den USA und vielen weiteren Ländern
- ❖ Sales Director bei der BRITA GmbH und Verantwortlich für das B2B Partner Geschäft in der EMEA Region für Professional Filter & Professional Dispenser
- ❖ Hobbies: Essen und Kochen, Wein, Kaffee, Reisen, Lesen



Inhalt der Forschung

Welchen Einfluss haben international individualisierte Vertriebsstrategien...



auf die Ergebnisse internationaler Tochterunternehmen von deutschen Mittelständischen Unternehmen?



auf das Verhalten und die Resultate der Vertriebsmitarbeiter



Welche Voraussetzungen müssen bei den Unternehmen gegeben sein um individualisierte Vertriebsstrategien anwenden zu können

Executive Summary

Individualisierte Vertriebsstrategien auf Tochterlevel bewirken...



nachhaltige Steigerung von
Umsatz und Marge



niedrigere Fluktuation von
fähigen Vertriebsmitarbeitern



wachsende Marktanteile in
schwierigen Märkten



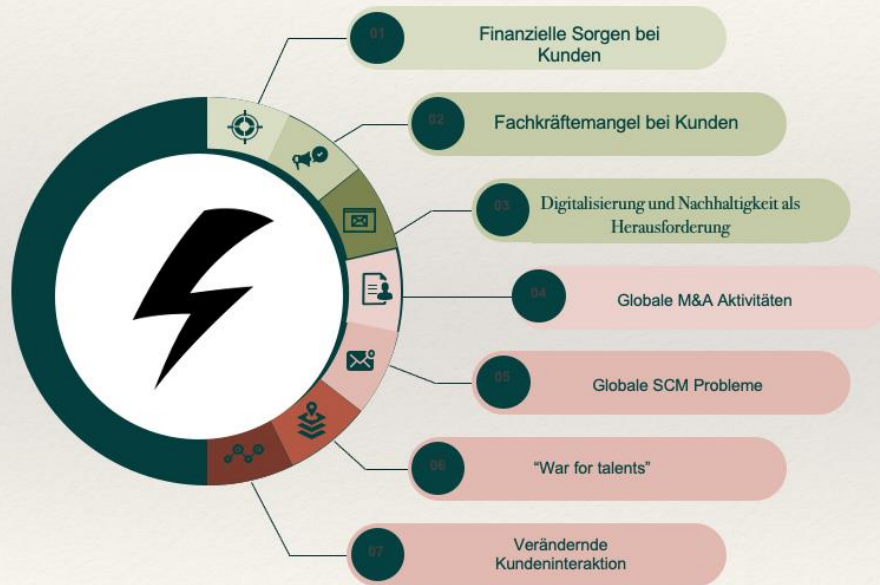
die Lösung globaler
Herausforderungen mit lokalen
Werkzeugen



Gesteigertes
Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl
im Team

Die Welt wird VUKA und Covid-19 ist ein Beschleuniger

„VUKA“ steht für volatil, unsicher, komplex und ambivalent – jene Merkmale des digitalen Zeitalters, die zunehmend für Unsicherheit sorgen.



“Eine Strategie um die VUKA Herausforderungen zu meistern wird eines unserer wichtigsten Tools für die nächsten 5-10 Jahre werden”

CSO, Mittelständiges Unternehmen BaWü, 700 Mio. € Umsatz

“Globale Flexibilität zu schaffen ohne unseren eigenen Werte und Prinzipien aufzugeben ist eine unserer größten strategischen Herausforderungen ”

Head of Global Sales, Mittelständiges Unternehmen Bayern, 900 Mio. € Umsatz

Die Vertriebsstrategie als Leitplanke für alle globalen Vertriebsaktivitäten



Unternehmen mit einer Vertriebsstrategie sind deutlich erfolgreicher als Unternehmen ohne Vertriebsstrategie

(Churchill, Gilbert A *et al.*, 1985, Cross *et al.*, 2001, Avlonitis, 2010, Panagopoulos and Avlonitis, 2010 and Jaramillo, 2019)

Globale Strategieentwicklung, -einführung und -umsetzung

In der Vergangenheit wurde die Vertriebsstrategie oft vom Headquarter vorgegeben und gesteuert

Vorteile:

- Kontrolle über den Prozess
- Leichte Vergleichbarkeit
- Niedrige Komplexität

Nachteile:

- Globale Strategie passt nicht für jedes Land
- Nachteile vs. lokalen und agilen Wettbewerb
- Globale Strategien tendieren dazu, das mittlere Management und Vertriebsmitarbeiter zu demotivieren



“Wir haben uns in die Augen gesehen und eingestanden, dass wir nicht so flexibel waren wie wir es gerne wären”

CEO, Mittelständisches Unternehmen, Hessen 550 Mio. € Umsatz“

Lokale Strategieentwicklung, -einführung und -umsetzung

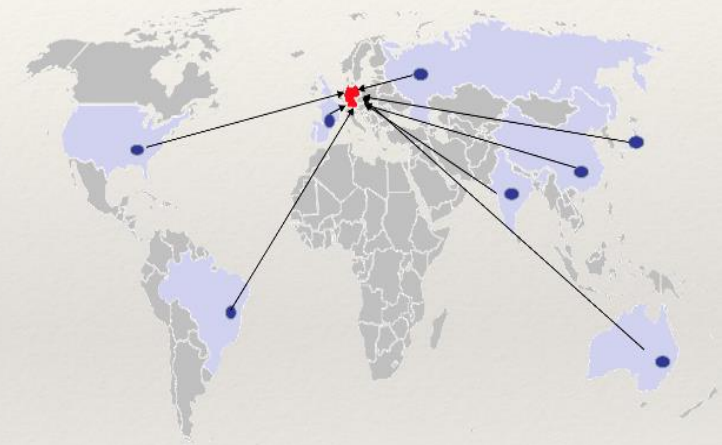
Individualisierte Vertriebsstrategien im globalen Rahmen können den Tochterunternehmen einen signifikanten Wettbewerbsvorteil bringen

Vorteile:

- Effiziente und marktorientiertes Tochterunternehmen
- Wettbewerbsvorteile gegen globale und lokale Wettbewerber
- Hohe Motivation im lokalen Management und im Vertriebsteam

Nachteile:

- Mehr Zeitaufwand für die Strategieentwicklung
- Höhere Anforderungen an das lokale Team
- Interne / Externe Unterstützung notwendig



Wie kann der Fortschritt und die Zielerreichung sichergestellt werden?

Sicherstellung der Zielerreichung

Entwicklung von Länderspezifischen Zielen und KPIs auf Basis des globalen Budgets und der globalen Strategie

Planung individueller Maßnahmen um die Ziele zu erreichen

Maßnahmen detaillieren und quantifizieren

Zusammenfassung in mid-term P&L



	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Initiative 1	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 2	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 3	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 4	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 5	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 6	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 7	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 8	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 9	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Initiative 10	100k	150k	200k	250k	300k
Total	4.788k €	5.927k €	7.432k €	8.268k €	9.188k €

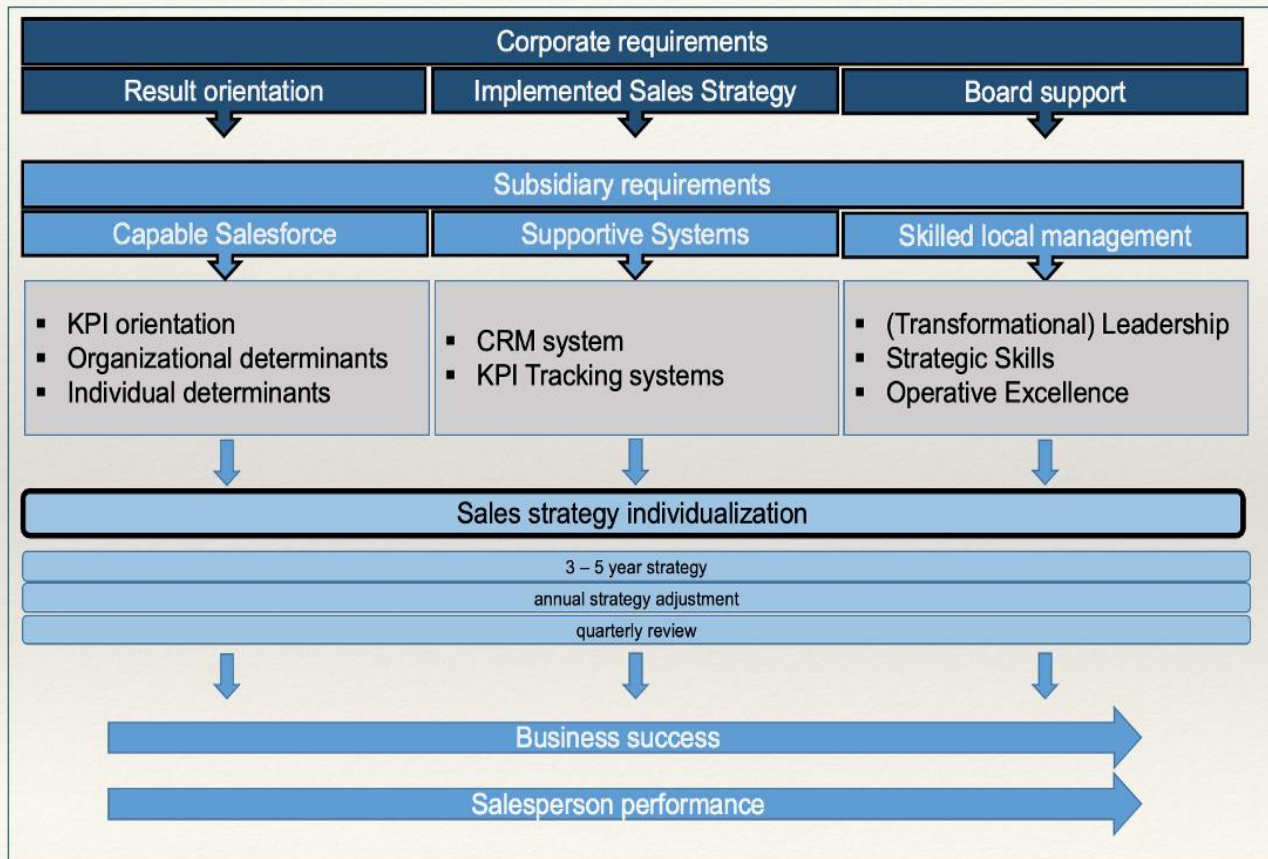
„Den Tochtergesellschaften maximale Freiheit bei vollem Kommitment zu den gemeinsamen Zielen zu geben war einer der schwierigsten und besten Managemententscheidungen der letzten Jahre“

CSO, Mittelständiges Unternehmen BaWü, 500 Mio. € Umsatz

„Durch diesen Prozess steigen die Anforderungen an das lokale Management, jedoch ist die Begeisterung und Motivation des Teams jeden Tag zu spüren. Wir sind für unseren eigenen Erfolg verantwortlich.“

Geschäftsführer Tochtergesellschaft Frankreich

Voraussetzungen für individualisierte Vertriebsstrategien



„Investitionen in digitale Tools und unsere Mitarbeiter sind wichtige Bausteine für unseren zukünftigen Vertriebserfolg“

Vice President EMEA, Deutschland

Executive summary

Das Resultat von individualisierten Vertriebsstrategien ist...



Steigerung von Umsatz und Marge durch den Richtigen Mix aus lokalen und globalen Initiativen



Verringerung der Fluktuation durch sinnhafte und motivierende Arbeit



Wachstum der Marktanteile durch globale Konzepte, die die lokalen Anforderungen erfüllen



Lösung globaler Herausforderung durch lokale Werkzeuge



Führung der lokalen und motivierten Teams durch effiziente Aktivitäten und eine passende KPI Messung

Thank you

"It is not the
strongest species
that survives, nor the
most intelligent, but
the most responsive
to change."

Charles Darwin

