

# Customer References as Marketing Practice in Company Web Sites – Content and Discourse Analysis

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## Abstract

Utilization of customer references is an important practice in business marketing. In the recent years the World Wide Web has become an increasingly important channel for communicating customer references as buyers use the Internet to source suppliers and solutions for their specific needs. However, the communication practices that companies actually use to present their references have not been studied. This paper reports on a study which explores how companies communicate about their customer references on their Web sites and how reference relationship is discursively constructed in these descriptions by using content and discourse analysis as research methods. The data consists of 140 reference descriptions gathered from three case companies' Web sites. The study identifies three discourses that construct the reference relationship from different perspectives: discourse of benefits, discourse of commitment, and discourse of technological expertise. For managerial implications, the results of the study suggest that companies can use reference descriptions to construct varying images depending on their needs and goals.

## Keywords

customer references, business relationships, discourse analysis, web sites, industrial marketing

## Introduction

The importance of customer references in business marketing is greatly acknowledged by business managers. The need for references is especially high for companies which try to enter new markets where they do not have an established reputation, and for companies operating in fields characterized by high technological uncertainty. To date the Internet can be used to establish direct contacts with possible customers. This requires that the possible customer has to be convinced about the supplier's competence and reliability. Customer references and testimonials from existing customers in the supplier's Web site are one way to provide evidence about the supplier's competence. For example, lists of reference customers' names are a commonly used practise in companies' Web sites. In addition to simple reference lists, a growing number of suppliers utilize their references even more extensively, by including reference descriptions in the form of "reference cases", "success stories", and "customer cases" on their Web sites. Usually these texts involve a description of the customer's problem and a description of the supplier's solution, as well as endorsing comments from the reference customer. What these texts have in common, is that they all describe the reference relationship between the supplier and the reference customer. Thus, these texts offer a fruitful data source for studying how companies communicate their

customer references and how the reference relationship is constructed discursively in companies' Web sites.

The purpose of the present study is to increase the understanding of references as a marketing practice by exploring the discourses in reference descriptions gathered from companies' Web sites. The research questions are as follows:

- 1) What are the main themes in companies' reference descriptions?
- 2) What discourses and discursive practices can be identified?
- 3) How the reference relationship is discursively constructed?
- 4) How the subject positions of the supplier and the reference customer are constructed?

The concept of subject position in discourse analysis refers to the different "roles" that the actors are given in the discourse (Davies and Harre 2000). Thus, when exploring the discourses special attention is paid to the ways in which the reference customer and the supplier are presented.

The structure of the paper is the following: *first*, the concept of reference and previous research on references is introduced, followed by a brief introduction to the research traditions selected for the present study. *Second*, the methodology and process of data generation and analysis are described. *Third*, the results of the discourse analysis are presented and discussed in the light of the theoretical traditions. *Finally*, managerial implications and suggestions for future research are proposed.

## **References as a research object in business marketing**

The concept of reference is rarely used in scientific literature. However, in managerially oriented magazines the word reference is used quite frequently. For example such terms as "customer references," "client list", "supplier references", "client references," and "user references" are often used. Salminen (1997, 311) defines the concept of reference as follows: "A reference is the supplier's relationship to its existing or former customer that can be evaluated by that customer in terms of the supplier's product, service, management, and co-operation performance".

Business marketers and managers have long recognized the benefits of having good references, and recently the importance of customer references has been identified also in academic research. Salminen (1997) has studied the role of references in international industrial marketing and Salminen and Möller (forthcoming) have identified the potential modes of reference usage and proposed a conceptual framework of references. Regarding reference utilization practices, success factors of a reference visit have been examined (Salminen 2001), as well as the use of references in industrial bidding (Salminen and Möller 2004). Helm (2000) has approached the referencing phenomenon from different perspective by studying customer referrals and motives for recommendations.

### Modes of reference usage in business marketing

References have various tasks in business marketing, such as reducing the perceived risk of a potential buyer and signaling the supplier's credibility. Also the practices through which references are utilized are various. These include reference visits, reference lists, and brochures of customer cases handed together with an offer, as well as communicating references through the Internet. The potential modes of reference usage have been identified from procurement rules, marketing textbooks, and scientific literature (Salminen and Möller 2003). The identified modes of reference usage in business marketing from the buyer's perspective are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Modes of reference usage in business marketing (Salminen and Möller 2003, 32)

GROWTH AREA SPECIFIC PURPOSE	UNIVERSAL TASKS	GROWTH AREA SPECIFIC TASKS	PRACTICES
Keeping present and winning new customers (in present markets with present products)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- aid in becoming shortlisted</li> <li>- aid in becoming finally selected</li> <li>- win new customers</li> <li>- break competing supplier relationships</li> <li>- get into new project market</li> <li>- re-establish credibility among old customers</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- visits / demonstrations in reference sites</li> <li>- articles in trade journals</li> <li>- press releases</li> <li>- reference lists</li> </ul>
As effective start for entry process as possible (with present products)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- serve as a strategic criterion in bidding decisions</li> <li>- signal service quality</li> <li>- prove the functionality of technology to the supplier</li> <li>- prove the functionality of technology to the buyer</li> </ul>	<p>Use domestic customers to facilitate entry.</p> <p>Create strong entry customer relationships facilitating further actor contacts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- detailed descriptions of similar contracts</li> <li>- promotional material</li> <li>- seminars and conferences</li> </ul>
Accelerating the adoption of innovation (in present markets with new products)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- overcome buyer's high switching costs</li> <li>- enhance source credibility to convince a buyer about product and supplier performance</li> <li>- improve sales force performance</li> <li>- develop supplier's image</li> <li>- aid in the access to new market segments</li> </ul>	<p>Speedup the diffusion process of a new product/ technology through the "launching" customers.</p> <p>Legitimate new technology by demonstrating superiority and attack the industry's existing technology paradigm</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- request for reference customers to promote their supplier relationship</li> <li>- Internet</li> </ul>

The identified modes of reference usage show that references can be used across all the three growth strategies of a firm. The "universal tasks" of references, grouped into internal and external tasks, are tasks that are independent of the supplier's growth strategies. The "growth area specific tasks" include objectives that are related to each relevant growth strategy in the utilization of references. In the "practices" column, the operational ways through which

references can be used are described. The results of Salminen and Möller's study show that references are regarded as an important instrument in industrial marketing, although the ways in which references are discussed in the literature is very fragmented.

### **Characteristics of Web-based reference communication**

There are certain special characteristics in communicating customer references through companies' Web sites compared to other practices, such as reference visits or a brochure of customer cases handed together with an offer. The Web site represents a relatively easy and inexpensive way to communicate customer references. Unlike other reference communication practices, such as reference visits or handed brochures, in Web the potential customer is in greater control of choosing and processing information. It is in the customer's power to decide which Web pages to browse, for how long, and how much information to obtain (Dholakia and Rego 1998, 724). From the business marketing perspective, the Web has a lot in common with a trade show. According to Berthon et al. (1998, 693) the Web can be thought of as a large international exhibition hall, where potential buyers can visit exhibitors and potential suppliers. The central problem facing both a trade show marketer and a web marketer is how to attract visitors to the extent that they become customers (Berthon 1998 et. al. 693). References have an important role in attracting Web site visitors, as their purpose is to signal the supplier's credibility and reduce the risk of a potential buyer.

### **Theoretical approaches to research on interorganizational relationships**

The present study focuses on exploring how the reference relationship is discursively constructed in companies' reference descriptions. The following research traditions have been selected to form the theoretical background against which the identified discourses can be meaningfully analyzed.

The transaction cost theory focuses on the basic questions of efficient governance structures and optimal boundaries of the firm (e.g. Coase 1937, Williamson 1975). The essential of transaction cost theory is based on the firms 'make or buy' decision making (Möller, Rajala and Svahn 2004, 216). According to the resource dependency approach (e.g. Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) and the more recent dynamic capabilities view (e.g. Teece et al. 1997, Foss 1999, Eisenhardt and Martin 2000), the reason for developing inter-firm relationships is the access to external resources and capabilities. However, these traditions see the role of resources and capabilities as a source of competitive advantage in different ways (Blomqvist 2002, 39). The social exchange theory (Blau 1964, Kelley and Thibault 1978, Dwyer et al. 1987) is interested in human behavior and emphasizes reciprocity and the role of social dimension in business relationships. The interaction approach presented by the IMP group (e.g. Håkansson 1982, Möller and Wilson 1995, Ford et al. 1998) also adopts the social dimension in business relationships, but focuses on emphasizing the dynamics and interaction in relationship development. Table 2 summarizes the research traditions and their basic premises and concepts.

Table 2. Summary of the research traditions (adapted from Blomqvist 2002, 58)

Approach	Focus	Premises	Conceptual Tools
<b>Transaction Cost Theory</b>	Transaction cost as a determinant for governance decisions.	Homogenous, autonomous, opportunistic and rational actors in a transparent, uncertain world.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Opportunism</li> <li>- Rationality</li> <li>- Uncertainty</li> <li>- Efficiency</li> </ul>
<b>Resource Dependency Approach</b>	Companies dependency on each others' resources	Emergence and management of firm-specific resources, path-dependency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Switching costs</li> <li>- Valuable, unique resources</li> <li>- Inter-organizational power</li> </ul>
<b>Dynamic Capabilities View</b>	Firms' differences in their behavior to create dynamic capabilities.	Innovation as a basis of economic evolution and competitiveness. Different organizational capabilities create different knowledge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dynamic capabilities:</li> <li>- Processes and routines</li> <li>- Path and positions</li> </ul>
<b>Social Exchange Theory</b>	Relationship development and close relationships	Mutual rewards are needed to exchange resources. Learning through experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-interest and reciprocity</li> <li>- Interdependence</li> <li>- Close relationship</li> <li>- Cooperation</li> </ul>
<b>Interaction Approach</b>	Dynamics and reciprocal exchange. Dyadic exchange relationship	Firms are heterogeneous with resource interdependence. Cooperation and competition exist simultaneously.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adaptation</li> <li>- Investments</li> <li>- Commitment and trust</li> <li>- Communication</li> </ul>

The research traditions presented above view the customer relationship in different ways; they employ different concepts and metaphors and pay attention to different problems while ignoring others (Blomqvist 2002, 39). For example, the transaction cost theory emphasizes the uncertainty and opportunistic aspect of business relationships, whereas the social exchange theory and the interaction approach focus on the development of trust and commitment in business relationships. On the micro-level, companies' reference descriptions construct a social reality by partly reflecting the ideas of these larger macro-level discursive repertoires. As Hardy et al. note (2000, 1232), in order to understand the discursive activity, it is important to study both the discursive strategies used by the actors in institutional level and the broader context of relevant discourses that operate on a more general level, as well as the links between these two.

## Research setting

The data gathering for the study started in the spring 2005. The Web sites of the 500 largest Finnish companies were reviewed in order to find case companies fulfilling the set criteria. The case companies were selected according to three criteria. The first and most important criterion was that the company must operate in business-to-business markets. The second criterion was that the size of the company should be over 250 employees. Finally, the

company's Web site must include reference-related material, such as customer cases, success stories, or customer testimonials. Three Finnish companies in the ICT-field, Nokia, TietoEnator, and F-secure were finally selected. The research data consists of 144 reference descriptions gathered from the selected companies' Web sites, and the total amount of data is approximately 160 pages. The reference descriptions were transformed into text files for computer-assisted analysis, as well as kept as print files in order to capture a snapshot from the Internet.

As in all Internet-related research, the problem is that the Word Wide Web is in constant flux and can never be totally captured in a snapshot (Pollach 2002, 7). What also has to be noticed is that the selected texts are the companies' marketing material targeted to a certain audience with specific purposes and they do not represent the objective 'truth' about the reference relationship. However, the 'objective truth value' of the data is irrelevant for discourse analysis because the focus is on the realities and different perspectives that the texts construct. (Burr 1995, 160)

The analytic process adopted in the present study is twofold. The preliminary analysis of the textual data was conducted by using content analysis. According to Phillips and Hardy (2002, 74), systematic forms of analysis, such as content analysis, can be counterproductive in discourse analysis, because they aim at rapid consolidation of categories and are helpful in analyzing large volumes of data. The second phase of the analysis was discourse analysis, which aimed at identifying the discourses and discursive practices in the reference descriptions. While other qualitative methodologies work to understand and interpret social reality as it exists, discourse analysis aims to uncover the way in which a phenomenon is produced. Thus, discourse analysis examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects and reveals it (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 7). The study adopts a social constructionist research approach, according to which language has a role in constituting the reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966). The social constructionist approach is relevant for the present study because it allows the view that the reference relationship and the subject positions of the supplier and the customer are constructed through the use of language.

The analysis of the research data included several, partly overlapping phases. The process of data analysis is depicted in Figure 1. The content analysis was conducted by coding the data with the help of Atlas/ti software. The method was open coding and the coding was done several times in order to capture all variations in the data. The actual discourse analysis was conducted in two closely related phases as suggested by Potter and Wetherell (1987, 168) *first*, by searching for patterns in the data and looking for differences and shared features in the content or form of the reference descriptions, and *second*, by examining the functions and consequences that the texts have. The identified discourses were taken under closer examination in order to deepen the interpretation and to seek linguistic evidence for the identified discourses. At this point, the subject positions of the customer and the supplier were taken under closer examination. Finally, to validate the findings, the amount of coded passages in each theme was checked with the help of the Atlas/ti software.

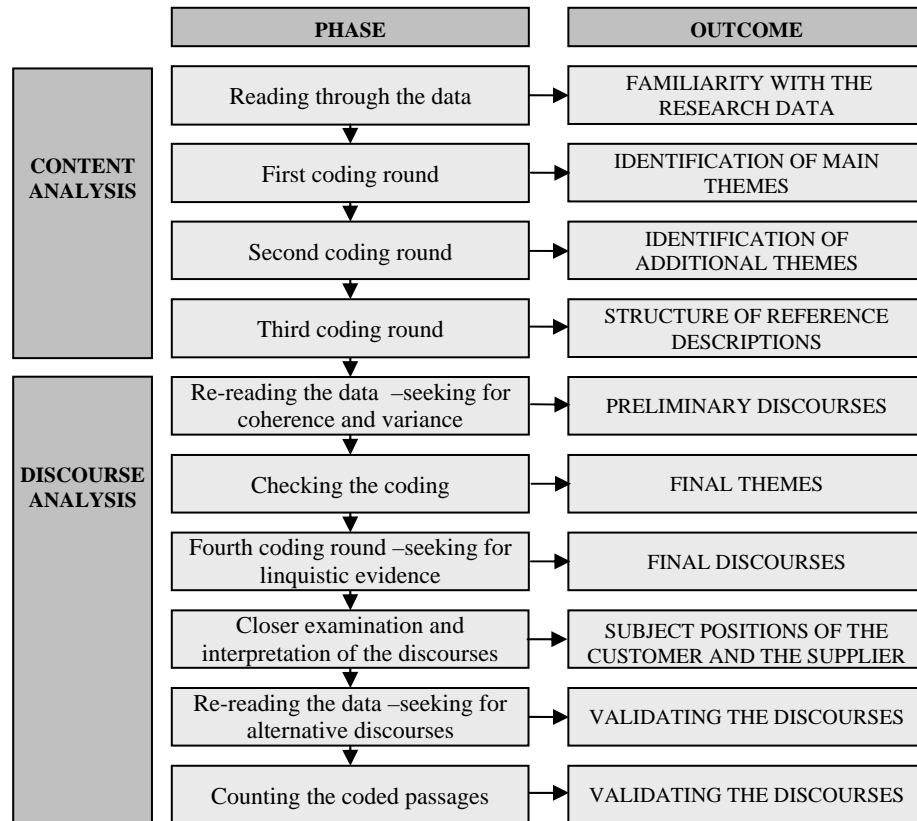


Figure 1. Process of data analysis and interpretation

## Results of the content analysis

The content analysis resulted in identification of the main themes that form the overall structure of reference descriptions. After several rounds of coding, it became clear that the descriptions included themes that were constantly repeated. The reference descriptions often began with key facts about the reference customer and a description of the customer's problem, need, and objectives. The reasons for choosing the supplier were often presented as well as a description of the supplier's role and responsibilities in the product/project delivery. Many descriptions included specific product details and a description of how the solution is in use in the customer's organization. Common themes were also the scope and time schedule of the product/project delivery. Few of the references descriptions also mentioned the challenges faced during the delivery. The most common themes in the descriptions were the results and benefits that the solution had brought to the supplier. The descriptions often involved a part where the "key benefits" or "main advantages" of the solution were presented. The identified themes that form the structure of reference descriptions are depicted in Figure 2.

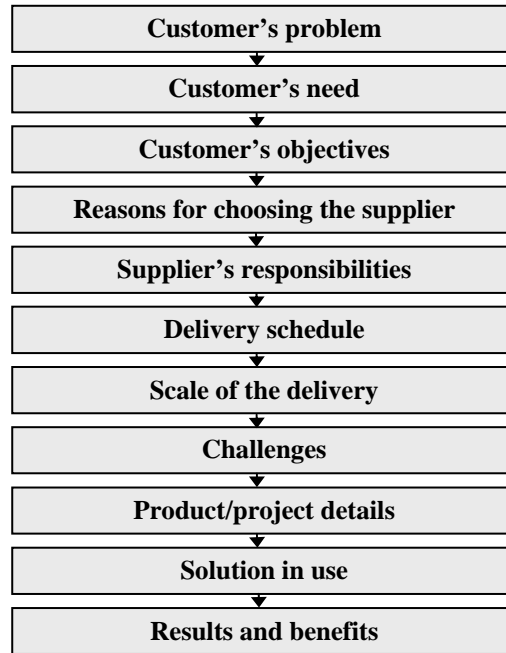


Figure 2. Identified themes and structure of reference descriptions

## Results of the discourse analysis

The discourse analysis resulted in identification of three major discourses, discourse of benefits, discourse of commitment, and discourse of technological expertise. Each of the identified discourses raises certain themes and treats them in a particular way. The discourses produce a certain perspective on the reference relationship and construct the subject position of the supplier in different ways. The identified discourses were partly overlapping and one reference description may include elements from all three discourses, sometimes even within one sentence. This is common, because a discourse seldom exists as its pure self in data (Lampinen 2005, 44). The identified discourses, the themes that constitute them and the view that they produce on the reference relationship and on the supplier are presented in Table 3.

An interesting finding was that whereas the discourses viewed the supplier from different perspectives, the subject position of the customer was constructed stereotypically in every discourse as a satisfied and important customer. In addition, the customer was repeatedly presented as a “leading vendor” and “innovative in adopting new solutions”.

*“The Nordea Group, a **world leader** in Internet banking with 3.3 million e-customers, is the **first bank to implement** the Finance Portal solution.”*

*“AstraZeneca, one of the **world’s leading** pharmaceutical companies, not only **innovates** with new and effective medicines, but also by adopting the Nokia 9210 Communicator as a powerful business tool, increasing efficiency and productivity.”*

Table 3. Identified discourses and the elements that construct them

	<b>Discourse of Benefits</b>	<b>Discourse of Commitment</b>	<b>Discourse of Technological Expertise</b>
<b>Main themes</b>	Cost savings Time savings Increased efficiency Improved productivity Improved quality Context-specific benefits Benefits for the end-user Benefits for the society	<b>Closeness</b> Commitment Cooperation Partnership Interaction/communication Sharing knowledge Shared goals Support <b>Customer orientation</b> Familiarity with customer's business Meeting the customer's needs Customization Flexibility <b>Trust</b> Reliability Keeping promises Responsibility <b>Long-term relationship</b> History of the relationships Developing relationship Future of the relationship	Professionalism Expertise Experience Capability Competence Delivery details Transferring competence Technological leadership
<b>Reference relationship</b>	Source of business benefits	Long-term and close relationship based on trust and commitment	Access to external expertise and leading technologies
<b>Subject position of the supplier</b>	Key actor in customer's success	Committed and reliable partner	Professional and experienced expert
<b>Subject position of the customer</b>	Important and satisfied customer	Important and satisfied customer	Important and satisfied customer

### The discourse of benefits

The most dominant discourse was the discourse of benefits, which was present in almost every reference description. It focuses on the benefits and advantages that the customer has gained from the supplier's solution. Certain benefits were frequently mentioned, such as cost savings, time savings, increased efficiency, improved productivity and increased customer satisfaction. Besides these, the discourse also involves more context specific benefits that depend on the solution at hand. Also benefits that the solution brings to the customer's customer were often mentioned. The following excerpt illustrates the discourse of benefits.

*“Forum Nokia PRO has saved us hundreds of thousands of dollars and opened market opportunities we could not have done ourselves: Forum Nokia PRO has provided our company with all the tools we need so we can focus on applications development and improve the quality of our applications and significantly added to our sales team so we can accomplish more business with less resources.”*

As the excerpt above illustrates, the discourse of benefits views the reference relationship as a source of business benefits for the customer. The discourse focuses more on the customer and its needs and than on the supplier. The subject position of the supplier is constructed through the benefits that the supplier brings to the customer. The supplier is someone who “provides” benefits for the customer and “enables” and “allows” the customer to do better business. The supplier is also often presented as strategically important to the customer and a “key actor” in customer’s business.

*“F-Secure **provides** peace of mind, plus it’s a huge time-saver.”*

*“In addition to reliable delivery and deployment, the Nokia solution **brings considerable savings** in operating expenditures. We know that **with Nokia we can secure success.**”*

Besides telling about the benefits for the customer and the end user, some reference descriptions also described the benefits that the whole society gains from the supplier’s products. The supplier and its products are presented here as improving the society and bringing more welfare to people:

*“When the TietoEnator’s Operation planning system is implemented in the Central Finland Hospital, patients will receive care faster than before.” Intensified resource utilization offers **care for more patients** and more quickly. In addition, careful resource planning **saves the taxpayers’ money.**”*

### **The discourse of commitment**

The second identified discourse is the discourse commitment, which focuses on the relationship between the supplier and the customer. This discourse includes several themes that can be divided into four groups: closeness, customer orientation, trust, and long-term relationship. It constructs the reference relationship as close, co-operative partnership, which is built on trust and long-term commitment. The discourse of commitment also emphasizes openness and information sharing between the partners. “Working together towards common goals” and “sharing information” are often used metaphors in this discourse.

*“Of course, **working together** on such a project is vital. This was an element that Mr. Roemer was particularly pleased with. “**The co-operation was brilliant,**” he says. “The project was set up as a **team** between the two companies right from the beginning and this was one of the winning factors... **We were definitely working like partners.**”*

*“**Communication was very open,** project plans with work estimates were **shared and discussed together,** and possible setbacks were communicated early. “This is exactly our aim in Nokia **working together toward the same goal** and helping each other out as much as possible by seeking at all times to be **honest, open and transparent** about the challenges we find”*

The discourse of commitment includes also the theme of long-term relationships. Previous co-operation as well as future of the relationship were often mentioned. In the following excerpt the relationship is presented as being a long-term partnership rather than an individual delivery.

*“The Competence Transfer Program has been a result of **more than two years of co-operation** with Nokia. This is a good example of a **partnership** between Vodafone Omnitel and Nokia, rather than the delivery of a simple training service.”*

Support is one of the dominating themes in the discourse of commitment. This theme ranged from formal “support service” and “technical assistance” to more informal support. The support that the customer had received from the supplier was highly appreciated by the customers who often considered the support as a “differentiating factor”. Also the theme of flexibility was strongly present in the discourse of commitment. The supplier was presented as a flexible partner who is willing to do “whatever it takes” to get the customer’s problem solved.

*“F-Secure definitely provides the best bang for the buck. I’ve had a lot of experience calling support services and they have been the most **helpful**. Whether it’s been detailed, step-by-step assistance or escalating the problem to a specialist, **they do whatever it takes**. I’ve even had people call me from home on a cell phone to get my problem resolved.”*

Another important theme in the discourse commitment is trust. Trust, reliability, honesty and responsibility are attributes related to the supplier and issues that are seen as important factors in a business relationship.

*“The three main reasons the partnership with Nokia has been so successful are their **responsiveness, reliability** and, basically, their **honesty**”*

*“My reputation was on the line with each of my clients when I was running my own company,” said Simmer, “and **F-Secure never let me down.**”*

As the extracts above illustrate, the discourse of commitment constructs very strongly the subject position of the supplier as being a committed and honest partner who is close to its customers. The supplier is more like a partner who is willing to invest in the relationship than a regular supplier. The supplier is also presented as an active party, who offers its support and remains in constant contact with the customer.

### **The discourse of technological expertise**

The third identified discourse focuses on the supplier and emphasizes its technological expertise. The discourse includes the themes of expertise, professionalism, experience, competences, and capabilities. Endorsing and praising expressions such as “state-of-the-art”, “setting the industry benchmark” and “cutting-edge expertise” are typical for this discourse.

*“Having delivered more than 150 networks around the world, Nokia has a **solid track record of delivery capability and experience** in keeping networks operating at **peak performance**. This success is also reflected in our **ability** to integrate new technologies into existing networks in multivendor environments.”*

*“For both us and our customer, a **state-of-the-art** and scaleable solution was important. We selected TietoEnator, with its **experience of more than 15 years** as a partner, to implement the solution so that our **high quality standard** would be guaranteed from the beginning.”*

As the excerpts above illustrate, the discourse of technological expertise constructs the subject position of the supplier as a professional and experienced expert, who has the needed experience, capabilities and competences to solve the customer’s problem. The discourse of technological expertise involves also a lot of specific product details and detailed descriptions of how the product/project delivery was “managed well” and “completed efficiently” despite of the possible challenges. Good planning, effective project handling, and ability to follow the schedule were often mentioned.

*“The globally agreed activities were done by Nokia according to the planned schedule without ambiguity. There was good project document planning and scheduling. Nokia have the **agility to manage changes** in SFR’s own planning and that shows **good organization and agility** on their side. It’s not an easy issue to manage and this was done well by Nokia.”*

*“We wanted to work with Nokia in order to get expertise on the subjects in hand. In order for this to happen, we needed to **learn about the new technology** and really get the help from manufacturer of this technology who knows it best.”*

As the excerpt above illustrates, the reasons for selecting the supplier in the discourse of technological expertise were often presented as being the supplier’s leading technologies and expertise. “Transferring competence” and “bringing in the expertise” are often used expressions in this discourse. By focusing on the supplier’s expertise and technological know-how that the customer values, the discourse constructs the reference relationship as an access to external expertise and technologies.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to identify the main themes and discourses in companies reference descriptions and explore how the reference relationship and the subject positions of the supplier and the customer are constructed in the texts. The study resulted in the following conclusions.

- Conclusion 1.* A certain structure and repetitive themes can be identified in the reference descriptions.
- Conclusion 2.* There are three discourses that companies use when communicating about

their customer references: discourse of benefits, discourse of commitment, and discourse of technological expertise.

*Conclusion 3.* The identified discourses construct the reference relationship from three different perspectives that are intertwined: as a source of benefits, as a close partnership, and as an access to external expertise.

*Conclusion 4.* The identified discourses construct the subject position of the supplier from three different perspectives: as a provider of benefits, as a committed partner, and as a technological expert, whereas the customer is stereotypically presented as an important and satisfied customer.

The analysis also revealed that especially the discourse of benefits is popular in companies' reference descriptions. The dominance of the benefits discourse may be partly explained by the fact that it offers a good way to communicate the value of the relationship (e.g. Ulaga and Eggert, 2005). Especially in complex projects the supplier's ability to create value for the customer is very important (Cova et al. 2002, 39). Concrete benefits, such as the estimated amount of cost savings, are an efficient way of communicating the value of the relationship in a way that can be easily evaluated by the potential customer. This is important in communicating about references, as the potential customer has to be able to estimate the benefits and sacrifice so that he can decide whether to invest in the relationship (Salminen 1997, 99).

The discourse of benefits can be linked to the transaction cost approach as it emphasizes the cost/benefit ratio of the relationship and focuses more on individual solutions than on the relationship between the supplier and the customer. The discourse of commitment draws strongly from the "relationship as a marriage" metaphor (e.g. Levitt 1983, Hunt and Morgan 1995, Tynan, 1997, Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2001) and can be related to the social exchange theory and interaction approach as it emphasizes closeness and long-term aspect of the relationship. The discourse of technological expertise views the relationship as an access to external expertise and focuses on the supplier's capabilities and competence. Thus, it can be linked to both resource dependency approach and to dynamic capabilities view. However, the discourse of technological expertise seems to draw especially from the dynamic capabilities thinking as it sees the business relationship as a mechanism to integrate internal and external competences. These links between the theoretical traditions and the identified discourses demonstrate the partial views that the different research traditions provide to studying interorganizational relationships and illustrate the need to combine ideas and concepts from different paradigms.

### **Theoretical and methodological implications**

The results of the study contribute to the emerging theory of referencing in two ways. *First*, the results of the content analysis increase the understanding of reference descriptions as one practice of reference utilization by identifying their structure and themes (Salminen and Möller, forthcoming). *Second*, the results of the discourse analysis increase the understanding of reference relationships by providing insights to their discursive construction. The dominance of the benefits discourse shows that the concept of relationship value (e.g. Baxter and Matear 2004, Ulaga and Eggert, 2005), is important in reference relationships and should be taken into consideration when developing the theory of referencing.

The study also provides methodological insights to the research on interorganizational relationships by introducing a discursive approach to business relationships. Discourse analysis has lately received increased attention especially in the field of organization and management studies (e.g. Vaara 2002, Tienari et al. 2003, Phillips et al. 2004). For example, a discursive approach to strategy has been introduced (Hardy et al. 2000, Vaara 2004). However, only few studies have applied discourse analysis to studying business relationships (Tuusjärvi 2003, Poncini 2003). It is argued here that a discursive approach to business relationships could complement the traditional approaches and provide valuable insights to the social construction of relationships practices. For example, studies focusing on the role of communication between individuals in business relationships (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2000) and studies investigating the meanings that individuals themselves give to different aspects of business relationships (Turnbull et al. 1996) could benefit from a discursive approach.

### **Managerial implications**

The results of the study can help companies develop their reference utilization practices. *First*, companies can use the identified structure of reference descriptions as a framework when communicating their references by selecting the elements that are suitable for their own needs. *Second*, companies can use the identified discourses by selecting the ones that best serve their reference utilization goals. For example, when the primary target of reference utilization is to increase sales, the company can communicate the value of its offerings by utilizing the benefits discourse and emphasize the concrete benefits that its solution has brought to reference customers. Companies seeking to establish partnerships can emphasize their partnership ability by utilizing the commitment discourse and focus on describing their partnership-type references. The discourse of technological expertise can be used to demonstrate company's technological competence and transfer ability.

### **Suggestions for future research**

Utilization of customer references is a phenomenon, which is theoretically underdeveloped in relation to its managerial relevance and needs further attention in the academic research. For example, the nature of the reference relationship should be investigated further. It would be relevant to examine the social construction of reference relationships in business manager's talk and study the ways in which people involved in the buyer company construct the meaning of customer references.

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