



**CHALMERS**  
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# **Mapping service providers' positions in the market**

## **- Exploring the field for evaluating technology consultancy firms**

*Master's Thesis in the Master's Programme Management and Economics of Innovation*

VICTOR ANDERSSON



MASTER'S THESIS E2017:063

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## ABSTRACT

Positioning a company in an industry provides opportunities for firms to differentiate themselves and provide additional value to their customers. In order to work efficiently with their positioning, keeping track of the different perceptions of the own company's position is essential. This thesis aims to develop a model to help companies evaluate their position from the customers' perspective. Additionally, the different perspectives on positioning have been examined together with possible ways to operationalize the model.

As this model were developed in the technology consultancy industry with customers within process and manufacturing industries, it differs from earlier models. Previous attempts to evaluate positions and customers' perceptions have been conducted in consumer markets where adoptions of positioning strategies are more common, which makes a model of this kind one rather unique. Also, many of the previous attempts to evaluate positioning is solely based on the managers' perspective.

This work has been conducted in an iterative manner where literature have been tested and adopted against the customers and employees in the context. Empirical findings together with previous literature have made the foundation on which the conclusions for this thesis have been drawn. The proposed model consists of 14 dimensions which have been found relevant to customers' perceptions and the value that they perceive. Furthermore, it is argued for a more "value-related" position to be measured due to both the low operability and the weak link of the perceptions of positions (or image) and the customers' purchase decisions. Additionally, the thesis has highlighted the different ways of finding discrepancies in perceptions between the different involved parties, and propose that finding and aligning the perceptions will be of highest importance in order to succeed with positioning.

Finally, it is also proposed that the concept of positioning, and the width of the area, differs between customers and the own employees. Here, employees seem to use positioning in a much wider context and incorporate a more strategic manner. Customers on the other hand, seems to regard a set of areas (which they find relevant) when building their perceptions. Although, the customers view seems to only evaluate the facade of the company and the different areas of interactions through which they connect with their suppliers.

Key words: Positioning, Customer's perception, Technology consultancy,

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

There are many scholars and practitioners that claim that a well-defined and competitive position is key for a company's future success, (Webster, 1991; Morris, 1992; Ellson, 2004; Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999). If this holds true, there seems to be a lack of detailed methods on how to work continuously with positioning during your everyday strategic work, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000; Day & Wensley, 1988). Many of the models to work with positions, especially the more practical approaches are solely based on the practitioners' perspective and influenced by the performer's assumptions, (Amonini, et al., 2010). Despite these attempts, there does not seem to be a generally accepted concept for dealing with a company's position. In addition, there are differences over industries that seem hard to overcome in creating a general model, and even a generic typology, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000).

Also, there seems to be a divide between researchers and practitioners. Researchers have defined positions and derived strategies. Although, little tell practitioners how to use them and how to benefit from the information given by these papers, (de Chernatony, 1994). To complicate things even further, there seems to be multiple definitions of the notion position that differ over both perspectives and domains, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999; DiMingo, 1988). Is position to be viewed in terms of a Porter's competitive forces "view" as a company's position in an industry, (Porter, 1979), or is positioning to be determined in the minds of the customer?

Positioning is crucial in the strategy creation of new firms, or start-ups, (Blank & Dorf, 2012). They claim that the positioning should be the answer to why customers' want to make business with your company. Also they highlight the fact that in order to create an effective position, the company needs to have good insights into their customers wants and need, (Blank & Dorf, 2012; Anderson, et al., 1999). But what happens when looking at incumbent players at a market? Do they work as fiercely with positioning? Perhaps the general assumption is that it is enough to create an effective position for the company once?

Incumbents do already have an offer to the market and a position in the minds of their customers. What do they do in order to keep track of those perceptions? Researchers within the marketing domain are often claiming that, positioning should be given a more influential role in the strategic work in businesses and in academia, (Dovel, 1990; Ries & Trout, 1986). Is positioning for incumbents only an activity for the marketing department, and should it only be conducted when launching a new product? Perhaps the thought of positioning, or re-positioning, seems too complex and costly for incumbents, or they just don't

know how to work continuously with positioning? Researchers have found that in business-to-business organizations, there is an evident lack of clearly employed positioning strategies, (Reeder, et al., 1987; Barr & McNeilly, 2003). Perhaps positioning is less prioritized than other more tangible strategic areas?

As services differ from products in terms of intangibility and perishability, it seems to be of great importance to have a clear position of the company in service markets, as product (service) positioning will be more abstract, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999; Barr & McNeilly, 2003). Furthermore, it is found amongst service businesses that a clear positioning is connected with higher performance measures, (Day & Wensley, 1988; Amonini, et al., 2010). This speaks for the importance of working with positioning over time.

As markets develop, new technology emerges and competition change, the image and position of a company will change with it, (Grant, 2008; Watkins & Bazerman, 2003; Grant, 2008). Also, as is the case within the technology consultancy industry, as markets mature consolidation is taking place, (STD, 2015). Merging two entities could also have impacts on the positioning on the company. After several changes in the environment, how can firms be sure of their position?

In the context of positioning products, Aaker & Shansby (1982) early proposed that companies should measure and track their position. But how do companies do that? Also, what is the point of knowing an exact position in the market for a company? Or is it enough to know in what type of space that customers define the market, and how well the company is performing in those measures? As Arnott (1994) claims, positioning is about elaborating what dimensions that makes up the perceptual space in which the target audience defines the market, but how do we operationalize that? Holmlund & Strandvik (1999) argues that perceptions are studied best in a dyadic perspective. Perhaps a way to find operational areas in the company's positioning is to measure and compare both customers' and employees' perceptions?

As seen above, the area of positioning is not an exact science. Many questions arise and there are many perspectives to regard, which may seem confusing at first sight. There seems to exist a need to clarify the different views, an area that this thesis aims to contribute within. The thesis was proposed by the consultancy firm ÅF, as they wanted to develop their strategic work with positioning and increase their understanding of positioning from their customers' view. As of this, ÅF have provided the author with support and access to their customers. Their gain from this thesis have been a deepened understanding of positioning, both generally and within their own context, and the gain of the resulting model that is developed for their specific context. As of this, ÅF were allowed to propose a set of requirements of the finalized model in order for it to be practical and adoptable to their organization.

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to identify, define and concretize the concept of positioning in the Swedish technology consultancy businesses. Ultimately the thesis will aim to develop a methodology for evaluating a company's position within the technology consultancy industry in Sweden.

### 1.2.1 Research question

In order to elaborate on how a company can evaluate their own positioning in their customers' eyes on an ongoing basis, this thesis have formulated the following sub-questions to help the readers' and the author's understanding of the concept and how an evaluation methodology can be created. These sub-questions will also compose for the logic and disposition of the thesis.

*What is positioning, and how is positioning perceived?*

*Is there a set of generic dimensions that the chosen customers use when assessing the positioning of their technology consultancy suppliers?*

*What is the main activities that a firm can conduct in their work with position evaluation?*

### 1.2.2 Desired properties of the model

As the subject of this thesis was proposed by the technology consultancy firm, ÅF, they summarized their desired properties of the model in the following set;

- The model should be able to identify a consultancy company's position and identify gaps between the actual and intended position.
- The definition of the position should be measurable and the evaluation procedure should be conducted with reasonable efforts.
- The model should be based on research literature and yield as objective results as possible.
- The model should be generic in order to be applicable to different combinations of consultancy domains and customers.
- The model should be based on the customer's view.

### 1.2.3 Delimitations

The thesis will be conducted with the following delimitations;

Even if ÅF is an international company with international customers, this thesis will only focus on their Swedish market, this could imply that the model and assumptions made about the market is only valid in the Swedish market.

Also, it will be created and tested towards ÅF's biggest customers, so called key accounts, which will imply that there are existing relationships. Therefore, the positioning concept for these customers will probably differ from that of new customers, making the dimensions untested and for that category of customers.

Also, as the model tries to generalize over a predefined set of customers that are active in different industries and are of different sizes, the method proposed will be a trade-off between accuracy (depth) and the usability (width).

## 2 Theoretical framework

*In this section, the theoretical framework that lays the foundation for this thesis will be presented. The disposition follows the flow of the research and the study of literature has been a vital part of this thesis. Firstly, literature regarding the first research question will be presented, a taxonomy is presented and then theories belonging to both parts of the taxonomy follows. In section 2.3.1 theories regarding the second and third research questions is presented. Secondly, theories regarding firms' positioning strategies are presented followed by the implications that may arise when adopting strategies. The section will also give light on where differences may arise between the perceptions of managers and customers. Thirdly, the customers' process of buying services are revisited. Finally, a brief summary of the framework is presented and notable insights are highlighted. All of the above mentioned parts will lay the foundation for the understanding of positioning and how to create a methodology to evaluate the same.*

### 2.1 The different views of positions

Something that many marketing scholars and strategy researchers agree on is the ambiguity of positioning and the need for clearer definitions in this theme, (Amonini, et al., 2010; DiMingo, 1988; Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004). Blankson & Kalafatis (1999) have identified a set of three common ways to approach positioning; *Conceptually, Operationally* or *Strategic*. Furthermore, they identify the two main positioning perspectives that one can assume, *managerial* or *customer* based, (Arnott, 1994). In order to gain a proper taxonomy for presenting the different views of positioning, this paper will borrow DiMingo's (1988) separation of positioning into two main components; market positioning and perceptual positioning. Although, this separation of position into two different areas is helpful for our further study of the literature, but as many scholars have noted before, both parts are intertwined and interconnected. They can be divided in theory, but in practice it is evident that they affect each other, and that their alignment is important for effective positioning, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004; DiMingo, 1988; Kalafatis, et al., 2000).

### 2.2 Market position

The "market positioning" part of DiMingo's (1988) typology for positioning refers to the activities and processes that take place continuously in a company's strategic work. These activities could be: determining where to compete, developing the value offering, developing new competitive strengths and so on. In this paper, market position will be expanded to include these activities and theoretical views that relates to market positioning and the firm's activities. Hence, all perspectives relating to perceptions of any kind will be dealt with under the second part of DiMingo's (1988) typology. Additionally, these

theories are to a large extent using a managerial perspective and consider issues relating to the firm's strategies and activities, (Arnott, 1994; Blankson & Kalafatis, 1999).

### 2.2.1 Positioning using an industrial perspective

In the early strategic literature, a firm's profits were proposed to be derived by the industry in which it was active. Hence, a firm should position itself in an industry in which it could exercise market power over other actors in order to enjoy monopoly rents. The most outstanding researcher developing this view of the external environments impact on the profits were Porter (1979) with his 5-forces framework for industry analysis. According to his framework, a company should position itself relative to five industrial forces, (*Threat of entry, Industry rivalry, Threat of substitutes, Bargaining power of suppliers, Bargaining power of customers*), and try to find a position where the overall competition was at its lowest. Although, even if the industry context is the primary source of superior profits, it fails to explain why some companies outperform others within the same industrial context. This is also the main criticism for Porter's particular industry analysis, (Grant, 1991; Porter, 1979). Although, the industrial factors and forces affecting a company will make for an integral part of managers work with strategy. Especially since industrial structures are reshaping.

### 2.2.2 Positioning using an institutional perspective

In addition to the industrial context, some scholars argue for a view that includes the institutions surrounding the companies and affecting their outcome of their strategic choices and positioning. Institutions are described by North (1990, pp. 5) "*Rules of the game*", meaning regulative and normative factors that shape how humans interact within a specific context, (North, 1990). As these institutions are to be considered an integral part of the explanation of different performance when comparing international businesses, they should be part of the formation of strategy and the strategic positioning. Also, the institution-based view can be seen as a connected to the view of the industrial context as it sets the rules for that industry, (North, 1990). However, firms can work with positioning themselves relative to these institutions within a given industrial context and thereby achieving a more favorable position. Also, as institutions are changing, they lead to new competitive environments, indicating that strategic positioning using an institutional view is a relevant process, (Peng, et al., 2008).

### 2.2.3 Positioning using an organizational perspective

Other literature has come to focus more on the choices that the company makes in order to compete instead of the industrial context. A company's position is here regarded as a function of all the activities of a company and is therefore mainly dependent on the side of the supplier. In this era, a desirable position is



when the company can draw benefits from a strategic advantage over its competitors. The competitive advantages of companies are claimed to explain why some companies perform better than others, which the industrial context failed to explain, (Grant, 2008). Porter (1996) states that being competitive is about being different and position yourself uniquely in the industrial context through the activities that the company performs. Also, it is argued that there is no ideal position in a market, but rather an ideal position relative to the specific company and its competition. Hence, when positioning itself the company must consider what and where to compete, but also which activities to perform in order to support this. Moreover, a position is not viewed to be sustainable if it does not imply a trade-off towards other positions on the market. This notion has led to a larger emphasis in the strategic decision process on choosing not to do certain activities in order to meet a unique position. In addition to choosing what activities to perform, a company must also choose which customers to serve and which to leave to the competition, (Porter, 1996).

This literature focuses on achieving competitive advantages through how the company is organized, which comes from how the organization chooses to compete. In regards to how a company chooses to compete for a unique position, Porter (1980) formulated generic strategies that a company can adopt in order to achieve such organizational based competitive advantages. These are differentiation, cost leadership and focus strategy, which tend to give a broad perspective to how firms strive for a unique position, (Porter, 1980). The strategy of cost leadership has become more common with the emergence of "low cost companies", leading to increased competition when adopting a cost strategy. This has led to an increased emphasis of differentiation amongst companies and an erosion of middle segments in the markets in favor of companies delivering differentiated or cost efficient products, (Ryans, 2009). Also, adopting a differentiation strategy generally allows for higher profits than competing on price, (Porter, 1980). Other scholars have put more focus in ways to compete through differentiation and focus on organizational activities that lay ground for their uniqueness. Such dimensions to focus activities brought forward by Hooley, Saunders & Piercy (2004) are, price, service, quality, innovativeness, customization and uniqueness. Others also mention areas such as image and relationships to be of importance when trying to differentiate from competitors, (Day & Wensley, 1988).

#### 2.2.4 Positioning using a resource-based view

Parallel to Porters theories, another school of strategy emerged, the resource based view. According to this, a company competes with its resources and capabilities. It is either through the uniqueness of the resources or the way of exploiting them into capabilities that the company can gain a sustainable competitive advantage over its competition. In this area, emphasis also lies on the connection between superior profits and achieving a competitive

advantage. Furthermore, the market will be the final judge in whether or not this capability will be relevant enough to pose as a competitive advantage as it needs to be relevant in order to generate economic profits, (Grant, 1991). Although, there is a difference in how this competitive advantage is considered sustainable. Proposed by Porter (1980) a competitive advantage is sustainable when a firm earns more than normal profits in the long-run. In the resource based view, a competitive advantage is sustainable when the competitors have failed at rendering the competitive advantage redundant, (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991; Porter, 1980).

Following the resource-based view of competitive strategy, one could argue that the positioning approach that companies adopt will be determined by their resources. Although, the position that the company achieves will be affected by how the company chooses to develop its resources and capabilities, but the resources that the company possess will work for a constraint to what may be achievable. Hence, a company's strategic positioning process should focus on exploiting their resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable, in order to achieve a sustainable competitive position, (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1991).

### 2.2.5 Positioning using a market oriented view

Previous sections of theory have described well-known and practiced methods that managers use to formulate strategy and strategic positioning. Criticism towards these strategic views when identifying and formulating competitive market positions is that it relies much on the managements' intuitions, which may not fully reflect the needs and wants of the market, (Dibb, et al., 1997).

Slater (1997) argues that a firm with superior performance over its peers is a result of that firm providing more value for their customers than their peers. The value-based theory of the firm, suggests that the level of market orientation of the firm and its capability to learn about customers and provide superior value will be the main driver of performance. In contrast to the resource-based view, this theory's main emphasis is the deployment of the intangible capabilities of the firm, as the main area to gain competitive advantages, (Grant, 1991; Slater, 1997). The view of a "link" between company performance and its ability to deliver customer value is further supported by Woodruff (1997) who implies that the understanding of value creation can be regarded as a competitive advantage. In the context of service businesses, there seems to be an agreement regarding what market-based factors that may yield competitive advantages and a superior market position. These factors are; *market orientation, branding and new product development*, (Slater & Narver, 1995; Matear, et al., 2004).

With information technology and the increased speed of information, the increasingly changing environment have become a focus area. Competitive

advantages are, more often, becoming temporary due to changes in markets and quicker responses from competitors. McFarlane (2013) argues that today's companies cannot rely on resources as a way of differentiating themselves since companies are now facing more equal access of important resources than ever. As the level of asymmetric information decreases and new technologies are spreading fast, it can undermine companies' product and process advantages. Also, while changing environments sometimes shorten the length and alters the sustainability of competitive advantages, sustaining a competitive organization is based on the firm's capacity to renew itself and innovate, (Dickingson, 1992; Jacobson, 1992). With increased change, adaptiveness and time to respond to change are essential for companies to stay competitive, (Grant, 1991). Additionally, Porter (2001) states that increased information flows mainly affect the operational advantages that a company may hold and that in this environment it becomes even more important with an effective strategic position. Furthermore, he claims that adaptiveness and time to respond will lead nowhere if there is no clear strategic direction for these activities to support. Also, as competition increases, the search for new uncontested market space have increased with it. Finding these "Blue oceans" is a way for companies to differentiate themselves from competition and, at least for a while, enjoy less competition, (Kim & Mauborgne, 1999).

## 2.3 Perceptual position

This part of DiMingo's (1988) typology, is defined as; "*distinctive corporate or product identity closely based on market positioning*" (DiMingo, 1988, pp. 35). According to this notion, the perceptual part of the typology will be related to how a position is perceived. As DiMingo's (1988) focus lies with activities to create and form the perceptions of people, (such as advertising, public relations, etc.) this paper will only touch upon the area of perceptions of positions from a customer's perspective in order to serve the propose of this paper.

When it comes to perceived positions or whatever perception of a company that a customer or a stakeholder have, the current research literature is lacking a common language in the terms of position, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004). In many ways, the perceptions of companies are closely linked to the perceptions of their offerings, (Ries & Trout, 1986; Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004). The decisions of practitioners and advertising professionals therefore have a large impact on how the company is perceived. Moreover, the organization reaches the customers in two dimensions, through making and delivering promises, (Grönroos & Ravald, 1996; Brodie, et al., 2009). Grönroos & Ravald (1996) claim that the customers' perceptions of a service brand are affected by the promises made by sales representatives and the organization (External marketing) and through the delivery towards those promises as the consultants work and interact within their projects (Interactive marketing). An alignment here is important for building trust between the entities, (Brodie, et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the perceptions of the employees and the organization is affected by the Internal marketing, though which alignment is target, (Brodie, et al., 2009; Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). The different kinds of marketing and their relations are shown in Figure 1.

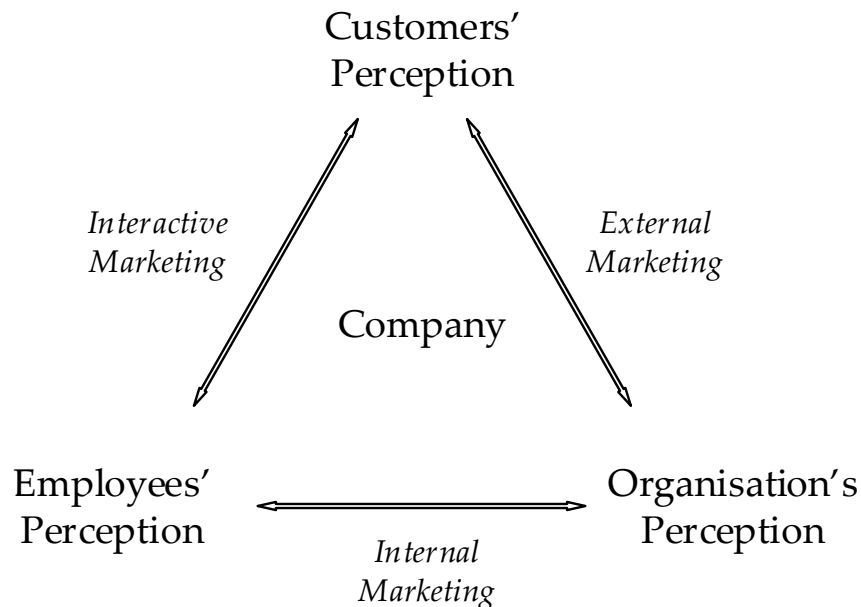


Figure 1. The relations of the perceptions, mediated through the three kinds of marketing. Adapted from Grönroos & Ravald (1996) and Brodie et al., (2009).

To illustrate how a product can be marketed (and thereby perceived) by customers, Kotler (1967) introduced his famous concept "Total product concept", (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). In this concept he argues for three levels of the product that will affect a customer's perception, *core product*, *actual product* and *augmented product*. In this case, the augmented product is of interest as the company and the salesforce will argue for additional attributes of a product or service with the aim to raise the perceived value to the customers. Positioning of the product, service or company, is a part of the augmented product, (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).

Other scholars propose that the exchange of goods is no longer only about the product, a so called goods-dominant logic, which marketing long have been based on. With increasing importance of knowledge for competition, a service-dominant logic has emerged, (Slater & Narver, 1995; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In this era, the exchange is regarded as something "bigger" than the transfer of goods, rather the transfer of a service. This transfer can be extended through a product, but the value that the recipient gains is also affected by the time prior, during and after usage, (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). In addition, when looking at values of service firms that lack products in the tangible sense, they differ from products due to their characteristics; *intangibility*, *inseparability*, *heterogeneity* and *perishability* (Zeithaml, et al., 1985). These characteristics need to be

considered when assessing the perceptions of customers, as the service is abstract and rely on other measures, (see Chapter 2.4).

In order to create an effective position for a company, the position must somehow be relevant in its dimensions for the customer, (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012; Hooley, et al., 2004; Blank & Dorf, 2012). As incumbent companies already have a position on the market and a clear reference point, the process of building a new position can be found when viewing new companies, trying to position themselves without a positional reference point. Many of the more prominent researchers and practitioners within the entrepreneurial domain argue that when starting new companies, it is of the outmost importance to understand what customers value and in what dimensions that the company can affect the customers, (Blank & Dorf, 2012; Reis, 2011). Therefore, when building a first time perceptual position, it is argued of importance to identify what customers need and value, (Blank & Dorf, 2012; Reis, 2011). Hence, one could argue that an effective perceptual position is the one delivering the highest value. When incumbents work with positioning and repositioning, they will have a certain reference point to regard. Repositioning, can indeed cause confusion (Kotler, 2000) and in order to assess the possibilities for confusion, the reference point needs to be determined.

The measuring perceptual positions is connected with certain difficulties. Firstly, the individual customers may not perceive the position in the same set of dimensions as the models use, (Steenkamo, et al., 1994). Also, the position may be perceived as a complex construct that is hard to divide into smaller dimensions, causing measurements in smaller dimensions to have low validity, (Churchill & Iacobucci, 2002).

### 2.3.1 Concepts of value & quality

Popular concepts amongst researchers to measure customers' perceptions of products or services are customer's satisfaction, value and quality. These areas of research have become dominant when trying to conceptualize the customers' perceptions of the interaction between a customer and a company, (Wang, et al., 2004; Slater, 1997). Concepts in this domain include the service quality (SERVQUAL), perceived performance and relationship value construct and satisfaction, (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Parasuraman, et al., 1985).

Perceptions of value and satisfaction have gained a lot of attention from marketers and there have been research showing their positive correlation with profitability of the firm. Furthermore, there are correlations with customer retention and customer loyalty which have been one of the driving factors for this concepts popularity for practitioners, (Fornell, 1992; Fornell, et al., 1996; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Gordon & McDougall, 2000; Woodruff, 1997; Slater & Narver, 1995). Some researchers argue that satisfaction is the main driver for

customer retention and states that customer value is a driver for the overall satisfaction of customers. (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Weinstein, 2012; Fornell, 1992). Furthermore, the constructs differ regarding to time, where value is a pre-purchase construct which will have a large impact on the purchase decision of customers, especially new customers. Relationship value is a more long-term construct covering an ongoing relation. Whereas customer satisfaction is a post-purchase construct which some scholars argue to be derived from their perceived value along with the match of their expectations and the perceived performance, (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Grönroos & Ravald, 1996). Hence, customer satisfaction is an affective measure while customer value is a cognitive one, (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Eggert & Ulaga, 2002). Eggert & Ulaga (2002) argues that the knowledge of the level of satisfied customers is only relevant when it is compared to how satisfied they are with other options on the market. As a comparative measure, customers' perceptions of the value gained is a better measure towards other market participants, (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; Gale, 1997).

The value construct is used and adapted in different ways, but the underlying analogy for using value as a measure comes from the "Exchange theory of marketing", which states that an exchange of goods or services will only occur if all parts involved believes that they will be better off after the exchange, (Kotler, 1972). The "Exchange theory" is still highly relevant in marketing, but the meaning of value has become wider. As of the emergence of the service dominant logic, the value construct has moved from being a performance measure to a broader concept, including other value adding areas in a relationship as well (so called *relationship value*), (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003; Lapierre, 2000a).

Also, since value is a perceptive measure, it cannot be objective. Rather, every measurement of perceived customer value is closely linked to that specific customer and its subjective view, (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001). This poses difficulties when measuring value in business markets since there is often not only one individual behind the purchase decision, who may have different views of the created value, (Perkins, 1993). Also, the perceived value may be object to perception gaps between customers and employees. Minimizing those gaps are argued to be important for organizations in order to efficiently create value, (Zeithaml, et al., 1990; Perkins, 1993). Also these gaps can be an underlying factor in the connection of customer value and satisfaction as the expected value will be affected by communication and promises from employees. Hence, minimizing the actual perception gap of value may lead to more satisfied customers, (Ries & Trout, 1986; Zeithaml, et al., 1990).

As originally presented by Zeithaml (1988) and later popularized by Anderson & Narus (1998), Lapierre (2000) and many more, value is constructed as a trade-off between two parts; gained benefits relative to sacrificed means. Early efforts

to model the perceived customer value have often been unidimensional, but later research have converged around a multidimensional approach in order to be able to cover this complex issue, (Wang et al., 2004). Despite the agreement over a concept of a trade-off between benefits and sacrifices, the different dimensions of benefits and sacrifice are more debated. Eggert & Ulaga (2003) made an inventory of proposed dimensions in the literature which this article has attempted to enrich. Table 1 shows a sample of different attempts to model the perceived customer value in previous literature.

*Table 1. Summary over various attempts of modelling perceived customer value, building on the initial summary from Eggert & Ulaga (2003).*

<i>Author</i>	Dimensions for benefit	Dimensions for Sacrifice
<i>Anderson et al., 1993; Anderson and Narus, 1999; Anderson et al., 2000</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic benefits</li> <li>- Technical benefits</li> <li>- Service benefits</li> <li>- Social benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> </ul>
<i>Wilson and Jantrania, 1995</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Economic benefits</li> <li>- Strategic benefits</li> <li>- Behavioral benefits</li> </ul>	
<i>Ravald and Grönroos, 1996</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Episode benefits</li> <li>- Relationship benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Episode sacrifices</li> <li>- Relationship sacrifices</li> </ul>
<i>Grönroos, 1997</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Core solution</li> <li>- Additional services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> <li>- Relationship costs</li> </ul>
<i>Patterson &amp; Spreng 1997</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Problem identification</li> <li>- Outcome</li> <li>- Methodology</li> <li>- Relationship</li> <li>- Level of service</li> <li>- Global competence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monetary means</li> </ul>
<i>Gwinner et al. 1998</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Confidence benefits</li> <li>- Social benefits</li> <li>- Special treatment benefits</li> </ul>	
<i>Lapierre 2000</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Product related</li> <li>- Service related</li> <li>- Relationship related</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> <li>- Relationship related sacrifices</li> </ul>
<i>Ulaga &amp; Chacour, 2001</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Product related</li> <li>- Service related</li> <li>- Promotion related</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> </ul>
<i>Petrick, 2002</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emotional response</li> <li>- Quality</li> <li>- Reputation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monetary price</li> <li>- Behavioral price</li> </ul>
<i>Eggert &amp; Ulaga, 2003</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time-to-market</li> <li>- Social Benefits</li> <li>- Product</li> <li>- Service</li> <li>- Know-how</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Product cost</li> <li>- Process cost</li> </ul>

<i>Ruiz, Gremler, Washburn &amp; Carrión, 2008</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Service Quality</li> <li>- Service Equity</li> <li>- Confidence benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Perceived sacrifice</li> </ul>
<i>Weinstein, 2012</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Service</li> <li>- Product Quality</li> <li>- Image</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Price</li> </ul>

As noted in Table 1, the dimensions of value tend to be different, and at few points mutually exclusive or collectively exhaustive. This leads to inconveniences when comparing results between the different research. Also, the value construct is considered to be a dynamic concept, which would mean that the dimensions that add value may change over time, e.g. over the services' or relationship's lifecycle, (Parasuraman, 1997). This could impose difficulties when comparing the importance of dimensions over different research as the value may be created at different times, varying over industries. In addition, some dimensions will be highly relevant in some industries and less important in others. Scholars have suggested that dimensions should be divided into core dimension and contextual dimensions, in order to capture the industrial context while still creating a standardized set of dimensions for the core values, (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003).

Finally, as Kotler (2000, p. 308) claims, "The end result of positioning is the successful creation of a customer-focused value proposition", clearly linking the activities of positioning with the construct of value, (Gale, 1997).

### 2.3.2 Positioning strategies

The strategic literature does in many areas stress the importance of finding a unique strategic position. To do so, many strategists propose generic ways in which companies can position themselves in. Although, they often only cover the initial formulation of strategy and often leave out underlying activities for managers to perform, (Ries & Trout, 1986; Porter, 1980; Grant, 1991; Slater, 1997; Kotler, 2000). There is also a lack in the literature regarding how companies are viewing its position and what it does in order to ensure its alignment with the desired strategic position, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000). These generic concepts often lack in connection to their perceived position, (Dibb, et al., 1997). A reason for this could be that they often are derived from a conceptual approach in a specific market, (Amonini, et al., 2010). On the basis of trying to cluster companies into different generic strategies, a holistic view over the market is achieved. Although, this view may be more colored by the perceptions of managers or researchers rather than the eyes of the actual market, (Dibb, et al., 1997; Amonini, et al., 2010).

Due to the different traits of service- and product-businesses and how their value offerings are perceived, there seem to be different approaches to how a company can position itself, (Amonini, et al., 2010). Many positioning strategies are developed in consumer markets, in which scholars argue it to be easier to



gain a clear competitive position, (Bingham & Raffield, 1995). Furthermore, Dibb & Simkin (1993) argues that service companies in business markets have less room for adopting positioning strategies successfully. Others disagree and claim that positioning is rare amongst businesses in business markets and that the positioning of the company is mainly affected by the activities of the salesforce, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000). Also, some scholars argue for different underlying factors that affect the companies' perceived position in business markets. It is claimed that operational and experiential factors have a larger impact on the position than what promotional attempts does, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000).

In order to conceptualize the research on positioning and interpret it into a practical approach, some scholars have developed models for positioning. One of the most widespread theories on "base line" positioning is Porters (1980) generic strategies. Although, it has been criticized for being too general and simplistic, (Amonini, et al., 2010). In the same category could (Treacy & Wiersema, 1995) three factor model (*Operational excellence, Product leadership & Customer intimacy*) be put in. Although, some emphasize this approach as being better with regards of its perception of the customers view, (Siebers, et al., 2013). Others have proposed more specific models, with dimension such as; *price, technical quality, service, innovation, customization, uniqueness* (Hooley, et al., 2004) (shown in Figure 2) or *price, products, access, experience, service* (Crawford & Mathews, 2001). Other researchers have developed even more complex models involving an increased number of factors to base positioning on; *pricing, easy to do business, personal contact, product performance, range of offerings, presence, safety, leadership, distinct identity, status, country identity, differentiation, attractiveness*, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000). A specific paper on the professional service industry highlighted competitive areas such as; *relationship, service quality, value & brand*, (Day & Wensley, 1988). Another approach to constructing typologies for positioning in the market have been used by Blankson & Kalafatis (2004), who solely based on customers' perceptions have identified a set of positioning strategies that customers perceive. These strategies were named; *Top of the range, Service, Value for money, Reliability, Attractive, Country of origin, The Name & Selectivity*. These researchers argue that competitive companies are outstanding in at least one of the dimensions in their models, and perform good enough in the remaining ones, (Hooley, et al., 2004; Treacy & Wiersema, 1995). Other researchers argue that a company do not have to constrain itself to one position but rather that they can rely on more than one dimension to compete within, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000; Hooley & Greenley, 2005), yielding even more ways to position and differentiate through.

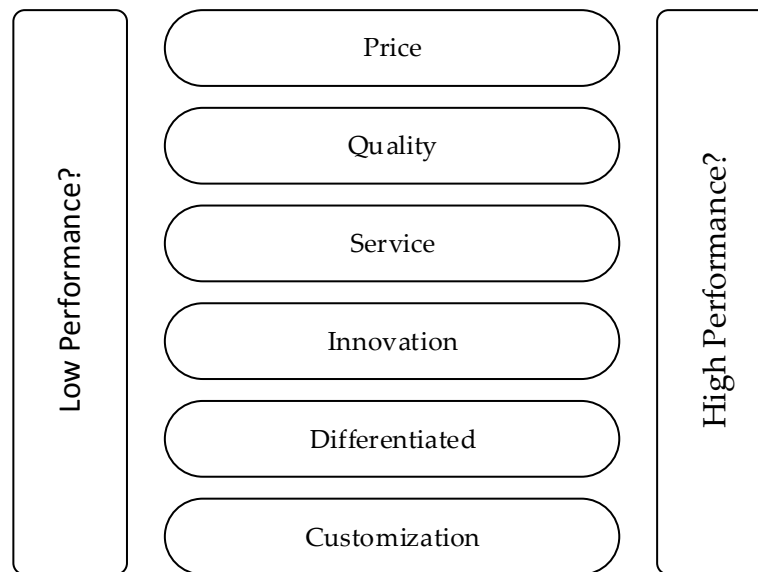


Figure 2. An example of a set of positioning choices a company faces. Adapted from Hooley (2004).

Blankon & Kalafatis (2004) suggests that a company have three different ways to change the perceptions of the company; attitude change through communication and advertising, change in brand or products/services through reinventing the company's offerings or through a change in competition (the references). Depending of which strategy managers choose to adopt, these are seemingly the main possibilities through which companies should channel their positioning efforts.

Also, as noted in many markets, companies do adapt to each other's positions. Even if companies in business markets often lack an outspoken positioning strategy, as Kalafatis, et al. (2000) proposes, companies tend to converge in their strategies and sometimes their positions, (Siebers, et al., 2013). This phenomenon has been called strategic convergence, (Hanel, 2002). As companies with superior performance will be objects to imitation by competitors, capabilities & resources with no barriers to imitability will no longer pose as advantages, (Grant, 1991). This is also valid for unique positions if they are to be sustained. Over time, the characteristics of superior companies' advantages may become overall characteristics on the industry as competitors attempts to compete converges around similar elements, (Siebers, et al., 2013; Grant, 1991; Amonini, et al., 2010). Firms that attend similar strategies can be clustered into *strategic groups*, which was coined by Hunt (1972) and further developed by Porter (1980). They argue that the reason for the convergence into groups is a result of barriers within the industry that forces the firm to compete in a specific way. These barriers can be a result of industry characteristics or the resources that the firm poses, (Porter, 1980). Other researchers claim that the other companies in a strategic group easily becomes the reference points to managers. The shared actions and assumptions of the managers in that group, so called industry recipes, may impose institutional

norms which limits the perceived actions and flexibility available to managers, (Spender, 1989; Fiegenbaum & Thomaas, 1995). Also, these shared assumptions may become the way companies define their market, which could differ from the customer's view.

Research conducted on *perceptual strategic groups*<sup>1</sup> in banking found that there are larger differences in performance within the strategic groups than differences between strategic groups, (McNamara, et al., 2003). Indicating that the perceptions of a company's offering could have a large impact on performance, even though companies adopt similar strategies.

### 2.3.3 Actual & intended positions

Customer derived positioning strategies suggests efficient positions in the market that companies can strive towards. Although, the methodology used to develop the typologies do not tell whether the perceived position was intended by the company or if it was emergent due to other factors in the company's environment, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004; Amonini, et al., 2010). Other scholars emphasize the importance of separating the intended position from the perceived position and states that there are possibilities for a perception discrepancy, (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Ellson, 2004). Furthermore, they state that the intended position most likely has its roots in the process of market positioning, and do in many cases seem to be closely linked to the company's core competencies. Kalafatis & Blankson (2000) suggests that the congruence between intended and perceived image is to be noted as marketing success, which implies that the execution of a positioning strategy have succeeded. Choosing the right intended position that is congruent with the firm is of the essence to achieve a positioning success, (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010; Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). In addition, researchers seem to agree that there is no optimal position in the market per default. The optimal position is rather a intuitive construct of managers' assumptions regarding their available resources and capabilities, together with their assumptions mad about the competition, market and customers, (Eryigit & Eryigit, 2014).

The reason for discrepancies in the perceived and intended position may appear in many ways, as there are several factors that affect customers' perceptions, (Ellson, 2004; Ries & Trout, 1986). Just as Mintzberg (1998) claims that a firms realized strategy is a combination of intended and emergent strategies, positioning strategies will also be affected by unrealized positioning attempts and emergent positioning opportunities. As Slater (1997) argues for a market oriented approach of the firm, the influences of the market would be turned from emergent to intended strategies as an organization learns about the market an incorporate those insights into its knowledge and updates its

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<sup>1</sup> Perceptual strategic groups – A group of firms within an industry that is perceived by industry managers to follow the same overall strategy, (McNamara, et al., 2003)

assumptions about the market, (Slater, 1997; Slater & Narver, 1995). Additionally, the decision processes within companies may alter the way of strategy. Decisions made will be affected by constraints in the organization as well as with illusions and varying levels of commitment, these are all factors that may amplify the gap between the finalized (perceived) and intended position, (Hung, et al., 2011).

Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) have identified what they call key discrepancies regarding the perceived views of executives and their customers. The 5 discrepancies relate to the whole process of understanding and delivering towards customers and they are linked in a circular pattern. In their model they divide the gaps over the organization and the customer. As noted in Section 2.3, the customer is comparing perceived and expected quality (or value, position), and will from that comparison either become satisfied or unsatisfied, (Parasuraman, et al., 1985). The other 4 gaps lie within the organization's process of evaluating the market's need, translating it into a value offering, producing that value and communicating it. It is believed that the perceptual gap that a customer may have is a function of the gaps within the organization, (Parasuraman, et al., 1985). The process is illustrated in Figure 3.

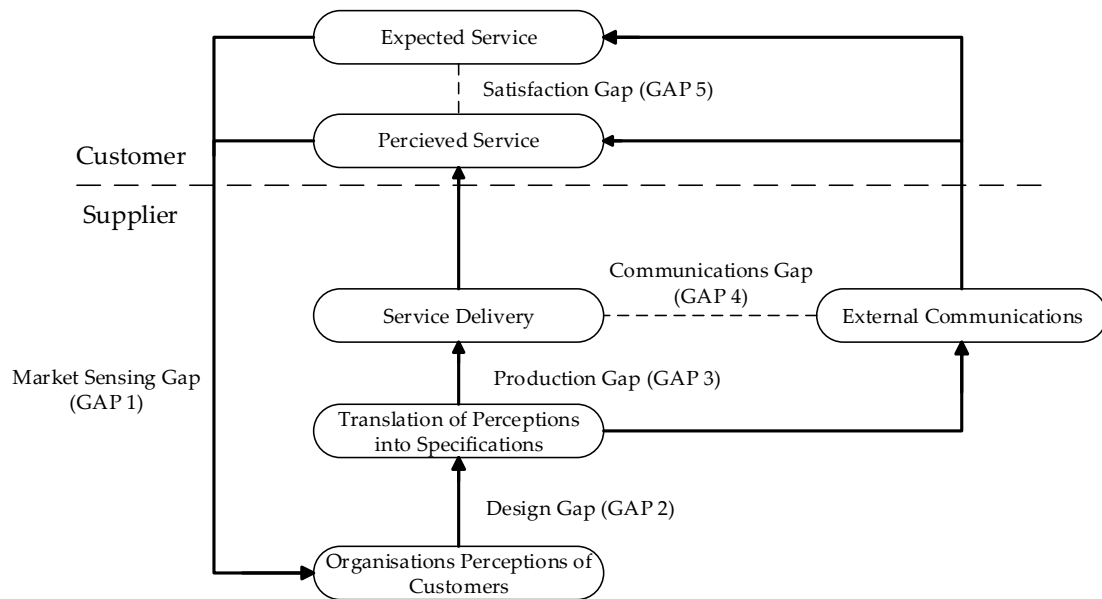


Figure 3. The different discrepancies shown in the service quality model, adapted from Parasuraman et al., (1985).

Some attempts to measure efficiency of positioning strategies have been done. Fuchs & Diamantopoulos (2010) uses *favorability*, *differentiation* and *credibility* to determine efficiency of positioning strategies. This is in line with what many practitioners and researcher claim is of importance when formulating the initial position, (Kotler, 2000; Mossberg & Sundström, 2011; Ries & Trout, 1986). These areas have also shown to be areas where discrepancies exist amongst customers and managers. In a study conducted by Bain & Company (2012), 80% of responding executives claimed that they were unique and differentiated while

only 8% of their customers agreed.

## 2.4 Businesses' purchasing process & forming of perceptions

Over time, as the purchasing processes have been researched, the main focus have lied on purchases of goods rather than services, (Ellram, et al., 2007). Although, there seems to be evident that purchasing services is a more complex task than purchasing goods, (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002; Jackson, et al., 1995). This additional complexity is most likely due to the traits (*intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability*) that differ services from goods and the main issue for purchasers is seemingly the evaluations of services, (Axelsson & Wynstra, 2002; Ellram, et al., 2007; Jackson, et al., 1995; Smeltzer & Ogden, 2002). Also, due to services' nature and the complexity of measuring it before a purchase, managers and researchers are linking the purchase to a higher risk than purchasing products, (File, et al., 1994). Despite this, managers often do discard the complexity of purchasing services, and rather believe that it is less complex than buying goods, (Smeltzer & Ogden, 2002; Ellram & Tate, 2015).

There are multiple approaches to conceptualizing the purchase process within organizations, (Fitzsimmons, et al., 1998; Van der Valk & Rozemeijer, 2009; Grönroos, 1998; Barnes, 1986), but the most prominent one is the six step process (Figure 4) proposed by van Weele (2005), which also have been argued to be most suitable for the service context, (Van der Valk & Rozemeijer, 2009). This process can be useful for companies trying to identify where and when their customers shape their perceptions.



Figure 4. The six step process, van Weele (2005).

According to the process, rational companies first specify their requirements, then they select suppliers and agree on the terms for the contract. After the contract is signed, the order is made and will be expedited. Finally, the whole process will be formally evaluated according to the set requirements, (Van Weele, 2005). Although, ongoing evaluations take place continuously over the different steps in the process, (Grönroos, 1998). As this conceptualization sheds light on the process and order of activities that business conduct when purchasing services, it does not tell how the evaluation is done. More importantly, it does not tell how different suppliers are assessed and compared. Arguably, companies should focus their efforts of evaluation in dimensions that matter to the organization, (Anderson, et al., 1999). Also, when it comes to the different types of evaluations that companies conduct in the different steps,

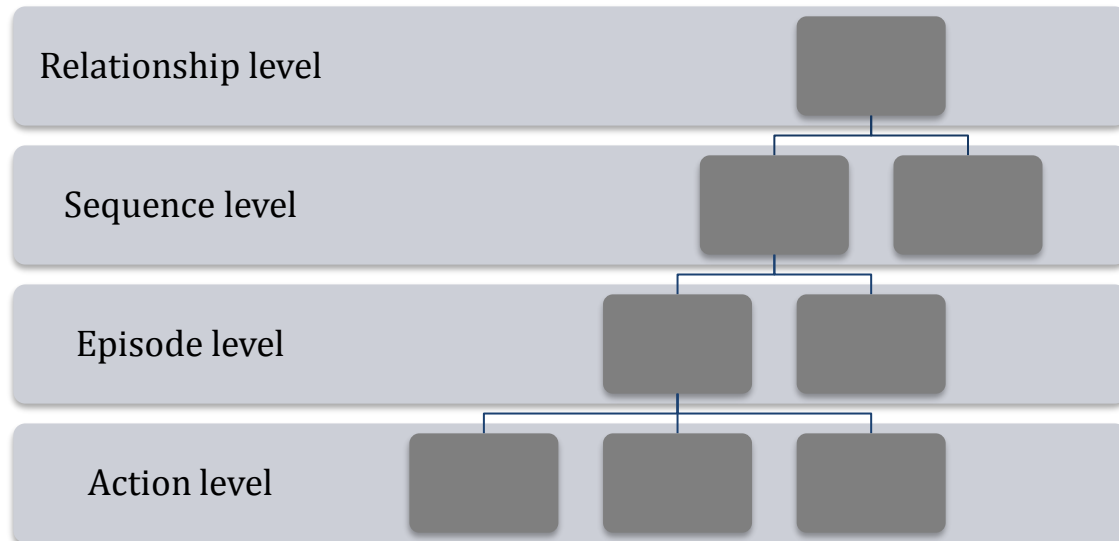
comparison standards are often used, (Lilijander & Strandvik, 1995). These standards are often divided into three sub standards, *ideal-like* standards – which is factors that are considered beneficial when conducted flawlessly, *industry* standards – which are linked to the norms of the market, *experience-based* standards – which are requirements that a company bases upon previous interactions and relationships, (Holmlund, 2008).

Argued by Kotler (2000) is that a rational customer always chooses the offering with the highest value. Although he states that there are three possibilities where a purchaser in a business organization do not make a purchase with the supplier offering the highest value. Firstly, the buyer may be under orders to buy at the absolute lowest cost (monetary cost). Secondly, the purchaser may gain personally for making business with another supplier. Thirdly, the purchaser is in a long-term relationship with another supplier and the competing offering is only short-term, (Kotler, 2000; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005). Even if Kotler's argument is rational, the definition of "highest value" is somewhat broad.

An important notion to understand in order to be able to evaluate customers' perceptions in business-to-business markets is that the purchasing process most often is somewhat different from consumer markets and that the process often involves more than one person, (Qualls & Rosa, 1995; Perkins, 1993). Furthermore, some scholars argue that the purchasing in business markets is relying on specifications more and less on the feelings perceptions of the purchaser, compared to consumer markets, (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Mossberg & Sundström, 2011). Although, it seems evident that individual perceptions affect purchasing decisions in businesses too, but the decision will be based on the purchasing group's collective perception of the performance of the offering compared to some predefined requirement, (Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999; Qualls & Rosa, 1995; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001). However, often the perception of the CEO, or some of the more influential persons in the context, do come to represent the main perception, (Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999).

When building their perceptions, Holmlund (1996) created a theoretical framework purposing that the interactions through which the perceptions are created in can be divided into different hierarchical levels. The lowest level consists of actions made, such as a single meeting or a phone call. Multiple activities make an episode, which could be a negotiation process. The two highest levels are sequence and relationship, as shown in Figure 5. More interestingly, she points out that in the end of a sequence, the relationship will be evaluated which means that the customers will sequentially change their perceptions, (Holmlund, 1996; Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999). In a study conducted by Holmlund (2008), found that persons on different levels in an organization tend to focus on different things when forming their perceptions.

Especially in regards to how many aspects they cover in their assessment, the notion for this is “span of perception”. The span was found to be widest amongst the top management, while narrow amongst people working with specialized tasks, (Holmlund, 2008).



*Figure 5. Different levels of interactions making up the perception of a relationship, adapted from Holmlund (1996).*

As perceptions are built through interactions of different kind, Håkansson (1982) tried to conceptualize how these interaction takes place and what variables that affect the involving parts, (Holmlund, 2008). The interaction model consists of four parts; the processes, the parties, the environment and the atmosphere, (Håkansson, 1982). The main point of the model is the notion of how external and internal factors affect how the interaction takes place and how it affects the relationship between the two parties, (Axelsson, 2010). The process part of the model is related to what type of exchange the relationship revolves around, together with the choices of processes that is used to conduct the exchange, (Håkansson, 1982). The different characteristics (size, orientation, strategy etc.) of the involved parties are important for how they perceive each other, as the relation of their characteristics influence how they act in the relationship, (Håkansson, 1982). The environment in which the interaction takes place will affect buyers and sellers through the market structure and other external factors. Finally, the atmosphere is described as factors that affect the other three variables. These can be dependences or the closeness between the supplier and buyer, (Håkansson, 1982; Axelsson, 2010).

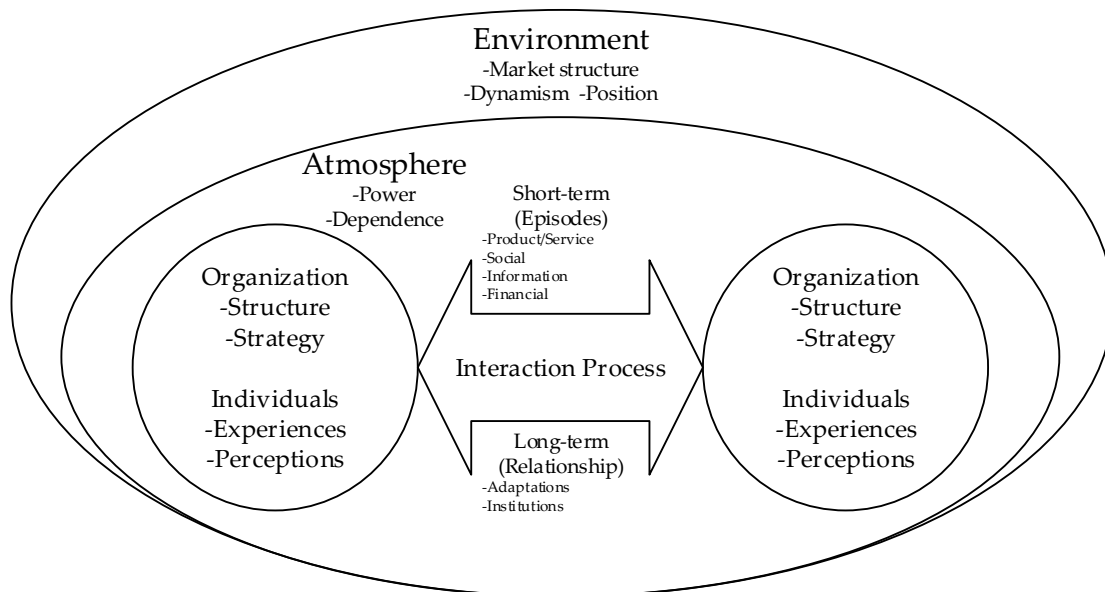


Figure 6. A model over the interactions in businesses, adapted from Håkanson (1982).

Research have shown that purchasing managers may assess changes in gained benefits and cost differently, even if the sum of the changes (added benefits versus cost reduction) is the same in monetary terms, (Anderson, et al., 2000). Other research has found relations between the importance of the service to the business and the influence of the monetary aspect. It seems as if monetary measures are more important when the service is of low strategic importance, (Ostrom & Iacobucci, 1995). Also, as with important services for the purchasing organization, the commitment and loyalty is higher and often regarded as a risk reducing action, (Mitchell, 1990; Fitzsimmons, et al., 1998).

Also, there seems to be a tendency to use secondary measures when evaluating complex services, which would imply that purchasers may base their choice on their personal liking of a brand or personal relationship instead of the actual offering, (Jackson, et al., 1995).



### 3 Conceptual framework

Following the proposed taxonomy by DiMingo (1988), the literature review has divided position into a perceptual part and a market-based part. As there is an obvious connection between the parts in practice, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004; DiMingo, 1988; Kalafatis, et al., 2000; Ellson, 2004), there seems to be a lack of theory regarding the interconnectedness of the two and what organizational activities that affects the perceptions in certain directions, (Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Amonini, et al., 2010). Despite the lack of understanding of the connectedness between the two perspectives, it is clear that both perspectives use the competitive environment as a reference, (Aaker & Shansby, 1982). This can be illustrated from the market perspective as companies compete and position their offerings relative to their competitors, as well as customers' view of the whole range of offerings available on the market, (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Aaker & Shansby, 1982). Furthermore, the activities affecting the market position may not always affect the perceptual position. Also, one should notice the set of constraints that the market positioning sets for the perceptual position, at least if there is some intent to have an alignment between the two concepts, (Dibb, et al., 1997; Ellson, 2004).

Attempts to evaluate the efficiency of positioning often make use of how different, favorable and credible the position is, (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). This further supports the need for alignment between the perceptual and market position as without it customers would be confused and find the intended position as not credible, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004; Kalafatis, et al., 2000). Although, measuring the efficiency of a company's position is complex. Linking financial measures to perceptual positions may not give a comprehensive understanding since the market position affects these measures as well, (Barney, 1991; Porter, 1979; Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004).

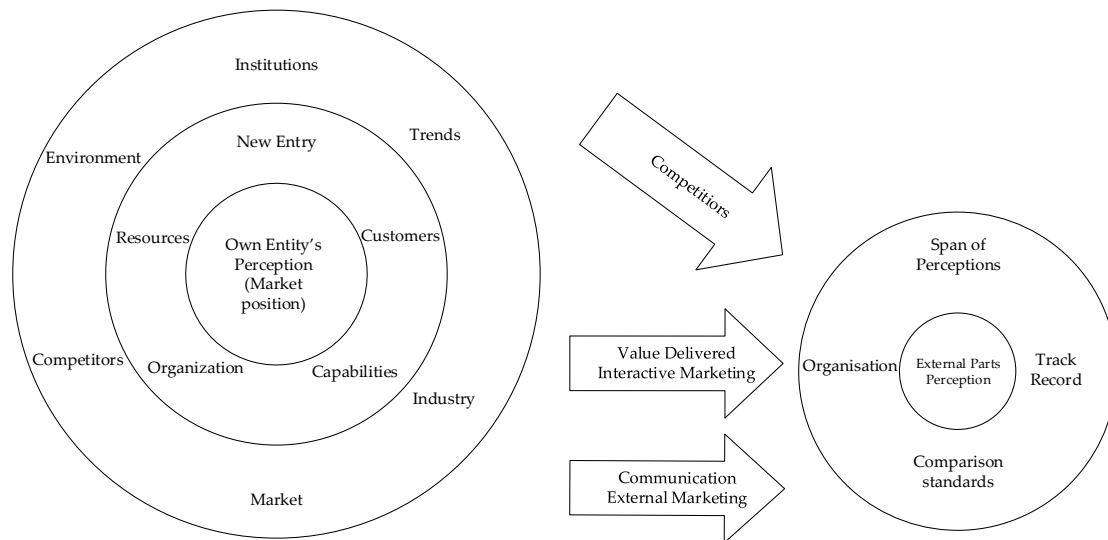
Furthermore, this review on literature regarding how businesses purchases services and also how they form their perceptions. It seems as the most complex issue for purchasing managers is the risks associated with evaluating and measuring services, (File, et al., 1994). Although, the organizations behind sourcing services seems underdeveloped in businesses, (Ellram & Tate, 2015). Regarding the forming of perceptions in businesses, research shows that perceptions are formed in different stages and through interactions of different sorts, (Holmlund, 2008; Holmlund, 1996; Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999; Håkanson, 1982). Concluded seems to be that the perceptions are summarized in sequences and then evaluated, indicating that many different interactions will make the basis for a business perceived position, (Holmlund, 2008; Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999). Furthermore, since businesses often involves more than one person in the decision, the overall perception will be aggregated, (Holmlund & Strandvik, 1999).

As Kotler (2000, pp. 308) states that "Positioning is the successful creation of customer-focused value proposition" this literature review has highlighted value based methods as a way of thinking of positioning dimensions in terms of the customers' perceptions. Furthermore, as advocates for value methods claim, measuring and identifying dimensions in which customers perceive value, offers concrete and operational dimensions in which a company can work to optimize its value creation for customers. Therefore, the value construct seems to offer some insight to perceptions in this business context. Also, the high level of fuzziness seems to pose an integral issue for service providers.

As an approach for positioning in this thesis, a conceptual framework for the two entities' perceptions of position have been created. Firstly, the positioning adopted from an employee (regarding the own organizations position) is thought to be viewed as a wider concept, involving strategic choices relating to market positioning.

The organization is reaching their customers in two main channels, interactive and external marketing. The interactive marketing is proposed to be mainly through delivered values and the customers assessment of these. The external part will mainly be through different communications, such as advertising, image building activities and other activities that effect the customers' expectations.

The customers own view of positioning (as this thesis is trying to elaborate on) will be affected by the supplier in these two channels mentioned above. These will actively be put in relation to competitors. The perception of customers will be affected by their own organization, previous interactions, comparison standards and their span of perception. The own organization will affect perceptions through its structure, culture, the atmosphere it contributes to the interactions and the environment. The previous interactions (track record) will pose as the existing relationship that customers have with their suppliers, which will be sequentially altered through each new interaction. The combined track records that a customer have from all of its suppliers will generate a set of comparison standards that they use to relate interactions to. The comparison of an interaction against these standards will result in the customer being satisfied or dissatisfied about an interaction in a specific dimension. Finally, the span of perceptions will guide what areas a customer will involve and their importance in the building of perceptions.



*Figure 7. The conceptual framework that summarizes the authors view of the concept of positioning relative to the parts investigated in this thesis.*

It is through this view that positioning will be regarded in the following study where the focus will lie with the perceptions of customers. More specific, the study will focus on the right hand side of the model where positioning will be regarded through the channels that ÅF use to interact with their customers. Here, the author would also like to claim that he finds this distinction relevant since a change in the market position not necessarily is linked with a change in the customers' perceptions. Also, this concept makes no claim to explain what and why a customer acts or alters their perception on any given input. The concept is simply presented in order to visualize the authors view of positioning in the context and how he believes that the literature is connected.

## 4 Industrial context

ÅF is a large Swedish engineering and consultancy company, offering consultancy services within the energy, infrastructure and industrial sectors for both public and private companies. The organization is divided in 4 divisions; Industry, Technology, Infrastructure & International. With more than 9,000 employees they are an international player and in 2015 they conducted projects in over 100 countries worldwide, (ÅF, 2016; ÅF, 2017). Last year (2016) ÅF had over SEK 11 billion revenue, making them one of the biggest players in the Nordic markets, (ÅF, 2017; STD, 2015).

The vision of ÅF is;

*"To be the best partner to the best customers"*

(ÅF, 2017, pp.1).

And their business idea is to deliver profitable, innovative and sustainable solutions to their customers through their collective experience and unique width. As they like to summarize it; *"Innovation by experience"*, (ÅF, 2017, pp.1).

ÅF is a service provider that specialize in technical services. Their offerings can be divided into two groups; Projects and Professional services. The main difference is the range of commitment, as in projects ÅF will deliver a project with total responsibility over the outcome. The Professional services are often based on a timely fee where the customers "rent" a consultant to work in-house, providing additional competences and resources to their teams.

Since its start in 1895, ÅF have grown through both acquisition and organically. During the last five years, ÅF's revenues have grown with over 13% annually, making them outperforming the industry average by almost 10%-units, (ÅF, 2017; STD, 2015).

The overall industry in which ÅF is competing is a growing industry where growth is driven by an overall increase of demand for "flexible-knowledge". Also, the industry organization (STD) is claiming that knowledge and the ability to deliver total concepts will be of the essence for future competitiveness, (STD, 2015).

The context for this thesis will be the interactions between ÅF and their key-customers. The way of conducting business is often set by agreements over a period from 1-3 years. Within those agreements, a set number of suppliers get to "bid" on the different assignments, both selection processes will be studied in this thesis.

## 5 Method

*In this section an explanation and motivation for the different methodological choices will be presented together with the process of the research. In the end, a short justification of its quality is presented and discussed.*

### 5.1 Research strategy & design

The research conducted in this thesis is of qualitative nature as it will try to operationalize existing theories together with empirical findings related to the industry. Although, the information gathering will also be supported with quantitative methods when applicable in order to enable comparisons.

Given the aim for the research, as the writer's aim is to try to build a practical model based on research theory and findings in the industry, the overall research will be inductive. Although, since the model will make use of previous literature, some parts of the research have a deductive nature, even if the propose is not to prove the theories but to operationalize them. As stated by Bryman & Bell (2015) such approach will be colored by the researcher as the outcome of an inductive research will be determined by the researcher's interpretative and constructional abilities, as is the case in this study. Although, as there is a lack of theories answering this thesis's questions, an inductive manner will be used to create new practical content. Probably, the best way to describe this thesis and its iterative exploration would be with the term abductive research. This, as it is highly influenced by empirical findings along the way and as new theoretical views are added, (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

The design of this research, how the data is gathered and applied, is divided into a qualitative part involving interviews and a quantitative part where data is collected through a survey. Also, additional information about the industrial context will be collected through second hand sources.

### 5.2 Research process

The overall research process was divided into smaller sub-steps. First, a study of literature with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the area position was conducted. As the literature were studied and a theoretical framework was formed, an attempt to model a set of practical dimensions of positioning were done. In the same process empirical data was being collected in an iterative manner from ÅF representatives. As this thesis revolves around the building of a model, there were not a streamlined process but rather an iterative one. Meaning that a set of hypothetical dimensions were proposed and then tested towards ÅF representatives, and later with customers. Simultaneously, interviews were conducted with customers, with the aim at creating a deeper understanding about their perception building and their purchasing and decision processes, as well as testing the dimensions. Once the

dimensionality was tested, issues such as data gathering and evaluation methods were considered.

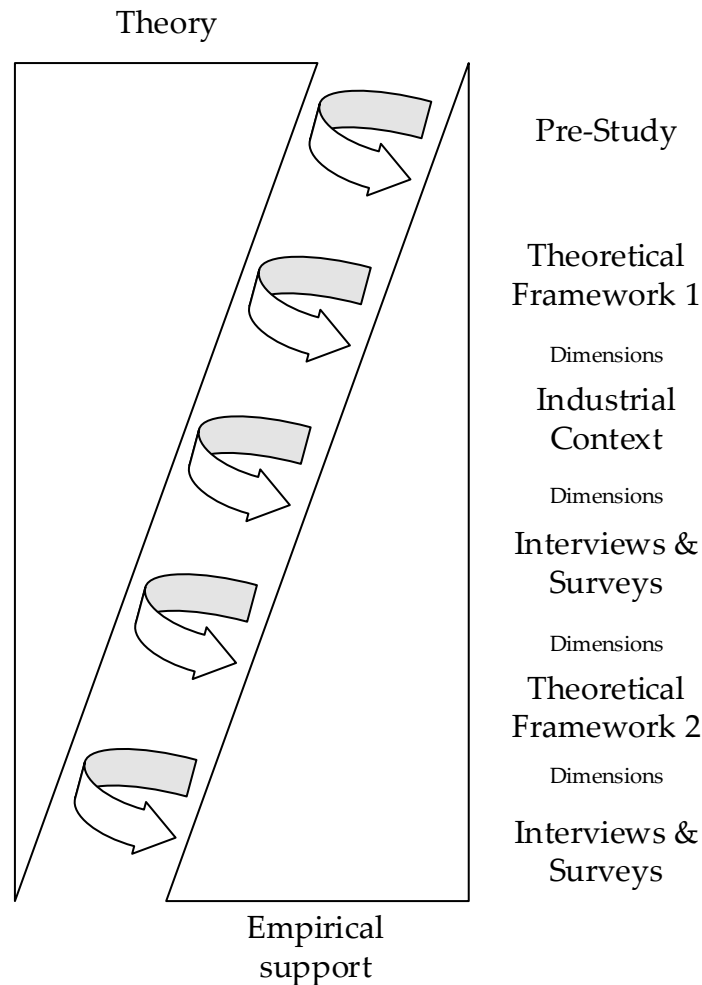


Figure 8. The flow of the research and its different parts.

## 5.3 Data

Data gathered for this research were of both secondary and primary nature. The data was gathered in different ways through; literature study, branch organizations, interviews and surveys. Also, interviews and surveys were distinguished whether the respondents were employees at ÅF (internal) or if they were from an organization outside ÅF, preferably customers (external).

### 5.3.1 Data Collection

The interviews conducted in this thesis were all in a semi-structured manner. As Bryman & Bell (2015) argues, a flexible interview is a good approach when the emphasis lies on how the interviewee perceived and understood events and issues. To support the interviews, an interview guide was constructed, consisting of general questions of interest to the supervising group along with questions derived from the literature study. The disposition of questions was following the practical rules proposed by Bryman & Bell (2015), with general, open-ended

questions in the beginning, followed up with more specific sub-questions in each topic. In cases of ambiguity or if the interviewee was answering in an unforeseen way, the flexibility of the interviews was used in order to ask follow-up questions in that area, and to keep the flow of the conversation.

The interviews were conducted in two stages with two different approaches. Firstly, the in-house interviews were conducted through face to face interview. These interviews were rather unstructured as the aim was to gain the insights from selected employees on the topic of the thesis. Questions involved positioning in general, their views on relevant areas for the thesis and a discussion on the proposed dimensions from the supervising group. The second round of interviews were conducted with customers. Due to time constraints and the movability of the interviewees and the interviewer, these were conducted through telephone.

As the interviewees were promised full anonymity, the interviews were transcribed instead of recorded, Also, it was believed that due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions, respondent would feel more comfortable without being recorded, (Bryman & Bell, 2015). As there was only one interviewer, possibilities of missing out on certain formulations or parts of the answers increased. After each interview, the interviewer summarized the findings and the own perceptions, allowing the interviewees to comment or change. This was done either at the end of the interview or by a follow-up phone call or mail. This approach also allowed for correcting translating errors, as the follow-up summarizations were translated from Swedish to English.

The majority of the interviewed sample were provided by ÅF, leaving the flexibility for choosing and altering the sample low, also one cannot fully discard the possibility for respondents being selected due to conflicting reasons. Due to restricted access to customers, such approach was accepted. Also, the sampling had a theoretical approach, as it was aimed at involving respondents at different operational levels within the organisation. Although, with the intent of having a theoretical approach, the sampling of the respondents came to a somewhat opportunistic nature as finding interviewees were hard, a so called convenience sampling, (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Although, the finalized sample provided a satisfying distribution amongst the different key accounts and at the different operational levels.

In total a sum of 15 interviews were conducted, which can be argued to be a small sample in order to draw any general conclusions. As Adler & Adler (1987) advises, a qualitative sample for a thesis like this should be in the range of 12 to 60. Also, as Bryman (2012) claims the sample size depends on the saturation of the responses together with the theoretical underpinnings of the research. Even though the sample size is generally regarded as to small, the close link to theory is increasing its quality. Also, as the interviews were means to a practical end and with the addition of survey results, the collection is considered "good

enough". Furthermore, in the analysis and discussions some contextual trends are identified. However, readers should bear in mind that they are based on a small sample set.

In addition to the interviews, surveys were used in order to gain larger amounts of data. Generally, the response rates for the survey were low. Even though respondents had been asked to complete the survey through known connections. Also, respondent was reminded about the survey, which increased the response rate additionally. The final number of responses from surveys were 37. 15 responses were from customers and 22 responses were from ÅF representatives, see Table 2.

The surveys consisted of questions relating to the dimensions of the model and their perceptions of ÅF. The survey used a mixture of a few open ended questions together with a larger amount of questions using a Likert scale (1-7), where importance's and agreement of statements were ranked. These two methods were considered as a compelling mixture to make the survey as easy as possible for the respondents in order to achieve high response rates.

As with the sampling of the interviews, the surveys were sent out based on a selection made from ÅF, making the samples initially based on a theoretical approach. The sales representatives at ÅF were instructed to contact their chosen customers and ask them to complete the survey. The respondents were promised full anonymity, since their responses could be regarded as evaluating their own point of contact at ÅF. Furthermore, this way of sampling and inviting respondents were agreed together with ÅF and may not be the best approach from a researcher's point of view. Although, it was considered the most feasible way of reaching out to customers.

A summary of the conducted data collection is shown in

Table 2.

*Table 2. A summary of the collection of data.*

STAGE	FOCUS OF ACTIVITY	TYPE	INTERVIEWEE POSITION	IN-HOUSE / CUSTOMERS	# INTERVIEWS /SESSIONS/ ANSWERS
1	Exploratory	Discussions	Thesis Supervisors	In-house	3
2	1:st Validation	Survey	Section managers	In-house	8
3	Validation follow up	Interview	Section managers	In-house	5



4	2:nd Validation	Survey	Section managers	In-house	14
5	3:rd Validation	Interviews	Customers	External	10
6	Test of positioning model	Survey	Customers	External	15

### 5.3.2 Data analysis

As described in previous sections, this thesis has altered between theory and empirical findings in an iterative manner. Therefore, the results from interviews and surveys were analyzed continuously to allow for additional questions to validate emergent patterns or to clarify areas of confusion. In cases of completely new questions being asked, earlier respondents were invited to answer the additional question. An example of this is the pattern described in Table 4 which were observed after a few interviews.

The conducted interviews were summarized and coded on an ongoing basis. Results from interviews were interpreted and summarized together with results from the surveys where the areas matched. Interviews were coded according to the practical tips provided by Bryman & Bell (2013). Although, as patterns arise and new data were added, the variables used for coding and clustering answers into groups changed. Further indicating the deductive approach of the research.

Also, empirical findings and patterns were compared towards theory in order to enrich and validate the findings in a more general context.

## 5.4 Quality of research & reflections

The research quality of a business research can be assessed through its Reliability, Replicability and Validity, (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

### 5.4.1 Reliability

The measure of reliability relates to how well a reader can rely on the results in this study being useful at a later stage. As Bryman & Bell (2015) claims, the reliability is related to how consistent the measures are. Further, a reliable research use measures that correspond closely to the reality and the description of its collection is transparent, (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015).

As for the reliability of this thesis, measures for the model were generated from previous theory and adapted through interactions with customers. Furthermore, the researcher's understanding of companies through which the model is adapted to, were gained via interactions with six different companies. Also, interviews at different operational levels were conducted in order to detect differences between the customers.

Given the stability of measures over time, this research cannot rely on respondents to repeat their answers. Also, as some of the results presented here is a snapshot of the perceptions of ÅF, one can expect that the next one will be somewhat different as those perceptions are relative to competition in the market. Also, as industries reshape and companies adapt, the general reliability of the majority of results will decrease. Additionally, some of the findings in this research is consistent with previous theories, indicating that those findings could be of higher reliability.

#### 5.4.2 Replicability

The replicability of a research indicates how well another researcher can re-do the research. As Bryman & Bell (2015) claims, qualitative research is hard to replicate as it is conducted in a dynamic setting. Also, as this study is largely dependent on the interpretations of the researcher, the view and the made assumptions needs to be considered. Finally, as the research is conducted through contacts provided by an external part, limitations to the replicability in the same context may arise.

#### 5.4.3 Validity

Bryman & Bell (2015) divides validity into external and internal validity, separating it based on how the research it relates to the researcher or to other contexts.

The internal validity relates to how believable the conclusions drawn are relating to what has been observed. As this thesis is using with a smaller sample set, the internal validity can be questioned, as some patterns may be a factor of that sample size. Although, within the samples, observed patterns seemed strong. Also, patterns found here could to a large extent be found in other contexts, described by other researchers.

The external validity of this work, can be expressed as how well the research can be generalized to fit other settings. As this paper builds on a smaller selected sample with focus on technology consultancy, the results may not be representable if applied on a different context. As many parts of the results are closely linked to the specific services offered, contexts with similar offerings may be the best choice if results are to be generalized.

## 6 Findings & analysis

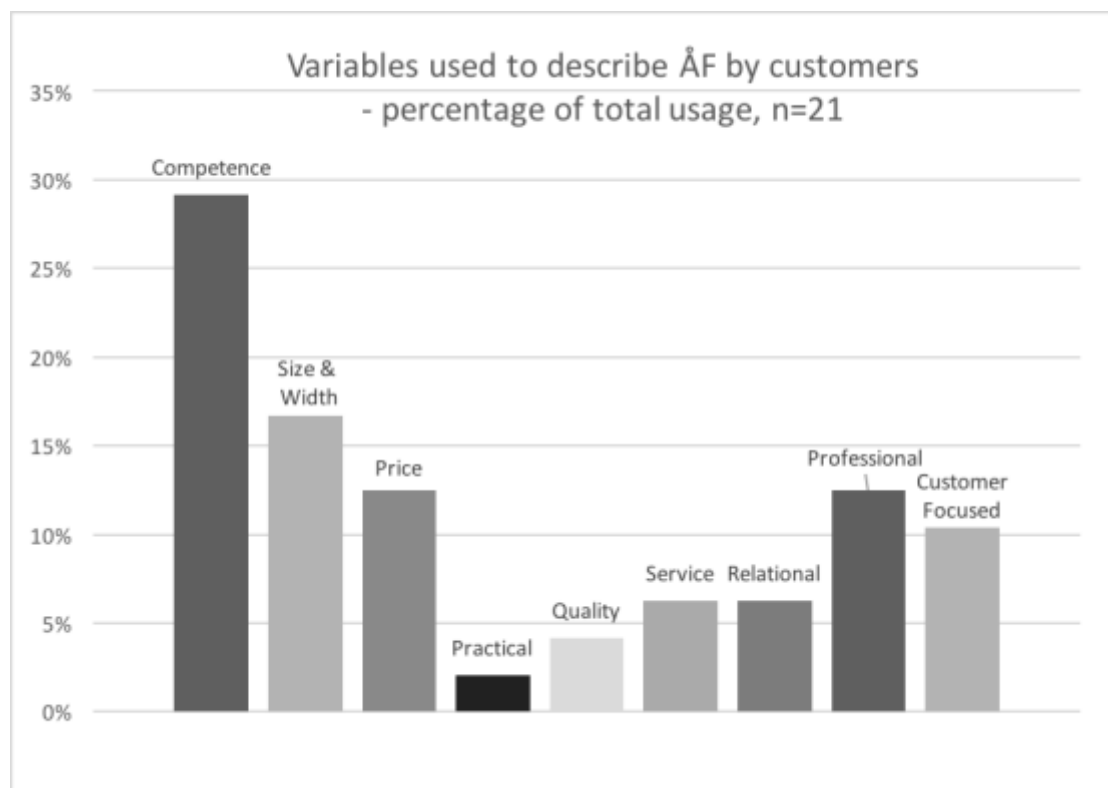
*In this section, the findings are presented and analyzed. As this is an attempt to build a model, the disposition of this section will be the following. First, findings regarding customers' perceptions of ÅF's position are presented in two different ways of measures. These are also compared with description of their evaluation of their own company's position. Afterwards, more qualitative findings are presented regarding customers' processes and perception building. Finally, results from employees are presented in relation to the customers'.*

### 6.1 Customers' reflections of position

#### 6.1.1 The position of ÅF

During interviews, customers were asked to describe the position of ÅF on the market, in any terms that they wanted to gain the "top of your head"-perception. The results from the interviews were also complemented with open-ended questions in the initial surveys.

The results shown in Figure 8 indicate that there is a spread in terms of variables used to describe the company. Also, when interviewees were asked to elaborate on positioning and how to describe companies, there seemed to be an initial ambiguity about the concept for the majority of the respondents.



*Figure 8. Showing the frequency of variables used to describe ÅF.*

When discussing positioning more in depth, there seemed to be other dimensions of interest compared to the initial variables presented in Figure 8.

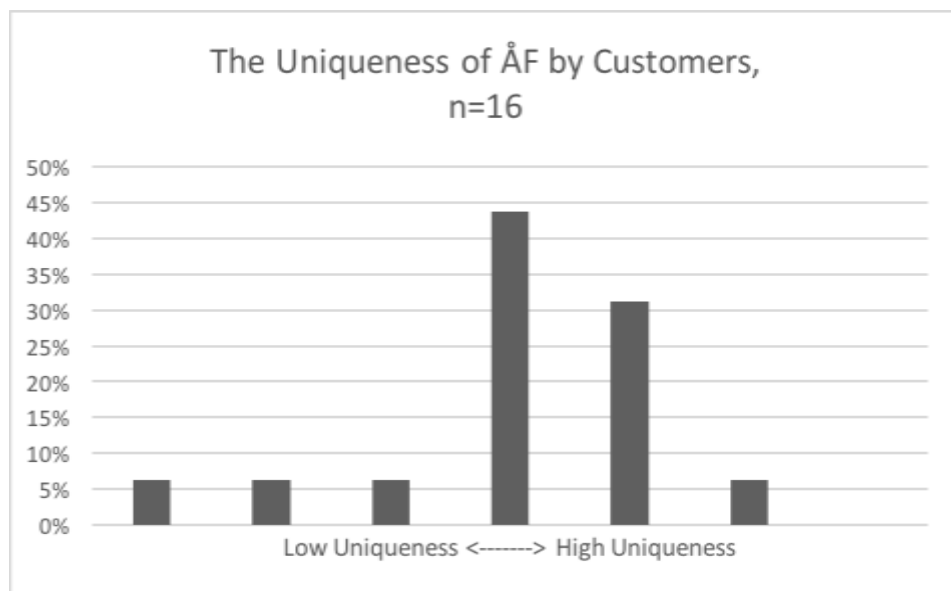
When asked what dimensions that differentiate companies from each other in the industry, answers included niches of their offerings in terms of “young talents” or “senior” consultants offered. When asked to elaborate on the meaning of these niche players, it was found that they were perceived as “high cost & high quality” vs “lower cost & lower quality”.

The results in Figure 8 could be divided with respect to the respondents’ operational level in their company. Table 3 shows the result of the three most commonly used variables, with respect to the respondents’ operational position in their firms.

*Table 3. The three most used variables used to describe ÅF with respect to the respondents’ operational level.*

	<b>MOST USED VARIABLE</b>	<b>2ND MOST USED VARIABLE</b>	<b>3RD MOST USED VARIABLE</b>
<b>DIVISION MANAGER</b>	Competence	Professional	Price
<b>SECTION MANAGER</b>	Competence	Size & Width	Professional
<b>TEAM LEADER</b>	Competence	Service	Size & Width
<b>PURCHASER</b>	Price	Competence	Size & Width

In addition to the results above, customers were asked to assess ÅF’s favorability, credibility and uniqueness were taken. These the results are shown in Figure 9, Figure 10 and Figure 11.



*Figure 9. The uniqueness of ÅF, estimated by customers.*

During interviews, some respondents claimed that the different suppliers on the market were very similar. Others claimed that suppliers differ in competence

areas or that personal relations were the differentiating factors, since all businesses were “doing the same thing”. The results indicate a wide span of perceptions.

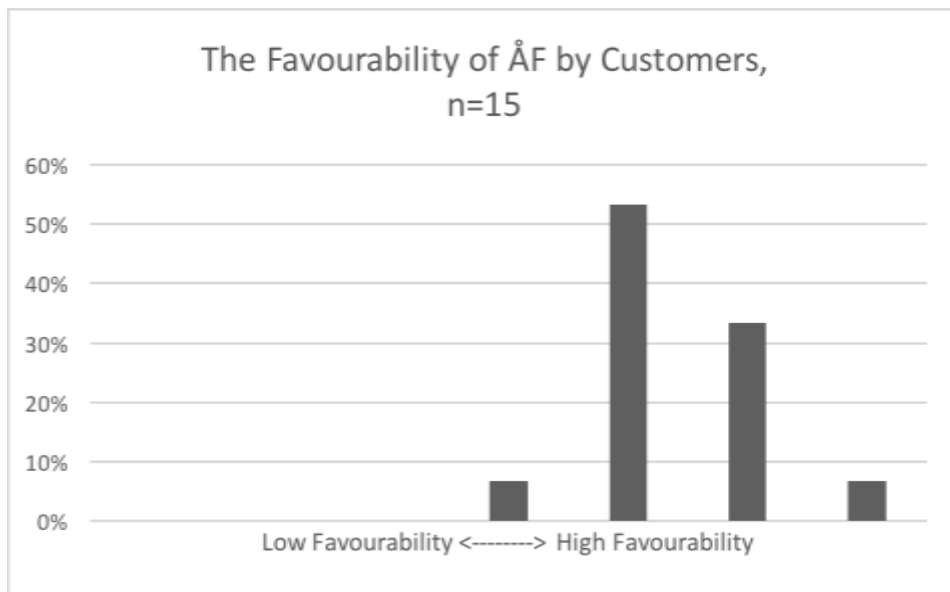


Figure 10. The favorability of ÅF, estimated by customers.

Throughout the interviews, customer’s claimed to be overall satisfied with ÅF and had a favorable attitude towards the company. The image was assessed as good, and customers seemed to have nothing against being recognized with ÅF.

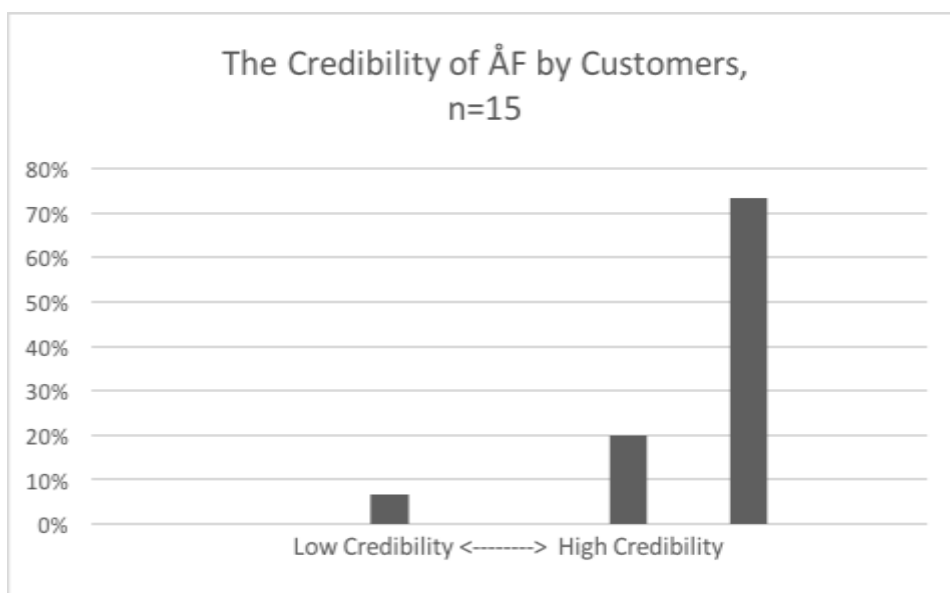


Figure 11. The credibility of ÅF, estimated by customers.

The credibility is measured as how likely the customers find ÅF to deliver on the promises that they make. Seemingly, customers find that ÅF deliver upon its promises.

## 6.1.2 The customers' own company

The interviewed customers were also asked to describe the position of the company that they represented in their own words. Due to the promised anonymity of the customers, their descriptions have been translated and bundled into categories. These are shown in Table 4.

*Table 4. The frequencies of variables used, by category and company described.*

INTERVIEWEE	COMPANY	COMPANY STRUCTURE	CAPABILITIES & RESOURCES	RELATION TO COMPETITION, INDUSTRY OR	DELIVERED VALUE	POSITION IN VALUE CHAIN	FUTURE STRATEGIC
9	ÅF						
	Own	X	X	X		X	X
10	ÅF		X		X		
	Own	X	X		X	X	
11	ÅF		X				
	Own	X	X	X	X		
12	ÅF	X	X				
	Own	X	X	X	X		
13	ÅF	X	X				X
	Own	X	X	X	X		
14	ÅF	X					
	Own	X		X	X	X	
15	ÅF	X	X				
	Own	X	X	X	X		X

## 6.2 Customers' buying process & perception building

### 6.2.1 Process & evaluations

As the interviewees all represent large organizations, their purchasing processes were structured and there were many individuals involved in the decision-making. The decision-making groups were in most cases cross-functional, involving both purchasing managers as well as representatives from the functional areas and sometimes senior managers.

There seemed to be some differences in amongst the participants in the decision-groups regarding focus areas. As the need for a consultancy service often exist at an operational level, the persons representing the link to that area were believed to have a greater emphasis on the competences and fit with the organization. The formal purchasers seemed on the other hand to be more concerned by the formalities, processes and agreements. As one purchaser claimed;

*"The simpler and positive deals we make, the more it contributes to me being in favor for that specific supplier the next time around. For me, the purchasing is a flow, were first time offers from suppliers should be right so we can move on to deal with other issues."*<sup>2</sup>

The process of buying consultancy services seems to be rather structured in terms of issuing the initial supplier agreement. Conducting business through a centrally negotiated supplier agreement is a common contextual factor for all of the involved customers. These agreements are often valid for a longer time than a single project. Also, as there were often many different services bought simultaneously, evaluation after the end of the agreement involved multiple projects or service providers, which all were believed to contribute to the overall assessment.

Although, when asked about the evaluating processes of services, some of the interviewees claimed that they were rather unstructured. There were few formal processes in place in their organization for evaluating and measuring the consultancy services. Rather, it was a factor of the overall satisfaction that represented the evaluation process. As one interview claimed;

*"Usually we don't evaluate ongoing, but rather on after closing a project or before we go into negotiations when a contract is about to expire. But if we are unsatisfied, we take action directly."*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interviewee 9

<sup>3</sup> Interviewee 8

Another interviewee meant that his evaluation was based on the holistic view of the organization;

*"I'm only interested in how my operation is going. So if I feel that they (the consultants) are contributing, I'm mostly satisfied."*<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, there seemed to be a general agreement amongst the customers that the purchases of services were more complex and uncertain than buying products. As one of the interviewees stated;

*"A pen is a pen.... Purchases of services are more difficult, there are abstract values and people involved... Also, what we lack in structured follow-ups for services, we try to make up through continuous contact with the company."*<sup>5</sup>

## 6.2.2 Perceptions & channels

As there may be influences of the companies' marketing efforts (through advertisement and similar communication) on the ways that customers describe the positions and perceive the company, the customers seem unwilling to agree;

*"The emails and other things that they send us is usually just information. It have to be really special if I were to alter my views based on perceptions."*<sup>6</sup>

Another customer claimed that even if marketing tries to affect him, the real persons he meets will have a more influential role as they spend much more time together. Also, given as a reflection on the importance of building an image, one respondent answered;

*"Image has no meaning to me"*<sup>7</sup>

Others claimed that image was not important for the business' choices unless it was a case of a bad image of a supplier. Then the customers would not conduct any business with that specific supplier. Another respondent claimed that image was a "pre-quote thing" decreasing in importance as a working relationship was initiated.

When looking at what affect customers' perceptions and what interactions that the customers have with their consultancy suppliers, the majority claimed that most of the contact was with their assigned "point-of-contact" or key account

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<sup>4</sup> Interviewee 7

<sup>5</sup> Interviewee 9

<sup>6</sup> Interviewee 6

<sup>7</sup> Interviewee 7



manager. In addition to this contact, interactions with consultants working in-house are common;

*"I believe that I'm influenced by my sales representative, the people in-house that are working for ÅF... Of course, when I think of them, I am comparing them to other alternatives."*<sup>8</sup>

The different channels ÅF and their customers used to interact, seemed to affect the perceptions of different parts of the company. Sales personnel seemed to be connected with the company in larger terms than the in-house consultants. In the interactions with sales personnel, one respondent claimed that in these meetings his perceptions about the supplier's attitude, image, their offering and relational traits were formed.

*"Well, through meetings with (name of the sales representative from ÅF) I get an insight to the company and where they are heading. ... The relationship I mentioned earlier is primarily with the sales force, as I talk to them when there is anything urgent."*<sup>9</sup>

While the interactions with consultants working operational at the site of the customers were described in terms of performance measures which often were linked with the consultant. One respondent stated;

*"The consultants at ÅF are really efficient, they work well with our teams."*<sup>10</sup>

Others were using a more binary approach to describing the consultants;

*"Well, the consultants... either they do a good job and fit in our organization or they don't, there is usually the one or the other."*<sup>11</sup>

Another claimed;

*"He is a really good CAD-engineer, if (name of one of the consultants) decides to leave ÅF, I will change the supplier with him."*<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, when asked what they believe are the key-drivers of their perception of a company, there seemed to be an emphasis on previous work relations and "track records". In contrast, no one could really be precise about what they believed that their perceptions of a company were based on. When

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<sup>8</sup> Interviewee 8

<sup>9</sup> Interviewee 9

<sup>10</sup> Interviewee 7

<sup>11</sup> Interviewee 9

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee 8

asked to collaborate on what the track-record consisted of, one respondent answered;

*"It's probably some kind of mixture of a lot of things, satisfaction, quality, personal relationships and a lot more."<sup>13</sup>*

Also, as one of the respondents could remember the dilemma of having no previous experiences of ÅF when starting at the customer's company;

*"I had no experience of them from before, so I asked around in our organization and got to hear from people that had experiences from before. They usually have a representable view."<sup>14</sup>*

The respondents seemed all to agree that previous performance was of importance when making their perceptions as well as leading up to the purchasing decision. As respondent claimed;

*"I believe what affects me is their reception, what they deliver and how they deliver it."<sup>15</sup>*

Another customer stated;

*"At the end of the day, the value they bring us is all that matters."<sup>16</sup>*

### 6.3 Employees' assessment of position

The supervising group at ÅF had a predefined set of dimensions in which they thought could be used when modeling ÅF's position. During discussions in the early stages of the thesis these were refined and used for an initial test. The predefined set were; Flexibility, Relation, Size, Width of offering and Offered customer value.

During the interviews with candidates from ÅF, candidates were asked same questions as customers and filled out the same survey. A comparison of the different variables used to describe ÅF and its position in the market is shown in Figure 12. In the figure, the variable "Size & Width" were the most frequently used measure by employees to describe the company. It was also the variable with the biggest difference between employees and customers. Furthermore, the employees' responses were concentrated to fewer variables than of the customers.

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<sup>13</sup> Interviewee 7

<sup>14</sup> Interviewee 9

<sup>15</sup> Interviewee 11

<sup>16</sup> Interviewee 8

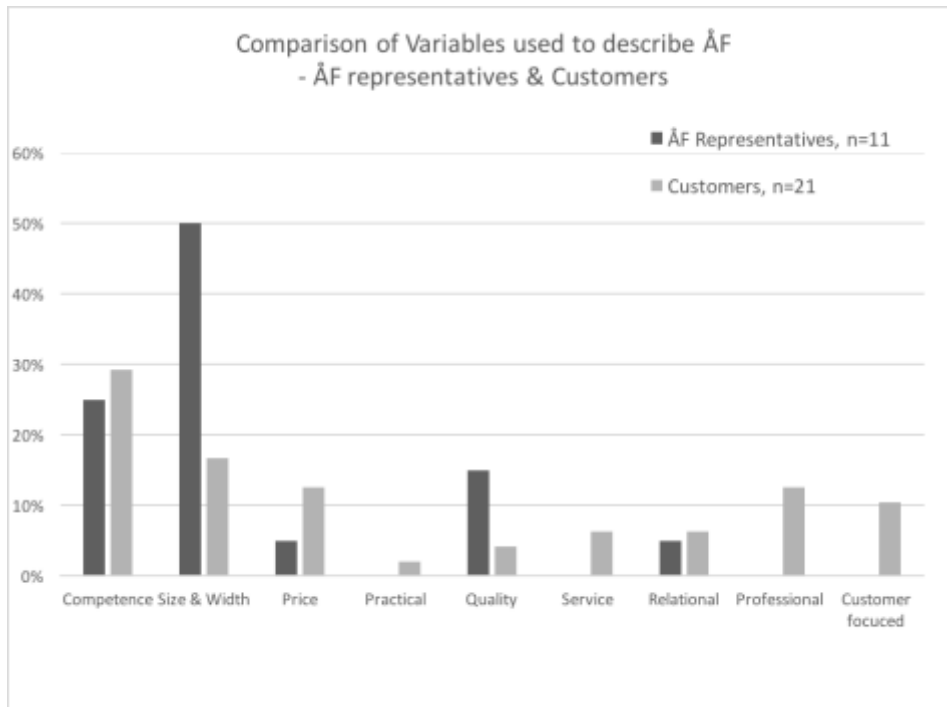


Figure 12. Comparison of used variables to describe ÅF, Customers and Employees.

Also, "To be the best partner for the best customers", which is the outspoken vision of ÅF, were used by some employees when asked about ÅF's intended position. A ÅF executive collaborated;

*"We aim to be our clients' partners, that's the position we want!"<sup>17</sup>*

#### 6.4 Employees' reflections on positioning & perceptions

When elaborating on the area of positioning and perceptions, there were some ambiguity about the term, as during the interviews with customers. One of the respondents gave a rather concise answer to the question; what is position?

*"The first thing that comes into your mind when thinking about the company"<sup>18</sup>*

Regarding the importance of having a distinctive position in terms of image, the answers were varying. The biggest advocates of working towards a distinctive and unique image were the employees involved with some kind of external marketing activities. As one of these advocates claimed;

*"Everybody is just talking about companies in technical terms, images don't seem to matter to them that much"<sup>19</sup>*

<sup>17</sup> Division manager at ÅF, overheard at a meeting

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee 4

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee 3

In contrast, the other representatives had a more technical approach and meant that its more important to be able to offer the best deal. Hence, instead of a distinctive image they argued for a distinctive offer.

*"The customers do probably have a pretty clear understanding of what every company in the industry is good at and what specialties they have"*<sup>20</sup>

Also, there was some criticism towards how ÅF were working with their internal communications;

*"The internal communication is a neglected area."*<sup>21</sup>

During these interviews, discussions about positioning also came to include a wider part of the concept, involving traits of the company's market position;

*"Also, we are in a dangerous position as a company, as our delivery to our customers is so much linked to individuals"*<sup>22</sup>

Or;

*"Our organization with earnings-based units, result in some areas being left behind, makes some part of our offering stand in the shadow"*<sup>23</sup>

## 6.5 Perceived importance of functional areas

As the interactions were studied between customers and suppliers in the business context, this thesis choose to conceptualize it as a combination of Delivery, Service, Relations and Sacrifices. (For further explanation about the conceptualization, see chapter 7.3.) Customers were asked to estimate the importance to their perceptions for each area. The results such estimation are shown in Figure 13.

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<sup>20</sup> Interviewee 2

<sup>21</sup> Interviewee 5

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee 4

<sup>23</sup> Interviewee 3

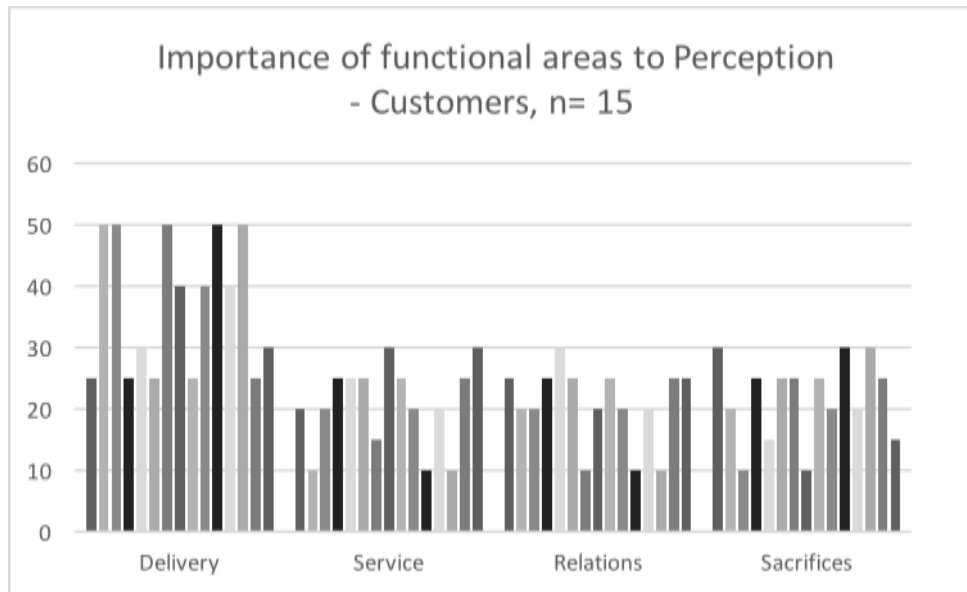


Figure 13. Customers perceived importance of functional areas.

As shown in Figure 13 there is a seemingly wide spread between customers' perception of the importance of the areas. Noteworthy is that in only one case were the delivery area not rated as the single or split most important area. The spread and mean of the sample is shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Mean and spread of customers perceived importance of the functional areas.

	DELIVERY	SERVICES	RELATIONS	SACRIFICE
<b>MEAN</b>	37%	20,7%	20,7%	21,7%
<b>LARGEST SPREAD</b>	25%-units	20%-units	20%-units	20%-units

Following, in Figure 14, is the same perceived importance estimated by the employees.

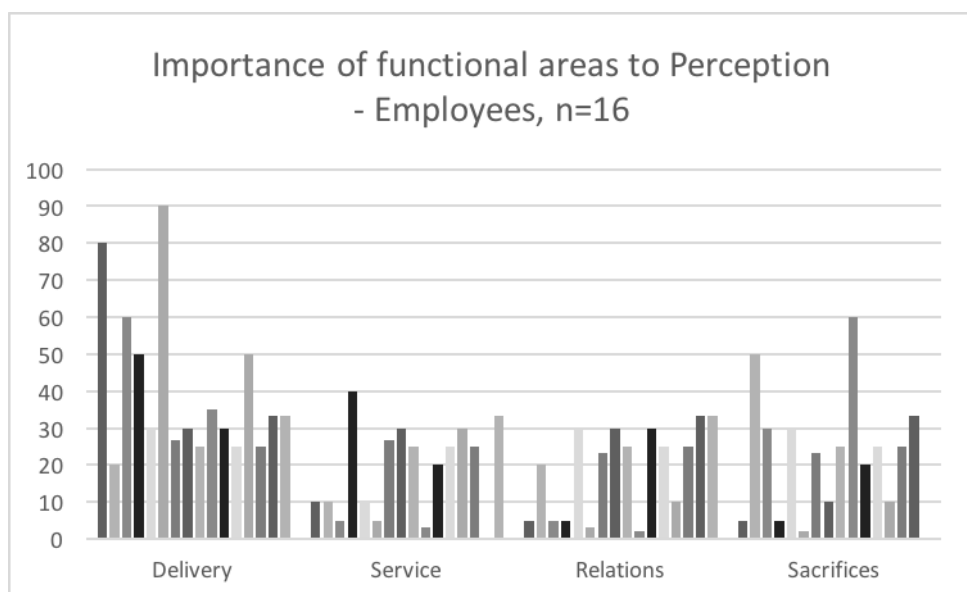


Figure 14. Employees perceived importance of functional areas.

Amongst the employees there were even larger variations of the perceptions of importance over all of the areas, shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Mean and spread of employees perceived importance of functional areas.

	DELIVERY	SERVICES	RELATIONS	SACRIFICE
<b>MEAN</b>	40,2%	18,6%	19%	22,1%
<b>LARGEST SPREAD</b>	70%-units	40%-units	31,3%-units	60%-units

As the respondents were asked to give information about their operational level within the customer's firm, the perceived importance of the different functional areas could be assessed in relation to their position, as shown in Figure 15.

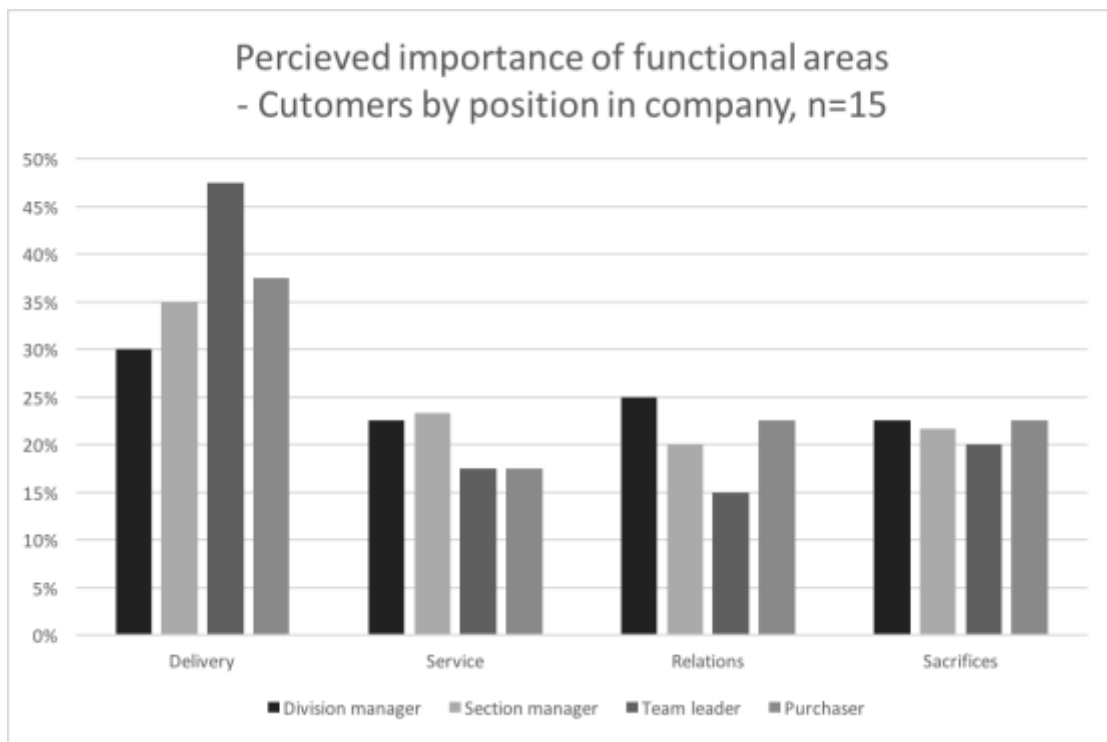


Figure 15. The perceived importance of functional areas per customer's operational level.

## 7 Discussion

*In this section the theoretical and conceptual frameworks will be related to the findings of this thesis. As the outline for this thesis is a model for evaluation, this section will also argue for the composition and dimensions of the model. In order to give the reader an understanding of how the author have come to regard the concept of positioning, this section starts with a discussion of the definition of positioning.*

### 7.1 The concept of positioning in the industrial context of technology consultancy

This thesis has followed the taxonomy proposed by DiMingo (1988), where positioning can be divided into market positioning and perceptual positioning. Despite the differences of the two areas of positioning, scholars argue for their interconnectedness, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004; DiMingo, 1988; Kalafatis, et al., 2000; Ellson, 2004). While these two areas compose a practical distinction for theorists, the lines are blurrier for practitioners. Findings from interviews with both employees and customers supports the claims of ambiguity and ranging definitions of the concept. Also, the taxonomy used seems to be a theoretical construct as no interviewees made any attempts deliberately divide the concept into different views.

While customers mainly used what could be described as a perceptual approach to describe ÅF and the market, employees also were to include a market perspective in their assessment. Customers generally spoke about their suppliers in terms of how well they fitted and delivered value to their own organization. Also, identification of positions in the market were done through pointing out certain traits that differed between the suppliers, mainly relating to some kind of value proposal (competences, quality, etc.). Employees on the other hand also included topics of a competitive nature, such as how new entrants' competed in the market with new business models or identified areas where the company's position of power were weak. The interaction model by Håkansson (1982) may give insight to this, as the interactions that a customer has with the supplier and its competitors are revolving around their offerings, which are assessed in relation to the organization, the atmosphere and environment. Hence, the perceptions that customers gain through interactions with suppliers take place in the context of evaluating who can best satisfy their need and their organization. On the supplier's side, there is a competition for delivering the best offer in comparison to the competition. Therefore, the ways of achieving the best offer become interesting, and with that the company's market position. Finally, it should be argued that a change in the suppliers' market position does not have to affect the customers' perceptions, indicating the relevance of separating market and perceptual positions.

When the trend of involving market perspectives of positioning for the own firm's position, while neglecting it when describing suppliers were identified, interviewees were asked to describe their own organizations position. These answers did also consist of market perspectives, which they did not use when describing ÅF. The terms used to describe their own companies are bundled in Table 4. A simple explanation for this behavior could be the level of information that the interviewee has regarding the companies and the insights into the strategic dimensions of positioning. Although, regardless of the underlying explanation, there seems to be a tendency to analyze the own companies position in more complex terms, than when describing other organizations' positions. The wider perspective on positioning adopted by the own employees could also be related to the study presented by Bain & company (2012) where managers found their companies to be much more unique than their customers did. Perhaps managers use many more aspects into which it becomes easier to consider oneself unique. These findings and the conceptual framework shows the importance to gain the customers' perspective, as many times the dimensions used by managers are irrelevant.

During the interviews with customers, it was found that a vast majority of the respondents claimed to have a structured purchasing process, in which many persons were involved and offers were compared towards a set standard in order to achieve a consistency in their purchasing decisions. Although, when asked how they evaluated their purchases, most respondents confessed that their evaluations were not following the same structured processes. Hence, the proposed complexity for evaluation of services as proposed by Axelsson & Wynstra (2002) and Jackson et al., (1995) seems to hold true in this context. Also, some respondents claimed to not take the images of companies or other marketing influenced efforts into account when making their decisions, meaning that they did not put much relevance into their perceptions of the company in general but rather to the objective measures of performance. Others claimed that positioning did not exist in the industry, that every company were doing the same thing. This is something that is in line with what Kalafatis et al., (2000) claims, that perceptual positioning is rare amongst business companies. Also, given the answers of the customers, it seems as perceptual positioning (general marketing efforts to differentiate) is of low importance in their purchase processes. Despite this, perceptual positioning may affect customers in their evaluation process as their perception of performance could be influenced. Especially since Jackson et al., (1995) have shown that when evaluation is complex (as in this case) individuals may put larger emphasis on secondary measures, like their own perceptions and liking. Hence, the claimed objectivity in these cases may be rather subjective, and the claimed focus on performance measures may be affected by secondary factors. Additionally, positioning seems relevant in order to be able to deliver the best offer. In this case, perhaps the company's market position is of more relevance



as it will influence the company's ability to deliver and alter their offer. Strategic considerations of what resources to acquire and dynamic maneuvers against competition seems to have a larger impact than marketing efforts. Seemingly, the offers had a big impact on the perceptions of customers and in the ways that they choose to describe the market. The relatively larger importance of the market positioning activities compared to perceptual positioning activities for building perceptions in business markets is something that Kalafatis et al., (2000) argues. They claim that market considerations are more important than what factors related to image and marketing activities are for the perceptual position. This seems to be in line with the findings from the interview sessions in this case.

Relating the discussion in this part to the created conceptual framework, the author argues for its validity. Support from the empirical findings regarding the different usage of the perspectives seem to follow the framework as employees take on a much wider perspective. Furthermore, interviewees claimed to be objective and focus on value when making decisions. Although, as evaluations of services is hard, which have been seen in both interviews and previous theory, the "objective" perceptions of value seem to be closely linked to the individuals. Therefore, the conceptual framework's suggested interactions through delivering value is relevant. Also, as the respondents claimed to not put much emphasis on their perceptions of the image of the company, the author would like argue for a usage of the perceptions of value delivered as the main driver for the overall perceptual position in this context.

## 7.2 Customers' perceptions

Customers have during interviews claimed that the contact surfaces they have towards consultancy firms consists of the sales representatives, the consultants, the value that they deliver and word-of-mouth from other customers or colleagues. All these contact surfaces pose for the interactive parts which are linked to different sets of interaction processes as suggested by Håkansson (1982). Also, the respondents had different types and amounts of interaction with the different interactive parties. For example, interviewees who had a more operational role would have a greater part of their contacts with the in-house consultants, while customers with less role in the operations seemed to interact mainly with sales representatives. As the respondents have different roles in their companies and different influences from their organization, Håkansson (1982) suggest that their interactions (and there by how they perceive things) will be affected.

The different interactions that customers have with ÅF, were believed to affect the perceptions in terms of an altered "track record". The building of perceptions like this is in line with Holmlund's (1996) concept of activities or episodes building up to sequences. The activities mediated through these channels (meetings, a segment of working together, problems, etc.) will make

for the building stones of the customers' perceptions. Also, as the length of the relationship grows with new episodes, new comparison standards are formed which are used in future comparisons. This was illustrated by a customer claiming that he would change supplier, if the person he had formed a strong relationship with, changed employer. Indicating that his comparison standards had been raised to a level that he only believed that specific person could fulfil. Also, in that specific case, the relationship between ÅF and the customer were undermined by the customer's and the consultant's relationship, supporting the claims of a "dangerous" (market position) bargaining position from interview 4.

The division of importance areas based on operational levels of the respondents, summarized in Figure 14, shows some small differences. The team leaders, who are closest to the operation, would put a larger emphasis on the deliveries than the other groups. Connections can be drawn to Håkansson's (1982) theories, as they would to a larger extent be influenced directly by the outcomes of the consultants. Also, all of the responding groups rated the delivery as the most important area, seemingly in line with the interviews. The Division managers, who have a more formal responsibility, was distributing almost equal importance's over the four areas. Additionally, during interviews, there seemed to be a tendency to relate to consultants through descriptions linked to performance of the delivery and regarded as individuals to a larger extent, while the sales personnel were more linked to the company.

Another finding with regards to the seniority in the organization were in which terms they used to describe ÅF, Table 3. Firstly, there seems to be a general usage of the competence when describing ÅF, which were common regardless of operational level. Secondly, the purchaser differed from the others being the only one frequently using "Price". Together with the division manager, the purchaser were the only ones using price as a variable to describe ÅF, usually indicating that they took a premium during interviews. Reasons for this could be the close link to the requirements put on purchasers and division managers as they have a responsibility to manage costs. In addition, the three more operational levels (division manager, section manager & team leader) all used some kind of behavioral variable, indicating how the representatives from ÅF behave. Perhaps the difference between the operational levels and the purchaser lies with the lower level of interaction that purchasers have with the consultants, as indicated in interview 9 (see section 6.2.1). Although, as there seems to exist some differences between the operational levels, the sample is still too small to make any general conclusions.

Again, relating to the conceptual framework, there seems to be some support regarding how perceptions are build and what factors that is of importance. The main types of interactions seem to be linked with Brodie et al., (2009) two interaction channels which is the foundation for the interactions in the

conceptual model. Also, spans of perceptions seem to differ over seniority and the perceptions are largely influenced by the previous encounters.

### 7.3 The dimensions of position in the industrial context of technology consultancy

In order to assess the dimensions that customers use to evaluate a product or a company, one has to figure out the terms of importance. Previous scholars have through focus groups farmed out sets of variables that later are used to define positions within, (Blankson & Kalafatis, 2004). Due to restricted time and access to customer contact, this thesis relies only on interviews and survey statements. Customers were therefore not allowed to interact in the generation of variables. Although, the dimensions found through initial interviews and surveys were tested during later interviews and compared towards previous literature. Also, a great emphasis was put on the supervising team's knowledge and assumptions when generating the first set of dimensions, which is a fairly uncommon procedure amongst previous literature. Although, conducting an internal process is in line with the practical approach as proposed by Ulaga & Chacour (2001).

Interviewees and survey results indicated that customers in this case seemed unlike from the bigger mass of consumers, which the large majority of previous literature have chosen to study, (Amonini, et al., 2010; Wang, et al., 2004; Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). The author perceived that customers in this business context seemed to put a larger emphasis on the use of services for the organization and that they at least claimed for a more objective decision process. As the term "value" kept appearing, the literature on customer and relationship value have been studied and allowed to contribute with dimensions that have been applicable, (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Weinstein, 2012). Lapierre's (2000) work with customer value in ICT-businesses, have many parallels with the dimensions proposed by the supervising team and from customers, which gives additional empirical support for the dimensions. For a greater insight into theoretical support for the finalized dimensions, see chapter 7.3.

To further justify the use of value-measures to define positioning, empirical findings are combined with theory. As in this business context, the customers were already having a relationship with ÅF, making their perceptions' already grounded in previous experiences. Also, there seems to be a factor of perseverance of perceptions within a company, as newcomers seek the input from older colleagues. Furthermore, interviewees claimed, that there is an ongoing work with consolidation of suppliers, in order to decrease costs, (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). This would indicate that, to an even larger extent, that evaluations will be done with perceptions of previous encounters in place, as long term relationships are formed. In order to position a company with an

ongoing relationship, a value-based perspective should be adopted, (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Anderson & Narus, 1998).

In consumer markets, perceptual position is often referred to as the image of a company, (Amonini, et al., 2010). As of the business context were images seem less relevant, as seen from interviews, a larger focus is put on the different benefits achieved, the position evaluated have been decided to be of a broader kind. Additionally, the nature of services affects the firm's ability to create a superior image in business markets through marketing efforts. Both empiric studies and literature have shown that customers do adapt a wider measure in this case, and that perception building relies on the interactions made. Also, as positioning aims for increasing the value for the customers and the own firm's business, relating measures to important factors in the customers' decision process seems relevant, as they pose for an interactive factor.

The higher order dimensions, Delivery, Service, Relation and Sacrifices, is a construct borrowed from previous research, (Lapierre, 2000a). As seen in Table 1, many of the concepts are involving similar elements, (Weinstein, 2012; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001). Also, this was a conceptualization agreed by the supervising group, were the benefits of organizational-like areas were appreciated. Furthermore, the internal validations were supporting the high-order concept as a practical method to model the way through which customers perceived suppliers.

When asked to assess and describe ÅF's position in the market, customers used different variables as shown in Figure 8. From the figure, it seems clear that customers make use of "competence" when describing consultancy firms. Also, providing competencies were found to be one of the main reasons for using consultants in the first place. "Size & Width" are can both be used as a perceptual and a value-based measure as they can both relate to the size of the corporation and the value that it can bring through its size. Also, "Size & Width" were the most used variable by employees. Other frequently used variables were "Professional", "Price" and "Customer focused". Seemingly, there customers use variables that can be divided into the proposed high-order dimensions, see Chapter 7.3.

As positioning is regarded as an abstract concept, it's effectiveness should be considered to be evaluated in another set of dimensions. As most positioning scholars claim, a position must be attractive to reach, free of occupation and in line with what the company can achieve, (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010; Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2010). For this set of effectiveness dimensions, dimensions proposed by Fuchs & Diamantopoulos (2010) were used, *Uniqueness, Credibility & Favorability*. Although, as previous literature defines the measure as a general uniqueness, it is hard to tell whether it reflects the image of a company or if it reflects the uniqueness of the value offering. In addition, as interviews have shown a specific interest in the offered value and forsaken the

concept of image, the uniqueness proposed to measure is of the offering. The results gained from surveys, showed satisfactory measures in two out of three dimensions. The uniqueness was perceived as low compared to the others, which seems consistent with interviews and theories claiming similarity in business markets, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000; Siebers, et al., 2013; Amonini, et al., 2010). Finally, these measures are able to evaluate an aligned position (actual equals intended) and not only identify discrepancies.

Also, due to the nature of the industry, where suppliers' agreements are signed over longer times and due to ÅF's stated vision to become a key supplier or partner to its customers, the model draws on the logic argued by Ulaga & Eggert (2006), who advocates for value-based differentiation in order to positioning the company towards a long-term sustainable relationship. Therefore, the proposed model measures important value-drivers and relates them to competition.

The proposed dimensions, on which the measurement of the position will be based upon, is presented in Table 7. The rest of this sub-chapter will discuss the sub-dimensions further by defining their meaning, how they were related to the empirical findings and their theoretical support.

*Table 7. A summary of the proposed dimensions on which the evaluation of position will be based on*

<b>Operational Dimension</b>	<b>Explanation of the Operational Dimension</b>	<b>Operational Sub-Dimension</b>
<i>Delivery</i>	The delivery dimension is closely related to "core benefits" or the delivered product. It is what the customers receive, the outcome of a project, or the resulting work done by a consultant in the field.	Width & size of offering
		Quality
		Customization
		Technical competence & methods
<i>Service</i>	The service dimension is the aspects surrounding the actual delivery. Whether the supplier is service minded or not. Operationally linked with the sales team or the point of contact with ÅF.	Communication & responsiveness
		Flexibility
		Reliability
<i>Relational</i>	The relational dimension has a somewhat more abstract nature than the other dimensions. The dimension regards social aspects and the perceived relational benefits. Operationally, this dimension is	Image & favorability
		Credibility
		Relationship

<i>Sacrifice</i>	somewhat scattered over different parts of the organizations, as the customers take many aspects into consideration.	Uniqueness
	The sacrifice dimension is connected with the perceptions of what the customers must give up when conducting business with the supplier. Some of the parts are connected to the delivery and service dimension, while other parts are connected with the relational.	Price
		Time & effort
		Conflict

### 7.3.1 Delivery

The delivery dimension is closely related to “core benefits” or the delivered “product”. The delivery is the grouping of dimensions that describes what the customers receive, the outcome of a project, or the resulting work done by a consultant in the field. An analogy could be drawn to companies selling products, where this measure would correspond to the actual product. The area is of operational importance as its measures describe the actual benefit that a customer is ready to offer money for. The following sub-dimensions gives a more in depth investigation on the areas of importance for customers.

#### 7.3.1.1 Width & size of offering

The dimension regarding width of the offering concerns the perceived offering of the supplier. Here, the width of relevant competence areas as well as the width regarding sizes and ranges of projects that are measured. The measure is supposed to capture the competitiveness of the solution width that ÅF offers.

From interviews and surveys from customers and employees, 17% of the customers and 50% of ÅF representatives mentioned the width of ÅF’s offering to be a describing character, and it was believed that the range of projects that could be undertaken was something that customers found as an important measure. Also, a wide offering and the ability to take on different sizes of projects within different competence areas is of importance, as interviewees stated that they try to minimize the numbers of consultancy providers. Therefore, the ability to choose the same service provider for new competence areas or projects of other sizes were of importance to customers. It could be described as an option to outsource new areas to a lower risk, and without the need to initiate another searching process for additional service providers.

The width is also a dimension which is brought up in ÅF’s business idea, were they claim to “provide profitable, innovative and sustainable solutions through their unique width.” Therefore, this dimension could also be linked to how the customers’ perceptions are relating to their claimed offering.

Furthermore, the dimension is of an operational character. A satisfying measure here will give guidance to the strategic decisions regarding how well the customers appreciate the efforts of developing the width and size of the offering. Although, little insight is gained to what specific areas that customers believe that ÅF is lacking or if any parts of their offering is obsolete. This measure will therefore guide efforts on a higher level. Finally, the management's choices regarding what areas to invest in and their understanding of future demand will affect how customers perceive this area.

When linking this dimension to literature, few authors have involved these aspects when modelling customers' perceptions and important dimensions. Both Lapierre (2000b) and Ulaga & Chachour (2001) have included similar measures when modelling what customers value in other industries, especially in the service context since customers' needs were considered unique, (Lapierre, 2000b).

### **7.3.1.2 Quality of delivery**

The quality measure relates to customers' overall perception of how well the outcome of the delivery is matching set requirements or their expectations. Therefore, this measure differs from other relationship or service quality constructs since it tries to capture the customers' perception of the delivery's quality.

Notable is that the quality measure is not an exclusive and unique measure. As previous methodologies to assess customers' perceptions suggests, quality is often considered a concept of the overall perception (Parasuraman, et al., 1985), in many cases also including relational aspects and service levels, (Wilson & Jantrania, 1995). Also, as interviews have shown, customers' evaluation processes are sometimes lacking in structure and they also admit that the evaluation is hard. Therefore, this measure could be influenced by other means than the actual quality of the delivery, which makes the measure fussy when operationally applied. The measure will not guide practitioners towards any specific areas of improvement, but rather provide a general insight into the perceptions of quality.

During interviews there were a large emphasis on quality which many customers highlighted. Although, the definitions of quality ranged over operational positions at the customers. Lower levels were seemingly interested by the quality of consultants while there were some differences with purchasers', who also did mention the quality in the processes. Therefore, when comparing results of the model over the different operational levels, one could gain additional insight into where and at which levels that quality is assessed.

The quality dimension is the most evident dimension that have been studied and researched in the domain of perceptions of products and brands, company positioning and customers' satisfaction and their evaluation process. (Aaker &

Shansby, 1982; Dovel, 1990; Sureshchandar Chandrasekharan Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002; Gordon & McDougall, 2000; Lapierre, 2000a; Sweeney & Soutar G. N., 2001; Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; Wang, et al., 2004; Whittaker, et al., 2007; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006).

### **7.3.1.3 Customization of delivery**

The customization of the delivery is a dimension that revolves around how well the delivery of a service or a project is adapted and suited for the specific customer. As Ostrom & Iacobucci (1995) noted, customization is a key driver of the perceived satisfaction, which makes it a relevant factor to measure in order to evaluate the company's performance in those terms. The measure is therefore focused on how well customers believe that their supplier is adapting to their needs and solving their problems in a way that the company actually can implement and benefit from.

Interviews showed that the different customers had varying needs, which directly affects this measure. Purchasers' arguing for a smoother process were also claiming for the importance of adapting the offers to their specific needs. Operational managers also claimed for the importance of correctly fitting the consultants into the need of the group, both in terms of competences and quality and also the personal fit of the consultant with the group.

The operational importance of the dimension will be closely linked to the sales force's understanding of the customers need, as they often are the ones that are interpreting the need of the customers into what later is offered. Also, this dimension will be connected to the organizations flexibility and ability to adapt, which could be argued to be of a more market positioning activity.

The dimension is supported in theory by authors claiming the importance of customization as it increases the usefulness of the service and reduces the perceived risks, (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Lapierre, 2000a; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Sureshchandar Chandrasekharan Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002; Lindgreen & Wynstra, 2005). Furthermore, for this specific context of consultancy services, Patterson & Spreng (1997) argue for the importance of an implementable result for customers' evaluation of a service.

### **7.3.1.4 Technical competence & method**

The technical competence and methodology dimension regards how well the customer assess the methods used by the supplier and how competent the personnel are perceived. The technical competence is one of the main reasons (other than providing additional resources) to hire consultants. The perceived level of technical competence of the service provider reduces the perceived risks, as it assures the customer when they perceive the suppliers as competent, (Mitchell, 1990). Both technical competence and methods is also consistent with the "assurance" dimension of the SERVQUAL method, (Parasuraman, et al., 1985).



Findings from customers support the importance of this dimension as a factor that seemed to be linked with the outcome but also as one of the most commonly used variables to differentiate between companies in the market. As some of the interviews revealed, some competences were vital for them to be able to purchase as they were lacking knowledge in the areas themselves. Seemingly competing with competences could pose for a differentiating factor.

Operationally, this measure will be related to the capabilities that ÅF develops in form of expertise areas and the methods they use in order to deliver. For a consultancy firm, with competences closely linked to individuals and knowledge sharing, the area will be affected by their ability to recruit competences that are demanded. Also, the information sharing systems inside the firm will affect the competences and methods used by consultants as well.

Theoretical support for the importance of competence and methods can be also be found in value literature, (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Sureshchandar Chandrasekharan Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002; Eggert & Ulaga, 2003; Ruiz, et al., 2008; Brodie, et al., 2009).

### 7.3.2 Service

The service dimension is the aspects surrounding the actual delivery. The area is supposed to capture the general perception of whether the supplier is service minded or not. Operationally, this area is mostly linked with the sales team or the point of contact with ÅF as it is them who handles issues surrounding the actual delivery. For this measure, sub-dimensions describing the day-to-day support from ÅF are used. Mostly the service-level is concerning how well the customers receive feedback on questions and how well daily problems are solved. Finally, the surrounding services of the delivery could be a crucial part for altering customers' perception and a clear source to differentiation, (Anderson & Narus, 1995). The service area is also found to be an important area of the customers post-purchase evaluation (Patterson & Spreng, 1997) indicating the area's importance for the perceived track record.

#### 7.3.2.1 Communication & responsiveness

This dimensions regards how well the communication is working between the supplier and the customers' organizations, as it is an important activity to reduce risks and assure the customer. The communication measured here is not to be confused with advertising, but rather the information flow between the customers and the supplier on a daily basis. The measure regards the clearness of communications and the level of responsiveness that ÅF shows.

Through the interview sessions, communication and responsiveness were highlighted as something that the customers appreciated and put value in. This measure seemed also to be mostly mediated through the point of contact that ÅF have provided to the customers. Also, the area was highlighted as important

when something was wrong, as when a consultant did not fit or when additional competences were needed quickly.

As claimed above, the area is somewhat connected to the specific point of contact and their way of handling their customers. Therefore, this measure is in many terms an evaluation of a person, which may affect the truthfulness of the data given by customers. Although, gaining customers perceptions in this area will guide work towards a rather specific area of improvements, making the measure easy to operate upon.

This dimension incorporated in many value assessment theories, (Patterson & Spreng, 1997; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Brodie, et al., 2009; Holmlund, 2008), communication as such is also one of the important ways of interaction with customers. Eggert & Ulaga (2001) found that responsiveness is one of the most contributing factors of "service-measures" to the customers perceived value.

### **7.3.2.2 Flexibility**

The flexibility dimension regards how well the supplier can adapt to problems and new changes. The overall flexibility of the supplier can also be related to the reduction of perceived risks as a high flexibility would convince customers that making changes and correcting false assumptions will be possible further on in the agreement.

During the interviews, flexibility was mentioned as something that were valued when needed, and something that smoothed the process, especially for the purchasers. Flexibility as such is probably appreciated by most customers and that especially when something unexpected happens which affects the customers. For example, a downturn in demand of the flexibility of ÅF to support with additional resources when needed.

The flexibility is a measure that is hard to operationalize, it seems connected with the mindset of employees. Although, there is no clear link to any activities that the firm can conduct in order to focus more on flexibility, perhaps the measure is somewhat reflecting the culture of the company.

Theoretical support for this dimension is found in value-theories, especially relating to relationships, (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006; Holmlund, 2008). The flexibility and the ease to address sudden problems efficiently is something that Ulaga & Eggert (2006) explicitly found to be of importance for suppliers to create values in long-term relationships.

### **7.3.2.3 Reliability**

The reliability dimension would relate to how comfortable the supplier makes the customers feel. As a measure, this dimension will evaluate whether customers trust that employees at ÅF will fulfil their promises and give support in times of crisis. Relating to the perceived risks that customers may feel when

outsourcing projects or services, a high reliability would decrease the perceived risk as the customers would feel more confident in ÅF. The reliability is a measure that probably is connected and affected by the track record between customers and ÅF. As of this, changes in perceptions would probably take place in a sequential manner.

This dimension also appeared frequently during interviews as they ÅF often were claimed to be a reliable partner. The track record mentioned during interviews were often claimed to be linked with a reliance in ÅF and an understanding of their processes. The purchasing processes also seemed to be considered smoother, as customers claimed that in some cases when they were relying on a supplier, they would only quote them, leading to less effort for the purchasers.

Reliability is also a complex area to operationalize as it is rather abstract. Just as the flexibility could be influenced by the company's culture, the reliability should be no different. Although, aligning the promises made by sales representatives in service matters with the actual delivery is of importance and will contribute to the customers' reliability. Measuring this dimension will, just as the two recent dimensions, be somewhat linked with the designated point-of-contact. This could influence the responses by customers, which should be taken into consideration.

Researchers involving this dimension in their assessment of important areas for customers are; Sureshchandar et al., (2002), Eggert & Ulaga, (2003), Lapierre, (2000), Patterson & Spreng, (1997) and Ulaga & Chacour, (2001). Furthermore, reliability of service is considered as a main factor affecting the customers post-purchase evaluation of services, (Patterson & Spreng, 1997).

### 7.3.3 Relationship

The relational high order dimension has a somewhat more abstract nature than the other dimensions. The dimension regards social aspects and the perceived relational benefits. The area of relationship is considering the more long-term benefits of conducting business with ÅF. Operationally, this dimension is somewhat scattered over different parts of the organizations, as the customers take many aspects into consideration in their assessment of the dimensions.

#### 7.3.3.1 Image & favorability

The image is in many ways described as the main determinant of a company's perceived position, especially in consumer markets. Image is in many ways described as "what comes up in your mind", and pose for the attributes that a customer connects with a company. The measure in this dimension is based on the favorability of the company's image and how well customers are willing to be connected to that.

Even if image were claimed to not have any relevance on customers during interviews, research have shown strong links between a company's image and its customers perceptions of quality, (Brodie, et al., 2009). Furthermore, one interviewee claimed that image can have negative effects on the business relations. Therefore, it is a measure that should be considered to be evaluated ongoing.

Operationally, it is hard to relate any specific activities that affects this dimension. Marketing and branding are seemingly related and of importance. But as claimed in both literature and in interviews, image seems to be less influenced by image building activities and more formed through the interactive marketing. Therefore, all interactions could be considered to contribute to this measure, making it less operational. Despite the vague connection to operational activities, the favorability of a company is yielding insight into the effectiveness of the position, making it more relevant for the strategic decisions regarding positioning.

Some literature supports the measure of favorability as an indicator of effectiveness, (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012). Other scholars argues for its importance in the value context, especially since the image have an effect on the possibilities for sustaining a long term relationship, (Ries & Trout, 1986; Lapierre, 2000a; Ulaga & Chacour, 2001; Wang, et al., 2004; Whittaker, et al., 2007; Ruiz, et al., 2008).

### **7.3.3.2 Credibility & trust**

As services are delivered over time, companies build trust, which is of an essential part of a business relationship. Also, as customer gain an understanding in how their suppliers are working, they assess the credibility of their promises. In this context the credibility and trust of a company are important as longer contracts are signed and assessments of performance in pre-hand are complex, which also were claimed during interviews. The credibility is also one of the measures that is used to measure effectiveness. This makes it relevant to measure as it relates the claimed position of ÅF with the position that customers believe that ÅF can achieve.

Interviews did not show any specific support for the credibility measure but some interviews claimed that trust was important. Trust seemed to be an important factor for achieving long term benefits of a relationship. Also, as evaluation were complex, trust seemed to work as a secondary measure that lowered the perceived risks. The credibility and trust also seems to be of a post purchase construct which grow over time. As such, it will probably also be altered in a sequential manner.

As this area also is somewhat diffuse and abstract, its connection to operational activities are weak. Also, its measure is not fully exclusive as trust it can be related to reliability. Credibility on the other hand can be seen as a valid

measure of the position's effectiveness and will guide towards any discrepancies.

The credibility of an offering is of vital importance to the perception of a company. Advocates of value are also purposing credibility as a risk reducing factor, (Lapierre, 2000a; Ruiz, et al., 2008). The perceived credibility of a company and its offering is also to be considered as a measure of a position effectiveness, which also can be related to the alignment of the perceptions of internal and external marketing, (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012).

### **7.3.3.3 Relationship**

The relationships between representatives at ÅF and the customers are relevant as they in many ways are the interaction channel through which the perceptions are built. Therefore, the perceptions of the overall relationship could possibly influence other measures as it will pose for a part of the atmosphere in which the interactions take place. Also, relationships can increase the ease of doing business and thereby decrease the perceived effort and time spent on businesses. In this case, the personal relationship between the customers and the employees at ÅF is evaluated.

Findings during interviews showed that individuals at ÅF had a large impact on the overall perceptions of ÅF's performance. As one respondent claimed, the personal relationship towards the consultant was so strong that the consultant was prioritized regardless of which supplier that were represented, indicating the importance of the relationship as a measure. Also, some respondents used their relation with ÅF to describe their position in the market, indicating the built relationship as a differentiating factor.

As a relationship is an abstract term that probably are influenced by many sub-dimensions, the measure does not give many concrete areas to act upon. However, the measure should pose for an indicator for the end result of activities relating to the personal interactions of consultants and sales personnel. Furthermore, as the measure is of a personal character it could be influenced to bias or be hard to gain a truthful answer, therefore, considerations to these problems should be taken during the collection.

A strong relationship has also been argued to be one of the best ways to differentiate in long-term business relationships and is in some cases claimed to be one of the key drivers to become a key-supplier, (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Further theoretical support for the value creation of relationships are found in, Grönroos, (1998), Patterson & Spreng, (1997), Lapierre, (2000) and Ulaga & Chacour, (2001). Also, as customers are dealing with the complexity of evaluating services, a personal relationship can pose for a secondary measure, (Jackson, et al., 1995).

#### **7.3.3.4 Uniqueness**

The uniqueness of the perceptions of a company and its offering is important in order to have a distinguished and differentiated position. Also, being unique is what many of the theories in section 2.2 (Market position) is arguing for in order to claim to be truly differentiated. Furthermore, this is a dimension that is evaluated relative to the market, indicating the level of perceived differentiation on the market.

The uniqueness of a company's offering is a measure that is completely relative to the competitors in the market. Also, as offerings and perceptions sometimes are hard to reposition and choices to alter the offerings may only happen over the longer term, the measure could yield insights to the competitors' attempts to position themselves relative to ÅF.

As literature suggests, positioning activities seems to be less common in the business markets, (Kalafatis, et al., 2000). This could also be seen during the interviews as some of the respondents claimed that the actors on the market all were similar.

The implications of this measure is of a more strategic nature as it could guide the choices managers make in order to develop their offering to be competitive and to deliver value to their target customers. Although, the measure will only evaluate the end result of the choices and activities done, regardless of what they are and how they were operationalized.

In addition, Fuchs & Diamantopoulos (2010) uses uniqueness (or differentiation) as one of three dimensions to measure positioning effectiveness. The argument for this dimension is generally to measure how well the company have achieved to position itself in a unique space in the market, regardless of what dimensions that the customers use to configure their perceptual market space.

#### **7.3.4 Sacrifices**

The sacrifice dimension is connected with the perceptions of what the customers must give up when conducting business with the supplier. The most apparent measure is the monetary cost. Although, the sacrifices made can be conceptualized in other terms as well. Some of the parts are connected to the delivery and service dimension, while other parts are connected with the relational aspects.

##### **7.3.4.1 Price**

The price to pay for a service is one of the most common dimensions that are used when distinguishing offers from each other's. The measure is concerning how much money that the customers have to pay for the services ÅF provides.

During interviews the price aspect were discussed and was shown a rather compulsory and generic consideration. Compulsory in the terms that everyone

considered it a relevant factor in evaluations of suppliers and generic since it is a measure that is applicable in most exchanges.

The price is a rather concrete dimensions that is easy for most to relate to. Although, to operationalise on this dimension is already highly relevant and ongoing in many businesses. Furthermore, the monetary cost of a product or a service is the end result of a longer "value" chain where each step is adding value to the end result while also contributing to the final cost to the customer. Due to this value-chain, activities to reduce cost can be directed towards any of these steps. This would mean that the specific areas of improvement cannot be determined by the measure.

Price is incorporated in many value theories as well and is the most commonly used sacrifice dimension, (Aaker & Shansby, 1982; Lapierre, 2000a; Sweeney & Soutar G. N., 2001; Wang, et al., 2004; Eggert & Ulaga, 2003; Holmlund, 2008; Brodie, et al., 2009). Although, the importance of the price may differ regarding what types of services that are provided, as Ostrom & Iacobucci (1995) stated, price sensitivity may differ with the strategic importance of the service. Therefore, the focus on cost savings could lie with competencies that are considered as a resource adding purchase, rather than a competence adding service.

#### **7.3.4.2 Time & effort**

The time and effort dimension is relating to the perceived costs of purchasing from and interacting with ÅF. The more time spent on negotiation and solving problems, the more resources have to be spent on ÅF, adding up the total costs. Furthermore, efforts relate to the personal perception of how smoothly the interactions is taking place and the efforts put into adopting towards each other in order to reach smooth processes. Additional sacrifices in time and effort may also come to the customers at arrival of new consultants, which may vary amongst the suppliers.

Some interviewees noted that they were satisfied when they could reduce the number of contacts at their suppliers. This since it would reduce the efforts spent on handling different contacts and relationships. Others claimed for value when offers were right the first time around, which lead to a smoother business. At a more operational level, customers highlighted the costs of involving and bringing new consultants up to speed and training them on new software etc.

The activities within the supplier relating to the time and efforts are in many ways linked with the sales personnel. Although, the processes that suppliers have relating to their interactions with customers is also highly relevant to this measure, as it will affect the time and efforts of the customers. A bureaucratic process can be efficient when requests are within the specified means, but cause for additional time and effort spent when requests are outside the specified means. Additionally, as Håkanson (1982) suggests, ongoing relationships

between businesses may cause the two parts to adapt to each other's processes and way of conducting business in order to decrease the effort and time spent on non-essential activities. Finally, the readiness of consultants for the specific customer is an area that will affect the measure.

Sacrifices such as time and effort are especially used by relationship value theorists as they are more likely to appear during longer relationships than in an arms-length market, (Lapierre, 2000a; Eggert & Ulaga, 2003; Ruiz, et al., 2008; Brodie, et al., 2009; Zeithaml, 1988).

#### **7.3.4.3 Conflicts**

As business in this context were conducted in long-term relationships, conflicts of different types may arise during negotiations or evaluations. The measure will be influenced by both the level of conflicts and how often they appear. There may also exist non-outspoken conflicts that customers probably will incorporate in the measure leading to it generating the overall perception of conflicts from the customers.

Conflicts or disagreements will be a natural part of a relationship, which could be seen during interviews were some respondents claimed to have been in conflict regarding prices with representatives at ÅF. Furthermore, arguments relating to altering and flexibility of an ongoing purchase were mentioned.

As conflicts take place between two parts, it will be linked to the personal interactions between the customers and suppliers. Although, disagreements and conflicts could be argued to be more likely when discrepancies in perceptions and delivery exists. However, to define what activities that needs to be undertaken in order to minimize the number of conflicts is complex. Therefore, to operationalize the dimension is hard and the measure should pose for an indicator of the negative parts of a relationship. Also, a lower level of conflict would indicate a high relationship quality.

This measure is not that common amongst the value theorists, but its support can be found amongst a few, (Lapierre, 2000a; Holmlund, 2008; Ulaga & Eggert, 2006), where conflicts is mainly operationalized by its frequency and controversy.

#### **7.3.5 Summary of dimensions**

The set of dimensions purposed above is the underlying metrics in this thesis attempt to measure a generic position for a technology consultancy firm. Due to the generality of the position, the dimension purposed will not be able to capture a truly perceptual position as it is complex and highly subjective. As noted in interviews and also summarized in Figure 8, customers have different ways of describing positions and they also have different perceptions. Therefore, these dimensions have been chosen of a more generic type that have



been shown to have a link to the satisfaction and value that a customer perceives. The choice to focus on these dimensions is argued for below;

1. Knowing customers' perceptions in terms of a detailed description of attributes that are linked with the company may be of low help when translating it into something to operationalize upon. Also, information of such abstract position needs to be interpreted into lower dimensions. This could require managers make assumptions and decisions based on their perceptions, making the "customers' view" clouded by own perceptions. Retaining answers about positioning without a predefined set of measures may lead to answers from customers to differ too much, leading to generalizations on the results to be hard to achieve.
2. As of the absence of positioning strategies in business markets and the lack in this case of a clearly defined "perceptual position", the performances that are relevant to measure can be argued to be closely linked with what affects customers' decisions and what they value. As the interview sessions in this thesis have shown, customers seem to base their business decisions to a large extent on how the suppliers are perceived due to previous performances. Also, as ÅF have claimed to reach for a position as a key supplier to their customers, having a relationship that offers superior value have been argued to be a key issue, (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006). Therefore, it seems relevant to include measures that relate to values in relationship in this model.
3. The three dimensions; *favorability, credibility & uniqueness* are measures that are generic when assessing a position and whether or not a supplier is considered to be differentiated. As the effectiveness measure of position is aimed towards positions in a consumer market, it is still relevant as the inbound dimensions also pose for value drivers. Furthermore, if differentiation is to take place in order to achieve a key supplier status, a strong relationship that is based on previous performance can create a unique perception of the supplier.
4. The high-order taxonomy (*delivery, service, relationship & sacrifice*) is considered a practical division relating to the different areas of contacts that customers have with consultants and sales personnel. Although, the division cannot be considered collectively exhaustive but rather make for an operationally focused taxonomy, with the trade-off in accuracy that comes with it.

## 7.4 Aligning the reality with the intention

When comparing the results of both "variables used to describe a ÅF" (Figure 12) together with the "perceived importance's of functional areas to the customers" (Figure 13 & Figure 14), one can identify somewhat of a gap. Customers used far more variables, and used them in other frequencies compared to the employees, who's usage were more convergent. In the ratings over the importance of the functional areas, there were also differences between the customers and employees, especially in terms of the spread. Consistency amongst the groups can be due to several factors, one has to keep in mind that customers are unique entities and that the representatives of ÅF

may be colored by their specific companies. This is also one of the greatest problems in this paper, generalizing over multiple separate entities.

One could argue that customers' have their individual views of what is important, and that the different employees at ÅF handle different customers and thereby would have different perceptions of the importance. Although, as the sales representatives from ÅF serve the responding customers, one could expect some kind of alignment. Also, the sample sizes differ and they are small, which may affect the variances in the results. Despite the small sizes, the trends in these samples seem to show a smaller misalignment in the perceptions of employees and customers. Also, it is interesting to see that employees have a more unified way of describing themselves than the customers, seen in Figure 12.

The misalignments between the customers' and employees' perceptions could be due to several reasons. As modeled by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1985) in Figure 3, there are five key discrepancies through which there may be gaps leading to satisfied or unsatisfied customers. Comparing the perceptions of customers and employees would yield insights into gap 1 in Figure 3, which in turn could be influenced by the other gaps in the model. Furthermore, it is interesting to determine the intended position and the actual, as proposed by Ellson (2004) and Fuchs & Diamantopoulos (2010). As there were no clearly stated and communicated position by ÅF, the intended position seems unclear. The case of discrepancy that could be seen in the results, is therefore a difference in actual perceived position, as illustrated in Figure 16.

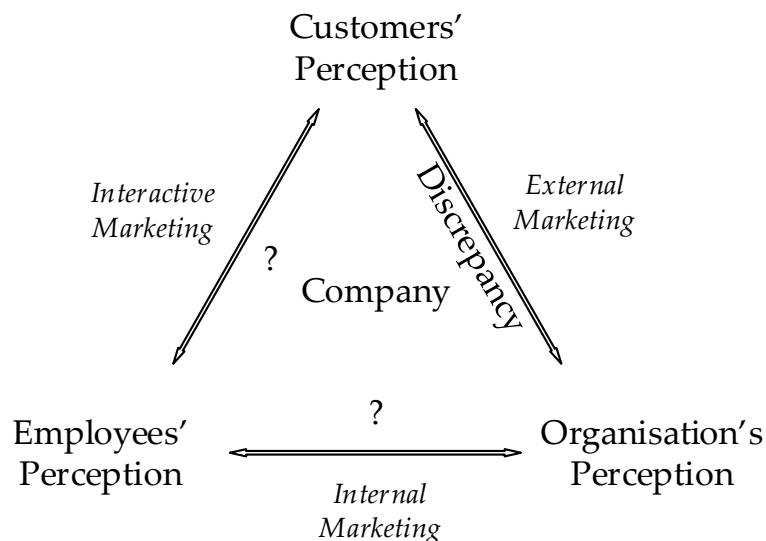


Figure 16. The relation of discrepancies, between the intended and the two actual positions.

Perhaps these discrepancies could be a case of poor internal marketing. As ÅF have grown through acquisitions at a high pace, internal marketing may have become lagging. Also, criticism towards the internal marketing were raised during the interviews, where it was claimed to be left behind. Perhaps this is

linked with the lack of deployed positioning strategies and external marketing activities (except sales), as seen in interviews and argued by Kalafatis et al., (2000). Also, according to Grönroos (1996) the customers interact with the company through external and interactive marketing (Figure 1). In our case, the external marketing seems to be mediated to a large extent through interactions with the salesforce, which also is in line with the findings of Kalafatis et al., (2000). Furthermore, as there are differences in the perceptions of the external marketers and the customers, the interactive marketing could have affected the customers' perceptions in a converging manner following the concept proposed by Grönroos (1996). The findings from interviews and surveys are linked with Grönroos's (1996) model in Figure 16.

## 7.5 Working with the model

As many theorists propose models in the area of positioning, many of them assume that the company have a clear and distinct position that it intends to achieve. Evaluation of positioning then becomes a quest for identifying gaps between the intended and actual position. As an evaluation tool in this case, measuring the customer perceived positioning will yield operational activities when identifying gaps between the customers' perceptions and the organisation, the different actual positions (Customers, Sales representatives & Consultants). Interesting in this case is the alignment of the intended position of the company and the actual positions of sales personnel and the consultants.

One of the main challenges when working with the model will be the collection of data. One has to consider how to collect data, whether it should be done through surveys and risking lower response rates or if a more personal collections process should be used, risking biases of the data. Also, when incorporating the measurement on an ongoing manner, second or third time respondents may react different to the evaluation than first time respondents. These areas are something that this thesis have not been able to answer, but importance of considering the areas above is hereby argue to be of high relevance.

Furthermore, the gathering of data needs to somehow to be translated into numbers on a scale in order for ÅF to be able to use and compare different measures. In this case, a Likert scale (1-7) have been used, when asking customers to estimate areas. Perhaps a broader scale could yield a better accuracy of the measurements. Also, in order to avoid confusion, statements could be used.

The main benefit of evaluating positions on a continuous manner over time is the possibility to link activities and initiatives in the organization to changes in position. Also, as of the higher order dimensions, the development of the areas can be visualised and examined. To enable for these kinds of comparisons over time, the company should set a standard for visualizing the position. The

visualization could be achieved in different ways, one of them would be the company's aggregated position;

An aggregated position could be used where the mean values of the performances in the different functional areas are weighted by their importance. The added benefits can then be visualized in a perceptual map with benefits on the y-axis and sacrifices on the x-axis.

## 8 Conclusion

*This thesis has attempted to create a model for evaluating positioning for technology consultancy firms in Sweden. In order to do so, the concept of positioning have been studied in a broader sense in order to identify what parts of the concept that is applicable in this specific context. Thereafter, the study focused on the customers' perception of positioning and through interviews and surveys, a set of dimensions to measure the position in this context have been generated and tested. Finally, the use of knowing a position have been examined, together with its implications. These areas are related to the research questions that were formulated in the beginning of this thesis, and the following section will conclude what has been discovered and try to answer each of the proposed questions.*

To gain a better view of the topic positioning and to gain an understanding of how it could be applicable in the studied industry. The following question were formulated;

*What is positioning, and how is it perceived?*

At a first glance, positioning usually considered from a marketing perspective in consumer markets, were attributes and images play a more important role. In this thesis the concept has been divided into two areas, the strategic area called market positioning and an area focusing on the receiving end of positioning, so called perceptual positioning. These two areas are clearly linked and affect each other, although how they affect each other's is not clear. Discrepancies between customers' expectations and perceptions seems to be an indicator the link is misunderstood. Therefore, positioning in this thesis is regarded as all efforts to stand out from competition and deliver superior value to customers.

Given this, the view that the author has taken on the concept of positioning is related to the above mentioned arguments and theories. It seems as if the position is evaluated through a broader context when it is regarding an organization that the person is involved within. This pattern were identified empirically and is shown in Table 4. With regards to this finding, an attempt at visualizing the different views of positioning of internal and external parts in this industrial context have been made. The conceptual figure is to be considered as answering the first research question, Figure 7.

The concept summarizes theories from Aaker & Shansby (1982), Parasuraman et al., (1985), DiMingo (1988), Kalafatis et al. (2000), Ulaga & Chacour (2001), Eggert & Ulaga (2002), Blankson & Kalafatis (2004), Keller & Lehmann (2006) and Amonini, et al., (2010) together with the models of interaction proposed by Holmlund (1996) and Håkansson (1982) and with the empirical findings from the conducted interviews and surveys.

Seemingly, the internal party tends to view positioning in a wider context, involving market perspectives when reflecting on positioning to a larger extent than the external party. The external party forms its perceptions through interactions as a mixture of the delivery of value (interactive marketing), communication from the organization and sales representatives (external marketing). These are evaluated in contrast to competition. Finally, the external parts perceptions are affected by its own organization, the set frame of reference, and the previous perceptions of the individual.

*Is there a set of generic dimensions that the chosen customers use when assessing the positioning of their technology consultancy suppliers?*

As the customers' purchasing process evaluates companies on far more measures than image, which is argued to have a larger impact in consumer markets and often are linked to perceptual positioning, the model used to evaluate a position of a company should make use of a richer set of dimensions.

Customers in this context seem to base their perceptions of a company on past experiences to a large extent. When describing their perceptions, customers seems to be using attributes that they think the supplier performed over or under what was expected, or attributes in which they differ from their reference frame (usually the competition). As of the business context, the attributes (or variables) used seemed to be linked with the needs of the organization and the professional needs of the individual. Also, there were a clear use of size and niches when describing positions.

As of generic dimensions, previous literature proposes dimensions such as quality and price, which always can be used. As of the complexity of services, and the long-term relationship, the dimension's quality/price seems a bit too narrow. For the generic dimensions, this thesis proposes a high-order construct of *Delivery, Service, Relationship & Sacrifices*. In the lower order, various dimensions have been proposed and tested towards this context. As of the lower levels more narrow nature, they are assumed to differ in relevance over the selected group, due to the heterogeneity. Although, these dimensions could all be assessed by the customers, and were agreed to be relevant. The dimensions are summarized in Table 7.

Also, positions can always be measured in its *favorability, credibility & uniqueness*, indicating the effectiveness of the position. Although, the operational insights gained from this set may be limited, but the formulation process may benefit more.

In summary, the methodology that this thesis has proposed is assessing the position of a company, not only in terms of the usual perceptual areas, but rather as a complete measure involving the assessment of offerings and satisfaction, as these are argued to be of importance for achieving a sustainable position.

*What is the main activities that a firm can conduct in their work with position evaluation?*

Gaining a representable view of customers' perceptions is time consuming. The gathering of data is critical. As this thesis have experienced, gaining larger amount of respondents is critical in order to be able to draw general conclusions. Also, as the value of these services are created with customers, the dyadic perspective on positioning should be evaluated, meaning that the input from the own parts in the interaction can enrich the measure. In this thesis, the majority of answers from customers were gained from surveys. The interviews conducted, yield a deeper insight but at a higher cost. Which type of collection that is more suitable cannot be concluded, but probably some form of personal interaction with the support of the model would increase the seriousness of the collection.

Once a position is identified, the company have a reference point on which to base its strategy on. Whether there is a difference in the actual or intended position or a misalignment between the perceptions of the customers and the representatives of the company (external and interactive marketers), gaps and discrepancies can be identified at different levels in the organization. As this thesis proposes a model with higher level functional areas and sub dimensions, the discrepancies can be directed towards distinct areas. Additional dimensions borrowed from Fuchs & Diamantopoulos (2010) could yield insight to the formulation process, as the perceptual position in the market is considered.

In summary, the quest to find a company's position in the market is an ever changing rollercoaster as the reference frame is constantly moving. The idea of knowing your exact position on a perceptual map seems of less importance when compared to identifying gaps between customers' perceptions and the own organizations. Although, the start of a continuous work with sensing the market in a structured way may be the real benefit in this case. As aligning the customers' and the own perceptions will enable the company to deliver a superior value.

## 9 Further research

*In this chapter areas of interest for future work is highlighted. As this thesis is in many ways of a practical approach, future areas of implementation and improvement will also be mentioned.*

In general, the literature on positioning in business markets are missing the adoption of the customers' perspective. Although, attempts to define typologies and strategies exist and have become more common lately, (Amonini, et al., 2010). Therefore, as the customers' perspective and their span of perception may differ both across operational levels and over industries, attempts to map such differences could be of interest for future research.

Also, as this study has focused on a technical consultancy firm in the B2B-context, it would be interesting to examine the differences towards other consultancies. How much is the professional services affecting the perceptions relative to consultancies that focus only on projects? Could there be any differences relating to the operational levels of the recipients?

Regarding this model, a more thorough validation at the customers' side would be of interest. This thesis does not have enough empirical data to draw general conclusions on the perception building of the customers in this context. Therefore, a more in depth study with a stronger empirical focus is recommended for future research.

For future implementation, the adoption of this model should be considered further. It is important to use a tool like this in a continuous manner in order to keep track of positioning and enabling further development of knowledge in the area. Therefore, ÅF should consider how to implement this tool and what parts of the organization to involve. In addition to this, they will also need to consider how to collect data in a sustainable way. The above mentioned areas is something that the author finds relevant for the future, but the best solutions to these problems do probably lie within the adopting company.



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# Appendix A – Interviews

*As respondents have been offered to participate anonymously the inventory over interviews will only show if they were external or internal.*

Interview 1 - ÅF employee

Interview 2 - ÅF employee

Interview 3 - ÅF employee

Interview 4 - ÅF employee

Interview 5 - ÅF employee

Interview 6 – Team Leader, Customer X

Interview 7 – Section Manager, Customer Y

Interview 8 – Section Manager, Customer X

Interview 9 – Purchaser, Customer Z

Interview 10 – Project Manager, Customer V

Interview 11 – Division Manager, Customer U

Interview 12 – Division Manager, Customer W

Interview 13 – Purchaser, Customer W

Interview 14 – Project Manager, Customer U

Interview 15 – Purchaser, Customer V



## Appendix B – The model with empirical support

Operational Dimension	Sub-Dimension	Theoretical support
<i>Delivery</i>	Width	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001)
	Quality	(Sureshchandar Chandrasekharan Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002) (Gordon & McDougall, 2000) (Lapierre, 2000a) (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003) (Sánchez-Fernández, et al., 2009) (Ruiz, et al., 2008) (Whittaker, et al., 2007) (Sweeney & Soutar G. N., 2001) (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) (Wang, et al., 2004) (Aaker & Shansby, 1982) (Brodie, et al., 2009)
	Customization	(Sureshchandar Chandrasekharan Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002) (Lapierre, 2000a) (Patterson & Spreng, 1997) (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001)
	Competence & Methods	(Sureshchandar Chandrasekharan Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002) (Lapierre, 2000a) (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003) (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) (Wang, et al., 2004) (Ruiz, et al., 2008) (Patterson & Spreng, 1997) (Brodie, et al., 2009) (Holmlund, 2008)
<i>Service</i>	Communication & Responsiveness	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003) (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) (Patterson & Spreng, 1997) (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001) (Brodie, et al., 2009) (Holmlund, 2008)
	Flexibility	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) (Holmlund, 2008)

	Reliability	(Sureshchandar Chandrasekharan Rajendran & Anantharaman, 2002) (Lapierre, 2000a) (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003) (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) (Patterson & Spreng, 1997) (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001) (Holmlund, 2008)
<i>Relational</i>	Image	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Whittaker, et al., 2007) (Wang, et al., 2004) (Ruiz, et al., 2008) (Ries & Trout, 1986) (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001) (Brodie, et al., 2009)
	Credibility	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Ruiz, et al., 2008) (Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012)
	Relationship	(Grönroos, 1998) (Lapierre, 2000a) (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003) (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006) (Patterson & Spreng, 1997) (Ulaga & Chacour, 2001)
	Uniqueness	(Fuchs & Diamantopoulos, 2012)
<i>Sacrifice</i>	Price	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003) (Whittaker, et al., 2007) (Sweeney & Soutar G. N., 2001) (Wang, et al., 2004) (Ruiz, et al., 2008) (Aaker & Shansby, 1982) (Brodie, et al., 2009) (Holmlund, 2008)
	Time & Effort	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Eggert & Ulaga, 2003) (Ruiz, et al., 2008) (Brodie, et al., 2009) (Holmlund, 2008)
	Conflict	(Lapierre, 2000a) (Ulaga & Eggert, 2006)

# Appendix C – The survey

Kundundersökning ÅF

2017-06-08 10:11

## Kundundersökning ÅF

Tack för att du deltar i vår studie genom att svara på denna enkät!

Denna enkät har utformats inom ramen för ett examensarbete i samarbete mellan Chalmers och ÅF. Målet är en generell modell för strategiutvärdering som kopplar ÅFs prestation mot kundernas upplevda värden av densamma. Modellen bygger på teorier kring kundvärden.

Enkäten syftar till att testa modellen hos några utvalda kundkontakter samt att få en uppdatering om hur valda kunder uppfattar ÅF.

Enkäten består av 2 öppna frågor samt 20 stycken kryss-frågor, där vi ber Dig värdera ÅFs prestation inom respektive område på en 7-gradig skala.

Om Du önskar att vara anonym så behöver du inte uppge namn eller mailadress.

Enkäten bör att ta mellan 8-10 minuter.

Vid frågor på enkäten, vänligen kontakta;

Victor Andersson, 0735-674636 eller [vicander@student.chalmers.se](mailto:vicander@student.chalmers.se)

Vid frågor till ÅF, vänligen kontakta;

Hans Bjarnehed, 0703-484986, [hans.bjarnehed@afconsult.com](mailto:hans.bjarnehed@afconsult.com)

**\*Obligatorisk**

### 1. Namn, Företag

---

### 2. E-post

---

### 3. Befattningsnivå

Markera endast en oval.

- Enhetschef
- Avdelningschef
- Sektionschef
- Gruppchef
- Inköpare

### 4. Vid annan befattningsnivå än ovan;

---

**5. Vilka tjänster köper Du av ÄF \***

Markera endast en oval.

- Projekt *Fortsätt till frågan 16.*
- Professional Services *Fortsätt till frågan 11.*
- Projekt + Professional Services *Fortsätt till frågan 6.*

**Leverans - Professional Services**

Dessa frågorna gäller ÄFs leveranser av PS-uppdrag, dvs tjänsten "konsult på plats hos kund". Skalan 1-7 relaterar till det värde som Du som kund upplever att ÄF levererar inom respektive fråga.

**Leveransbredd - Professional Services**

---

- ÄFs möjlighet att förse Dig med konsulter/tjänster som täcker hela Din verksamhets tekniska behov

**6. \***

Markera endast en oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

**Leverans kvalitet - Professional Services**

---

- Nivån av kvalitet på konsultens arbete hos Dig  
- Nyttan av konsultens arbete för Din verksamhet

**7. \***

Markera endast en oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

**Leveransens anpassning - Professional Services**

---

- Hur väl ÄF möter Ditt specifika behov och erbjuder en kandidat som matchar Din verksamhet

8. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### **Teknisk kompetens & Arbetssätt - Professional Services**

---

- Konsultens bidrag till Din verksamhet och Dina projekt
- Konsultens tekniska lösningsförmåga

9. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### **ÄF relativt andra leverantörer - Professional Service**

---

Hur står sig ÄFs PS-leverans relativt andra leverantörer?

10. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Mycket sämre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mycket bättre

Fortsätt till frågan 16.

### **Leverans - Professional Services**

Dessa frågorna gäller ÄFs leveranser av PS-uppdrag, dvs tjänsten "konsult på plats hos kund". Skalan 1-7 relaterar till det värde som Du som kund upplever att ÄF levererar inom respektive fråga.

### **Leveransbredd - Professional Services**

---

- ÄFs möjlighet att förse Dig med konsulter/tjänster som täcker hela Din verksamhets tekniska behov



11. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### **Leveranskvalitet - Professional Services**

---

- Nivån av kvalitet på konsultens arbete hos Dig
- Nyttan av konsultens arbete för Din verksamhet

12. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### **Leveransens anpassning - Professional Services**

---

- Hur väl ÄF möter Ditt specifika behov och erbjuder en kandidat som matchar Din verksamhet

13. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### **Teknisk kompetens & Arbetssätt - Professional Services**

---

- Konsultens bidrag till Din verksamhet och Dina projekt
- Konsultens tekniska lösningsförmåga

14. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### **ÄF relativt andra leverantörer - Professional Service**

---

Hur står sig ÄFs PS-leverans relativt andra leverantörer?

15. \*

Markera endast en oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Mycket sämre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mycket bättre

Fortsätt till frågan 21.

## Leverans - Projekt

Dessa frågorna gäller ÄFs leveranser av Projekt.

Skalan 1-7 relaterar till det värde som Du som kund upplever att ÄF levererar inom respektive fråga.

## Leveransbredd - Projekt

---

- ÄFs bredd av kompetensområden och hur väl ÄF kan leverera olika storlekar av projekt till Din verksamhet

16. \*

Markera endast en oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

## Leveranskvalitet - Projekt

---

- Kvalitén (krav- och tidsuppfyllnad) på ÄFs projektleverans  
- Hur väl Du kan implementera ett slutfört projekt i Din verksamhet

17. \*

Markera endast en oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

## Leveransens anpassning - Projekt

---

- Hur väl projektet löser Ditt problem och bidrar till Din verksamhets framgång

18. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### Teknisk kompetens & arbetssätt - Projekt

---

- Kreativiteten i lösningen samt användandet av ny teknik
- ÅFs metodik vid genomförande av projektet

19. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

### ÅF relativt andra leverantörer - Projekt

---

Hur presterar ÅFs Projektleverans relativt andra leverantörer?

20. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Mycket sämre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mycket Bättre

Fortsätt till frågan 21.

### Servicenivå - ÅF

Dessa frågorna gäller ÅFs servicenivå, dvs hur ÅF presterar utöver sin faktiska leverans. Skalan relaterar till det värde som Du som kund upplever att ÅF presterar.

### Kommunikation

---

- Återkopplingen som Din ÅF-kontaktperson ger vid frågor, ändringar, offerter etc.
- Enkelheten i kommunikationen med ÅF

21. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

## Flexibilitet

---

- Flexibiliteten hos ÄF som leverantör
- Hur väl ÄF hanterar uppkomna förändringar

22. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

## Tillförlitlighet

---

- Ditt förtroende till att ÄF bistår med hjälp under arbetets gång
- Ditt förtroende att ÄF genomför saker på rätt sätt

23. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt kundvärde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt kundvärde

## ÄF relativt andra leverantörer

---

Hur presterar ÄFs servicenivå relativt andra leverantörer

24. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Mycket sämre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mycket bättre

## Relation - ÄF

Dessa frågor gäller ÄFs relationer och image. Skalan relaterar till det värde som Du som kund upplever att ÄF motsvarar.

## Image

---

- ÄFs anseende och trovärdighet
- Din vilja att förknippas med ÄFs image

25. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt värde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt värde

## Tillit

---

- Ditt förtroende att ÄF levererar vad de åtagit sig
- Ditt förtroende att ÄF bidrar med hjälp när det behövs, även utöver vad som är avtalat

26. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt värde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt värde

## Relation

---

- Din personliga relation som utvecklats med kontaktpersoner på ÄF
- Professionalism hos ÄFs anställda

27. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt värde	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt värde

## Unikhet

---

- Din uppfattning kring hur unikt ÄFs erbjudande är på marknaden

28. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Som alla andra	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Unikt

## ÅF relativt andra leverantörer

---

Hur presterar ÅF i sin relation till er relativt andra leverantörer?

29. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Mycket sämre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mycket bättre

*Fortsätt till frågan 30.*

## "Kostnad"

Dessa frågorna gäller de "kostnader" som Du som kund får när Du anlitar ÅF. Skalan relaterar till den "kostnad" som Du som kund upplever.

## Pris

---

- Det upplevda priset som Du får betala för ÅFs tjänster

30. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Lågt pris	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Högt pris

## Tid/Ansträngning

---

- Din tid och ansträngning lagd under genomförandet av ett uppdrag/projekt av ÅF
- Din tid och ansträngning lagd vid förhandling/förberedelser innan köp

31. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Låg Tid/Ansträngning	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Hög Tid/Ansträngning

## Konflikter

---

- Konflikter med ÄF gällande upphandling, genomförande och leverans

32. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Inga konflikter	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Många konflikter

## ÄF relativt andra leverantörer

---

Hur presterar ÄF kostnadsmässigt (mätt i ovanstående termer) relativt andra leverantörer?

33. \*

*Markera endast en oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Mycket sämre	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mycket bättre

Fortsätt till frågan 34.

## Relevansen av Leverans, Servicenivå, Relation & "Kostnad"

Hur viktigt är respektive område för Ditt upplevda värde av ÄF?

Vänligen fördela 100 poäng mellan de olika områdena. Höga poäng betyder stor vikt.

Ex. Om ni anser att alla delar är lika viktiga, skriv 25 i varje fält.

34. **Leverans** \*

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35. **Service** \*

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36. **Relation** \*

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37. **"Kostnad"** \*

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38. **Beskriv kortfattat Din samlade bild av ÄF** \*

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39. **Ditt allmänna intryck av ÄF som leverantör?** \*

Markera endast en oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Inte alls nöjd	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Mycket nöjd


## Stort tack för Din hjälp!

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Vid frågor eller kommentarer på enkäten, vänligen kontakta;  
Victor Andersson, 0735-674636 eller [vicander@student.chalmers.se](mailto:vicander@student.chalmers.se)  
Vid frågor eller kommentarer till ÄF, vänligen kontakta;  
Hans Bjarnehed, 0703-484986, [hans.bjarnehed@afconsult.com](mailto:hans.bjarnehed@afconsult.com)

40. **Övriga kommentarer**

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