

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Designing a Model for Developing Digital Marketing Capabilities in B2B Markets (Medical and Industrial Gas Industry)

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### Abstract

Having a comprehensive view of digital marketing capabilities is essential for companies to survive in the revolutionized digital world. Specifically, in B2B commerce, is a game-changer, turning complex sales cycles into efficient that boost client engagement and drive rapid growth. Accordingly, the purpose of the present research is to design a model for developing digital marketing capabilities in B2B markets. Emphasizing B2B marketing, this research has adopted a qualitative approach. A model is developed through grounded - theory and in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 experts of medical and industrial gases industry. The collected data has been analyzed with the three-step coding method and Nvivo10 software. The data has categorized into 6 main categories including; casual conditions (dominance of the Internet, development of international relations in B2B markets and digital marketing features), intervening conditions (manager's attitude and cooperation of different units of organization), contextual conditions (changing the way B2B customers choose suppliers and predominance of classic approach in B2Bmarkets), methods (e-mail marketing, website, etc.), consequences(customer retention and loyalty and increasing the growth rate of the organization) and main phenomenon (development of digital marketing capability in B2B market). This model provides a comprehensive mental framework for the managers of this field regarding the capabilities of digital marketing.

**Keywords:** *B2B market, Digital marketing, Digital marketing capabilities*

### Introduction

The emergence of the Internet and new technology has led to the change of marketing role and its performance (Quinton & Simkin, 2017). Besides, the COVID-19 pandemic not only influenced consumer habits by increasing media consumption, but also led to increasing number of internet users, use of digital devices, and online activities (Masrianto et al., 2022). According to Dataportal (2021), the number of internet

users worldwide reached 4.66 billion, which is 59.5% of the global population of 7.83 billion. Meanwhile, digital marketing not only has seamlessly more integrated into the daily lives of people worldwide (Hien & Nhu, 2022) but also, in the last twenty years, digitalization has transformed consumer marketing and specifically B2B marketing (Herhausen et al., 2020). In fact, the digital evolution was accepted as one of the

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important drivers in B2B markets (Cortez & Johnston, 2017).

As business-to-business (B2B) companies are known for their intense competition (Smith, 2024), the burgeoning relevance of digital marketing in B2B companies is emphasized by several notable trends (e.g. Gupta, 2018; Janda, 2018). It is noteworthy that even in the early days of the Internet, it seemed that B2B companies would benefit from greater access to global opportunities, more communication opportunities, and more effective and more supportive business communication ((Alvonitis & Karayanni, 2000). However, despite the well-known benefits of digital marketing, the adoption of this type of marketing in B2B companies has been extremely low (Setkute & Dibb, 2022). Additionally, the distinctive features and different working methods of the B2B companies made the methods used in B2C digital marketing probably not suitable for B2B ones (Setkute & Dibb, 2022). Besides, such companies are facing other obstacles such as lack of awareness and knowledge to achieve the benefits of using digital marketing (Matarazzo et al., 2021; Karjaluoto & Huhtamaki, 2010). In order to overcome such problems, Companies must have digital marketing capabilities in order to improve their performance (Masrianto et al., 2022).

Digital marketing is not only the acceptance of this type of marketing, but also how to plan, implement and manage digital marketing. The concept of digital marketing capabilities is about the company's ability to use the market knowledge for quick commercial changes and adapting itself to new circumstances (Buccieri et al., 2020; Moi et al., 2021). To take advantage of such opportunities in the new marketing

landscape, companies need to adjust their strategy in the field of digital marketing to acquire new customers and maintain customer loyalty. Therefore, companies must have digital marketing capabilities (Masrianto et al., 2022) and B2B companies are not an exception. Digital marketing capabilities can help B2B companies to overcome their obstacles in digitalization road, achieve their ultimate goal of optimizing processes similar to business development, create reliable relationships, retrieve relevant information and create new opportunities (Pöyry et al., 2017). In addition, in a business's long-term strategy, digital marketing transformation emerges as a pivotal element.

Based on the fact that, navigating the complexities of B2B enterprises to choose the most effective and suitable marketing strategy is no straightforward task (Hien & Nhu, 2022) and examining the existing theories and researches in this field has shown the lack of investigation on how to create and develop special capabilities of digital marketing in B2B companies, therefore, this research seeks to clarify these capabilities and provide a comprehensive model to develop them.

The results of the study can provide a new perspective in the field of B2B companies attitude to use the benefits of digital marketing capabilities and how to achieve these benefits. Besides, it will show how B2B companies can use digital marketing for their products and services and the comprehensive model can be used by B2B managers and leaders to synchronize their organization with the current world's trend that is joining the digital world.

## Literature Review

### Digital Marketing

According to Philip Kotler, widely regarded as the “Father of Modern Marketing”, the advent of digital marketing can be traced back to the early 1980s. The concept of digital marketing involves the promotion of an organization’s products and services through digital technologies, including mobile devices, display advertisements, and various digital media platforms such as google Ads, Facebook and so on (Panda & Mishra, 2022). In another definition, digital marketing refers to the entirety of marketing activities conducted online. It encompasses all digital communication and advertising channels that businesses can utilize to engage with their customers and target audience (Dimitrios et al., 2023). As a result, digital marketing encompasses the full range of tools and activities used to market products and services in the digital realm, including the web, internet, mobile devices, and other digital platforms. Given the increasing importance of digital marketing in business world, numerous studies have been conducted in this field.

In one research, it’s believed that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed marketing, leading to increased reliance on digital channels. The impact of digital marketing during the pandemic has been examined and redefined from the Islamic perspective. Advances in information technology have been pivotal in shaping digital marketing, especially during COVID-19 (Junusi, 2020).

In another study, the significant role of digital marketing adoption in enhancing digital marketing capability has been validated. Moreover, ecosystem readiness for

digital transformation, along with the adoption and capability of digital marketing, has been identified as influential factors. Digital transformation is recognized as a highly impactful determinant affecting both the adoption and capability of digital marketing (Masrianto et al., 2022).

Another study investigates the barriers to digital marketing in small B2B companies, identifying both internal and external challenges. This research highlights a standardized approach to digital marketing across all B2B firms is impractical. Internal factors include limited awareness of the potential benefits of digital marketing, apprehension towards technology, and resistance to technology-driven methods. External factors encompass customer demographics, competitive landscape, industry dynamics, and product characteristics (Sektute & Dibb, 2022).

To implement digital marketing, every company requires digital marketing capabilities. Extensive research has been conducted in this area (e.g. Masrianto et al., 2022; Herhausen et al., 2020), which are discussed in the following.

### Digital Marketing Capabilities

Digital marketing capabilities reflect the organizational ability to adapt their resources and to develop new skills in relation to their stakeholders (Wang, 2020). In other definition, these capabilities constitute a specific set of skills supported by technological abilities aimed at acquiring more comprehensive customer insights. This facilitates greater access to both offline and online customer data, empowering businesses to operate more effectively in digital business world (Apasrawirote et al., 2022). The Boston Consulting Group

believes that companies can achieve significant results by increasing digital marketing capabilities and reduce their costs by 30% and increase their income by 20%.

Two gaps in digital marketing capabilities were identified during researches in this field. First of all, the practical gap, which highlights the distance between current managerial practices and their digital marketing capabilities. The second is knowledge gap, which indicates the significant distance between digital marketing developments in B2B companies and the existing scientific knowledge underpinning them (Herhausen et al., 2020).

Another study highlighted the importance of digital marketing capabilities for businesses and their impact on key business performance metrics. The proposed dimensions of the digital marketing capabilities framework aim to identify new research directions for both marketing and IT fields (Apasrawirote et al., 2022).

Also, companies in Indonesia have an average score of 71.97, indicating medium-level digital marketing capabilities. Enhancements can be made by boosting managerial innovativeness, organizational readiness, and perceived usefulness, alongside prioritizing digital transformation and emphasizing digital analytics, CRM, and advertising (Masrianto et al., 2022).

The findings of the research in the field of social media capabilities in B2B marketing suggest that social media capability hinges on understanding the firm's technological capacity and adapting to environmental changes. A four-level Social Media Capability Maturity Model is proposed to enhance this transformation (Wang et al., 2017).

## Digital Marketing Capabilities in B2B Markets

Digital marketing capabilities in B2B markets has not had a specific definition so far. Although digital marketing is recently being added to the marketing strategies of B2B companies, research in this regard is in its nascent stage (Pandey et al., 2020). A B2B company special features which enables them to benefit digital marketing can be considered as digital marketing capability in B2B markets.

The ultimate goal of advanced technologies in B2B marketing is to optimize processes similar to business development, create reliable relationships, retrieve relevant information and create new opportunities (Pöyry et al., 2017). Digital marketing channels can be used to create awareness, strengthen brand image, attract new customers, improve customer service, improve customer satisfaction and loyalty, increase sales and reduce costs (Taiminen & Karjaluoto, 2015). Until recently, the prevailing belief was that digital marketing is only useful for B2C organizations (Lacka & Chong, 2016), but now we see that this kind of marketing may have advantages for B2B companies as well. Digital marketing capabilities significantly contribute to the profitability of companies to an extent that surpasses the impact of classic marketing capabilities (Homburg & Wielgos, 2022).

Although some B2B firms utilize digital marketing, many are unable to fully benefit due to lack of comprehensive research in this area. A collaborative conceptual framework has been provided to explore future themes. It highlights that certain areas such as digital marketing communications and sales management are experiencing sustained development, while decision support

systems, critical success factors, and electronic marketing orientation have received less scrutiny (Pandey et al., 2020).

Through an examination of the impacts of digitalization on B2B relationship, researchers have underscored the critical importance of focusing on several key areas such as Coopetition, Value co-creation, B2B branding, Innovation networks, Relationship dynamics and power and trust (Hofacker et al., 2020).

Despite research conducted in this field, there is limited literature presenting a comprehensive model for developing digital marketing capabilities in B2B markets.

## Methodology

### Design

Given that the present study seeks to develop a model for developing digital marketing capabilities in B2B markets, it is applied in terms of its objective and exploratory in nature. This research has been conducted using a qualitative approach. Considering the novelty of this topic, the limited knowledge and need for development in Iran, the absence of theory in this area and the inability of existing literature to address the research questions, this study uses the grounded theory method. Grounded theory is recognized as a prominent qualitative research approach extensively in social studies, particularly within marketing and sales research (Gummesson, 2003; Johnson & Matthes, 2018; Johnson & Sohi, 2016; Deeter-Schmelz et al., 2019). As the purpose of this study is to present a comprehensive model for digital marketing capabilities in B2B, Straus and Corbin ground theory has been applied.

### Data Collection

The study sample in the present research consists of 12 individuals active in the marketing sector of companies producing medical and industrial gases. Sampling in this research was conducted using the snowball method, and data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews (Appendix 1). Before conducting the interviews, the interview questions were designed based on the information needed related to the research topic. To ensure that the interview questions adequately addressed the research questions, two preliminary interviews were conducted as pilot tests. As a result of these preliminary interviews, the interview questions were revised, refined, and completed. The data were recorded during the interviews, and after each interview concluded, the audio files were transcribed into texts. In this study, efforts were made to ensure that the interviewees responded to the interview questions freely and independently, without any interference from the researcher in their responses. Additionally, after transcribing the interview text, it was provided to the interviewees for their confirmation.

### Data Analysis

Since the current study was conducted using grounded theory methodology, data analysis began immediately after the first interview concluded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data analysis based on grounded theory comprises three stages: open coding, selective coding, and axial coding. Data analysis was done with the help of Nvivo10 software in this study. After the first interview, the text of interview was entered in the software and open coding operations commenced. Following open coding for each

of the 12 interviews, selective coding began, where similar codes were grouped together for deciding on how to combine and refine them into focused codes. Subsequently, a deeper exploration of each code's nature led to their appropriate naming. These focused codes categorized and conceptualized themes. The last step in the analysis based on grounded theory is axial coding. In this step, the focused codes created in selective coding were gathered around central phenomenon of

the research and paradigm model of the research was formed.

## Result

The analysis results indicated that out of the 12 conducted interviews, 405 segments were classified into 6 primary categories: Casual conditions, Intervening conditions, Methods, Contextual conditions, Consequences, and Central phenomenon. The following tables present a summary of the results (Table 1-6).

**Table 1.**

*Categories and classes related to casual conditions*

Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective coding
۱	-	Development of international relations B2B markets	
۲	Mastery of digital marketing	Dominance of the	
۵	It is impossible to avoid digital marketing in the future	Internet and virtual space over all aspects of life	
۴	High efficiency		Feeling the need and interest of B2B managers to use digital marketing
۴	The distance dimension is not important	Features of digital marketing	
۴	Ability to measure digital marketing results		
۸	lower cost		

**Table 2.**

*Categories and classes related to intervening conditions*

Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective coding
۸	-	The importance of management attitude and thinking	
		Coordination and integration of the marketing team with other units	Intervening Conditions
۳	-		

**Table 3.**

*Categories and classes related to methods*

Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
۱۱	Specialized content production	Website	
۴	company's information		
۲	Industry news and trends		
۱	Social network links		
۱	Online tenders and auctions		
۱	Online exhibitions		
۴	Aparat	Social networks	
۱۱	Instagram		



Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
۵	Telegram		Methods of developing digital marketing capabilities/using digital marketing tools
۱	Twitter		
۲	Facebook		
۵	LinkedIn		
۵	Whatsapp		
۱	Youtube		
۱۱	Initial customer search suggestions	SEO	
۳	-	PPC <sup>۲</sup>	
۷	-	Email marketing	
۱	-	Personal branding	

**Table 4.***Categories and classes related to Contextual conditions*

Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
۳	-	Changing the way customers choose suppliers	Contextual Conditions
۲	Ease of using digital marketing opportunities in the industrial market	Predominance of the classical approach in the B2B market	
۶	Weakness of competitors in using digital marketing		

**Table 5.***Categories and classes related to consequences*

Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
۲	branding		Consequences
۳	Creating a competitive advantage		
۴	sales increase	Increasing the growth rate of the organization	
۹	Increasing credit and building trust		
۴	Increased visibility		
۳	Saving time		
۳	Increase customer engagement	Customer retention and loyalty	
۱	Creating good image in the customer's mind		
۲	Institutionalization of the brand name in the minds of the audience		

**Table 6.***Categories and classes related to central phenomenon*

Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
۲	Appropriate digital marketing strategies		central phenomenon
۱	Constantly updating digital marketing knowledge	Development of digital marketing capabilities in B2B markets	
۱	Utilization of digital marketing specialists		

Pay-Per-Click<sup>۲</sup>

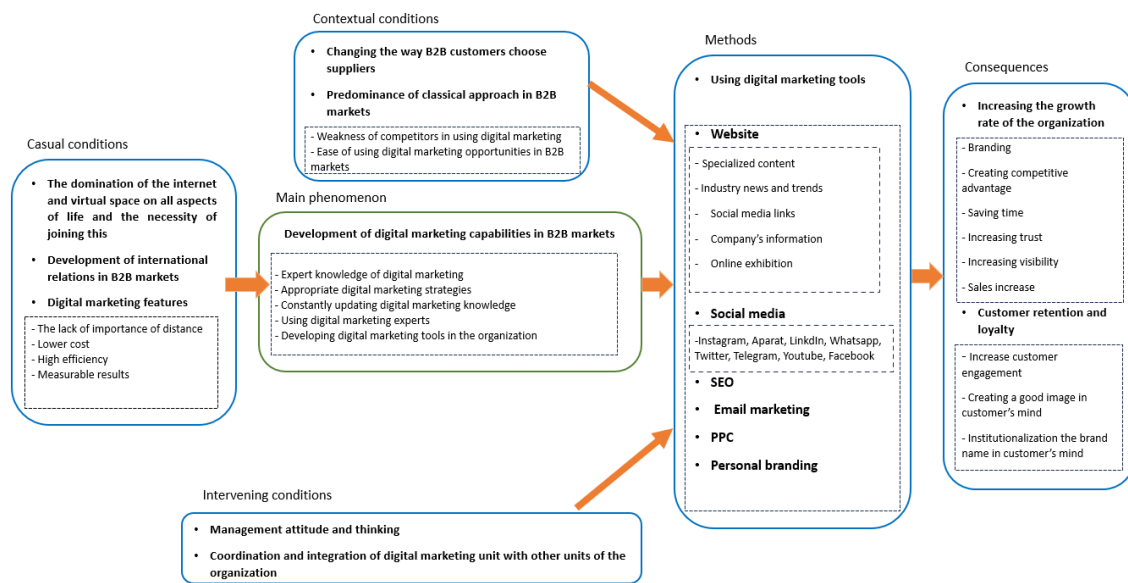
Abundance	Open Coding	Axial Coding	Selective Coding
1	Development of digital marketing tools		
11	Expert knowledge of digital marketing		

During the process of axial coding and with the help of Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory general paradigm model, the

paradigm model of the current research is formed for developing digital marketing capabilities in B2B (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.**

*Paradigm model of developing digital marketing capabilities in B2B*



## Discussion

During the coding process of interview files with experts, some of the content was repeated in most of the interviews. Repeating these titles several times shows the importance of these topics compared to other digital marketing topics in the studied industry. Some of these titles are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.**  
*Most repeated codes*

Codes	Abundance
Expert knowledge of digital marketing	11
Importance of management attitude and thinking	8
Lower cost of digital marketing	8

Weakness of competitors in using digital marketing	6
Social networks (Instagram)	11
Specialized content production	11
SEO	11

Based on Table 7; expert knowledge of digital marketing, social networks specifically, Instagram, specialized content on the company's website and SEO are key issues in medical and industrial gases industry. As a result, these companies require special attention to these issues in order to benefit digitalization as much as possible.



## Main phenomenon

Digital marketing capabilities seek to improve the efficiency of social networks and market analysis and are often related to the communication skills needed to benefit digitalization.

According to the conducted research, digital marketing capabilities in B2B include five categories, each of which has been discussed in the following:

The first refers to this specialized knowledge of digital marketing; which means the knowledge that gives people the ability to use digital marketing tools. As in the past studies the gap between scientific knowledge in organizations and digital marketing developments in B2B companies has been discovered (Herhausen et al., 2020). Based on the present research the specialized knowledge of digital marketing can be obtained through studying in universities or specialized courses.

The second category refers to appropriate digital marketing strategies that examine, analyze and make decisions about how to use different digital marketing tools according to the business and its internal and external environment. One of the ways to observe digital marketing strategy is to consider the organization's strategy and possible methods for business developments (Hall, 2023).

The studies conducted in the current research indicate that one of the most important capabilities of digital marketing in B2B, considering the special characteristics of B2B markets, is adopting appropriate strategies for using this type of marketing. This requires a comprehensive and complete analysis of the organization's internal and external environment, existing opportunities and threats, customer behavior and

tendencies, and the resources available to their organization.

## Methods

Until now, B2B markets have been influenced and dominated by classical approach. They need to change the marketing methods of companies present in this market has increased in recent years. B2B customers have turned to digital world more and more and are trying to meet their needs through digital methods. In the past, B2B suppliers were selected through traditional marketing methods. Therefore, the supplier companies did not need to make changes but, now with the passage of time and the change in the behavior of B2B customers and their desire to use digital tools; they need to turn the digital marketing and their development is felt in B2B companies. The impossibility of using a single version in the using digital marketing in different types of markets is proved (Sektute & Dibb, 2022). Based on these in the result of the current research, the most efficient methods for B2B companies in medical and industrial gases industry have been obtained as described below:

The high costs of traditional marketing methods, the creation of distance restrictions, low efficiency and the impossibility of measuring the results of these methods have led B2B companies to use digital marketing tools.

By observing the changes in the B2B markets, B2B managers have also felt the need to use digital marketing tools and have changed their attitude towards marketing methods. Also, in order to use these tools as effectively as possible, they are trying to coordinate and integrate all organizational units with digital marketing department.

The results of the current research indicate that the best and the most important basis for using digital marketing in B2B markets is to have a professional website. Current research experts believe that, B2B customers making decision to supply their raw materials look for suppliers using search engines like Google, so every industrial company needs to create its own specialized website to be seen and increase its sale. This website can contain information such as a specialized articles related to the company's products and services and how to use them. Company information is one of the other things that must be mentioned in the content of the website. It can include the company's communication channels, its history and honors, introduction of the companies, products and services, social media links, certificates and standards.

B2B customers are experts and technical people in their industry. They always look for specialized information and news and trends, so another content that can be uploaded on these websites can be industrial news and trends to increase engagement of customers and website visitors. Today, most of people in society are internet users to improve and to manage their reputation. This is not just limited to websites; social media is also considered as a key source in continuous improvement of relations between companies and customers. Website and social media are the two basic digital marketing methods to interact with customers and are so necessary for businesses (Ponzwa et al., 2023).

The expansion of the use of social media has led businesses looking for growth to take advantage of its features for their businesses. Current research has found effective and efficient social media for the studied B2B industry; Instagram as the most popular and

basic social media for promoting businesses; LinkedIn as a high quality social media with professional features, YouTube which offers high capabilities in sharing specialized and long-term videos, Twitter and Facebook as social media with a smaller number of audience; WhatsApp and telegram can be also used to ease the communication between companies and their customers. Recognizing suitable social media is a key factor for guaranteeing digital marketing to be successful (Bala & Verma, 2018).

In recent years, the desire to hold face-to-face events has gratefully decreased and factors such as lower costs and time savings have pushed B2B people who have limited time to participate in online exhibitions, tenders and auctions. Therefore; these cases can also be considered as the specific content of the companies present in B2B markets.

Search engine optimization (SEO) refers to the process of influencing the visibility result of the website in search and having a higher rank to be displayed in first options to have more visitors (Yasmin et al., 2015). By searching in search engines like Google B2B customers are looking for more qualified supplier companies in digital world. One of the criteria for qualifying and scoring is having strong SEO and being among the first search choices. This study has shown that after conducting a search, B2B customers look for answers to their companies needs among the first three companies. Therefore; B2B companies are required to have a special look at their website SEO and plan for its continuous improvement.

B2B customers always seek to meet the needs through reputable B2B companies. Personal branding is one of the methods of using digital marketing in B2B markets by creating sufficient knowledge of experts

working in B2B organizations and creating trust and credibility.

In the past, B2B companies have been taking advantage of digital marketing in some ways. Email Marketing method is one of those methods that has been used by B2B market companies for years. This type of marketing is one of the least expensive types of marketing which can attract the full attention of the customers if it is attractive and uses graphic and textual combinations (Yasmin et al., 2015). Sending industrial news, event invitations and resumes of B2B companies was done via email in the past. According to the current research, email Marketing is one of the digital marketing methods that still has high efficiency due to its low cost.

In today's world people have turned to digital tools to meet their various needs and are always searching online. Pay-per-click advertising is a method of using search engine advertisements to generate clicks on a website. This method is considered one of the best methods for advertising companies as it is low-cost and interactive (Yasmin et al., 2015).

### **Casual Conditions**

In the past, the managers of companies producing medical and industrial gases didn't believe in digitalization and this issue has been the reason for their distance from entering digital marketing. But now, these managers have realized that, in order to stay in business, they need to synchronize the processes of the organization with the changes in the market. Also, these companies used to focus on the geographical areas around them. But recently, they have become interested in entering the international market. One of the requirements

of which is to operate in online space and that forces B2B managers to accept digital marketing.

Some features of digital marketing have had great impact on the interests of B2B managers in using digital marketing. Features like; the lack of importance of distance, lower cost, higher efficiency, and the ability to capture digital marketing results.

### **Contextual Conditions**

Until years ago, industrial customers used to choose their suppliers through traditional methods. But now, these methods have given way to more modern methods; such as Google search, which determines the need for these companies to enter the digital arena. Medical and industrial gases industry is one of the industries, where most of the companies in it are influenced by the classical approach and consider their market to be stable (Koduri, 2011). Now, if a company has a more modern way of thinking than its competitors, it can turn this competitors' weakness into an opportunity for itself and go one step ahead of all competitors.

### **Intervening conditions**

The agreement or non-agreement of a manager in the entry of digital marketing into an organization is of a special importance as this issue results from their attitude. At the beginning of digital marketing unit entering an organization, the people active in it need to cooperate and coordinate with other departments of the organization; such as production and R&D departments in order to produce specialized content and also how to publish these contents. The presence or absence of these corporation can act as a facilitator or an obstacle for them.

## Consequences

The consequences of using digital marketing in B2B companies in medical and industrial gases are including the growth rate of the organization through branding, creating a competitive advantage, saving time, increasing credibility and trust, increasing visibility and increasing sale. Customer retention and loyalty is achieved through increasing customer engagement, creating a suitable image in customer's mind, and institutionalizing the brand name in customer's mind. Competitive advantage and customer loyalty are the consequences of using digital marketing in the field of auditing, too (Shahbazitakabi et al., 2023).

## Implication

Using the results of this research, B2B managers can design their digital marketing plan based on the most important and effective methods mentioned in this research and synchronize their organization with the world's current trend, which is digitalization.

## Conclusion

Since the purpose of the research is to provide a model for developing digital marketing capabilities in B2B and it has been conducted based on grounded theory; the results have been grouped in particular categories. Casual conditions, intervening conditions, contextual conditions, methods and consequences of using digital marketing appropriate tools in B2B companies have been obtained during analyzing the interviews with experts and presented in a comprehensive model.

## Limitation and Future Research

This study was done in medical and industrial gases industry and if needed, it can be done in other B2B industries.

The research was done in developing countries and doing it in developed ones can provide the essentials to have a useful comparison.

Researchers can do the research having different qualitative approach or evaluate the presented model in the research using quantitative methods.

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