
Sources of Information about Suppliers Used in Purchasing Processes on the B2B Market

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Abstract:

Purpose: The purpose of this article was to identify the sources of information regarding suppliers most often used by manufacturing companies and to define their importance.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The considerations based on the analysis of the literature and the results of empirical research indicate that enterprises use both direct forms (such as sales representatives, recommendations of other clients, fairs and exhibitions) and on-line forms (such as suppliers' websites). Specialized industry as sources of information about suppliers. portals as a source of information about suppliers. The thesis is confirmed by the results of empirical research conducted with the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technique in medium and large manufacturing companies operating in Poland.

Findings: The results of the conducted research indicate that the sources of information concerning new suppliers most frequently indicated by the surveyed companies are visits of sales representatives of suppliers sending the offer by suppliers, suppliers' websites, direct contacts of the management/specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers, recommendations of other companies and fairs and exhibitions. The results of the conducted research also indicate that for manufacturers the most important sources of information about suppliers were: suppliers' websites, sending the offer by suppliers, direct contacts of the management / specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers and the visits of sales representatives of suppliers.

Practical Implications: The considerations based on the analysis of the literature and the results of empirical research indicate that both direct forms (such as sales representatives, recommendations of other clients, fairs and exhibitions) and electronic on-line forms of contact (such as suppliers' websites, specialized industry portals) play an important role in the B2B market as sources of information about suppliers.

Originality/Value: Research on sources of information about suppliers used in purchasing processes on the B2B market is undertaken very rarely. Therefore, the results of studies presented in this article fill the research gap.

Keywords: Sources of information about suppliers, supply chain management, supplier relationship.

JEL codes: L14, L15, L17.

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1. Introduction

Supplier selection is a key stage in the buying process in the business-to-business (B2B) market. This process is often associated with a high level of risk, especially when guided only by the supplier's price offer (Ruhmann *et al.*, 2014). A new purchase is a particularly sensitive situation when a company buys a specific product or service for the first time. In such a case, enterprises lack knowledge related to the technical criteria of a given product and / or economic criteria (knowledge of the supplier sector's activities). This situation makes it necessary to obtain as much information as possible in order to select solutions that are beneficial for companies and reduce the risk associated with purchasing from a new supplier (van Weele, 2010).

Using all possible sources available, institutional buyers gather information on potential suppliers by:

- personal contacts (meetings or telephone calls, e-mail correspondence with bidders);
- participation in fairs, exhibitions, specialist conferences and symposia;
- reviews of specialized magazines, catalogues, brochures;
- referring to specialized database portals, supplier websites;
- consulting other business entities already cooperating with suppliers;
- advice from independent chambers of commerce, offices of trade advisers in diplomatic missions (Monczka *et al.* 2009).

Activities in this area are most often conducted by employees of the purchasing department or persons with qualifications and knowledge (e.g., technologist, department manager, or ICT specialist).

2. The Role of Communication in Building Relationships between Suppliers and Customers on the B2B Market

The development of mutual cooperation should be based on the synergistic use of the partners' strengths (i.e., resources, market position). Through such mutual synergy, partners should strive to achieve mutual benefits (Singh and Koshy, 2011). These benefits determine the development of further cooperation, establish trust and open communication that strengthens the ties between partners on a win-win basis (O'Cass and Ngo, 2012). This may foster even more mutual understanding of cooperating companies and their employees, as well as mutual learning processes (transfer of knowledge and experience), as well as sometimes the interpenetration of organizational cultures of business partners (Xu and Hao, 2021).

The cooperation of partners based on trust can lead to many mutual benefits. The benefits of such cooperation include, improving the quality of products and services, shortening order fulfillment cycles, improving communication between the supplier

and the recipient, joint projects aimed at improving the efficiency of processes, and joint research and development works (Kim and Chaib 2017; Quigley *et al.*, 2018; Quigley, 2018). These benefits determine the development of further cooperation, build trust and open communication which in turn strengthens the ties between partners. The competitive advantage of suppliers on the B2B market is further clearly emphasized by the breadth of the product portfolio. This product portfolio often includes individualized packages of highly specialized services that are offered both before and after sale (Durugho, 2020). Pre-sale services mostly focus on technical and financial feasibility studies.

The scope and detail of this information must also be adapted to the perceptions and expectations of departmental staff in the company involved in the purchasing decision-making process (Töllner *et al.*, 2012). Direct contacts between suppliers, represented by sales representatives, are significantly important in this respect. In the case of clients of strategic importance, there are special key accounts managers (Rosenzweig and Roth, 2007).

Portals often send newsletters to registered customers / users giving information about important events in the sector (mergers/ acquisitions of enterprises, changes in legal regulations, especially significant contracts /commercial agreements) (Acharya *et al.*, 2020).

Some of these portals also run an information exchange forum, as well as blogs that allow the user to ask questions, provide mutual advice, present / exchange customer opinions (also about suppliers/products). It can therefore be seen that these activities lead to the formation of social ties between managers (especially middle and low-level management) or specialists in departments responsible for design/development, production and, above all, purchasing/selling industrial products (Mattos and Laurindob, 2017).

In recent years, purchasing platforms have become an increasingly frequent form of looking for new suppliers, especially in the case of standard products. On these platforms, companies wishing to make a purchase issue an inquiry and organize electronic auctions (Olivares-Aguila and ElMaraghy, 2020).

During negotiations, customers can also agree on the period and scope of the warranty, as well as the package of after-sales services. Recently, an increasing level of specialization of fairs and exhibitions can be noticed, which allows customers to reach specific suppliers and get to know their offer comprehensively (Sarmiento and Simões, 2018). In response to an inquiry, potential suppliers should try to provide the customer with a comprehensive product and price offer and define the terms of delivery (Ngniatedema *et al.*, 2015).

In order to reduce the risk associated with the purchase, enterprises collect evidence confirming the capabilities of potential suppliers through audits at the supplier, as

well as examining their economic and legal situation through due diligence. The choice of suppliers is preceded by the so-called preliminary evaluation of suppliers. The assessment is conducted by collecting offers, a supplier self-assessment questionnaire, audits, ordering a trial batch of products, as well as reference visits to customers already using the products (Taherdoost and Brard, 2019; Nikoofal and Gümüş, 2020).

For industrial companies, it is also important to provide pre-sale services (design solutions, technical advising) and after sales (delivery, installation, technical service, repair and maintenance) information service through training and consulting (Azambuja and O'Brien, 2012; Chiu *et al.*, 2015, Yoon and Moon, 2019). The preliminary comprehensive assessment is applied by analyzing the data contained in the self-assessment questionnaires completed by the suppliers.

Frequently, the questions included in the supplier self-assessment questionnaires refer to the international requirements contained in the quality, environment and safety (products, information, health and safety) management standards (Kannan 2018; Guarnieri and Trojan, 2019; Alavi *et al.*, 2021). This assessment is conducted through a comparative laboratory analysis of samples from potential suppliers and assessment of their compliance with the required technical specification, trial purchase, free temporary use (with regard to machines and devices) and collecting opinions from current users during reference visits (Arvidsson and Melander 2020; Nagel *et al.*, 2021).

Many companies, especially international concerns, wanting to further reduce the risk associated with potential bidders, pay attention to the ethical activities of the supplier by publishing requirements for them in a code of business conduct. (Jenssen and de Boer, 2019). These codes are largely based on the principles of the UN Global Compact and focus on guidelines for ethical conduct, in particular respecting the law, respecting human dignity, ensuring safe working conditions, counteracting corruption and environmental protection.

3. Research Methodology

The subject of the research conducted was to identify the most important sources of information about suppliers for manufacturers operating in Poland. The research was conducted between October and November 2019 using the Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) technique. The research covered 151 producers (employing over 49 people) who were suppliers for enterprises from the automotive, electromechanical, chemical and furniture sectors operating in the Polish B2B market. Almost half of the surveyed economic entities (47.33%) were enterprises with foreign capital (including large international concerns with global activity).

The importance sources of information about the suppliers were assigned a rank on a scale from one (the least important criterion) to five (the most significant). The study was commissioned to a specialized research agency that conducted a targeted selection of companies registered in the Bisnode database, which is a business directory search platform.

4. Research Results

The results of the conducted research indicate that the sources of information about new suppliers most frequently indicated by the surveyed companies are visits of sales representatives of suppliers sending the offer by suppliers, suppliers' websites, direct contacts of the management / specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers, recommendations of other companies and fairs and exhibitions. It can also be noticed that the sources of information, which are relatively often used by enterprises, are also specialized industry press and purchasing platforms (especially when they buy standard products).

The least frequently researched organizations used such sources of information as chambers of industry and commerce as well as trade and investment promotion sections of embassies and consulates. Detailed results of the analysis of comparisons between the analyzed enterprise segments are presented below:

Table 1. The frequency of indications by the surveyed producers of sources of information about new suppliers (general results and a comparison between the segments depending on capital and the number of employees, and the number of employees, percentage rate)

Sources of information	General N=151	Capital		Number of employees	
		Polish N=92	Foreign N=59	50-250 N=105	251- N=46
Visits of sales representatives of suppliers	96.7	98.9	93.2	96.2	97.8
Sending the offer by suppliers	94.0	95.7	91.5	92.4	97.8
Suppliers' websites	92.7	93.5	91.5	92.4	93.5
Direct contacts of the management / specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers	89.4	90.2	88.1	85.7	97.8
Recommendations of other companies	83.4	83.7	83.1	80.0	91.3
Fairs and exhibitions	81.5	81.5	81.5	78.1	89.1
Specialized industry portals	64.9	64.1	71.2	62.9	76.1
Specialized industry press	55.6	55.4	55.9	51.4	65.2
Purchasing platforms	45.0	44.6	45.8	39.0	58.7
Chambers of industry and commerce	25.8	28.3	22.0	22.9	32.6
Trade and investment promotion sections of embassies and consulates	21.2	15.2	30.5	20.0	23.9

Source: Own study.

Making cross-sectional analyzes between the segments of the surveyed group of enterprises, some interesting observations can be noticed. Visits of sales representatives of suppliers indicate enterprises with only Polish capital as a source of information about new suppliers. Also, the same group of companies most often indicated sending offers by suppliers. On the other hand, suppliers' websites as the most frequently chosen source of information about new contractors indicate large enterprises with foreign capital operating in the automotive sector.

Table 2. The frequency of indications by the surveyed producers of sources of information about new suppliers (Comparison between the segments depending on sector, percentage rate)

Sources of information	Automotive N=38	Electromechanica 1 N=43	Chemical N=29	Furniture N=41
Visits of sales representatives of suppliers	93.1	97.7	97.4	97.6
Sending the offer by suppliers	93.1	93.0	89.5	95.1
Suppliers' websites	96.6	86.0	97.4	90.2
Direct contacts of the management / specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers	93.1	97.7	86.8	80.5
Recommendations of other companies	72.4	88.4	81.6	87.8
Fairs and exhibitions	86.2	79.1	81.6	80.5
Specialized industry portals	72.4	72.1	68.4	56.1
Specialized industry press	62.1	67.4	50.0	43.9
Purchasing platforms	27.6	55.8	50.0	41.5
Chambers of industry and commerce	24.1	25.6	26.3	26.8
Trade and investment promotion sections of embassies and consulates	20.7	18.6	23.7	22.0

Source: Own study.

Direct contacts of the management / employed specialists in the enterprise with suppliers and recommendations of other companies are most often declared by large economic entities with Polish capital, operating most often in the electromechanical sector. Fairs and exhibitions as sources of information about suppliers. indicate mainly large enterprises from the chemical sector. On specialized industry portals and specialized industry press as a source of information about suppliers, focus mainly large enterprises with foreign capital from electromechanical and chemical sectors.

The purchasing platforms, on the other hand, are indicated by large enterprises that operate in electromechanical and automotive sectors. Chambers of industry and commerce is a source of information about a new supplier mainly for large companies with Polish capital. In turn trade and investment promotion sections of embassies and consulates is mostly a source for economic entity with foreign capital.

Table 3. The importance of sources of information about new suppliers for the surveyed producers (general results and a comparison between the segments depending on capital and the number of employees, and the number of employees, average rank)

Sources of information	General N=151	Capital		Number of employees	
		Polish N=92	Foreign N=59	50-250 N=105	251- N=46
Suppliers' websites	3.74	3.66	3.86	3.67	3.91
Sending the offer by suppliers	3.55	3.54	3.56	3.48	3.72
Direct contacts of the management / specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers	3.57	3.55	3.59	3.39	3.98
Visits of sales representatives of suppliers	3.42	3.46	3.37	3.30	3.72
Fairs and exhibitions	2.99	2.99	2.98	2.82	3.27
Recommendations of other companies	2.91	2.88	2.97	2.83	3.11
Specialized industry portals	2.52	2.42	2.66	2.35	2.89
Specialized industry press	2.13	2.11	2.17	2.06	2.30
Purchasing platforms	1.93	1.99	1.85	1.82	2.20
Chambers of industry and commerce	1.41	1.43	1.37	1.35	1.54
Trade and investment promotion sections of embassies and consulates	1.36	1.27	1.49	1.31	1.46

Source: Own study.

The results of the conducted research also indicate that for manufacturers the most important sources of information about suppliers were: suppliers' websites, sending the offer by suppliers, direct contacts of the management / specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers and the visits of sales representatives of suppliers.

Table 4. The importance of sources of information about new suppliers (Comparison between the segments depending on sector, average rank)

Sources of information	Automotive	Electromechanical	Chemical	Furniture
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	N=38	N=43	N=29	N=41
Suppliers' websites	3.97	3.77	3.83	3.44
Sending the offer by suppliers	3.45	3.74	3.48	3.49
Direct contacts of the specialists management/ ts employed in the enterprise with suppliers	3.74	3.67	3.62	3.27
Visits of sales representatives of suppliers	3.21	3.81	3.21	3.37
Fairs and exhibitions	2.98	3.28	3.00	2.76
Recommendation of other companies	2.87	3.14	2.66	2.90
Specialized industry portals	2.50	2.84	2.52	2.20
Specialized industry press	2.11	2.40	2.21	1.83
Purchasing platforms	1.89	2.26	1.55	1.90
Chambers of industry and commerce	1.42	1.35	1.41	1.46
Trade and investment promotion sections of embassies and consulates	1.42	1.30	1.31	1.39

Source: Own study.

The research results also indicate that fairs and exhibitions, recommendations of other companies, specialized industry portals, as well as specialized industry press may also be important sources of information about new suppliers. Suppliers' websites, as a particularly important source of information on the product offer and terms of supply by new suppliers, can be identified in the case of large business entities (employing over 250 employees) with foreign capital, as well as enterprises operating in the automotive and chemical sectors.

Offers sent by suppliers are mentioned as an important source of information by large economic entities (employing over 250 employees) with foreign capital, as well as enterprises operating in the automotive and chemical sectors. On the other hand, direct contacts of management / specialists employed in the enterprise with suppliers play an important role in the case of economic entities operating in the automotive and electromechanical sectors as well as large organizations with foreign capital. In turn, large enterprises with Polish capital and companies from the electromechanical sector attach importance to the visits of sales representatives of suppliers.

Trade fairs and exhibitions are primarily indicated by large manufacturers from the electromechanical sector as an important source of establishing contacts with potential suppliers. Also, enterprises from this sector and economic entities with foreign capital focus on specialized industry portals, specialized trade press, and also use purchasing platforms. In turn, chambers of industry and commerce are of the greatest importance for large companies with Polish capital operating mainly in the furniture manufacturers sector. On the other hand, trade and investment promotion sections of embassies and consulates as a source of information about new suppliers are important for large enterprises with foreign capital.

5. Conclusions and Future Research

The considerations based on the analysis of the literature and the results of empirical research indicate that both direct forms (such as sales representatives, recommendations of other clients, fairs and exhibitions) and electronic on-line forms of contact (such as suppliers' websites, specialized industry portals) play an important role in the B2B market as sources of information about suppliers. The analyzes clearly show the increasing and more important use of the Internet as a particularly important medium of information on the offer of suppliers on the B2B market. This is due to the time and cost savings of obtaining information about suppliers and their offer.

In many cases, however, the Internet (such as suppliers' websites, specialized industry portals) is often only a source of introductory information. Undeniably, however, in the processes of purchasing production goods at the stage of finding a new supplier, direct contacts with bidders play a very important role. Direct contacts allow not only to specify the solution related to the satisfaction of the need related to the purchase of a new material goods / service by the enterprise (especially the customized product).

Direct contacts allow customer expectations regarding the level of pre- and after-sales service quality to be comprehensively defined. This is of particular importance for building trust between the parties to a potential transaction and undoubtedly affects the development of partner relations in the future (Cannon *et al.*, 2012).

It can also be noted that in building relationships on the B2B market, the supplier's flexibility in terms of timeliness, assortment and size of ordered batches of goods is also increasingly important (La Rocca *et al.*, 2019; Parry 2020). This is conditioned by the volatility of the market demand (both for capital goods and consumer goods) and the necessity of effective inventory management, which is of particular importance in companies that are OEMs (Original Equipment Manufacturers).

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